

# Oxy/morons: Architecture and Doctoral Studies in Italy

Ossi/mori: architettura e dottorato di ricerca in Italia

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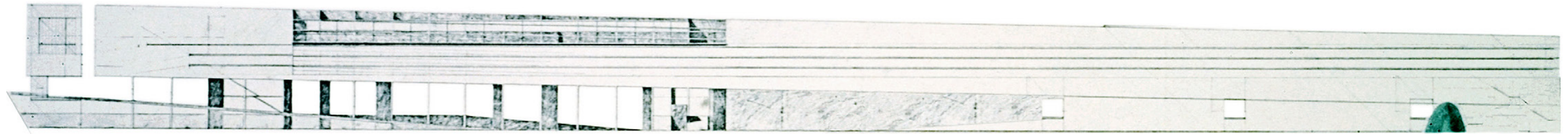
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**After forty years since the introduction of doctoral studies in Italy, a reflection upon the contradictory relationships between design disciplines and higher academic education.**

A quarant'anni dall'istituzione dei dottorati di ricerca in Italia, una riflessione sulle relazioni contraddittorie tra discipline del progetto e alti studi accademici.

Right at the beginning of an article about a hypothetical "ars oblivionalis", Umberto Eco (1988) singles out it as the most interesting among the impossible disciplines his friends and he invented as a joke in the 1960s. Thinking about their impracticability, they had envisaged a taxonomy that placed the anachronistic sciences, such as "history of the wheel in the pre-Columbian empires" in the department of "adynata"; "potiosection, or the art of cutting broth," and other useless topics in the one of "byzantinica"; the excess of subtlety in "tetrapiloctomia, or the art of quartering a hair"; and the incongruent approaches such as "nomadic urban studies" or "institutions of deviance" in "oxymoronica". While Eco wonders about which department can better fit his "art of forgetting", the readers who deal with academic research in architecture cannot help to recognize themselves in this "science-fiction" exercise and





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Piotr Barbarewicz, Anna Cinelli, Juan Manuel Palerm Salazar, Sergio Perez Parrilla, Juan Luis Trillo de Leyva, with Jorge Gorostiza, Antonio Martinez, Leopoldo Tabares de Nava, Carlo Angius, Igino Gini, Reconfiguration and Reuse of the Granary Island, Gdańsk, Design Seminar, IUAV, 1989.

its facets. Ours is in fact a discipline in constant crisis (nostalgia or future? spontaneous or planned? ethics or aesthetics? ...), intrinsically out of time and quite inconclusive – also because of the unforgiving gap between its ambitions and actual capacity of action –, and, above all, contradictory, given its inclination to accept reality and at the same time criticise it (to the point that, in our field, "urban nomadic" researches or projects focussed on the formalisation of illegal practices are often proposed and financed). This structural uncertainty nurtures a methodological approach suspended in-between arts, hard sciences and humanities, which gets further intensified by a complicated relationship with the professional practice, where disciplinary innovation is usually produced. While academic research is supposed to offer competences available for everybody and generally applicable solutions, the actual practice of design develops tools for internal use with the aim to obtain competitive and commercial advantages. The truth systems we are plausibly able to put together are therefore strictly local and ephemeral, so much that we can aspire, in the best cases, to produce gazes rather than knowledge, personal attitudes rather than theoretical generalisations (Corbellini, 2018a). The introduction in the Italian university of PhD programmes opened for such a scientifically weak discipline an unprecedented space, where an increasing number of scholars and professors could, as it were, look insistently at themselves in the mirror and try to figure out where they come from and in which direction head towards. It is an already mature initiative – schools are selecting the candidates for the 40th yearly cycle – able to raise, if not a thorough analysis, at least some reflections on the evolution of this peculiar environment and the developments it fuelled.

