

SPACE; OR, BRAMANTE'S PROBLEM

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1. Space

In 1934, a very young Giulio Carlo Argan wrote, for a rather provincial magazine, a fundamental text titled “Il problema del Bramante”, or “Bramante’s Problem”.¹ Argan tried to identify the focus of Bramante’s interests and to define his particular way of making architecture. He concluded that what was systematically explored in Bramante’s work was space: for Argan, Bramante’s architecture was a *spectacle of spatiality*,² an investigation of space developed beyond tectonic constraints and a rhetoric of space understood as the endlessly multiplied unfolding of artificial landscapes.

But if the substance of this architecture is space, then what kind of sense did Bramante attribute to his work on space? And, more generally, what does it mean to work on space? What kind of intellectual value does such work have? What kind of “problem” is *Bramante’s problem*?

Bramante’s problem is space: the possibility of making space and the possibilities then built into that space. His investigation takes the form of a phenomenology: whether it is possible to *think* space, whether it is possible to *move in* space, whether it is at all possible to *live in* space and, finally, whether it is possible to *control* space, whether the contradictory desires that produce space can survive in space and whether such a production of space could prove somehow realizable.

Here it becomes necessary to introduce a provisional definition of space.³ Space has a double nature: indeed, space can be occupied or not, filled with matter or empty. Space filled with matter (i.e., a *volume* or, in phenomenological terms, an *obstacle*) can be measured by means of a system of coordinated architectural elements, or *order*.

1. Giulio Carlo Argan, “Il problema del Bramante”, *Rassegna marchigiana* 12 (1934), 212–33. The title could also be translated as “The Problem of Bramante” – indeed, the Italian original implies both the (architectural) problem faced by Bramante as well as the (historiographical) problem Bramante poses. In any case, this text does not deal with Bramante from the point of view of architectural historiography.

2. In the Italian original, *spettacolo di spazialità*; see Argan, “Il problema del Bramante”, 214. Argan explicitly opposed the *spectacle of spatiality* to the *geometric construction of space*.

3. This definition has been kept as simple and banal as possible, and of course it applies only to architecture. I have absolutely no ambition to enter into a scientific/philosophical discussion of space in

general – and I sincerely doubt such an endeavour would be of much use to architecture.

4.

One of the obvious and advantageous consequences of this commonsensical definition is that tectonics is made irrelevant for architecture.

5.

In this respect, see Tzuchien Tho, "The Void Just Ain't (What It Used to Be): Void, Infinity and the Indeterminate", *Filozofski vestnik* 34, no. 2 (2013), 27–48. Tho's conclusions are not strictly relevant to the present discussion, but they propose an interesting hypothesis.

Unoccupied space is *void*, and within that void actions and gestures can take place. Architecture can consequently be defined as the production of the void by means of order (by positioning and decorating obstacles to human movement).⁴

Bramante understood architecture as the construction of the void by means of order: in the terms of an absurdist metaphysics, *the production of the form of non-being by means of the production of the form of being* (a definition in which the relationship between being and non-being is entirely instrumental, as if, in architecture, being would be non-being's little helper).

Without a doubt, the idea of a *form of the void* is paradoxical, given that the void should be, by definition, indeterminate, and so lacking form. And yet in architecture – and most notably in Bramante's architecture – the void *has a form*, and so architecture, in its material evidence, forces us to imagine a different definition of "void",⁵ one that allows it to receive a form and yet at the same time still contain infinite possibilities. Such a definition allows architecture to be thought of as a relationship between order and void, as a relationship between something real and something possible, between something finite and something infinite. As a consequence, the void becomes the receptacle of the possible, the repository of all gestures that could end up occupying its emptiness (the depository of all leaving and of all glances and of all farewells, the warehouse of all fighting and of all insults and of all brawls, the storeroom of all lying and of all kisses and of all betrayals). Such a definition allows architecture to be conceived as a discipline in which the increase in the precision of the order coincides with the expansion of the set of gestures possible within it.

Bramante's problem is space, and space is a *logical* and *political* problem.

Architecture is a double search: a direct (logical) search for order with indirect (political) consequences for the void. Work on order is a search for consistency among the given data of the architectural problem: *logical work* on the possibility to insert all given elements into a coherent whole. Work on the void is an investigation of the possibility of gestures: *political work* on the conditions that are artificially established by means of borders and limits. Architecture is a series of experiments with order and void, and with the peculiarity that while working on order is directly possible, working on the void can only operate indirectly, namely by working on order. And of course the direct work on

order is subordinated to the indirect work on the void. Architecture is just a logical operation that measures a scene enclosing a determined amount of void and, consequently, an infinite series of possible gestures. The only talent required for such an activity is precision.

“Il n’y a point d’autre vertu que l’amour de l’ordre.”⁶

2. Logical Work

Bramante’s work can be read as a treatise – as all his contemporaries read it – because each architectural problem he tackled was both precisely solved in its real terms and understood as an episode of a larger theory on architecture. This concrete theory⁷ was developed through design essays elaborated for each of a series of different commissions: an essay on the orders at the cloister of Santa Maria della Pace and the Belvedere staircase; an essay on scale at San Pietro in Montorio and St Peter’s; an essay on type and city-making at the Palazzo Caprini and the Palazzo dei Tribunali; an essay on dome and nave at the cathedral in Pavia and St Peter’s . . . These site-specific and multi-layered essays did not apply a pre-established doctrine or derive consequences from a lone original foundation, but rather contributed to the construction of a general theory starting from the given circumstances of each particular case.⁸

