

Shifting practice: Metal, Zumthor, the Baroque, Deleuze, Foucault

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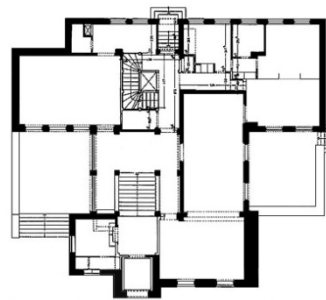
“I didn't do it, it just ... happened. The pole, the bow, the arrow, are one, not many things.” (D.Carradine)

In 2009, while the office's first larger scale project was under construction (Metal), my partner researched Zumthor's approach of materiality, and I was interested by Baroque paintings and architecture, read Foucault's “The order of things” and Deleuze's “The Fold, Leibniz and the Baroque”. A bit more recently, I engaged in a PhD in Design Practice at the RMIT (Australia).

Though these activities of architectural practice, reference analysis and theory happened independently, they spontaneously referred to and influenced each other. This mental mapping and relating of apparently unrelated elements provoked a kind of bottom-up theorization. However, it is not my intention here to discuss the credibility of the “architecture theory” that was developed, even though I feel there is something out there that is valuable knowledge. Rather, what was of interest to me, as practicing architect, was to understand how this happened, how it contributed to shift profoundly my practice, and how the practice



anthropological morphing



conscience is the meaning of occurrence.

questioned the theories.

Fig.1: Two sensemakers (2008)

Linking apparently unrelated elements into a new coherent whole is probably a designerly way of thinking. We do it every day. Large sets of constraints (administration, site, norms, budget...) and ambitions (client, architects, society...) get interrelated in new artifacts and buildings, which synthesize possible new meanings. Some time ago, I playfully developed some internet applications called “sensemakers”. They propose random combinations of (chosen) terms inside a designed, coherent structure.

Similarly, recently, we introduced the model of a small lookout tower that was made for a competition, into photographs of a great variety of landscapes. It was a kind of playful joke, of course, but it also aimed at questioning our role as architects. Is everything possible everywhere? If so, why is relevant propose any kind of architecture instead of another one?

It is often heard that pure creation does not exist, and that it all emerges from new, unexpected combinations of pre-existing things. I don't know if this should be considered as true, but at least, a kind of “combinatorial writing” is explicitly present in my field of interest.



Fig. 2: Touring Lanaken (2010)

What I would like to propose here is a bottom-up process, from projects and references towards the contouring of a framework and back. I need to explicit shortly the separate elements before I can develop how they have been linked and organized into a new whole, the consequences practice and the understanding of the references.

1. METAL, BRUSSELS, 2009

The Metal project addresses the refurbishment of an ancient tyre workshop in a multipurpose building, housing a sports hall, a homework program, and three apartments. The entire project fits into an existing concrete structure, except two apartments, that were added on top of the existing building. Budget is very low, which implies that expensive detailing won't be able to support the overall quality of the spaces. Accordingly, we had to develop an approach which allowed great constructive flexibility to ensure low prices. Basically, the project proposes a complete cleanup of the construction, in order to unveil the structural elements. Extensive glazing is replaced partly by a cheaper polycarbonate skin. Consequently, spaces are very fluid and open: the nude structure opens the interior to the neighboring urban spaces.

Constructive strategies were developed upon a loose understanding of the behavior of the existing structure, organized in three categories: sheer preservation, transformation and addition. The building consists of large concrete beams freeing space from neighbor to neighbor on the ground floor, with smaller concrete frames supporting a thinner first level. This produces lateral views on the first floor and abundant daylight on the ground floor.

The three strategies all obey the essential behavior of the structure (simply free space with large beams), and can further be freely derived from context and needs. Some structural elements are now outside and exposed to exterior conditions. They will be preservation in their actual state by a simple bituminous painting. Some elements are interrupted or their constraints modified. New beams of black poured concrete support them. As for new elements, a two storey Vierendeel beam on the facade is constructed on the façade, and some steel beams appear at the rear.

