Abstract

The contemporary architecture is characterized by an even more marked transparency, as a result of a continuous experimentation all directed towards the search of the built “lightness”, that is towards the “dematerialization” of the architecture and the consequent loss of weight connected to the excess of form. It is in 1851 that a New Architectural Age springs because of the realization of the Crystal Palace, in London — that has addressed towards the experimentation of the glass as an architectural, structural element and of design. Today, part of this experimentation has been applied for some interventions of coverage, protection and communication in situ of the archaeological ruins. Also they are expressions that give consistence to an architecture of glass defined by a strong identity and a proper language. In these cases the box of glass plays a determining role in the definition of the atmosphere that edges the ruins. It happens, however, that the demands of protection — especially if treated without attentively reflecting on the meaning of the archaeological emergencies — the demands of protection conduct to the building of pure containers, whose prominent characteristic seems to be the negation of the inside space, reduced to a simple transparent box. Some international representative cases of study will be exposed in which transparency has been used with a language and a more appropriate symbolism to evoke archaeological preexistences.

Keywords: Glass; Architecture; Communication; Presentation; Archaeology; Covering

1. Research aims

Actually, in many interventions for the protection and valorization of the archaeological ruins, there is an implicit and commune tendency to accent the sense of the continuity as planning element. The so-called longue durée is effected through original actions interpreting the meaning of ruins. To explicit this meaning, contemporary museography has brought various evocative forms of original environments or an even more modern contextualization. Today the protection of the ruins does not involve only material interventions but also actions to recover the immaterial aspects, to bring up to date the ancient rests and to begin a process for their interpretation. Together with specific museological strategies is possible to recreate a shared history of the collectivity, in which the recovery of the past becomes a fundamental component of the community identity.

With their architecture, the ruins protection structures can develop a fundamental role in the circle of the collective memory’s recovery. In this way, every intervention above the ancient heritage forces the architects to research actual architectural solutions, refined in the materials and in the technologies, not resulting in contrast with the same nature of the ruins and allowing a complete restitution of the relative visible and invisible aspects. Following, there are some specific cases in which the characteristics of the glass are been used for trying to get a possible contextualization.

2. Introduction

The contemporary architecture is characterized by one more and more accentuated transparency, result of
a continuous experimentation, directed towards the research of the lightness of the building, or rather towards the dematerialization of the architecture and the consequent loss of weight linked to the volume excess.

This dematerialization represents one of the most suggestive presuppositions in today’s landscape of the architectural planning [1], whose lightness is often reached exploiting glass potentialities and the peculiar characteristic of transparency. In the current imaginary glass constitutes the ideal expedient to visually abolish skin and weight of a building. But this concept is not always applicable.

Even if from a semantic point of view the use of the glass is set as «una delle possibili configurazioni dell’immaterialità architettonica» (one of the possible configurations of the architectural immateriality) [2], the glass is a material endowed with a concreteness of its own and therefore, almost paradoxically, with an opacity of its own. Actually, the glass surfaces play a double role: neutral and at the same time mutable.

In fact, certain typologies of glass can assume an undesired reflecting property according to light variation (natural and/or artificial). This property seems to contradict all the possible metaphorical principles derivable from the concept of transparency. At least so it has been stated by the theories expressed in the magazine of Bruno Taut, Frühlicht (1918), according to which glass architecture can have a strong cathartic effect, in relation to the purity and the absolute transparency [3]. It is a concept already theorized by Paul Scheerbart, Danzica visionary poet, in his «Glass architecture» [4].

Actually, assigning this sense of immateriality to architecture is not certainly inspired by contemporary demands only, it rather finds deep roots in a less recent past. It is in the 19th century experience that begins the Architectural Era of transparency — of which ‘Crystal Palace’ by Joseph Paxton constitutes the emblem — that oriented towards a practice of glass experimentation as architectural, structural and design element [5].