Bramante was a realist. He had no interest in utopias. No “ideal” project by Bramante is known: even the Prevedari engraving (an explicitly theoretical exercise describing an imaginary building taken as a pretext for exposing a working method) shows a relatively small construction that is thoroughly feasible and avoids addressing the city or the future or society at large. His designs – even the most megalomaniacal ones, even the ones that appear to be nothing but colossal nasty jokes – were always for real. For instance, Bramante’s proposal to re-position St Peter’s basilica in order to align it with the Vatican obelisk⁹ was both a disconcerting act of cynicism (asking the pope to move the tomb of the apostle!) and a very pragmatic way of hiding the fact that he could not move the obelisk. Bramante proposed solving from an ideological point of view what he could not solve from a technological one: given that he was not able to move the obelisk, he could still imagine moving the church . . . It is on the basis of this extreme realism that Bramante’s logical work becomes intelligible and reveals its peculiar interest. The formal purity is *built* upon the concrete materiality of the given architectural problem, whose exceptional circumstances are not negated or eliminated, but on the contrary *used* to produce the final result. This

6. Nicolas Malebranche, *Traité de morale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999).

7. The *built theory* that can be decoded from his buildings is so clear and so consequent that any discussion of the possible existence of a treatise by Bramante becomes redundant (a treatise by Bramante is mentioned by Lomazzo in his *Trattato dell’arte della pittura, scoltura et architettura* of 1584). Bramante’s theoretical work was so obvious to contemporary architects that Vasari felt the need to underline the pragmatic component of his work right at the beginning of his biography: “non solamente teorico ma . . .” (not simply a theoretician but . . .); see Giorgio Vasari, “Vita di Bramante da Urbino”, in idem, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue insino a’ tempi nostri* (Milan: Newton Compton, 1997), 332.

8. “Each work by Bramante . . . , more than the demonstration of an architectural theorem, appears as the rigorous and detached exposition of the data of an equation with several unknowns whose solution is not given a priori, but, on the contrary, can reveal the unsuitableness of the given data through its own elaboration.” Manfredo Tafuri, *L’architettura dell’umanesimo* (Bari: Laterza, 1969), 128; translated by the author.

9. The proposal was refused. This was too much even for Julius II. The obelisk, formerly part of the Circus of Nero, was located about 250 metres from its current position in St Peter's Square. The obelisk was later moved in 1586 by Domenico Fontana under the papacy of Sixtus V.

10. Bramante's is one of the many reflections on *occasione* (opportunity) and *virtù* (virtue) that accompanied the fundamental work of Niccolò Machiavelli on this subject; see Machiavelli, *The Prince* (London: Penguin, 1961), and idem, "Capitolo dell'Occasione", in idem, *Capitoli: Introduzione, testo critico e commentario di G. Inglese* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1981), 157–58.

11. The expression is employed by, among others, Bruschi and Portoghesi; see Arnaldo Bruschi, *Bramante architetto* (Bari: Laterza, 1969) and Paolo Portoghesi, "La lingua universale: Cultura e architettura tra il 1503 e il 1527", in *Studi Bramanteschi: Atti del Congresso internazionale, Milano, Urbino, Roma, 1970* (Roma: De Luca, 1974), 351–71. The sources, origin and evolution of this terminology would be an interesting subject for further study.

form of realism meant that the very randomness of Bramante's commissions led to deeper evolutions in his investigations.

Like that of all of his contemporaries, Bramante's work meant combining given architectural pieces with given *opportunities*.¹⁰ The problems were given and the tools to solve the problems were also given. What was special about and defined the tone of Bramante's work was his attempt to adapt architectural elements to specific opportunities *without compromising the possibility of using these very same elements in other possible opportunities* – in other words, using the specific case as a chance to re-define and expand the domain of the rule that was put to test in that specific case. For each new case he had to derive a new solution from a predetermined, finite repertoire, so he had to propose a new definition of that repertoire each time (one that was capable of comprising all previous cases *as well as* the new one, one that was once again finite and yet *ampler* than the previous). Bramante systematically tried to show that a more refined and at the same time more general idea of order existed, one that did not exclude an adequate solution for all the particular circumstances with which architecture would be faced in the future. Through this logical work, the given architectural problem was systematically suspended and re-formulated. By addressing different and completely random opportunities, Bramante's works shifted from one order to another in a process that appeared to be the deepening (and *therefore* the expansion) of all preceding efforts. Innovation happened as a reaction to the opportunities that presented themselves, and so it was a clarification in the use of a repertoire that could be transformed and expanded but was never re-founded from scratch. In this respect, working with given architectural elements meant concentrating on the availability of all existing forms to all human activities. What was at stake was not the invention of new forms, but the confirmation that all existing forms were part of a shared code and, consequently, of a shared life.

2.1 Order

It has been common to refer to the impact of Bramante's work on Renaissance architecture as the establishment of a new "universal language".¹¹ This terminology, however, is suspect. The work of Bramante is certainly "universal", and yet Bramante did not think of architecture as "language". Even when Bramante's buildings most blatantly served as propaganda, their message was nothing but their own grammar, the triumphal announcement of the conquest of the grammar of

classical antiquity. The Doric order of San Pietro in Montorio has been explained as a reference to the maleness of the martyr (understood as a soldier of Christ) following Vitruvius’s characterization of the Doric.¹² Yet Bramante used the Doric simply because it was the most *classical* and most *difficult*¹³ order – he did it just to show his complete command of the Roman repertoire. (San Pietro in Montorio is bravado, or maybe even insolence, not symbolism!) With San Pietro in Montorio, as in any other project, Bramante did not want to say anything except that he was capable of saying everything. And even if “language”, with respect to Bramante, is understood only in metaphorical terms – in order to suggest the establishment of a grammar, of a system of formalized relations – “language” still cannot help but imply some sort of intentional signification. On the contrary, the study of Bramante requires a terminology that while it does not exclude the possibility of attributing meaning to architecture, it does consider meanings as accidental and maintains that architecture is not a medium, but in terms that are indirect and all in all unpredictable for the architect. Bramante indeed saw meanings as a possible field of compromise with all other subjects involved in making architecture. Meanings were entirely negotiable. Bramante was fine with any meaning that did not get in the way of his work on order and void.