We will try to collect some impression on the basis of our own experience, wide enough to offer a sufficiently articulated point of view: we are and have been involved in programs

of well-known Italian schools, but also in peripheral situations, crossing multiple other initiatives in different roles, as advisors, referees, invited to intermediate seminars, in selection committees and in final ones. All in all, we came across several hundred theses and research proposals. Ours is also an experience extended in time. As candidates of the 3rd cycle, we were among the first to attend a PhD course in Italy. In that moment, if we remember correctly, there were only two doctoral programmes in architectural design. The Venetian one in "architectural composition" we attended was a consortium between IUAV and the Politecnico of Milan that had brought together, after thirty years, some of Samonà and Rogers's disciples who have been part of the *Casabella continuità's* "Centro studi". Around Guido Canella, Giorgio Grassi, Gianugo Polesello, Aldo Rossi, Luciano Semerani and Francesco Tentori had gradually gathered colleagues of the two schools, together with some others from Rome and Naples. Of course, nobody had an idea about what a doctoral thesis should be, neither we candidates, as it was quite logical, nor professors, who could not have achieved a PhD. And, of course, we did not know what doing academic research in architectural composition would mean (which, in fact, represents a rather controversial issue: many countries, for example, still prefer to entrust investigations around architecture to the greater methodological solidity of history). However, anticipating the fragmentation in scientific-disciplinary sectors that shortly thereafter invested the Italian university<sup>1</sup>, those professors of composition took advantage of the opportunity to set up a strictly delimited experiment, of which we were excited to become the guinea pigs. On the one hand, all this has led to an unexpected freedom. As candidates of that 3rd Venetian cycle, we could tinker with formats and tools – drawing, for instance, represented for some of us a precious investigation device – and, in the absence of specific examples, the references that we considered more consistent with our researches, even the

classics, provided methods and strategies to organize their contents (to the point that one of the dissertations dared to present itself in "four books" ...). Even topics, scales, and situations the six of us dealt with were very different: from an obscure Polish artistic movement to the museum as a contemporary architectural issue, from the compositional instruments of Terragni to the great urban voids, from the urban role of the theatre to a comparison between some European "exchange cities" (Barbarewicz, 1999; Ciorra, 1991; Corbellini, 2000; Dal Fabbro, 1994). On the other hand, an aim which that quarrelsome group of friends-foes did not stop insisting on was the "disciplinary transmissibility", understood as the affirmation of a genealogy<sup>2</sup> whose not too hidden purpose was to give relevance and continuity to their personal story and design languages<sup>3</sup>. The PhD programme, therefore, represented the opportunity for the elaboration of theoretical constructs, and didactic methods, capable of supporting them. Thus, many candidates followed the interests of their masters. It was a hard but effective school, conducted with all the cruelty that that generation of survivors of World War II was able to exert. If nothing else, we learned to support our ideas. Eventually, sooner or later, we have all become professors. Follow us, therefore, on the other side of the desk a few years later.