Though all these interventions are designed differently, they provoke a sense of familiarity beyond material of formal aspect, because they all share the same fundamental structural logic.



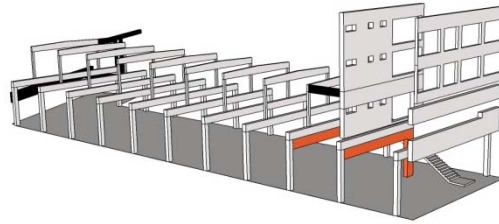


Fig. 3: Metal, photograph and structural perspective

2. ZUMTHOR, ATMOSPHERES AND MATERIALITY

Independently from the Metal project, my partner ran a research on Swiss architect Peter Zumthor's approach of materiality. This research was thoroughly discussed and practically embedded in the office. What follows is based upon some results of his research.

As Zumthor is stating himself, his work is about the creation of “atmospheres”. He achieves this through recurrent features of his approach on spatiality (chiaroscuro, monumentality, interiority) and materiality (tight control and detailing of assembled, composite, massive monoliths).

Strong “chiaroscuro” affects space through natural indirect lighting, dark ceilings, and low pending artificial lamps. Architecture becomes the condition of light, and light conditions the perception of space. This can be considered as a transformation of Le Corbusier's quote “Architecture is the learned game, correct and magnificent, of forms assembled in the light”. Zumthor induces a reciprocity between light and architecture.

Monumentality is introduced by scale effects and high ceiling. The absolute absence of symbols adds the sensation of eternal structures standing there for their own sake. Monumentality corresponds a-humanity, as it often seems that Zumthor's is quite a-programmatic and not intended for appropriation. There is also a lack of articulation to the context:

the buildings are monolithical blocks in the landscape, carefully located in order to maintain their independence, like Neolithic stones or centenary trees.

Interiority is omnipresent. When the building does not consist of one single introverted cell, it consists of a set of introverted cells (monocellular or multicellular buildings), that are connected to the exterior through umbilical accesses, and do not have any windows. In multicellular buildings, a dynamic, circulatory space appears between the cells, in which a few windows look out at the large distance.

For a set of study cases, these spatial aspects were analyzed exhaustively (visits, documentation, plans, sections).