The new terminology for the study of Bramante could actually be an old one. Indeed, the system of architectural elements derived from the Roman tradition that Bramante employed in his work and that was later used by his followers can be simply called “order”, as Bramante and his contemporaries themselves called it.¹⁴ In fact, Renaissance architects spoke of “order” and “orders” (*ordine* and *ordini*), but never of “language” (*lingua*). And although “order” is just one of the many terms employed by Renaissance architects to refer to the systems of architectural elements derived from their analysis of Roman ruins,¹⁵ the use of the term “order” at least leaves the discussion in its original terms, without introducing any signifier/signified relation for the use of the classical architectural elements. “Order” suggests a logical operation, one that *orders* a set of conventionally defined architectural elements. “Order” is both a strictly formalized notion and a plural one. In this respect, the Renaissance terminology might be less naïve than we might think: in Renaissance literature, “order” (*ordine*) is never separated from a plurality of “orders” (*ordini*). “Order” is used both for a set of architectural elements from the classical tradition (one of the so-called *five orders* – for instance, the Ionic) and for the “order” of

12.

Vitruvius, *De architectura*, I, 2, 5.

13.

This explicit search for difficulties was evident to Vasari – “difficultà accrebbe grandissima all’arte” (he incredibly increased the difficulty of the art); see Vasari, “Vita di Bramante”, 332.

14.

Bramante used “ordine” (order) once in the *Opinio* on the cathedral of Milan in the sense of measure: “Quanto alla quarta cosa, che è bellezza, quanto più alto se andasse, più bello sarebbe, pure non se eccedesse l’ordine”; Donato Bramante, “Bramanti opinio super domicilium seu templum magnum”, in *Studi Bramanteschi*, 24. It must be noted that the *Opinio* is barely two pages, and that the only other known text by Bramante is even shorter and talks only about fortifications (and the report was so badly done, that Ludovico had to send another expert to survey

the fortress). So the term “order” is relatively well represented in what remains of Bramante’s “theoretical production”. According to Christof Thoenes, the first use of “ordine” in the contemporary understanding is in the so-called letter of Raphael to Leo X of 1519. The letter, although written five years after the death of Bramante, probably reflects Bramantesque terminology; see Christof Thoenes, “Spezie’ e ‘ordine’ di colonne nell’architettura di Brunelleschi”, in *Filippo Brunelleschi: La sua opera e il suo tempo*, vol. II (Florence: Centro Di, 1980). Thoenes also discusses the evolution of the terminology of the “five orders” in his “Vignolas Regola delli cinque ordini”, *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 20 (1983), 345–76.

15. Thoenes mentions the following terms: “specie” (species), “genere” (genre), “generazione” (generation), “qualità” (quality), “maniera” (manner), “opera” (work),

a certain building, meaning the particular relationships between the various “orders” employed in that building (e.g., the specific combination of Doric, Composite and Corinthian of the Palazzo Rucellai), but also for the totality of the “orders”, for the “order of the orders”. This use might seem confused, but it is not all that different from the use of concepts in logic such as “set” or “class”, and architectural “ordering” generates exactly the same logical complications of any other recursive procedure. This plurality and recursivity of the notion of order reappears throughout the architecture of Bramante. The Chioostro della Pace and the Belvedere staircase are explicitly designed as an “order of all orders”. Both of these designs were understood as a combination of all of the possible orders – in one case, squeezed into a square courtyard, and in the other, into a spiral staircase. This search for an “order of all orders” had nothing absolute to it; on the contrary, both the Chioostro della Pace and the Belvedere staircase were extremely site-specific projects that by no means tried to hide the idiosyncratic circumstances in which they happened to be developed. The universal ambition of these projects was once again built by starting from the particular. The search for an “order of orders”, or even of an “order of all orders”, remained a purely logical investigation, and anyhow, it was not an attempt to find an origin of or a foundation for order. Bramante did not search for such a foundation, nor for a referent for order. He was fine with order being without any foundations and without any significations.

2.2 A Certain Idea of Roman Architecture

The recovery of the architecture of the ancient Romans was a goal for all of the architects of the Italian Renaissance. Bramante was no exception, but he did not follow the Roman fashion with the sincere enthusiasm of Mantegna or Alberti (or, for that matter, of Raphael or Palladio); he merely took it as a *fashion* and proceeded to gain complete control over a heritage that others simply contemplated with nostalgia.

