

Is the architect an artist? Reconsidering the role of architects

L'architecte est-il un artiste? The first thing to do before answering this question is to truly understand it. In fact, its meanings can be various; I do not see it as a mere equivalence to be confirmed or confuted; rather, any possible answer to this question depends on the definitions one gives to the two elements of the equation: architects and artists.

Different definitions – which will generate different answers – are possible: this is what makes it such an elaborate and debatable question. The point is not to reach any absolute truth. Being assertive in such a context would mean not having grasped the nature itself of the question: the subjectivity of this topic is blatant, because different assumptions will lead to different conclusions, but all assumptions can be seen as legitimate (there is no logical exclusion of any possible definition of art, for example: each one of us has her/his own irrefutable conception).

Throughout this essay various possible conceptions of art and their relationship with architects' responsibilities towards the community and their power in the creation of cities will be considered. Whatever conclusion may intellectually appeal, but it will not necessarily prove definitive: the question on whether an architect is an artist will certainly continue to pose problems.

Art as production

I believe one of the ways we could think about art is as an extension of ourselves, as a projection of our ego (our mood, ideas, tastes, desires) onto the outer world through creation. This is quite a large definition of art: pretty much any result of our creative processes can be considered art. We can find traces of such conception in ancient languages. The term used to indicate “art” in ancient Greek is *tèkne*, and it is considered the equivalent for the Latin *ars*. Both these terms have as a fulcrum of their meaning the idea of production, as is stressed upon by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*; at the basis of this concept, there is the understanding of art as anything man-produced that is not present in nature. In ancient times, and until Kant, the term art was used to designate both mechanic and aesthetic art: any artisan, for example, would be considered an artist. There was only a slim nuance between art and technique.

If we stand by this definition, architects are of course included in the category of artists. The main critique to the identification of architects as artists is the fact that they produce on command, that they have rules to abide by, and that the economic, legal, and functional aspects of their works come first in their productive process; according to the large definition we are considering, this does not represent a problem. With such a large definition of artist, it does not really matter what conception of architect we choose. Even if we accepted to define the architect as merely a technician, an employee of society whose role is to build our cities in the most efficient way (definition that, as I will discuss later, I do not personally agree with), even so, architects would still fall in the category of artists. One could argue that anything man creates – no matter the purpose or the rules that others have set on the productive process – contains at least a little bit of him. It is arguable that any building (and here aesthetics do not matter) is, at least in part, a projection of the architect who realized it, because it necessarily contains, as it derives from, the architect's taste, ideas and knowledge. According to this conception, functionalism does not exclude art.

Art as necessary self-expression

In the paragraph above we have showed a definition of art mainly based upon the process of creation – anything we create, even if under request or constrained by several rules and canons, is ours, and this is

enough for us to call it art – therefore we got to the conclusion that architects are, indeed, artists. But if we restrict our definition of art, our results will be different. Another way one could conceive art is as necessity for the artist: an artist is a painter who could do nothing with his life but paint, because painting is the best way he can express himself. Artists are people with an ego that exceeds their bodies: the projection of themselves onto the world is inevitable for them(1). It's art per se, for itself and free of any function except self-expression: its inevitability makes functionality completely meaningless.

This definition redefines the borders of art: when utility counts more than the spontaneous act of creating, there is no art. Every type of artistic production naturally has an addressee: even artists who fall in the category described above, who create out of necessity, always have in mind a public to their works, and they are always to a certain extent driven by their perception of this public. However, the fact that they produce for someone to receive their art is different from producing for others to practically benefit from one's work. This is where architects enter the picture: the architect does not create out of inner necessity, because architecture is inherently functional, as it serves people's needs in a practical way. The first scope of architecture is construction, not free self-expression. Additionally, legal, economic and technical limits are imposed upon architecture: it contains many aspects of a science, of a technique, therefore it does not fall in the definition of art here proposed.

The points of view of several architects confirm the legitimacy of this conclusion. For example, Mies van der Rohe, a German architect and designer, refuses any type of formalism: "We do not recognize any form, but only problems of construction. Form is not the end of our job, but rather its result. [...] Form as an end is formalism, and we refuse it. [...] We have other worries: we substantially want to free the practice of constructing from aesthetic speculation, to bring constructing to what it exclusively has to be."

