

## Seven coffee tales: detecting the plot of inhabited space

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For teachers and students the workshop experience is a testimony of learning, and, if the project is a discussion, then the object that undergoes dissection is the cultural background of the author or the setting (the community, the school...) within which the project is being developed. The occasion of an intensive design seminar, as a moment for reflection with respect to the intersections between design and narrative, was the opportunity for some reflections.

The workshop planning exercise was conditioned by the layout and activities of the current occupants of an existing building in the centre of Trieste: the headquarters of the Emperor company, a place of work but also of learning, since it is the seat of the Bloom Coffee School, the new soul of Emperor, set up with the desire to provide tailor-made training courses aimed at a varied public: companies, professionals, but also lovers of coffee and the plain curious.

In view of the shortness of time available and the need for students to tackle the rules of concreteness, the suggestion was to adopt a preferential scheme referable above all to the distributive solution; the results were however complex and differed from one another.

To achieve the objective the workshop activities were divided into two sections, for the first two days, on the basis of the programme provided, each group identified the theme and investigated the complexity of the existing build-

ing, in the second part of the week the students arranged the materials necessary to describe the project. To guide the students' work on the inevitable reflection between architecture and narrative the only imperative was that each project should be able to transmit "coffee" as the generator theme, a point of entry that allowed us to design the architecture. When a project is devoted to apparent silence, this requires, to be able to tell the story, a material involvement and an imaginative glance that can let the sensibility speak. To this end, literature is a paradigm for the construction of knowledge, Calvino tells us, because it shows us that everything is a narration in the relationship it establishes with reality.

Generally speaking, I dislike anything that is much discussed, instead I am fascinated by taciturn situations, which must be sought out, investigated, unearthed; but when a topic is extensively treated, when there are countless appearances in literature, music, and cinema, when it is so present in an economic and cultural interest like that of Trieste, when it is no longer necessary to underline that the very definition of an idea of the city's life can be recounted through its appearances in history, then it becomes stimulating to wonder: "What is this coffee?" In this sense, the chameleon-like nature of coffee becomes the material for the project, the measure, the degree of intensity, the point of entry that allows us to design the architecture. The idea is to work with

56 Lo chef Pierre Charlot in un *Automat* a New York, 1969

students trying to use those “Coffee Tales” that are not limited solely to revealing a source or circumstance linked to coffee’s production and importation, or to rituals linked to the place of consumption, but using those appearances where the black drink is the bearer of symbolic properties and content.

But can the language of thought become a way to describe and thus communicate an architectural project? Is it possible to see the relevance of the reference in these Coffee Tales?

And above all, what are these stories? They are stories of love, politics, assertion, revolution, stories of innocent joys where the properties of coffee assume a symbolic as well as a real value. Close to known references, as in the case of Pietro Verri<sup>1</sup> where the metaphoric nature of coffee, as the drink of those who “reason”, is related to Enlightenment thought that sought to “wake up” ideas and contrast them with the sleep of dogmas because “obeying with eyes shut is the beginning of panic.”<sup>2</sup> we can find other contemporary stories, different stories. To mention just a few, for Muriel Spark<sup>3</sup> coffee is a solidifier of reality, it allows “realignment”, instead, for Don DeLillo<sup>4</sup> the exciting power of coffee and the “acceleration” of the heartbeat will take a couple to the point of wondering whether the loving impetus and mutual emotional interest are not simply symptoms due to the properties of coffee, for the “coffee-addicted” David Lynch coffee is a witness, not in the sense of a spectator, but as an element of reference or a constant

with respect to which it is possible to notice a variation<sup>5</sup>. Murakami, writing of great rock and bad coffee<sup>6</sup>, wonders if our habits with respect to the beverage are not perhaps an index of the quality of life, of our emotional state, our level of involvement or detachment from the reality that surrounds us. With respect to this latter contribution, the way of producing it and transmitting it as a value, of representing it as a moment of involvement with the political context, when the bearer of social instances and ethical pacts between private and collective interests, becomes an indicator of quality and responsibility. For the students, this latter aspect was an opportunity to imagine other tales linked to the economic and commercial worth of coffee to try to answer other issues in compositional terms: how to live, study and have fun in a production sector? How to arrange the proximity between rituals, even recreational ones, and production? And how can this proximity turn into opportunities for interaction and a moment of social inclusion?