It is undeniable that the application of this innovative technology has forced to the cultural, constructive and perceptive redefinition of the concept of wrapp. To perceive an interior space it is necessary to mark a border, a limen: a threshold [6]. Such border rules, by its nature, the relationship between indoor and outdoor space. Therefore, using glass structures to get ‘evanescent wraps’ means to consider the ambiguity of an element of separation which does not impose ‘visually’ its concreteness, even if playing its role of delimitation [7].

3. Experimental section: some international cases of study

Today, part of this experimentation finds application in some interventions of covering, protection and communication in situ of archaeological ruins [8]. Such interventions are expression of a glass architecture defined by a strong identity and a language of its own. In these cases the glass box plays a conclusive role in the definition of the atmosphere that surrounds the ruins. Contemporary museographic practice had frequently to face the problem of the relationship between container and content. In that cases the exhibition container fading has been often proposed for a more authentic objects representation. A fading that in some cases recomposes a spatial—temporal relationship between in-box ruins and surrounding context, otherwise lost, or rather between what is out and what is in.

The experience led by Jean Nouvel for the protection and musealization of the Domus des Bouquets (sec. I B.C.) in Pérguex shows through the use of an entirely glass-made structure, how spatial and historical continuity has been well resolved, even though with many troubles of mise en scène of the ruins. The archaeological site in which the domus is, according to Jean Nouvel, deserved absolutely to be révélée et protégée [9], through a transparent museal architecture characterized by the difficult assignment to face the ‘ghosts of the past’. The intervention proposes itself as an artificial background of the archaeological park that integrates both Tour de Vésone and domus (Fig. 1a and b).

The museum, called Vesunna, is surmounted by a linear protection covering, whose geometry marks the perimeter of the whole Gallo-Roman plant, but at the same time it shelters the ruins from direct sunbeams and, with a projections game, it suggests the villa planimetry and its developmental steps. The new architecture makes legible what in reality could be illegible: glass captures ruins. The great glass surfaces, supported by steel exiles columns, connect the domus structure with the rests of the ancient city laid beyond the transparent limen [10], and the fragments of the indoor ruins continue visually outside of the museum building in the frame of the surrounding city [11]. It does not happen the same if we try to observe the ruins from the outside, during the hours of greater illumination. The reflection effect of the surrounding context is such to prevent the eye from going beyond the glass, since the glass becomes almost totally reflecting. The original purpose is reached at night only, when the inside illumination offers a clear vision of the archaeological complex.

Without attentively reflecting on the meaning of the archaeological ruins, both the new architecture intervention and the preservation requests can lead to the realization of pure containers, whose main characteristic seems to be the negation of the interior space and the de-contextualization of the archaeological rests [12], rather than the desired architecture lightness.

Also in the project of the Thermenmuseum in Treviri by Oswald Mathias Ungers, thought for returning to the city the underground ruins of a public thermal plant of the III century A.D., the choice of the transparency did not turned out to be a winning strategy: on this great glass cover, solar light reflects the other building fronts, making the underlying interiors almost invisible. But the main incongruity consists in the fact that the load-bearing structure ended to be intrusive with the ancient walls, in order to comply a precise linguistic expression of the new architecture (Fig. 2).

The distinguished intervention of Bruxella 1238 in Bruxelles has had the same fate of invisibility, in which an entirely glass-made museum structure has been set to protect of...
a Franciscan convent of the XIII century. In 1990, in a very innovative way, the architect Jean-Paul Jourdain fulfilled the museographic idea to make the area ‘transparent’, allowing to perceive the presence of the past and understand the rich underground stratification of the city history [13]. But once more the inexorable reflex on the glass surfaces materially prevents the vision of what they should invite to look (Fig. 3a and b).

A very close example to the experience of the Musée de Vesunna is represented by the Musée des Tumulus of Bougon, located in the archaeological park of Bougon and planned to exhibit all the aspects of the megalithic architecture present in the département Deux-Sèvres. Contrarily to the choices of Jean Nouvel, Jean François Milou has worthily combined architectural expressiveness and museal requests. The museum building (1993) is a clear application of the typological model of the glass box, already used in the preceding case of Périgueux, and here used for englobing a whole ancient architecture — a Cistercian chapel — which has become part of the exhibition apparatuses (Fig. 4a and b). The volume combinations of the new building and the chapel give a mild touch of virtuosism, but it produces difficulties in interpretation of the ancient preexistence, resulting de-contextualized. In this sense, Jean-Paul Robert claims that realizing architecture as elementary as daring, generally asks for a simplified formal language having in itself the risk of producing incorrect expositive effects, however, legitimated by the main protection needs [14].