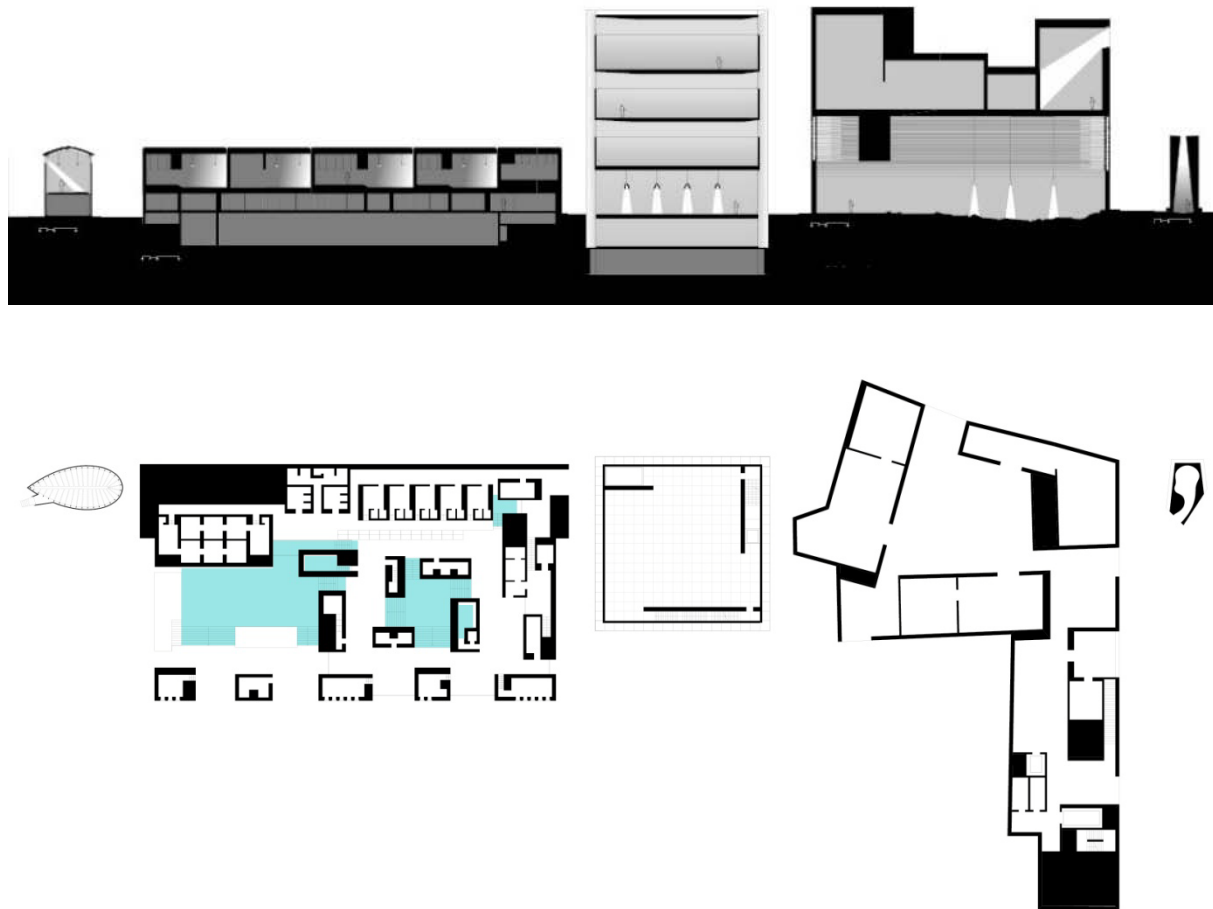


Fig 3: Zumthor, various projects, spatial analyses

On the side of materiality, it must be noted that Zumthor originates from the “baukunst” tradition of very talented craftsmen. His projects are always fed by what he calls “the anatomy” of the building. These are very controlled constructive seeds that allow the building to emerge in the shape of an irreducible, independent monolith that is not physically articulated to the context. His control upon the building is absolute: as well the constructive details as the spatial aspects are “closed” to external influences or contradictions, which transforms the buildings into autonomous, eternal structures.

There are various types of monoliths. Some are assembled, like the wooden construction of the Sogn Benedegt Chapel. The columns, beams, windows and floor are clearly identifiable and separable. Still, they are so complementary to each other in form and size that their existence depends from their mutual articulation. Some are simply massive, like the Bruder Klaus chapel made of poured concrete around burned tree trunks. In this case, time plays a central role in the constructive process (the burning of the trunks, the layered pouring, etc.). A third type concerns the composite monoliths, like the stone-concrete couple for the thermal baths of Vals. In this case, stone is married to concrete into one body. Stone is placed to shape the concrete, which in returns ensures the structural stability of the walls.

Beyond these types, all monoliths imply the merging of various identifiable elements into a new whole. This produces a wide variety of materialities (one per project), and simultaneously, a strong coherence between projects. Zumthor's cellular monoliths are always bifacial: the separation of interior and exterior is reinforced by very different textures on both sides like a grotto, a treasure chest or a baroque church. At first

sight, when comparing to Metal, the differences are striking. Metal's extroversion and loosely controlled structural behaviors respond to Zumthor's introversion and stiffly controlled constructive details.



Fig. 4: Zumthor, Sogn Benedegt Chapel, detailing for an assembled monolith



Fig. 5: Zumthor, Bruder Klaus Chapel, constructive process for a massive monolith