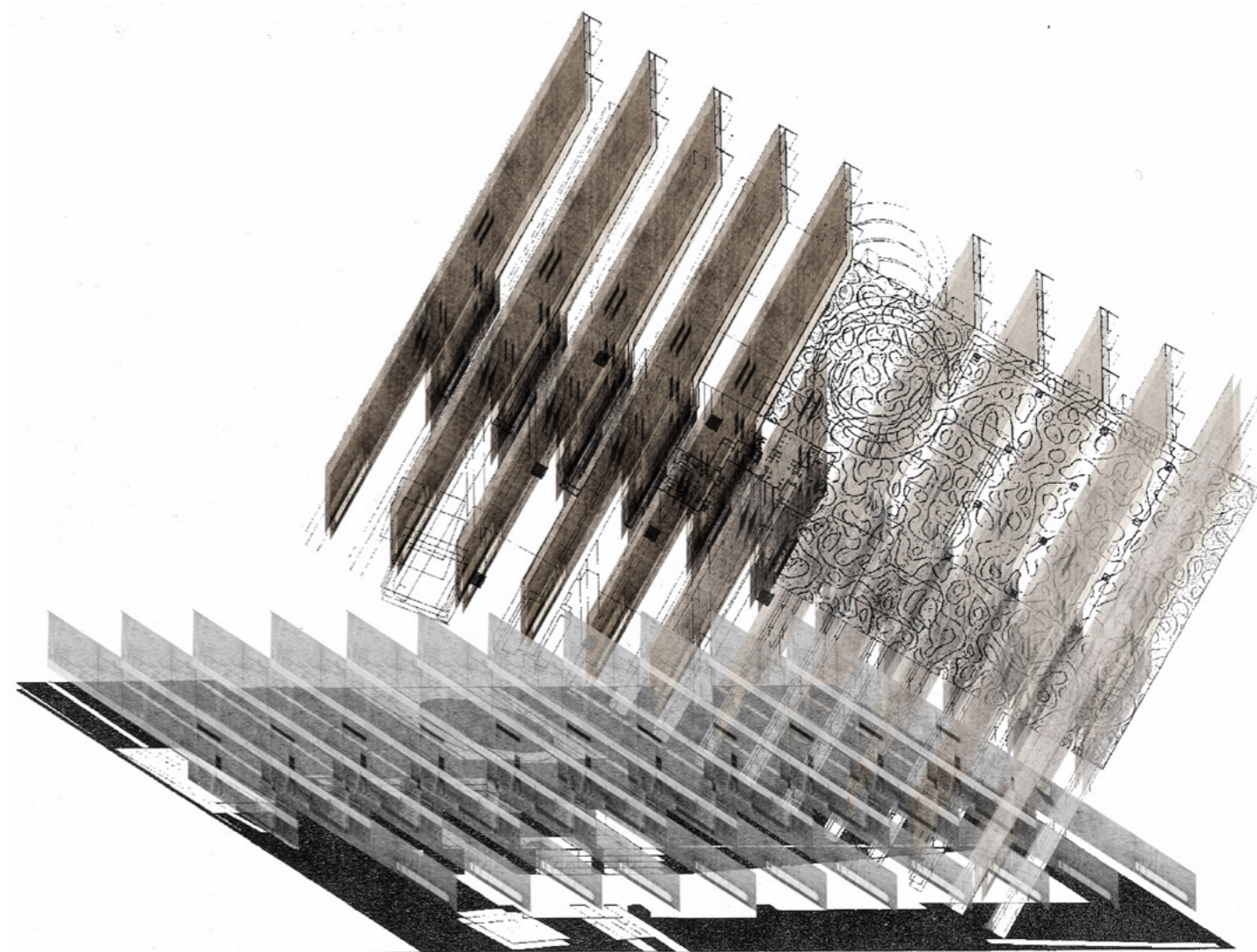
Almost everything has changed.

Forget, first of all, about the very elitist condition of that early PhD period. A large majority of architecture schools, meanwhile quadrupled in number, offers today doctoral programmes. Although in comparison to other countries we still graduate few doctors, a certain inflation has occurred and its effects are evident. One of the most obvious is the dilution of the authoritativeness of us professors, rather watered down compared to the charisma of our masters. The condition of the candidates has in parallel changed, both in attitudes and, above all, in perspectives (Corbellini, 2018b, 2020). Only very few of the approximately ten thousand PhDs of all the disciplines that every year come out of Italian universities have had or will have the opportunity to become tenured teachers. The academic purpose of the doctorate, as it had been conceived at the beginning, had to adapt, trying to keep together the ambitions to excellence with the demands of a "secular" job market, even less interested in theoretical subtleties or strictly disciplinary investigations. A trend that has been further bolstered by the recent injection of money from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, precisely aimed at improving the connections between universities, institutions and companies.

Forget also about the compactness of PhD programmes, both in disciplinary terms and people's affinity. For better or worse, the cohabitation between teachers and candidates from even extremely different backgrounds and formations, even ideologically opposite such as architecture and engineering, is now widespread. However, the experiences of real discussion among history and the diverse design scales as the one of the "Villard de Honnecourt" programme of the IUAV Doctoral School, of which we are part, are extremely rare. More often, these are heterogeneous and fragmentary groupings of monads, determined by the respect of parameters, rules and academic conveniences.