When we narrate a constructed event, as we asked the students to do, the project is an event that happens in time, and projects conceived as such are stories of words, descriptive sequences in which the signs left, few but irreplaceable, act as retainers of an impression. The project for the seat of the Bloom Coffee School is basically linked to the concept of movement, an inhabited environment, regulated by bodies and not solely by the visual aspect; the goal of the

work with the students was to imagine a new mobility, a hypothesis to re-invent the existing space that took account of consolidated rituals and that developed vertically from the teaching spaces of the school of coffee roasting, located on the ground floor, up to the serviceable roof where the students imagined more playful objects, and where the relationship with the city becomes aware in looking and being seen. The last compositional reflection, the building's first floor, the seat of the school, to be redesigned with small catalysing interventions to accompany the visitor-student. The architecture is the space lived, it is the space of the experience, and in this sense, perhaps that of interiors exploits an awareness and certain stimuli that come from the body and its movements. In *Mask of Medusa*<sup>7</sup> John Hejduk wrote that architecture can only manifest when it grasps the physical nature of movement. And Giuliana Bruno, in her *Atlas of Emotion*<sup>8</sup>, wrote that a house is a sequence of layers, of passageways, not a static place but a place of transit; the ability of a house is to contain the mobility of the space lived and the emotions. Therefore, the body in space represents the narrative territory of architecture. We talk about living spaces, spaces that movement transforms into a narrative, however, we can also speak of inhabited tales, capable of shaping the plot of the living space.

However, it becomes easier to propose a narrative approach when the rituals involve a com-

munity, where the space described is geographical or social and the story is more immediate; when the stories are instantly shared. Often however, as in the case of this workshop with the students, we deal with individual buildings and daily rituals, so what happens in this case? The value of architecture lies in its ability to imagine the same vision in any scenario, since places for dwelling are the contact between us and the environment and allow us to enter into a relationship, or not, with others, whether as individuals or as a community.

Narrating a project therefore means narrating the characteristic procedures of this event.

It is compulsory to say that these arguments are often attributable to academic language, linked inevitably to subjective speech, and describe what, in my opinion, is a privileged dimension of the profession; but what happens when the architectural narrative must tackle the requirements of the client as was the case for the students at this workshop?

Are these translations from different expressive universes still a tool that we can use and especially transmit when the project is no longer merely theoretical or involves research? We can only say that narration in making works of architecture is what characterizes them and that understanding and communicating the structure of a project therefore coincides with the recognition of the layers that different moments and rituals settle into, like chapters that bear witness to the development of the design process.

With the students we tried to imagine “Coffee Tales” capable of transcending the most mundane aspects and evoking certain properties of the symbolic black drink. Coffee became the material that “stimulated” the project, as an actor of mental representations.

The theme was difficult, it demanded conscious and challenging choices especially for the first year students; experimenting with a narrative approach to the project helped them to cross the place given, mentally and physically, without taking possession of it, and as a result, to think of the project almost like a book. Ultimately, the things that literature can teach are few but irreplaceable, necessary but sometimes difficult<sup>9</sup> and perhaps the fate of architecture is to be a hidden dimension of the prose of the world and to narrate awareness of the relationship with the context in which everyone lives.

- 4 D. DeLillo, *Running Dog*, Einaudi, Turin 2005.
- 5 “...Coffee has always seemed to facilitated thinking and catching ideas. Not only that, but the flavour of coffee is beyond the beyond good... Maybe there’s not an idea in every bean, but for me there are many good ideas hiding in coffee.” Interview given in 2012 by David Lynch to the Huffington Post.
- 6 H. Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase*.
- 7 J. Hejduk, *Mask of Medusa: Works 1947-1983*, Rizzoli International, New York 1989
- 8 G. Bruno, “Atlas of Emotion: Journeys” in *Art, Architecture, and Film*, Verso, New York, 2002.
- 9 “...The things that literature can seek and teach are few but irreplaceable: the way of looking at others and ourselves, to relate personal facts and general facts, to give value to small or large things, to consider our own limits and vices and those of others, to find the proportions of life, and the place of love in it, and its strength and rhythm, and the place of death, the way of thinking or not thinking; literature can teach hardness, piety, sadness, irony, humour and many more of these necessary and difficult things.” Italo Calvino, *The Lion’s Marrow*.

57 La modella Twiggy  
posa in un *Automat*,  
1967

## Notes

- 1 *Il Caffè* was an Italian periodical published from June 1764 to May 1766. It was founded in Milan by Pietro Verri and Alessandro Verri with the contribution of Cesare Beccaria.
- 2 P. Virilio, *L’arte dell’accecamento*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milan 2007.
- 3 M. Spark, *The Comforters*, New Directions Publishing Corporation, New York 2017.



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