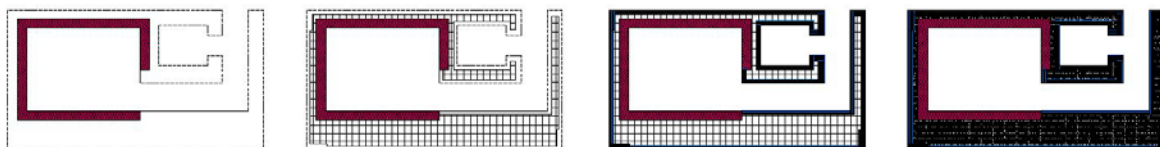


Fig. 6: Zumthor, Vals Thermen, constructive principle for a composite monolith

3. BAROQUE ARCHITECTURE AND PAINTING

I have always been intrigued by the complex simplicity of Baroque art and spaces, in which shadowy interiors, covered by folded curtains and carpets, are indirectly lit by windows looking out at an inaccessible distance. In architecture, sets of self oriented spaces with several symmetry levels compose complex, but very readable buildings. We were struck by the apparent correspondence between baroque atmospheres and the ones in Zumthor's architecture. We opened some books about Baroque art, in order to (in-) valid this intuition. There are obvious similarities, but also very significant differences.



Fig. 7: Vermeer, the Astronomer versus Zumthor, Sogn Benedegt Chapel

In painting, chiaroscuro, indirect lighting, interiority and materiality are important features, like in Zumthor's projects. However, it is striking that baroque architecture and paintings are inhabited by symbolical or representational items (look at the mapamundis or the painting inside the painting) while Zumthorian spaces are void of such elements. Also, it is striking that baroque materiality is provoked by the application of curtains, carpets, or their representation in stone, while in Zumthor's buildings, textures are the consequence of the constructive process.

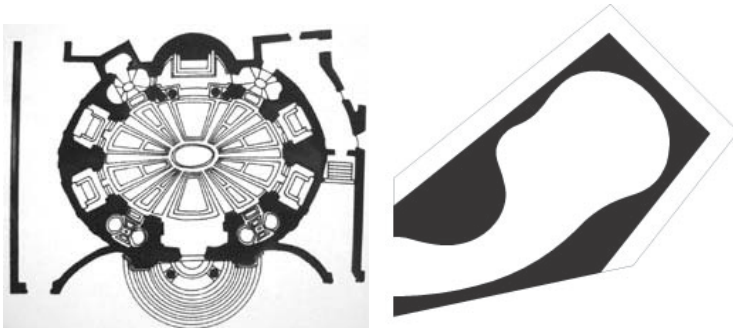


Fig. 8: Guarini, Sant'Andrea al Quirinale versus Zumthor, Bruder klaus Chapel

In architecture, introverted buildings seem to share features of Zumthor's projects. Monumentality through scale, light treatment, interiority, umbilical access are shared. They also differ in shape and goals. Monumentality is obtained through scale and autonomy or self-referencing in both cases, but baroque architecture achieves this through a high symmetry degree, while Zumthor makes use of the independence of the constructive process. While baroque architecture mirrors itself, Zumthor's buildings are like isolated stones in the landscape. The remark on visual materiality also applies: baroque textures do not proceed from the construction, but are rather an applied decoration, as if materiality had to be represented but not constructively embodied.

Referring to Metal, it is noticeable that the topics of spatiality and interiority are also present, but in very different ways. Metal is extroverted, and very present textures do not proceed from rigorous internal laws, but rather from the absorption of openness towards the contingencies of the real world.

4. “THE FOLD, LEIBNIZ AND THE BAROQUE”

Intrigued by the similarities and differences between Baroque Art, Zumthor, and Metal, or out of sheer interest, I started to read Deleuze's book “The Fold, Leibniz and the Baroque”, which was recommended to me by a colleague. I understand that the way I will relate the theories of the two books is probably reductive. However, this reduction to essential nodes makes interaction with practice possible in an enriching dialogue, beyond mere application.

Deleuze's book proposes an interpretation of the Baroque framework developed by Leibniz in the 17th century, develops its consequences and questions its limits. Leibniz rejects the atomist understanding in which the entire world is to be reduced to elementary particles subjected to mechanical laws, because it implies the impossibility of freedom and unexpectedness. He also rejects the infinite division of Cartesianism, because it implies a homogeneous dissolution of the world in which evolution and forces would tend to disappear. Instead, he proposes that the world is to be understood as the result of irreducible “souls”, which he calls monads, that are like irreducible behaviors, endogenous forces, or identifiable inclinations. These monads are realized (brought to reality), where they are subjected to their internal or endogenous forces (inclination) and external or exogenous forces (contingencies, circumstances, mechanical laws, etc.). This implies that more perfect states are not absolutely “better”, but instead, closer to natural inner inclination, without alteration by external forces. Monadism implies that exteriority is linked to alienation, while interiority means authenticity.