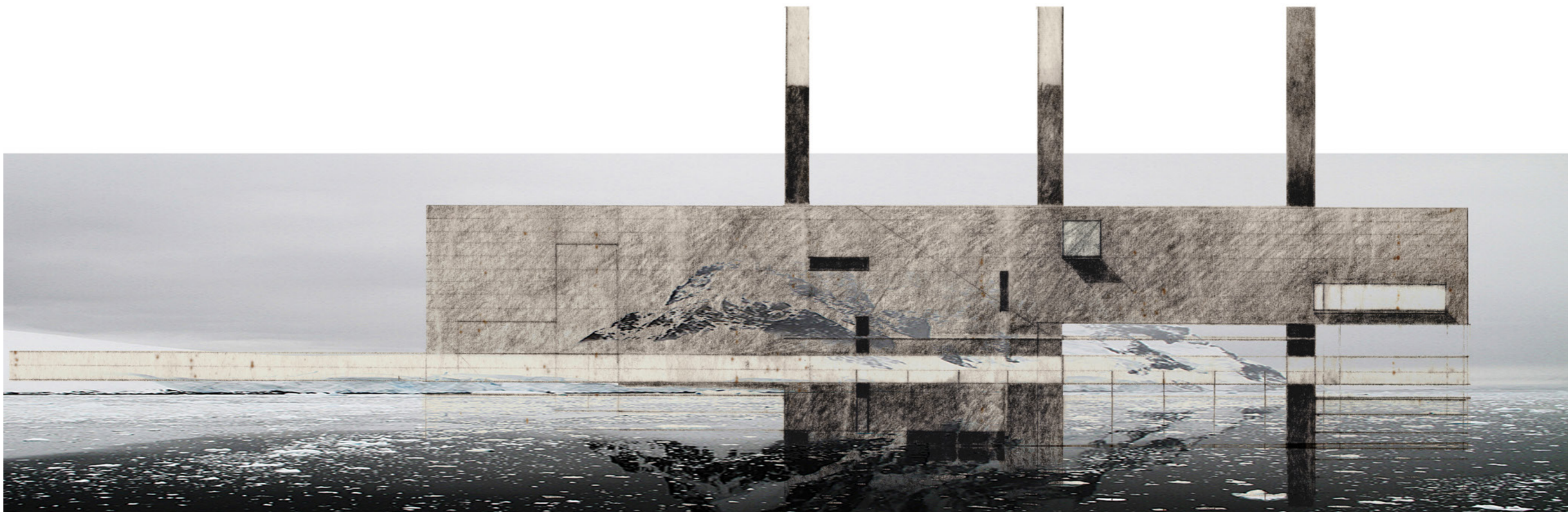
Forget, therefore, about the intensity of horizontal and vertical education exchanges in the scientific communities gathered around doctoral programmes in architecture, whose members less and less share tools, themes, shibboleths, keywords. At best, subgroups follow hierarchical relationships or customary collaborations on research projects, but the most frequent condition is of a delimited dialogue between candidate and advisor. Thus, now almost always, the papers in progress or the final dissertations we must comment on or evaluate tend to deal with elusive issues that involve unknown references.

Forget then about the diversity of results of the early PhD cycles: an unexpected effect, if we think about the transition from our masters' control crave to the current fragmentation. One of the substantial changes that took place over time and that may have eased this outcome has been the introduction of mandatory writing courses and other contributions aimed at providing the candidates for basic tools to carry on their work. Although necessary and meritorious, their application may have produced a certain levelling, also fuelled by the now vast availability of