Bramante’s interpretation of Roman ruins was a pragmatic reaction to the impasse experienced by the other architects of the time, all of whom were incapable of putting together the different ambitions they had inherited from the architectural debate of the 15th century. Giuliano da Sangallo, for instance, spent his entire life trying to reconcile nature (tectonics), theory (Vitruvius) and architectural evidence (ruins as found). Of course he never managed, and Giuliano’s architecture never succeeded in ridding itself of its overly complicated

hypothesis. Bramante approached the problem differently. For him, only ruins (i.e., physical evidence or *reality*) mattered; the rest was superstition. Like Machiavelli, who analyzed Roman political history without much concern for Roman political theory – he gave hyper-detailed commentary of Livy and largely ignored Cicero – Bramante investigated the evidence of Roman architecture believing that its theory could be written anew. He looked at the architecture of the Romans the same way in which Quentin Tarantino looks at Italian B-movies of the 1970s or Sergio Leone looked at classic Westerns or Ludovico Ariosto looked at the *chanson de geste*.¹⁶ In all of these cases, what matters is simply the repertoire of figures that can be employed to explore potential relationships, no matter whether this repertoire is a heap of broken columns, a bunch of ignorant cowboys or a gang of even more ignorant knights.

For Bramante, who lived in Rome at the beginning of the 16th century, Roman architecture provided the largest and most accessible sample that could be directly analyzed and used to clarify architectural relationships. Nothing more. The Italian landscape was full of Roman debris: everybody could see, measure and learn from them. For Bramante, the abundance of the ruins at hand provided the *opportunity* for developing a rigorously derivative understanding of architecture. So Bramante's architecture was derived from Roman ruins, yet for him the crucial point was logical – that architecture was *derived* – and not sentimental – that it was derived *from the Romans*. The derivative nature of architecture corresponded to an understanding of the ruins as part of the *public domain* (Romans were indeed kind enough not to copyright their ruins, a fact that allowed the entire history of Western architecture to unfold). As a consequence, Bramante's approach to Roman architecture was very different from that of his contemporaries. Roman architecture, for Bramante, was simply the pretext for a universalist agenda, and in fact, Bramante still referred to a plurality of sources (Roman and non-Roman) in the assembling of his spaces. Bramante understood the recovery of the architectural repertoire of the Romans as a logical operation, one that expanded the resources of contemporary architecture and exposed the possibility of finding a solution for every possible architectural problem. By conquering – and in a very brief interval of time – all of Rome's architectural heritage and showing its immediate availability, Bramante freed Roman ruins from all enchantment, from all nostalgia, from all messages. Bramante's conquest had something destructive to it that would not have particularly pleased truly sincere classicists like Mantegna and

"lavoro" (work), "ragione" (reason), "modo" (manner), "misura" (measure), "forma" (form), "sorta" (kind); see Thoenes, "Spezie e 'ordine".

16.

Leone explicitly referred to Ariosto's work in exactly these terms; see Piero Spila and Bruno Torri, "Intervista a Carlo Lizzani", *CineCritica*, nos. 54–55 (Apr.–Sept. 2009).

17. Bramante lived in the *age of discovery* and at the dawn of colonialism. His life (1444–1514) more or less coincided with those of Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) and Amerigo Vespucci (1454–1512). Although Bramante never left Italy, and although an explicit anthropological interest developed only later (Montaigne's essay on cannibals dates to 1580), the universalism of Bramante's work is undeniable and it must be seen in relation to contemporary geopolitical transformations.

18. For an introduction to the Milanese context, see Luigi Patetta, *L'architettura del Quattrocento a Milano* (Milan: Maggioli, 2011). On the Roman context, see Piero Tomei, *L'architettura a Roma nel Quattrocento* (Rome: Multigrafica, 1942); Christoph L. Frommel, *Der römische Palastbau der Hochrenaissance* (Tübingen: Verlag Ernst Wasmuth, 1973); and Paul Letarouilly, *Les édifices de Rome moderne* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997 reprint).

19. Donato Bramante, "Bramanti opinio super domicilium seu templum magnum", in *Studi Bramanteschi*, 22–24.

Alberti. If Bramante inherited anything from the Romans, it was the universalism that could be deduced from an architecture that had to take into account the needs of a global empire. And although Bramante never happened to see the more explicitly multicultural Roman architecture of the Near East and North Africa (he would certainly have liked Leptis and Jerash), he perceived the universalism of Rome in the metropolitan nature of its ruins. Like St Paul, Bramante needed *Rome as metropolis* to construct his universal project.

2.2.1 Universalism

Bramante never considered the problem of how Roman architecture could be understood and employed as *universal architecture* in "comparative" terms. This formulation of the problem lay outside of his cultural context.¹⁷ Bramante was familiar with a fairly limited number of architectural repertoires: during his life, he came in contact with Roman, Romanesque, Byzantine and Gothic architecture, and it is possible to argue that he might have had some notion about Greek, Arabic and Ottoman architecture. Anyhow, what defines the universalist tone of his classicism is not the plurality of the sources he was confronted with. On the contrary, Bramante discovered the openness of the classical code *within* this code, observing it from a logical point of view, not from an anthropological one.

The only difference between repertoires to which Bramante was personally exposed in his life is the one that distinguished Milan and Rome at the end of the 15th century.¹⁸ In Rome, after *experiencing* a change of context, Bramante could derive all of the conclusions that a confrontation of different repertoires made necessary. In other words, with respect to a new context and a (slightly) new repertoire, the nature of the operation he carried out upon these repertoires became clearer. The difference between Bramante's Milanese and Roman periods is not a difference in the toolbox employed, but a difference in his consciousness of the *logical* and *derivative* nature of architectural praxis. And if a rationalist universalism was already a feature of Bramante's work in Milan (the *Opinio* on the Milanese cathedral leaves no doubt about this¹⁹), then in Rome all the consequences of this approach became clear. The incredible openness of Bramante's architecture – which is even more surprising once the extremely limited diversity upon which it was based is taken into account – was built through a purely logical investigation, a merciless analysis of Roman architecture which, within this very same Roman repertoire, revealed no reason to

limit the number of possible architectural solutions to be employed in contemporary practice.