At the end of the book, Deleuze proposes that some conditions of monadism are not valid anymore nowadays. First, monadism implies a world of harmonics: dissonance and contradictions are not envisioned, as the monads tend ever closer to perfection, and the monads form an infinite series of complementary souls, which cannot contradict each other. Second, monadism implies enclosure: interiority of the endogenous forces, closed limits of the monad, etc. Indeed, as he points out, in the 20th century, science and arts have opened the door to contradiction, dissonance, openness, uncertainty and unexpectedness: the world of enclosure and harmonics has passed away.

This was interesting to me, because it could give some intuitions on the differences and similarities between the Metal project, Zumthor and Baroque Art. Metal could be a kind of application of the monad through structural principles, but “unclosed”, open to unexpectedness and to heterogeneity. Zumthor's constructive principles are like the actualization (identification) of a constructive monad, which then develops according its endogenous forces, in a closed system. It “works” like monadism. Baroque architecture seems to achieve similar goals through the mimicry of monadism.

5. “THE ORDER OF THINGS”

A few months before, I had been reading another book, “the order of things” in which Foucault establishes a history of the shifts of epistemes (thought enabling frameworks) since the Renaissance. The reading of this book was absolutely not linked to any conscious explanatory intention, however, it produced a very strong organization of the pieces, as if it was a kind of instructions book or users guide. At the same time, it produced a questions oriented towards the future, and finally, perhaps, the understanding and the evolution of the practice also questioned and broadened the understanding of Foucault's text.

He identifies several distinct eras following the Renaissance. In the Renaissance, words and things formed one single reality. Each thing is the sign of another thing, and each thing participates to the global knowlegde. As such, legends and observations, recipes and deductions, commentaries and paintings all share the same level of scientific credibility.

In the Classic era (corresponding the baroque), knowledge is mainly made possible through abstract representation. Naming and representing allow to organize (taxonomy), and then to tabulate and quantify (mathesis). Knowledge is produced through symbols and allegories, which are clearly separated from the real things. There is a conscience of the power of naming.

In the Modern era (since the end of the 18th century), representation looses its central position in favor of mechanics. Behaviors, mechanisms, the way things work become central. Natural history becomes biology, and the concept of richness becomes economy. Nature, knowledge and creativity can now be understood as

processes rather than only as quantifiable objects. This still implies representation, but shifts fundamentally the production of knowledge.

In the Contemporary era since the end of the 19th century, appears the conscience of the central position of the human being in knowledge production in all activities, from naming and counting to the interpretation of processes. Experience, perception, subjectivity and interpretation become fundamental issues. Human sciences arise, like sociology and psychology. The distinction between subject and object appears in sciences. All this implies a shift in the world's perception and conception. It unfolds in an uncertain, unpredictable way, is open to unexpectedness and individual creativity, which implies a need for interpretation.

In the very last pages of the book, Foucault suggests that since man appeared recently in human thought history, his disappearance from his central position is thinkable. Furthermore it could be that we are able to perceive the outlines of the "contemporary era", because we are in the process of leaving it. What could this mean for thought in the near future? Which could be the new basements on which thought will be built in the coming decades?

6. ORGANIZING THE PUZZLE

Leibniz proposes a framework of understanding of materiality through the concept of Monad. This concept is explained by a spatial model (interiority vs. exteriority). The Metal Project, the architecture of Zumthor and the baroque architecture share similarities and show differences on both their approaches materiality and spatiality.

My intuition was that these three approaches of architecture all address monadism, but in different ways.

These different ways can be understood through the lens of the epistemes described by Foucault.