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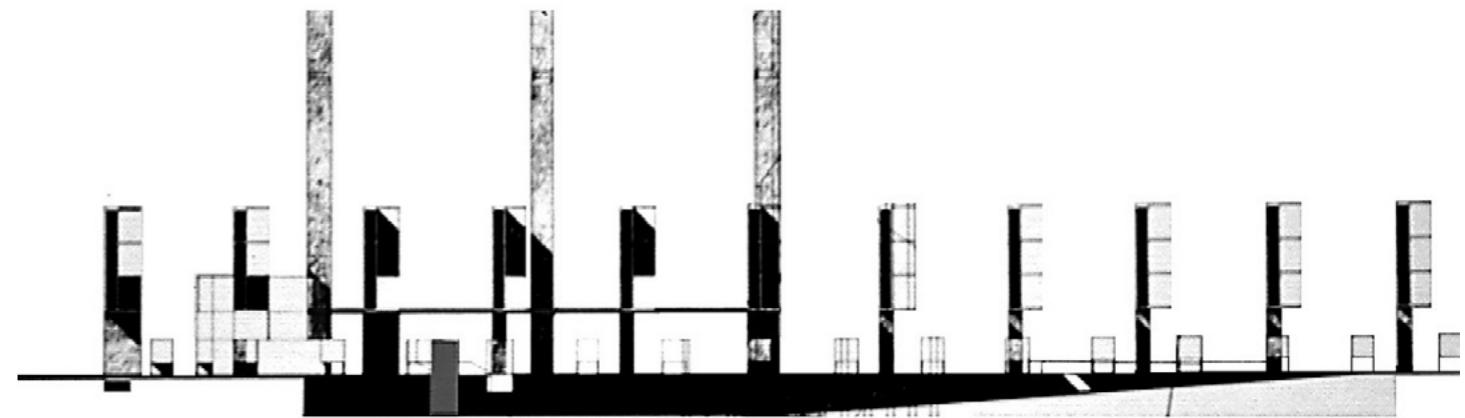
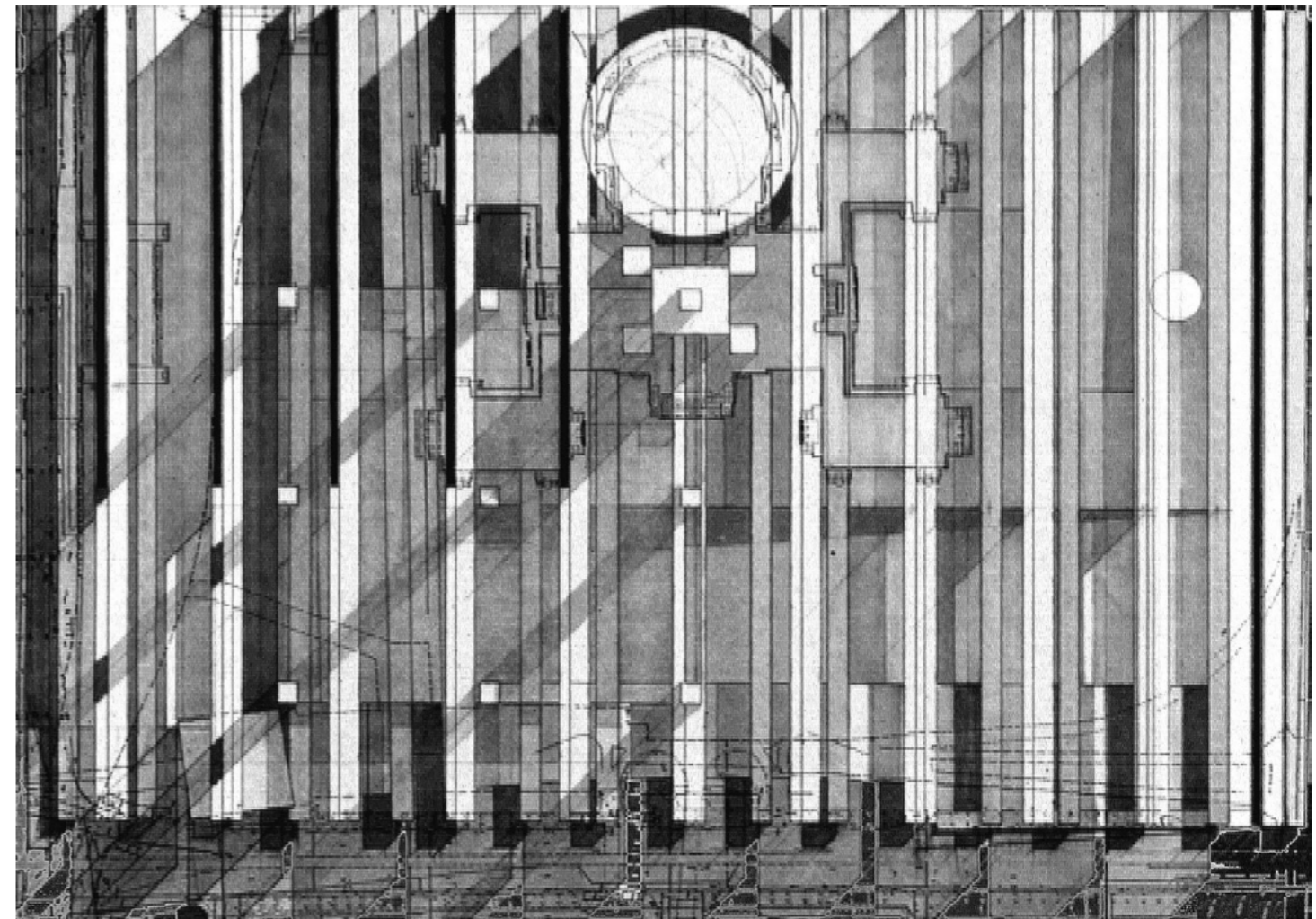
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PhD theses from which to "copy" methods and general organization. It is, for instance, more and more widespread a "canonical" model (roughly tripartite into a theoretical premise, a central part dedicated to cases, and a final one with conclusions), which ends up collecting, as in a diary, the chronological development of the research work<sup>4</sup>. Without the necessary post-production, those works struggle to grasp any operative aspect and to organise them according to the necessary logical-narrative links. This comes out as an even less understandable attitude for designers, from which one would expect the use of the retroactive cyclicity of the project, its developing by trial and error, and, above all, its tension towards a specific, idiosyncratic form, consistent with the contents, in other words: architectural.