The move from Milan to Rome was for Bramante a direct experience of a move from one “order” to another. This compulsory change of paradigm, which the architect experienced in his own life, had a retroactive effect on his entire understanding of order. Order remained a closed system – given that its components can have meaning only in relation to one another and within the context of an overall structure – and yet it was evident to Bramante that reality also included shifts between orders: it was possible to re-think (and re-new) order by jumping from one order to another.

By using Roman architecture in the same abstract and pragmatic way as somebody who repairs a tractor using pieces from an old Ferrari, Bramante defined an idea of classicism that rejected any definition of identity – a project based on a shared past – and imagined a universal agenda – a project based on a shared future. By doing so, he erased any possibility of understanding the classical repertoire *as a tradition* and turned the Roman repertoire into the operative toolbox of a project proceeding *from the particular towards the universal*. This approach also meant that he understood the Roman architectural heritage not as a totality but as a collection of pieces (or *precedents*). These pieces composed a group of elements with no intrinsic value beyond the fact that they could be ordered in a consistent set. For instance, the fact that Bramante imagined St Peter’s as the sum of the Pantheon and the Basilica of Maxentius meant that both addends in this sum were understood as parts. In the new St Peter’s, the Pantheon was reduced to *dome* and the Basilica was reduced to *nave*, and the architectural problem of the new building was reduced to the definition of the element that could make possible the coexistence of dome and nave – namely the piers of the new church (the only problem that Bramante investigated over and over in his drawings for St Peter’s – drawings in which both nave and dome are fundamentally neglected). Entire buildings became parts of a composition that had an essayistic tone and escaped any idea of totality that was not the – ultimately unachievable – totality of thoroughly universal architecture. Like any kind of universalism, Bramante’s implied a negative, sceptical side that was committed to showing that all partial realities were false with respect to the only truly universal one. As such, the architecture of Bramante was not only derived from the Romans, but also explicitly anti-Roman – or at least clearly opposed to fanatics

20. The passage from Bembo's letter is quoted in its Italian translation in an interesting text by Paolo Portoghesi on the relationship between the linguistic and architectural debates of the Renaissance; see Portoghesi, "La lingua universale: Cultura e architettura tra il 1503 e il 1527", in *Studi Bramanteschi*, 354. The letters of Giovan Francesco Pico and Pietro Bembo have been published in English in JoAnn DellaNeva, ed., *Ciceronian Controversies*, trans. Brian Duvick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

21. As, for instance, according to the *function* "form follows function".

who pretended that the totality of architecture coincided with Roman architecture. Bramante's indifferent approach to antiquity (and his notion of parts and totality, and of their relationship) could be subjected to the critique that Pietro Bembo addressed to Giovan Francesco Pico:

What is more absurd than taking several and multiple forms – different from one another – that have been used by many and trying to put them together into a single form? It is as if in building a single temple you were to think of taking something from the many examples of different temples found all over and made with different images and styles. . . . This would be a kind of patching together, or, if you would allow it, a kind of begging. This manner was indeed used by men during times of famine, taking what was necessary not from one but from many.²⁰

The urgency of *men during times of famine*: Bramante certainly felt sympathy for these unlucky men – men who most likely are no different from us.

2.3 Abstraction

Bramante's architecture is abstract.

Abstraction here has nothing to do with the expression "abstract art", as used in reference to the work of artists who privileged geometric or non-representational subjects. Such "abstract art" indeed identifies itself with a precise *style* and is consequently incompatible with the stylistic indifference that is taken here as a constitutive feature of abstraction. Here abstraction is understood simply as a cognitive process that extracts general consequences from a body of empirical data, arriving at conclusions that are then independent from the opportunities that promoted their development. In this respect, Bramante's architecture is *abstract* because, although based on a precise confrontation with reality, it aimed at the definition of formal relationships between architectural elements that were independent from the specific contexts in which they happened to be developed.

Abstraction results in a sort of suspension: content drains away and disappears, leaving only formal relationships. This reduction of order to a purely formal notation, one with no direct link to the "content" of architecture, opens up a possible freedom in space. In fact, if the relationship between order and void cannot be entirely predicted, if a gap remains between the architectural work on order and the experience of the void, if the void nullifies any *function* – in a mathematical sense – that might be established to link form and content,²¹ then emptiness remains something suspended, open to a multitude of possible interpretations.

And if architecture acknowledges its incapacity to link gestures and void, and void and order through a series of linear, one-to-one connections, then work on order and work on the void become detached from one another: the generality of the conclusions drawn about order does not immediately include void. Order is only *around* the void. Architecture is a desire to control the void that has to deal with the impossibility of controlling it – a consciously pathetic, delicate, happily inefficient tyranny.

“Abstraction” means to forget, or to leave out (as in the expression “abstracting from”), and in the work of Bramante, an immense number of issues were left out, forgotten or unresolved.²² In doing this, Bramante developed a paradoxical form of architecture, one that was both *universal*, so shareable, and *meaningless*, so not offering anything to share if not the simple possibility of sharing. Bramante, with ruthless indifference to anything else, worked on the production of this most abstract universality of order and on the production of this specific suspension of the link between order and void – the equivalent of some sort of freedom for human beings crawling into the void.