The Classical era of representation corresponds to an approach of architecture as a symbolical allegory of monadism. Indeed, baroque architecture and painting are very introverted. An intense materiality of folds and draperies cover space extensively. It does not "work" like monadism, but it is like an illustration of its principles. Referring the Sant'Andrea Chapel (Guarini), we even notice that structural elements like columns and arches are mostly representational, as their structural role does not completely correspond to their structural identity.



Fig. 9: Guarini, Sant'Andrea al Quirinale interior- the representation of materiality

The Modern era of mechanics and processes should correspond to an approach of architecture as a mechanical embodiment of any kind of rules or processes. Quite strangely, Zumthor seems to correspond quite well this approach of process-oriented implementation, applied to monadistic constructive principles. Indeed, his projects are very introverted (avoiding contamination of exterior influences), but on the contrary of baroque architecture, he does not represent the monadistic materiality, he embodies it directly.

The first necessary step is the precise identification of the constructive principle. This can be considered as the identification or actualization of the Monad. It is perhaps because of this that Zumthor's drawings are so important and specific. The second step is the realization into a real construction. In order to stick as much as possible to its “soul”, it needs to minimize external influences. Because of this, interiority and monumentality become important conditions.

The correspondence between Zumthor and Foucault's Modern era is intriguing, because more than a century divides them. However, this might also help understanding why Zumthor is so unique and specific – almost anachronistic. It is perhaps also because of the classical “a-humanity” and anachronism of its buildings that Zumthor mainly addresses religious programs (chapels and museums).

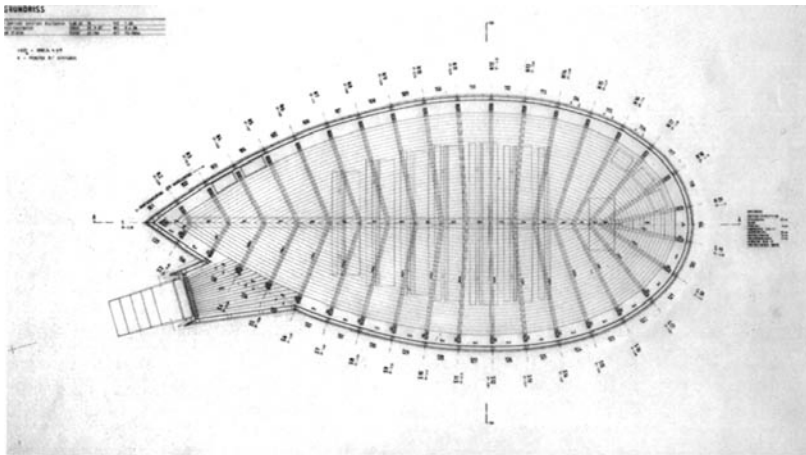


Fig. 10 : Zumthor, Sankt Nikolaus Chapel, drawing – actualization of the Monad

The contemporary era of subjectivity and uncertainty could correspond an approach of architecture in which the creative individual plays a central role through “interpretational actualization”.

The Metal project could be understood as representative of this free creative interpretation of a monadistic structural principle. The difference with Zumthor lies in the quite loose and open constructive interpretation, contrasting with the very tight and closed control of Zumthor's details. In this interpretation, the structure is brought to reality in very different shapes, following the creative decisions of the architect, which relate to interpretations of the context.

At the same time, the Metal project seems to take Deleuze's conclusion into account. On the contrary of Zumthor and the baroque, contradictions, dissonances and openness to influences are not seen as alienating. On the contrary, Metal's spatiality is completely open and absorbs the context (the existing situation, the neighboring city, the possible appropriation of space etc.).