Forget, finally, about the epistemological reflection on the discipline. The mirror of the doctoral education has returned to too many of us a merciless image of its overt ambiguity and impotence, further unleashed by the type of narrative that thrives in the interface between the architectural project and the expectations of society. The latter is interested in substantial problem solving. Thus, the architects who want to work (as well as the professors who aspire to obtain funding) pretend to be able to deliver positive solutions of environmental transformation and management. Now, if we have understood something in these forty years of self-analysis, it is that the architectural project hardly keep pace with the increasingly dramatic questions that cross our tormented time and even less can do it in that reality in quotes represented by the academia. At most, architecture gives them representation, allows society to recognize itself in the space it lives in and to live it meaningfully. Yet, both the researches proposed by PhD candidates and the directions to which they are pushed by their advisors have long been moving on the level of performance, political action, sociological survey, regulatory control, participatory inclusion... The import of other disciplinary approaches, better equipped in reading social phenomena and in their capability of intervention on reality, is therefore inevitable, as well as a certain level of improvisation. That is not news, as generalists we have always stolen here and there, but we are doing it with increasing naivety, buying the stories we tell without critical distance. If we looked out of our disciplinary garden – an always-healthy practice – it was to step aside, to "learn from", to recognize the mechanisms of the architectural project in the test of the real, extract tools, disassemble its rhetoric, investigate the always elusive and not linear relationship between words and things, processes and results. It seems, therefore, that the long and repeated attempt fuelled by PhD programmes to transform our discipline into a more solid scientific field is eventually getting closer to produce a paradoxical forgetting machine. Again Umberto Eco notes how amnesia cannot be reached by subtraction: the more we try to eliminate something from the mind and the more we renew its memory. However, the great semiologist shows that memory can be confused by excess, repetition, overlap of meanings<sup>5</sup>. The entropy that distinguishes the doctoral studies in architecture therefore has its roots in the initial autonomist attitude, aimed at the infinite reproduction of the equal, and the current drifts towards heterogenous knowledge is its most logical outcome. Apparently opposite, both attitudes share a neo-illuminist root whose desire for rationalisation, rather than removing architecture from the impossible sciences imagined by Eco and his companions, ends up directing it towards the studies, rather masturbatory, of the Department of Byzantinica.

Instead, we should recognize our ambiguous duplicity and seriously join in the studies of Oxymoronica. The Greek term "*oksýmōron*, composed of *oksýs*, 'sharp', and *mōrós*, 'stupid, mad'" (Corno, 2011), describes us with a certain precision: reducing the madness of architecture means giving up our nature and losing all our sharpness.



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Piotr Barbarewicz, Warsaw City Core Competition, Warsaw, 1992.