A new conception of architecture

The conception of art that I want to start from in this third paragraph was brought about by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant distinguished between *mechanic* and *aesthetic art*. Art is mechanical when the artist, "in conformity with the knowledge of a possible object, only performs the actions which are necessary to realize it". On the other hand, we can talk about aesthetic art when "its immediate scope is the sentiment of pleasure". This distinction goes beyond the two definitions previously given, and it allows us to understand architecture in a different way. I want to put next to Kant's conception of art, John Ruskin's idea of architecture. Ruskin wrote in 1854 that "architecture is the art of disposing and decorating buildings, erected by man for whatever scope, so that the mere view of them can contribute to the health, strength and enjoyment of the soul".

I interpret this definition of architecture as an enlargement of the mere functional role that is given to architects, and I totally abide by it. Architects have a power on people's enjoyment of spaces (and, consequently, on their mood) that is often underestimated. Making functional architecture, which is what Van der Rohe advocates for, is in my opinion a waste of the artistic potential of the discipline. I believe that architecture can and should be a mix of Kant's mechanic and aesthetic art. To make it simple, we could even bring Kant's distinction between aesthetics and mechanics down to art and science. Architecture obviously cannot exist without science, or our buildings would not stand straight; but Ruskin makes us think about the possibility of extending the definition of architecture to include aesthetics in it. One could argue that not only architecture cannot survive without science, without the mechanic component; but also, it cannot be called architecture if it doesn't satisfy people's need to live in good-looking cities. Therefore, for architects to be architects in the most complete sense of the word, they need to be artists as well as technicians: "No person who is not a great sculptor or painter can be an architect. If he is not a sculptor or painter, he can only be a builder" (Ruskin, 1854).

This definition of architecture, which includes aesthetics, would collide with the definition of art given in the second part of this essay. In fact, the conception of art exposed above concentrates more on what is *true* than on what is *good-looking*. The fact that a building *should* please people's eyes makes it different from a painting: a painting does not have to look good, but to be real and truly express the *est*ro of the artist. If it *has to* look good, it means its creation is too constrained, and that it is not art. This is why I believe that the strict, almost elitist definition of art given above (which almost considers popular art – the art that's created to please the people – a distortion of what art really is, because it does not come inevitably and exclusively from the artist's desire for expression) should not be applied to architecture. Architecture determines the way our cities look, and this has an enormous impact on our lives and enjoyment of the cities themselves: we must not allow architects to ignore aesthetics.

A conclusion can be drawn from what has been discussed in this paragraph. It is arguable, if we stand by what has been said here, that yes, architects are artists, but not all the people commonly called "architects" are true architects in the first place. Only architects who are also artists, and who include aesthetics in their creative process, are truly to be considered architects. So the distinction should not be done between architects and artists, but rather between builders and architects.

I quote here Richard Meier, renowned American architect, answering the question "When does a building become art?":

"I don't say all buildings are architecture, first of all. So there's lots of buildings that have nothing to do with architecture. They have to do with economics, they have to do with enclosure, but I wouldn't consider them works of architecture. To be a work of architecture is creating a work of art."

The answer to the question posed throughout this essay is not unique, but rather it depends on the definition that one gives to art and artists, to architecture and architects. The first definition proposed considers art anything that is newly produced by man, which somehow contains his ideas, tastes, knowledge, and vision of the world. In this category inevitably falls any type of human creation, and so does architecture. But I would not accept such a large conception of art, and this is why I refused that conclusion.

The second definition is, on the other hand, very restrictive and elitist, as it pretty much excludes the possibility of functionalism in a work of art. According to this vision, architects are not to be considered artists, because they are too deeply constrained in their work by outer needs, which takes their production quite far away from the concept of self-expression; but such a definition makes real art hardly recognizable.

Kant's distinction between mechanic and aesthetic art put the seeds for a more complex discourse, which results into a different understanding of the role of the architect itself: in the creation of a landscape, aesthetics is too important to be ignored. The job and responsibility of the architect towards the whole community reaches further than the simple erection of a safe, healthy and solid building: it includes creating something that pleases the eye and the soul of the people who walk by. All architects are artists, but it takes more than pure technical knowledge to become an architect in the first place.

Notes

(1) I got inspired for this by a short movie called *Life Lessons*, written by Richard Price, directed by Martin Scorsese and contained in the anthology movie *New York Stories* (1989), in which Scorsese, Coppola and

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Allen cooperate by directing one short-movie each.



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