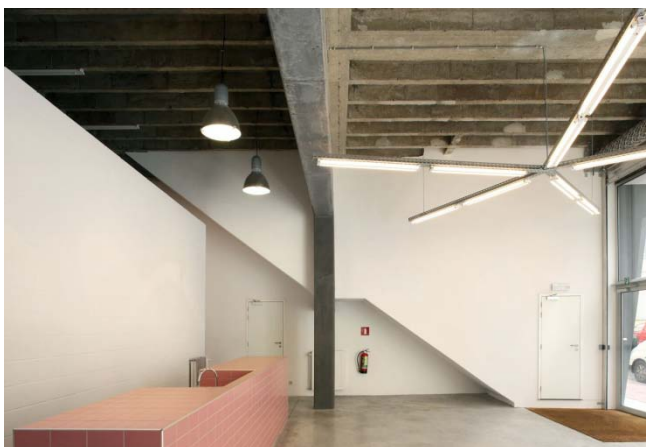


Fig. 11: Metal, openness and loose interpretation of a structural monad

7. PROSPECTION: DISAPPEARANCE OF MAN ?

I also stood still at Foucault's proposition at the end of his book, which he does not develop: what could the possible "disappearance" of man mean in the history of thought? Consequently, the question can be transferred to creative practices and more specifically to architecture. Is an architecture possible in which the architect retracts from his creative omnipotence and centrality? How could this happen?

Instead of the provocative assertion of man about to disappear from its central position in the understanding (and making) of the world, I would propose that man can be re-placed: it's position can be redefined.

In fact, this question corresponds to an issue with our positioning as architects. Indeed, the office was founded in 2003, two years after the partner's graduation. This is particularly meaningful; we did not undergo a long training period at a Master's office. We found ourselves almost immediately projected in the realm of a deconstructed field (in which you can be a high tech formalist, a social participationist, or even a white minimalist), with no Master to follow, and reading Koolhaas stating that "Nitzschean frivolity should be our laughing gas". As a consequence, through our projects, we are in a process of definition of an attitude in the field, which attempts to escape the arbitrariness of choosing for any creative individuality instead of another one. Is an architecture possible, which could overcome the necessity to choose for a style, or a school?

Recently, I made a time-line of the projects of the office and added architecture and literary references that accompanied the last years. I also extracted the operational concepts that were discovered through projects. The result was an operational dictionary collecting the recurrent themes of the office. I was stroked to note that the themes "before" the metal project, and thus before the Metal-Zumthor-Baroque-Deleuze-Foucault puzzle (I'll further call it MZBDF), are specifically about the nature of creative input in the project. It is about "formulating hypotheses", defining "constructive strategies". After MZBDF, I notice that most themes are about the limitation of creative arbitrariness. It is about detecting existing opportunities, about obtaining perfection or completeness, about stepping back or about irreducibility.

So, beyond the identification of the operational concepts (praxemes) at work in the metal project, this cloud of relationships helped me to formulate what was ongoing on a conceptual level in the project and to position the project in the global production of the office. It also accompanied (or produced?) a shift in the practice.