Bramante took on the responsibility of preserving the multiplicity of the void by defending its fundamental ambiguity. His architecture was an architecture of non-exclusion, and his fundamental goal was protecting possibilities. He looked after the void and defended it as the receptacle of the possible. As a result, Bramante’s architecture was deliberately unreliable: space was always richer than any possible description of it. Space remained unpredictable: it was neither described nor announced by the architectural elements. Columns did not explain rooms, pavilions did not comment on landscape, doors did not suggest entering. Abstract architecture is *an architecture of space alone*. Its product is a formalized crust of colour around emptiness: “Mass does not impose itself any more as exalted solidity: what matters in this mass is its limit with respect to the surrounding atmospheric space; what matters is the faint linear vibration of the decoration, the subtle oscillation or slow expansion of the surface that suggests this limit.”²³

2.3.1 The Consequences of Abstraction

Making the architecture of his epoch by means of the architecture of the ancient Romans, Bramante produced the space of his time by means of a repertoire of another era, and so he introduced a distortion into the relationship of his work to his contemporary world. For Bramante, ancient architecture was a tool for suspending the present.

22.

See James S. Ackerman, “Notes on Bramante’s Bad Reputation”, in *Studi Bramanteschi*, 339–49.

23.

Argan, “Il problema del Bramante”, 218; translated by the author.

24. The value of the past as “other”, as a measure of the present, was perfectly clear to the supporters of the ancients in the so-called *querelle des anciens et des modernes*. The year the *querelle* began is conventionally given as 1687, with the presentation to the Academie française of Charles Perrault’s *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, yet the origins of this debate are lie in the Renaissance. On the *querelle*, see Marc Fumaroli, “Les abeilles et les araignées”, in idem, ed., *La querelle des anciens et des modernes* (Paris: Callimard, 2001).

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While other Renaissance architects were animated by a desire to *reduce the distance* that separated them from the Romans, Bramante – as a Renaissance *painter* – used the Roman architectural repertoire to detach the setting from the gestures happening within it, to *increase the distance* from the contemporary world.²⁴

Bramante increased the space and expanded the time between gestures and architecture. He not only combined but also separated all of the different pieces he assembled together; he discovered an entire landscape in between an arch and its corresponding niche, he diluted spatial sequences into a natureless Leonardesque fog that gave varying depth to the different vapours inhabiting barrel vaults, domes and niches. Bramante systematically attempted to increase the distance between the different architectural elements, to expand the amount of space, to suggest ever more distant landscapes, to maintain a logical sharpness while immersing this clarity in distance (Bramante produced spaces that are *slower* than any other spaces of a similar dimension, a bit like how Furtwängler played Beethoven more slowly than any other conductor). No link was ever direct; elements were always separated from one another, related but not immediately. Niches excavated into a wall (from the sacristy of San Satiro to the piers of St Peter’s) were always framed by an arch separating the order of the main space from the cavity of the minor one. These telescopic landscapes in which every element is just one step further away than the other expanded space into a multiple geography of slowness. If Bramante endorsed anything, it was distance, silence, space understood as amplitude, abundance: the possibility for others to say what he felt no reason to.

It is precisely this distance that is so promising in Bramante’s architecture. This distance means that without a change in our historical essence, without revolutions or apocalypses, without becoming anything different from what we already are – so, without becoming modern, or postmodern, or ancient, or primitive or whatever – it is possible to establish a relation with the entire complexity with which gestures confront architecture. Abstraction is just distance, and distance is perfectly possible in contemporary architecture.

Abstraction is the condition for public architecture.

The generosity of architecture coincides with the concave nature of space, with void’s capacity to receive, with the absence of a narrative that fills emptiness with predetermined feelings. Space can be occupied only if it is empty; it can be public only if it is void. Architecture

can be public only if it has no content, if it simply *contains* whatever its users would like to bring inside it.

By leaving space for the unpredictable to happen, abstraction addresses the complexity of the human motives that either promoted or occupy architecture. By keeping silent, architecture remains loyal to the multitude of motives that inhabit space. Architecture is just meant to protect this emptiness: “Wenn alle Krüge zerspringen / Was bleibt von den Tränen im Krug”.²⁵ The pitchers say nothing about the tears; they just collect them like inverted domes, providing a form to avoid their dispersal.

A theory that could be of some use for contemporary architecture is, in the end, nothing more than a theory of abstraction, a theory that could allow the regaining of the abstraction²⁶ that Bramante achieved in his work. This would allow the re-location of the core of architectural investigation to the interval between gestures, void and order without recourse to preconceived couplings. This would mean imagining an architecture without needs (contrary to modernism) and without desires (contrary to post-modernisms of any sort). An architecture built around gestures that are neither anticipated nor explained nor psychoanalyzed: an abstract production of the concave, a careful calculation of a desireless receptacle of others' desires, a humble development of a technology for giving precision to the memories of others. What would be a good theory for contemporary architecture is a theory that precisely explains that in architecture there is nothing to explain.

3. Political Work

Architecture is *political work*. It is an experiment in the construction of agreement between the different subjects involved in the production of buildings, and it is an agreement between producers that is then offered to everybody as a void open for occupation.

Bramante understood his work as the construction of the agreement among the producers of architecture: clients, workers, contractors, state officials. Bramante allowed all of them to leave a trace in his architectural objects, which were deliberately charged with a multitude of desires, of fears, of nightmares. Bramante's problem was to show – case by case, from the Prevedari engraving to St Peter's – that different desires could coexist, that a more sophisticated order did not need to exclude anything, that the series of decisions about order – precisely because multiple and arbitrary – could expose an agreement (or at least the search for an agreement) that was extended to anybody.

