

Re-programing Disaster?

“The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact. It does not touch anyone in particular; “I” am not threatened by it, but spared, left aside. It is in this way that I am threatened; it is in this way that the disaster threatens in me that which is exterior to me – another than I who passively become other. Out of reach is he whom it threatens wheatear from afar or close up, it is impossible to say: the infiniteness of the threat has in some way broken every limit. We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future...” (“The Writing of the Disaster” by Maurice Blanchot)

We were driving up on the hill of Monte Gaia. It was a wonderful November day. Visits of the building site of a new Cultural Center in Galicia named The City of Culture were canceled. The new government needs some time to think about how to go on. The project eats money beyond believe. It is not clear; or it is not yet public who is going to program cca. 75.000 m² of new space including new Galician Library, Museum of Galician History, Technology Center, Music Theater, Periodicals Archive etc. Maybe there is money to finish the building but who is going to pay the running of new institutions?

We had to get a special permission to enter the building site. It looks like a big volcano crater just after the eruption, where the atmosphere is still and quiet but it is clear that the monstrous devastation had just happened. Too late! This is the site of disaster.

It is Peter Eisenman, the architect of the Cultural City of Galicia, himself who is referring to disaster within his writing. Does he ever think outside of metaphors about his own work creating and provoking disasters? *“He frequently cites “The Writing of the Disaster” one of the essential texts of Maurice Blanchot ; and his architecture shows the same exigent fascination with denial, the same radical search for emptiness, the same deliberate vertigo towards nothingness; but also the same penchant for paradox, word games, and abstruse formalism.”* (Codex, p. 17) But obviously he would never think of his own work being a disaster or creating any kind of devastation. Or... would he even be proud of it if that would happen by his work; if he or his work would be the cause of disaster? Architecture would finally create an immediate effect; the kind of effect that Santiago de Compostale will have to live with forever.

I can't say that the Cultural City of Galicia is a disaster, since it is not yet even finished. But it is also very hard to believe (according to many parameters of the project) that it will be a success. What I question in this case is not its formal representation on the hill of Monte Gaia designed by Peter Eisenman but rather the decision for creating a

Centralization of Cultural Institutions within a mega structure in the country where the typological fragmentation and small scale settlements are genuine for centuries already. The country of Galicia is known for its many small villages and cities which are spread around the hills on the last west corner of Spain. That must just as well in many ways represent the mentality of people living in Galicia. No one ever in this case thought about the importance of the context – the existing everyday culture.

The whole project is all wrapped into highly sophisticated language of symbolism mainly referring to the most obvious historical fact of the place; the presence of Saint James. Santiago de Compostela is the home of the most important codices of medieval era, the Codex Calixtinus, named for Pope Calixto II. It has five parts which mainly talks about Saint James and the last part – “guide for traveling pilgrims” became an inspiration for Peter Eisenman to contribute to creation of this extremely oversized project. I feel sorry for Saint James! He and his story get constantly abused. Highly spiritual entity gets its own representation within the most banal strictly market oriented materialization. It is clear to everybody today that the beautiful city of Santiago de Compostela turned into well known tourist destination due to its reach and important history. Tourism based on culture became one of the leading drives in economy of the whole region (not only in Galicia but world wide). This is a fact! The City of Culture is based on the same idea: building cultural institutions will attract tourists who will bring money which will provide more work and improve economy. The scenario is clear and it used to work!

Unless... people on key positions including architects misunderstood the idea of scale in relation to the context. As Michael Keating writes in his article “Rethinking the Region”, the qualities of territories themselves are going beyond matters of location and infrastructure, into the social construction of the local economy. This has been heavily influenced by economic sociology (Swedburg 1993), by work on the ‘social construction of the market’, and by the debate on different models of capitalism. All of these have sought to demonstrate that there is not one best mode of production, that capitalism is socially embedded and takes different forms in different places, and that the market is, like other social phenomena, a human product which also takes different forms in different contexts. Territory then becomes, not merely location, but the basis of a whole complex of social relationships, behaviors and norms.” This clearly state that “Bilbao effect” cannot be repeated by only re-seizing and re-placing the existing model.

Misunderstanding of the context in the case of Cultural City of Galicia is not only created by the American architect but also by the local politicians and other professionals in

power at the time of the commission. **The Money, The Power, and The Strive for Immortality** have been the main driving forces for this project. No one talks about Galician people ever being involved into this project; the people who represent and create the Culture of the Place. People who are building culture, who are part of culture, people who are financing culture didn’t decide to build this cultural mega structure; it is obvious that the decision was taken on a higher political level; it was decided by people who were eager to create just another monument for themselves. In this case we are facing again one of the many examples of failed democracy. It is clear that also in this case the democracy of today has reached its limits.

“But it is not an architect’s fault” they would say, “He is just fulfilling the requirements of the client”. Architect should just listen to the client and do what the client wants? Without any critical thought, without any moral or ethical responsibility not even to himself? If there is a **Moral Codex** in architectural profession than there is now

certainly replaced by the **Codex of Business**. That drives architectural profession into a very limited non-critical field of operation. It become just and only a service. A service for whoever would need it; a king, a priest or a thief and serve to what ever possible ideology.

According to Giancarlo De Carlo the conformist position was the role of the architect in the history. In different historical epochs depending on the use to which political power put him, the architect has been more a head-brick-layer or more a god. But in all epochs, whatever the importance of his role, the architect has been subject to the world view of those in power. Therefore we could question the credibility of architecture even nowadays even within the project like Cultural City of Galicia which pretends to represent higher goals.

“At the same time, the morphological and structural conceptions and the operative tools which until now governed architectural production are thrown into question. A vast set of variables which institutional culture and practice had suppressed come back into play, and the field of reality in which architecture intervenes becomes macroscopic and complex. Therefore only the assumption of clear ideological positions and the application of rigorously scientific procedure can guarantee a legitimate political and technical framework.” (Giancarlo De Carlo; Architecture’s public)

Therefore I had to ask myself some questions when I visited Monte Gaia, when I have seen the building site of the new Cultural City of Galicia:

Has the architect finally got to create a Disaster? (no metaphors or symbolic analogies, please!). Who has put him into this dreadful, unpleasant situation? Did anybody of those glamorous participants of the architectural competition revisit the program in relation to the context? Why nobody protested?

Report from New York Times, April 3rd, 2001- “Spain's Minister of Education, Culture and Sports, Pilar del Castillo, and Manuel Fraga Iribarne, President of the Xunta of Galicia, today unveiled plans for the City of Culture of Galicia (CCG): an 810,000 square foot (75.250 M2), \$175 million (145 mill. EUR) project designed by the world-renowned firm of Eisenman Architects. One of the largest cultural complexes now in development world-wide, the CCG is evidence of Spain's growing investment in culture as an economic development tool. Banking on the "Bilbao-effect" (so-called for the popularity conferred on that city by the Guggenheim Museum), the Autonomous Community of Galicia, in the Northwest corner of Spain, looks to its boldly contemporary City of Culture to spur tourism at the same time as it enriches local cultural and educational offerings.”

It is hard to find a God who will appreciate the richness of symbolic language build into the project of the City of Culture and gave mercy to its creators.

Amen.