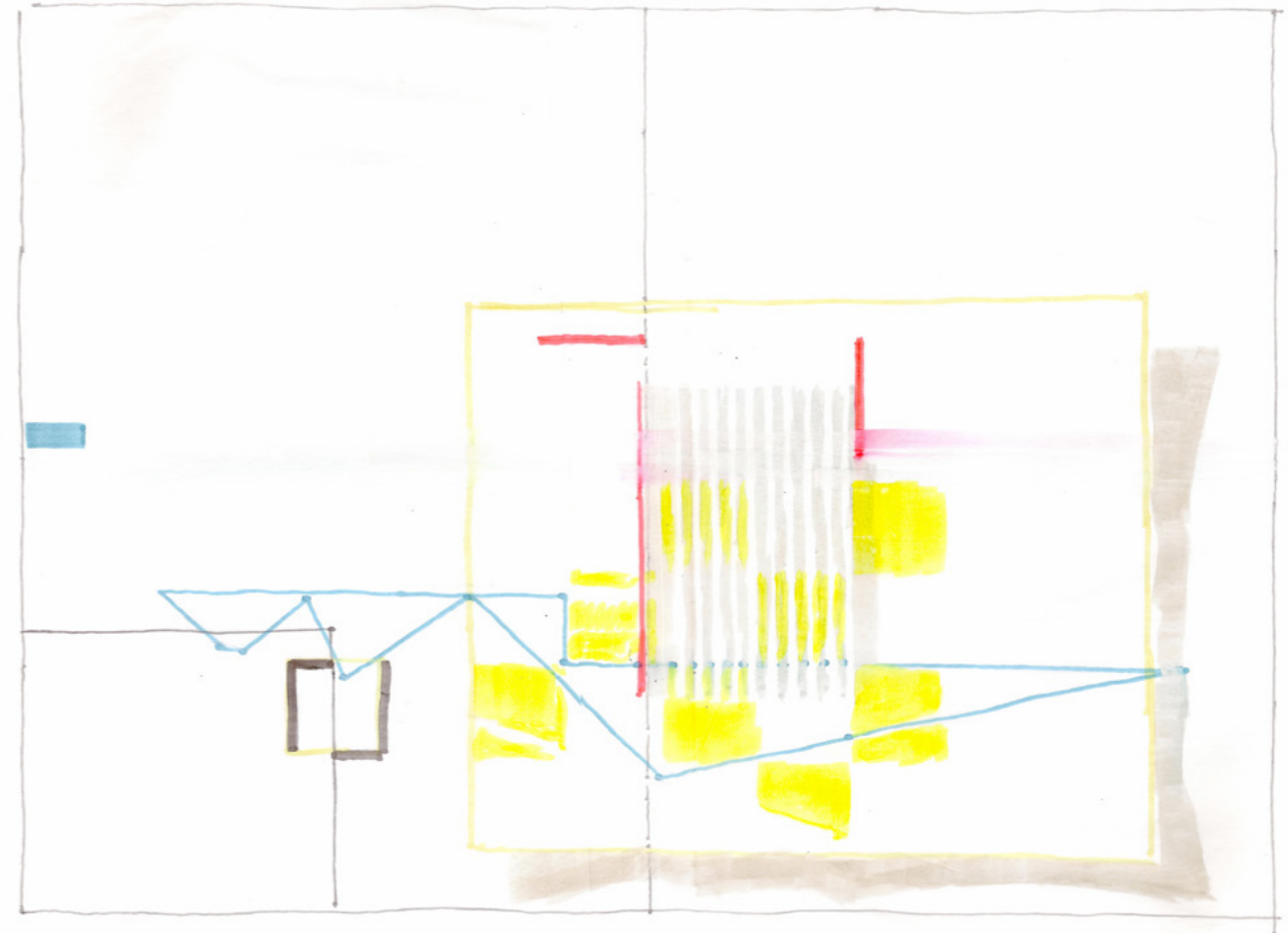


## NOTES

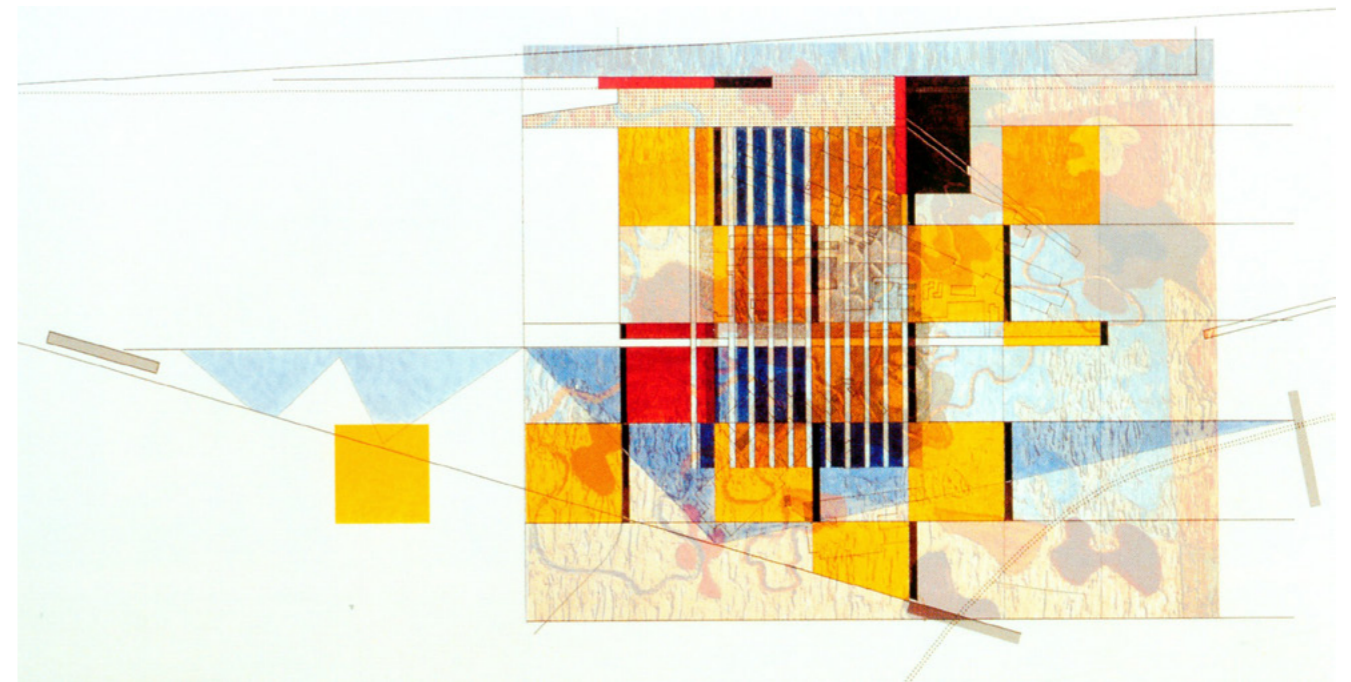
- 01] The "scientific-disciplinary sectors" are a peculiar feature of the Italian university that eased very specialized approaches and their respective isolation. They have been introduced by the Law, 19 November 1990, nr. 341, and further regulated by the Minister Decrees, 30 October 2015, nr. 855, and 2 May 2024, nr. 639.
- 02] The genealogic approach of the Venetian doctoral programme emerges clearly from its initial activities: a series of lectures about its faculties' masters, given by their closest collaborators (Montuori, 1988).
- 03] Francesco Tentori (1999), who has been the first director of the Doctoral Programme in Architectural Composition of the IUAV, soon understood that cultural phase.
- 04] The same, by the way, brilliantly exploited by the doctoral thesis of Peter Eisenman (2006), defended at Cambridge in 1963.
- 05] "Thus it is possible to forget on account not of defect but of excess, just as, though it is not possible to destroy the meaning of an assertion pronounced aloud, it is possible to pronounce another assertion in the same moment, so that the two assertions are superimposed. There are no voluntary devices for forgetting, but there are devices for remembering badly: it is necessary to multiply the semiosis." (Eco, 1988), p. 259.

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Piotr Barbarewicz, Ilario Boniello, Giovanni Corbellini, Armando Dal Fabbro, Giovanni Fraziano, Massimo Iori, Giovanni Marras, Raffaella Neri, Project for Sesto San Giovanni, exhibition "Progetto periferie", Triennale of Milan, 1995.