The article observes the germ of architectural design, the old “authorship,” and confronts the contemporary process in which the hyper-publicized accumulation of resources is used for the incessant reproduction of the built environment. The text shows that the current plurality of the preexisting is radically involved in the production of new “contents” through its interference in the architect’s machine. The author of the article analyzes from this perspective two recent architectural projects of respected authorship, to identify an apparent renunciation of the project and authorship in favor of what he calls “browsing” and identifies with the impulsive “scroll down” of navigation on the Internet.
However, that same idea that seems universally assumed has not been transferred to the core aspect of the architecture, to the interior of the project. It is evident the scientific consensus that celebrates the “co-existence” as a monad of contemporary architecture, but not to verify its active presence in the “authorship” of the project, leaves its full validity in abeyance. This text will attempt to observe precisely this germinal process and will verify that the global content and the hyper-publicized accumulation of resources are used also for the incessant reproduction of the built environment (fig. 01). If so, there could be no more radical implication of a preexisting plurality than its “meddling” in the author’s machine.

Four years ago, the knowledge about the evolution of species was completed in a really captivating way, after the studies of Roberto Cazzola Gatti,1 empirically confirmed by David A. Marques.2 drew a three-dimensional multiplicity of pluriauthorships. In it, the simplistic Darwinian struggle for survival as an explanation of the mechanism of biological advancement is replaced by an accumulation of accommodative relationships or simply by “real sympathy” as an instrument that facilitates not only co-existence, but also the emergence of new species. This turnaround in the theory of evolution seems to possess an inevitable logic when we observe it in the light of the hyper-connectivity of the second decade of the 21st century and places the idea of production multiplicity based on previous already existing productions nothing less than in the explanation of our own transformative nature.

In this new understanding of the way of producing ourselves and a new way of producing architecture, the spray replaces the line and its ramifications, navigation replaces exploration and, what is probably more significant, the lack of interest – this is understood here as a lack of ascendancy, of predominance – replaces the itinerary.

EXPLORATION

“Recherches,” “Searches,” was the wise plural with which Le Corbusier and Ozenfant titled, in 1924, the article published in number 22 of the magazine L’Esprit Nouveau (fig. 02) in which, before reviewing the plastic successes of the successive personal explorations that would lead to the appearance of Cubism, in which each of them made significant progress on the previous stage, they defined “search” referring to the “fact” sought and the effectiveness of the inquiry, as “the clash, sometimes brutal, of new ideas that bring new facts that upset customs.”3 These “new developments,” as they continued, “provide solid resources for the new generations.”4 The “novelty” provided the “solidity,” sometimes implanted with “brutality,” and the artist – the painter, the architect – the discoverer, the explorer of the “new.” “Search” was also the term used by Frank Lloyd Wright, another great explorer in the same decade of the 1920s on the other side of the Atlantic. “I have been searching for the ideal of life and simultaneously searching for the ideal construction”5 had proclaimed the Master of the Prairies who, in 1943, resumed his autobiographical writings with an announcement that left no doubt about the permanence of his mission: “the early search for the form continues.”6

The coincidental position of the protagonists Le Corbusier and Wright did not differ substantially from that held by the rest of the great architects of the modern avant-garde, as expressed in manifestos, books, and lectures. The “search” was, for them, the succession of discoveries based on a permanent and personal effort that turned the architect into a researcher, an explorer of places that had not existed before, of liberating paths that, mainly, should possess the quality of the uncharted, unexplored.

This imperturbable conviction about research, exploration as an engine of progress, literally built the twentieth century and has continued in the first two decades of the twenty-first century as an implicit intellectual framework in which the thought about architecture as well as the criticism of architectural works are inscribed.
The commission completed in 2018 by the Swiss architect has browsed (both in its finished form and in its models and working documents) by the (fig. 08) Prehistoric dolmens – reused later, among others, by Superflex in “Dive-In;” its pink installation in Coachella globalized desert;– Le Corbusier’s necessarily handcrafted concretes in Chandigarh as still observed in the columns of the Secretariat building; also by Mies van der Rohe, this time in his House 50 by 50 – of 1950, as it should be in the master of perfection– whose square glass plan with four accessess located in swastika, occupied as a continuous space thanks to the arrangement of exempt interior parts, is exactly (figs. 09, 10) the house in Devon; or, as in the example by Foster, by the architect’s own work, also revisited here, where the façade to the landscape of the Baths in Vals scales with millimeter fidelity to transform itself into the elevations of the bedrooms (figs. 11, 12) of his English house.

There is an archaic precedent, that is, prior to the time of social networks, of this multi-referent system to make architecture. We can find it in the grouping of times and places lived by Marna and Rockwell Schnabel with which Frank O. Gehry composed in 1990 the couple’s house in Brentwood, Los Angeles. The architect invited the clients to remember “significant things” that you liked, places that you liked, scraps or pieces of your life that you would like to remember” to compose the architectural collage of the house, although there each category alluded to was performed by a different piece, and the calls were not yet intermingled to configure the architecture.