25.

“When all the pitchers are smashed / What's left of the tears in the pitcher?”, from Ingeborg Bachmann, “Scherbenhügel” (Shard Mound), in idem, *Anrufung des großen Bären* (Munich: Piper, 1956); translated into English as *Darkness Spoken: The Collected Poems of Ingeborg Bachmann* (Brookline, MA: Zephyr PR, 2006), 164–65.

26.

Contrary to the widely accepted idea of a progressive increase of abstraction along the path leading from ancient to modern architecture (see, for instance, Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991]), modern architecture is far less abstract than Renaissance architecture. Reducing buildings to signs representing the activities performed inside of them (the shared goal of all moderns, from Colbert and Perrault to Laugier and Sullivan) implied abandoning abstraction in order to assign a precise content to architecture. Modern architecture produced the one-to-one correspondence of signified and signifier *against* the abstraction of Renaissance architecture, *against* the perfectly a-referential grammar of the five orders.

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The Prevedari engraving is a declaration of method: forms and signs are combined with cunning indifference to produce a multi-layered totality. The variety of figures included in the image – the kneeling monk, the soldiers, the dialoguing philosopher-flâneurs, the indifferent passers-by – corresponds to the multitude of subjects that are taken into account in the configuration of the architectural scene. Santa Maria delle Grazie is a similar orchestration of relatively naïve astrological signs moving in a sophisticated architectural carousel. Bramante did not try to exercise full control over the building and accepted the decorative mania of the Lombard craftsmen, provided it could be inscribed within a precise equilibrium of spaces. The architecture of the Prevedari engraving, of Santa Maria delle Grazie and of St Peter's is all based on this *tolerant indifference to differences*.²⁷ And although this has driven architectural historians nuts, the explanation for the architect's apparent schizophrenia is simple: he just didn't care. He didn't care about the decoration of Santa Maria delle Grazie, and he didn't care whether St Peter's had a central or longitudinal plan. He didn't care about the capitals of St Peter's, and so he simply sent the workers to copy those of the Pantheon. What Bramante did care about was the syntax that could allow such plural constructions to be held together: the logic of the three apses of Santa Maria delle Grazie, the form of the piers of St Peter's.

For Bramante, architecture was *work* – that is, human activity that very naïvely aims at the transformation of the world. For Bramante, space was *built*, not *found*; contrary to Brunelleschi, for Bramante space was not deduced from the laws of nature: space was a *social product*, and architecture was *political work*. Buildings were elementary cases for testing the human potential to re-shape the world.

As *political work*, design combined decisions that responded to a multitude of given opportunities; decisions that were made about problems which were only partially known; decisions that were elaborations of incertitude; decisions that were meditations on the arbitrary nature of making decisions. Knowing how fragile this architecture of decisions was, Bramante produced spatial conditions that systematically exposed their instability, their unreality, their lack of foundations. Space incorporated and exposed its arbitrariness and appeared as a *human thing*, far removed from nature, far removed from necessity, uncertain and fallible and fragile and violent. As much as Bramante's work was the product of very precise social circumstances in which men were certainly not all equal and not all free, his work *imagined* all these men as equal and free, at least in terms of their relationship to space. The men that requested,

27. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

paid for and built the spaces designed by Bramante – the men who negotiated an agreement on form under Bramante’s direction – were *free* men, and precisely for this reason they were also unsure, stupid, often vanquished, sometimes evil and, most of all, perplexed.

3.1 Abstract Political Work

The production of space is political, and yet it is political in an entirely indirect way: the forms of space do not immediately define the forms of the life that unfolds within them.²⁸ On the contrary, space simply defines a world that *could be adequate* for a potential form of life but does not impose it. Architecture does not coincide with the gestures happening within it, and this incongruence allows it to expose other possible gestures – another possible life. Somehow architecture multiplies real life into a plurality of fragile, uncertain and, most of all, undefined possible lives – that measure life like a series of blurred mirror-images. And architecture is responsible only for these *mirror-images of life*, not for *life itself*. This means that the Doric frieze defines the border of the room according to the same ideals of equality upon which a constitution should be written, and that the measurements of the door are based on the same demand of justice that requires the law to be equal for all and taxation to be progressive, and yet the precision of the frieze and the proportion of the door cannot control what happens inside the room: the landlord can enter and evict the poor orphans, and the executioner can enter and hang the political refugee.

Architecture as *political work* is not necessarily in agreement with – and has no power over – the immediate political circumstances under which it is developed. The political meaning of architecture – what could be directly ascribed to the architect – is only an indirect one, otherwise all the architecture of the present and the past, made for demented emperors, cruel colonels and usurer merchants would be all equally detestable, with Bramante’s architecture being the most detestable, for it was made for a prince who poisoned his relatives and for a pope who liked to personally direct the besieging of enemy fortresses.²⁹ Architecture is political work, and yet this work is indirect, not immediately identifiable with the policies promoted by the rulers who decide to produce architecture.

The fact that architecture is political only in an indirect way also means that architects should not abandon such clumsy activity for a more directly political battle. There is no need for architects to strip themselves of their robes in order to become social activists. In fact, by becoming

28.

This happens independently of the architect’s will. Even if the architect is so foolish as to want to modify life through architecture, this simply does not happen.

29.