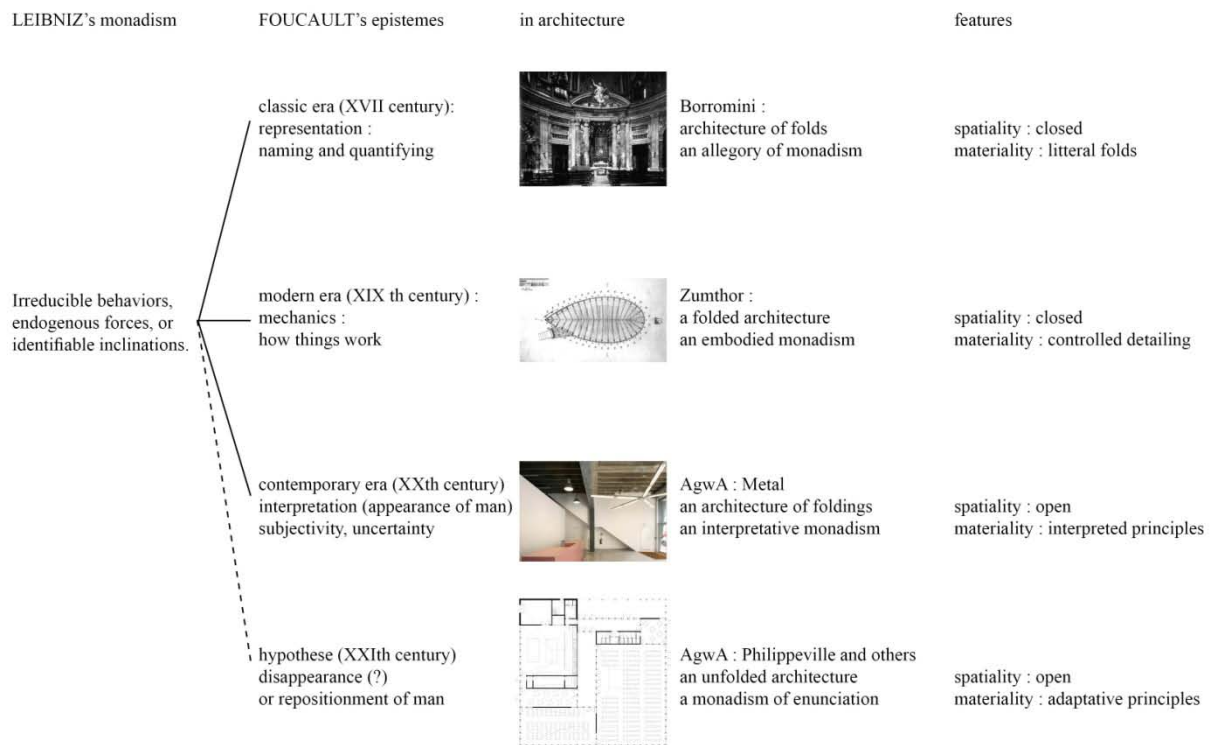


Fig. 12 : a possible framework for understanding architecture through monadism

8. PRACTICE CHALLENGING THEORY

Third, this work questions some aspects of the used literary references. At least, it questions the way I interpreted them and it proposed additional fields of application.

On the one hand, there is a questioning of the nature of epistemological and creative shifts.

In design practice, such shifts do not mean that the working themes of a period are automatically forgotten or replaced by others. Operational dictionaries are a rather additive phenomenon. Some themes might disappear completely, and radically new items appear, but it is more a matter of gravity. Applied to us, we still do take arbitrary creative decisions, but there is a gravitational (or statistical) shift towards processes of their limitation. It is probably the same with Foucault's epistemes. In his book, the era's are presented as historically identifiable items. In fact, as it does with operational themes, I believe the epistemes work in a more or less additive way. At some point in history, it became possible to think mechanically, but this didn't mean the complete obsolescence of quantitative encyclopedism. Rather, mechanical approaches became predominant, but naming and counting kept its field of application. That is probably why Zumthor's work is possible nowadays, despite its specificity.

On the other hand, Foucault only applied his epistemological history to science, and not to creative disciplines. This is probably due to his scientific background. However, there is a possibility for creative practices to feed such theories. Without any ambition of exhaustiveness, the study of referential architecture (Zumthor and the Baroque) and ongoing architectural practice (Metal and recent projects) allow to broaden the possible field of application of Foucault and Deleuze's writings. Furthermore, prospective practice can help to build further the theory (the disappearance of man and the issue of positioning the practice in a fragmented field).

The contemporary production of (architectural and cultural) theories has become manifold. This could produce an issue with the relationships between practitioners and theorists, growing towards separate worlds. There is probably an interest in considering that a mutually enriching dialogue can take place between practice (its objects and processes) and theory. I would argue that is more enriching to look at the way it actually happens, and at the consequences in the practice and in the definition of frameworks, than trying to impose normative criteria or processes to frame a possible dialogue.

9. AGAIN?

The discovery and explicitation of the shift that happened in the practice through a set of implicit relationships has proven incredibly effective for the development of the practice. It made us conscious of some aspects of our past design work, and formulated renewed hypotheses about current or future work.

I wonder if it would be possible to provoke new shifts in the practice, similar to the one described in this text.

However, I am fully aware that there was a kind of implicit coherence in the linked items. It was not a random set, which made it possible to “make sense”, or to make the implicit sense explicit. However, based on important, challenging projects, and current interests in the literary, artistic, architectural, or even other fields, could result in understanding their implicit coherence and again, shifting understandings and practices.

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