In both the above stated cases, the outside light permeates the transparent wrap, cutting out the interior space, in which ruins find new spaces of dialogue with the architecture placed above, but at the expense of an already deficient project of ruins communication. This way of intervening on the preexistence does not represent the only possible solution, rather the practicable roads are various and equally valid.

A more technological approach, where the protective covering constitutes an example of perfect armonia tra l’antico ed il moderno (harmony between the ancient and the modern) [15], unless for the museographic aspects, is the Römerbad Museum Badenweiler [16]. The covering, built on the ruins of the Roman thermal baths of Badenweiler (1 cent. A.D.) [17], proposes a different reading of the monument and it exploits glass optic properties and steel elasticity, proposing a new contextualization [18]. The lightness of the crystal shell simultaneously answers to the research of an absolute minimalism and the negation of a formal approach [19]. The intrinsic characteristics of the used materials allowed to reduce their encumbrance to the minimum, so the structure, notably relied, seems to levitate on the ruins. Only in summer season the archaeological rests are radiated in more incisive way, but with the reflecting treatment of the glasses and an automatic system of curtains — flowing between the steel framework and the glass-made surface — the risk of an excessive illumination of the interiors has been obviated (Fig. 5).
The intervention on the ruins should respond to the need to give back life to the past with effective solutions, both in terms of planning and architecture. Also the most traditional techniques of the restoration or the philological reconstruction, assume almost always greater meaning, being oriented to the museographic transformation of the site. This is the case of the Archäologischer Park Xanten, considered as a laboratory of research on archaeological communication (Fig. 6a and b). In contrast with the other preexistences of the park, for the musealization of the Great thermal baths it has been preferred ‘to recall’ rather than ‘to reconstruct’, since any ‘addition’ would have falsified the reading of the stratifications. The covering realized on the ruins is perhaps one of the more involving and discreet re-configurations present in situ [20], whose steel frame reedit the skeleton of the ancient baths and the new glass-made walls reedit the volume of the original building. Very synthetically, here is a further example of glass use for conservative and valorization purposes: the Römermuseum of Heitersheim (project by Werner Höfler and Richard Stoll, 2002), built on the ruins of a Roman villa of the 1 cent. A.D., in which a different reading of the monument is recognizable, exploiting the glass qualities to suggest its ‘re-configuration’. While within contemporary architectural planning the glass use gives lightness, dematerialization and expresses the duality of the relationship indoor/outdoor, in archaeological field the use of the ‘glass architecture’ show still quite a lot contradictions, if not supported by effective museographic and technological expedients (Fig. 7).

Today, nouvelle muséologie and nouvelle archéologie agree in putting in the foreground the needs of evocation of archaeological preexistences, and exhort to the research of
a more appropriate language and symbolism [21], especially when the protection and valorization intervention on the ruins goes towards absolute expressive modernity and great technological evolution.

4. Conclusions

In every case, all the examples cited remarks the general attempt of every nation to bring before own planning researches about it, shaping a variety of approaches that constitutes the sure premise to a total enjoyment not univocal of the past. The main point is to intervene, in any way, with protective solutions able to make survive the past in our present. To the presence of the quantity and variety of the initiatives, it seems logical to think that inside the same disciplinary field (interiors and museography), one of the possible reflections to privileged in the next years is really the recovery and the communication of the archaeology inside new buildings; this is a discipline that forces to the necessary integration between spaces and contemporary languages and valorization of the ancient heritage. The experimentation described in this brief synthesis, should contribute to create a greater awareness of the concrete opportunities that spring from recovery and musealization of the archaeological ruins and of the possible technological solutions.

References