Guicciardini and Machiavelli believed that Ludovico poisoned his nephew Gian Galeazzo Maria; on Ludovico, see Gino Benzoni, “Ludovico Sforza, detto il Moro, duca di Milano”, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 66 (2006). Julius II personally directed the siege of Mirandola (1510); on Julius, see Christine Shaw, *Julius II: The Warrior Pope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

30. This, in turn, does not mean that a reasonable social agenda is incompatible with architecture; it simply means that it does not substitute it.

31. And, in fact, the minor nave of the transept is not mirrored (as it should be in the case of a fictive centrally planned church) along the same line along which the choir is mirrored. Also, the coffered ceiling of the nave and that of the choir are drawn with an explicitly different geometry. The drawing entitled "Schema dimostrativo dell'organizzazione dell'impianto illusionistico ideale di Santa Maria di S. Satiro" on page 134 of Bruschi's *Bramante architetto* is therefore incorrect.

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social activists, and, so, by becoming indifferent to form and beauty in order to pursue an immediate social goal (to entertain orphans, to give solace to widows, to make drug addicts stop taking drugs), architecture loses its faculty to provide a concrete prefiguration of a political order that is not content just to hand out some miserable alms to those very same orphans, widows and drug addicts.³⁰ This twofold and often contradictory political dimension of architecture cannot be considered given once and for all, and consequently ignored. This question resurfaces in every project and needs to be answered case by case – no sweeping formula can spare architects the nuisance of having to answer these questions: How can one save the ideal generosity of space under the immediate circumstances of the architectural object? How can one incorporate into architecture an awareness of the current impossibility of creating a more refined architecture, and, at the same time, how can one incorporate into architecture an awareness (and a promise) of the possibility of achieving a more refined architecture (and society)?

Bramante never failed to show his awareness of the cynical gambles made in order to produce space in his day. This awareness produced the characteristically baffling atmosphere of Bramante's architecture, one that aimed at both convincing and not convincing.

Santa Maria presso San Satiro is perhaps the clearest example: the illusive space of the choir is made both to deceive and to reveal, to suggest the expansion of the nave and to exhibit its impossibility, to expand the space and to mirror it in the sharpest way. In San Satiro, the viewer *experiences the unreality* of the choir. The fictive space of the choir is made to work within the real space of the church: the *fake choir* is part of the *real T-plan church*, not of an imaginary central-plan church.³¹ The illusion does not substitute reality; rather, the illusion is part of reality.

Bramante's work is interesting precisely because it pushed this investigation to its limit, coupling the extraordinary generosity of his spaces with the most unprejudiced exploitation of the political circumstances in which he had to operate. Bramante was not afraid of forging all sorts of dreadful alliances in order to proceed with his conquest of beauty. In the case of St Peter's, the scale of the building was so vast that its realization required a political project of its own (and this political project was not very subtle: it was about selling indulgences throughout Europe). The conquest of beauty – as a promise of the possible – required immediate political measures, and these measures directly clashed with this

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promise. In St Peter's, architecture short-circuited politics. The abstract political value of space was exposed to a critique of its immediate political implications. Indeed, Martin Luther did not particularly like the idea of destroying and rebuilding the church.³² Luther's critique was not just a critique of the waste of money and of the immoral fundraising of the Renaissance Church; he was more generally questioning the reasons behind such a conquest of beauty. What Luther could not understand was the need for this useless destruction, for this nonsensical potlatch, for this expensive and silly hubris. He did not see any reason to trust architecture so much, or to consider space so important. He saw no reason to allow architecture any autonomy from common sense.

It is extremely difficult to oppose Luther's arguments, and it is extremely difficult not to see Bramante as responsible – at least partially – for a political and religious catastrophe that led to widespread war across Europe for more than a century. And yet, as much as it sounds disconcerting, a theory of architecture that wants to protect the void from the two-faced stupidity of functionalism and symbolism needs to take Bramante's side against Luther, to be brave enough to defend the autonomy of architecture from common sense.³³ And this requires a good reason, not just some complacent praise of nonsense or some sort of ridiculous mysticism. And this reason probably has to do with a need for form that has an original relation to a possible common life, with a sublimation of a constitutive human violence that it is probably better not to ignore . . . Anyway, I am not able to provide such a reason; all I can do is expose a need. Still this is the biggest question posed by the work of Bramante. The demolition of St Peter's was indeed the most ambitious work of art of the Renaissance, the most explicitly cruel and sublime. In the end, contemporary mockery of it³⁴ got it right: at St Peter's, Julius II and Bramante were attempting to seize power over beauty through a military operation. The plan obviously did not work, yet it was a plan – at least, Bramante's architectural plan – that was perfectly consistent with the presuppositions of Western architecture. And it is impossible to save Western architecture without saving this plan, which is actually its best plan.

Bramante leaves us with some frightening theoretical homework: to find a theory that somehow makes sense of the fragile beauty and devastating rage of Western architecture – which, by the way, has been the sole architecture left on the planet ever since colonialism eradicated all other possible alternatives.

32. Four of the ninety-five theses published by Luther on 31 October 1517 referred to the construction of St Peter's (nos. 50, 51, 82 and 86).

33. Whatever other sciences might say, the void in architecture is an entity, and this – the positive existence of the void – is the only reason to support the otherwise pathetic idea of an *autonomy* of architecture, because without autonomy, without independence from a science that rightly claims to unify the laws of the void and the laws of substance, the void would be lost, just as it was in modern architecture.

34. See Erasmus, *Julius exclusus e coelis* (the author consulted the Italian-Latin edition *Giulio* [Turin: Einaudi, 2014]); and Andrea Guarna, *Scimmia* (Rome: Istituto grafico tiberino, 1970).