

Marta Oliveira

LEARNING FROM ALBERTI

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«From the field cross, the lane bends into the woods. Nearing its hemline, it greets a tall oak, under which a raw timbered bank stands. (...) When enigmas pressed upon each other, and no way out was offered, the path across the fields helped. For it led the foot on the winding lane quietly through the vastness of the barren land.»

(Heidegger [1953], 2006, p.1).

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Sitting on a bank, under a tree, Ledoux' Man questions earth and sky.

Eh! bien, ce vaste univers qui nous étonne, c'est la maison du pauvre, c'est la maison du riche que l'on a dépeuplé; il a la voûte azurée pour dôme, et communique avec l'assemblée des dieux.

(Ledoux, 1784, p.104).

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On verra qu'ici le pauvre a ses besoins satisfaits comme le riche; on verra qu'il n'est pauvre que du superflu (...)

(Ledoux, 1784, p.106)

Such is Alberti's way, a mediocritas, a clarity, simple and «amica della quiete, vincolo della pace, nutrice della felicità tranquilla dell'animo nostro» (Portoghesi, 2011, p.138).

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[L'homme] Dans quelque situation qu'il soit, ce n'est pas a lui de rivaliser la nature, c'est à l'art de soumettre ses besoins à ses possibilités ; c'est à l'art de les soumettre à la proportion ; c'est un bienfait qu'il rend commun à tous.

(Ledoux, 1784, p.106)

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De re aedificatoria to reach out for answers. The themes of the communications in the Session 'Learning from Alberti', of the Alberti Digital Conference were varied. They drew upon Alberti's manifold territory of architecture, reading along his lines of thought on *concinnitas, lineamenta* and triads built upon Vitruvian and medieval architectural, and religious correspondences. They looked also into principles of architectonics and similarities of architectural forms, particularly in tracing the fine line between public and private spaces and significance of values, both in works attributed to Leon Battista, as in works by contemporary architects. The themes concerned the inquire of the very nature of the narrative of Alberti's writings, in their rhetorical form and seminal concepts, expressed both in text and works, and explored depth and fruitfulness on theoretical reflection opened by the problem of translation and transposition of terms into different languages, seeking clarity through the property of the words. Altogether they shared one accent in making sense for contemporary architectural thinking and practice.

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Does it mean Leon Battista Alberti's realm of thoughts could be common ground, the same goals universally accepted, the many things he knew and his many ways for problem solving, soluble by improved methods, thus rationalized proceedings? Or could it be that Alberti's polyhedric discourse is but one way of reflection? Like the *hedghog*,¹ he sought one big thing to know and argue in a lasting inscription. A written text on nature and wisdom of the *uir bonus* thought *architectus*, seeking the accomplishment of virtue in cultural, artistic and architectural sense and insights in decision-making and form-giving. Such is the flow of classical knowledge and tradition, and the sense of dwelling as the form of care and build, *colere* and *aedificare*, (Heidegger, 1959, p.147) the experience and circumstance of the shape of things, which voice the appeal of his written work.

Despite the comprehensiveness of the architectural writings and interwoven texts, which refer to different levels of approach and the horizon of social interaction, the ability to follow from one standpoint and a narrow view, not being knowledgeable overall, is still possible.² In fact, it is a path in search of meaning, comprehension and knowing.³ Reading the original words and syntax artefacts, trying to reconstruct rigorously the idea and follow the thoughts of the author in the historic significance of a problem solving. But also, working through means of distancing from the signification of the concrete situation, and interpreting, transcending the original text in its content as 'what was being said' in relation to 'what it meant', and built on its «semantic autonomy» (Ricoeur [1976], 2013, p.47) such as to form «live opinions» (Nietzsche [1880], 1978, 320-321), appropriated critically for contemporaneity.

Learning from Alberti could be thought as a way to see through the words inscribed. Marks and principles of form-giving through design (it seems just appropriate that there were no illustrations, namely in the *De re aedificatoria*), in order to imagine and handle incompleteness, and work in fragmentary conditions, which are those of every contemporaneity.

Words which help outline a path driven by the question asked, such as Hermann Muthesius sought in the Werkbund's assembly (Dresden, 9/11 June 1911), echoing Leibniz' «Où en sommes-nous?»: «Where do we stand?».

Therefore, in the tradition of *imitatio*, not a given theory, similarly as Quatremère de Quincy (1825) thought, when he wrote:

Je pense que les beaux ouvrages des arts ont plutôt donné naissance aux théories, que les théories aux beaux ouvrages. Mais il y a de belles théories qui sont aussi en leur genre de beaux ouvrages, et auxquelles bien des personnes prennent plaisir. Ainsi on ne doit pas plus demander à quoi sert une poétique, que demander à quoi sert un morceau de poésie.
(p.xij)

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Alberti is mediating the time span of centuries

I notice that the most prudent and modest of our ancestors much preferred frugality and parsimony in building as in any other matter, public or private (...).⁴

in a dialogical inscription, lines of thinking in quiet wait for the sense of «minoranza» (Gregotti,1991, p.45-46) to take shape, the exact meaning of what has to be, in the very same nows, in the cause of the *res publica* and in the long and winding road for building the home.

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1 ≥ Archilochus, frag. 201. «The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing».

2 ≥ S. Zeitblom on W. Kretschmar's piano recital and conference, Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 1947, cap. viii (cit. ed. Fischer Verlag, 1967:39).

3 ≥ Louis Kahn on 'knowing': «This must be considered when knowledge, which is a tremendously valuable thing, comes to you. It is valuable because from knowledge, you get knowing, which is private. The only thing valuable to you is knowing, and knowing must never be imparted because it is very singular, very impure: it has to do with you. But knowing can give you in-touchness with your intuitive, and therefore the life of knowing is very real, but personal.» "1973: Brooklyn, New York" (1973), *Louis I. Kahn : Writings, Lectures, Interviews* (New York : Rizzoli, 1991):322.

4 ≥ Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, translated by Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, Robert Travenor (London : The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1988):291. *De re aedificatoria*. IX, [i]: «Apud maiores nostros video prudentissimis et modestissimis quibusque viris vehementer placuisse cum in caeteris rebus et publicis et privatis tum hac una in re aedificatoria frugalitatem atque parsimoniam (...).» *L'Architettura. De re aedificatoria*, 2 Tomos (Milano : Edizioni Il Polifilo, 1966), Tomo II:779.

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