The allusions and references listed about the pieces in London and Devon are not intended to be a comprehensive inventory. It would not make sense for it to be so in a work of this extension, nor would it be consistent with the reality explained. It will be possible to correct them and make valuable additions, and it will also be possible to include a multitude of current architectural works resulting from many other navigations. Families of related projects can also be tracked by the sources of their particular logbooks, which feedback on currents that cross the World Wide Web sites most admired by our profession.

**BROWSE, SIGHT, AND USE**

The mechanism is not that of a “civilization,” as Michel Houellebecq would say, which “dies of tiredness.” The navigators belong to a decadent period, yes – which, by itself, makes them already a coveted object– but more significant is the fact that they are pioneers of an era that is making its way. That is to say, they have not lost the production capacity – the “originality” if we were to use the popularly accepted term– but have given up the project understood with the old meaning of exploration, still commonly used in most schools of architecture in the world.

No one would predict much success for a profession of explorers in a world already as overexplored and hypertransited as ours – which even, by the very existence of those incessant and crushingly repeated transits, has had during the pandemic to temporarily stop all its movements in an unprecedented tacit agreement.

In contrast, we are faced with the logical use of a knowledge that seems to have no end, which is still growing at a speed that is almost impossible to calculate and whose consideration forces a different way of working and, also, of producing architecture, a new “speciation.” It would identify itself as a phenomenon derived from the digital revolution, even in the sense that Paul Mason gives to his “post-capitalism,” according to which the availability of knowledge at low prices opens the door, by the difficulty of its dosage, to an era of “sharing” and the consequent “contradiction” in the previously established power. “Sharing” turns the whole of the growing volume of architectural pieces into an endless working capital of cumulative use, while architects accustomed to the old “search” face a systemic “contradiction.”

It is enlightening to analyze the evolution of the terms –I wish metadata were used more in architecture theory– “exploration” and “browsing” published over the last few decades. While the first grows almost parabolically and reaches its peak in 1980, when it multiplies by 17 the appearances of the second, this later one goes up at that moment and begins to gain the position that the other loses during the end of the twentieth century;” aimless navigation takes over, as “nets” do on “hierarchies” in Mason’s theory.

The project, like the architecture, has mutated in response to the explosion of connectivity, the profusion of information, and the apparent exhaustion of ideas. This mutated projective exercise has almost identical characteristics, as we have seen, in works that we can well describe as opposite in terms of scale, location, purpose, and type of client, and in offices also opposed by their link with the outside, that is, by their radical difference in relation to the current forces of production, openly direct one of them, veiled by a symbolic network the other.

This reversal of the design work once again demonstrates that the use of data is the technology that truly transforms the discipline, as opposed to the limited advances of its own physicality. To this new technology, architecture has been adhered in an automatic way. It did not need to meditate on it as the masters of the last century did and we have glossed at the beginning, nor to establish it in a renewed Charte d’Athènes or by no way to decide it in turbulent international conferences such as the recurrent CIAM. It has occurred directly, pushed into an abyss of connections by the unstoppable journey of networked knowledge.

Architecture does not seek anymore. It directly finds, selects, and applies. Moreover, if navigation through the existing means the absence of the project, it is exactly there where it finds its advantage to interpret and develop our moment, in which, in the words of Éric Vuillard, “the absence of the project is the contemporary, possible and necessary form of freedom.” Vuillard did not talk about architecture, but undoubtedly, he could have done so, not only because production often precedes social uses, but because of the congruence of the “code blocks” he identifies. Freedom is only possible without a project, it needs to be so, and it is our way of achieving it.

Indeed, navigation heralds a horizon of freedom and possibilities, infinitely and constantly growing. The architecture of browsing does not produce, therefore, mortgaged returns but free, sensitive, and bold – let us borrow Le Corbusier’s term as consistent digital navigators – “facts:” the disinterested – remember, exempt from the predominance – outcome of browsing, sighting, and using.
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Notes
07. Id.
10. Studio Foster + Partners, founded by Norman Foster in 1967. The project team led by Norman Foster for the Bloomberg Building was composed also by Stefan Behling, Dan Sibert, Michael Jones, Annamaria Anderloni, Christopher Trott, Francis Aish, Irene Gallou, Kate Murphy, Mike Holland, Owe Schoof, Simona Bencini and Thouria Istephan. Fosteranpartners.com. Obtained of https://www.fosterandpartners.com/projects/bloomberg/ (22 June 2021).
Images
03. Foster + Partners, Bloomberg headquarters, London, 2017. One of the accesses from Queen Victoria St. Photo Nigel Young / Foster + Partners.
06. Berthold Lubetkin, penguin pool at London Zoo, 1934.
08. Peter Zumthor, Villa in Devon, 2018. Living room under construction.
10. Mies van der Rohe, House 50 x 50 feet, model, 1950.