

The Task

Symmetries

The international workshop for students of architecture in Split is the first in the series of collaborative meetings focused on the contemporary issues of architecture and urbanism in the Mediterranean. As a joint-venture of GAF Split and ETSAM Madrid, organized by the Oris House of Architecture, participants will unite forces to give (at least) three responses to this year's theme entitled "Symmetries" and generally related to the phenomenon of the Diocletian's Palace in Split.

The major objective of the workshop is to facilitate the students' approach to the central issue of architectural design – The Discourse. It is a sort of *terra incognita* – the superficial overview of the knowledge level in the schools of architecture around the world shows a complete unfamiliarity with the word, even in its basic meaning. Therefore, we shall try to combine conceptual thinking and theoretical basics with operative nature of the contextual reality, as an exercise of relating the abstract idea of symmetry to the very concrete aspects of the chosen site(s).

The participants are supposed not to be misled by the title – it is important to avoid simplified interpretations of symmetry from the field of mathematics and go beyond the elementary logic of geometric operations. In spite of focusing on the Diocletian's Palace, it would be wise to omit the banal and generic observations such as cardo/decumanus or the double-axial relation of its four quadrants or any other formal or physical speculation. On the contrary, symmetry should be taken as a powerful structural and organizational device. It can be read as "hidden", "perfect", "apparent", "virtual" or even "fearful", as Salman Rushdie suggests in his "Satanic Verses"¹. Furthermore, we can think of dissymmetry, asymmetry, antisymmetry as we find it by reading and analyzing the Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment"² and understanding the very nature of his characters. However, a sympathy for measure and symmetry in literature originates way back in history³ – to Homer and even the Alexandrian philologists. There we can also find examples of "concentric symmetries". Within the linguistic studies there is also a theoretical investigation of various dimensions of symmetry exhibited in human language. One talks about two kinds of symmetry⁴: agreement symmetry and structural symmetry. Building on these types of symmetry, it is possible to articulate theoretical explanations for a variety of phenomena within the framework of the Minimalist Program and provide empirical verification backed up by a cross-linguistic study. The idea of symmetry is linked with the arborescent and rhizomatic model of thought and thus related to the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari. The hypernovels by Italo Calvino and Georges Perec also offer a vast territory for the estimation of importance of symmetry as a *structural* phenomenon. The Calvino's "Città Invisibili" is a particularly rich reading to start from. In one of his "Cosmocomics" named "The Crystals" the author writes⁵ about the universe as a geometry of broken symmetries, like the topography of New York where the main character Qfwfq lives. He perceives this city as a crystal-like metropolis of glass surfaces and vertical and horizontal lines, whose artificial external order hides a fundamental disorder. Qfwfq rejects as false the apparent order around him, enforced by the gadgets and devices which impose the regularity of life, such as daily newspapers, diaries, wrist-watches and clocks that confirm the impression of order. The seemingly cyclical order of the perceptual world he knows, bears within it the force to degenerate at another level into a state of disorder.

We find reflective and concentric symmetry in music as well, such as the Sonatas and Interludes by John Cage.⁶ The term also appears amidst the changing political landscape in Libya.⁷ The Gaddafi loyalist forces are adapting with the new tactics of a-symmetry as the new means of modern warfare. A-symmetrical (or "unbalanced")

tactics are those used by the weak against the strong, pitting the weaker forces' strengths against their enemies' weaknesses. They often ignore the international laws, formed by convention, that were designed to govern state-on state warfare. Therefore they employ "non-conventional" tactics and weapons that are as wide and varied as man's imagination and his innate ability to harm others, and include small arms ambushes, suicide bombers, assassinations and the use of improvised explosive devices. Most forces employing these tactics will use the population as a shield when conducting their operations; dressing as civilians to melt in with the local population and not carrying their arms openly. This, of course, makes them difficult to detect and destroy. Many heads of western militaries have been at pains to highlight the changing nature of warfare and the threat it poses to conventional military power, its procurement and to political decision making. When states' militaries seem to adopt a-symmetrical tactics this quickly, it certainly should not be underestimated. A-symmetry, and military tactics to counter it, are now firmly in the mainstream. In fact, at present it appears *a-symmetry is the new symmetry*.

Finally, in politics we speak of false symmetry⁸ - Israel's symmetry between the histories of the Holocaust and the Nakba (The Gaza Strip conflict) is misleading for a simple reason. That is while the Holocaust is seen by Palestinians as part of European history and has nothing to do with Palestinian consciousness, the Nakba was generated by Israel and must be taught in its schools as part of its own history. Can we take advantage from the fields foreign to architecture to devise an applicable strategy within our own profession ?

The site for our intervention is not the Diocletian Palace itself, but it's more or less immediate outskirts, in the broadest sense of the word. However, it would be interesting to recognize the *fouri le mura condition* - a series of sites around the palace and develop them as a necklace of inner-city activities, related a-symmetrically to their historic predecessor. In the present-day urbanistic concerns, the grey zone between the mediaeval core of a mid-sized Mediterranean city and it's sprawled outskirts deserves our attention.

In order to do so, we should :

- Swap and mix students and teachers
- Combine abstract conceptual thinking with the objectives of the site
- Demonstrate a specific discourse
- Show it's operative adequacy on the chosen site
- Propose and argue the programmatic (a)symmetry of the suggested new functions
- Present the project in a compact power-point format

¹ Francois, Pierre. "Salman Rushdie's Philosophical Materialism in The Satanic Verses." Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie. Ed. D. M. Fletcher. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994. 305-19.

² Rahv, P. (1962) Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment*, In: Wellek, R., ed., *Dostoevsky: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 16-38.

³ <http://www.jstor.org/pss/461687>

⁴ <http://en.scientificcommons.org/746504>

⁵ Pilz, Kerstin. „Mapping Complexity. Literature and Science in the Works of Italo Calvino“ Troubadour Publishing, Leicester 2005.

⁶ <http://www.jstor.org/pss/832449>

⁷ <http://patrickbury.blogspot.com/2011/03/libya-symmetry-becomes-symmetrical.html>

⁸ http://www.palestinechronicle.com/view_article_details.php?id=16749