The Pyramids of Sand
From the absolute to the relative in architecture

How long does architecture last? Following Boltzmann’s argument—that the only infinite thing is change and that every object invariably tends towards degradation—this text presents a brilliant theoretical argument regarding the possibility of architecture no longer surviving as an object—building—but rather as a document. In this sense, questioning the temporality of architecture would be unnecessary because, sooner or later, even the pyramids will turn into dust.

**KEYWORDS** · Theory, creation, archive, document, media

The Genesis 1:1, in Hebrew opens by saying, Bereshit Bara Elohim which means "In the beginning The Eternal created..." Nevertheless, it is peculiar that The Torah starts with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet Bet and not Alef, which is the first one. Since Bet means "House", The Eternal began with a house. Afterwards, we see Bara Elohim Et, Bara is the act of creating something out of nothing, unlike the word Yotzer that means creating from something else. Man is just able to create from something else, but only The Eternal can create something out of nothing. Elohim [is] in Hebrew theology, the Judge, Yud-Hey-Vay-Hey. In his Elohim character (not of creator) judges it, and since this work is also created by Elohim, decrees that there are laws that maintain this universe.
The last word is Et, referring to the object in the phrase. Et finishes with the last letter of the alphabet Tav, which communicates that The Eternal used the 22 letters of the alphabet to make creation possible. The Alef is the space, and its symbol in the mathematical realm represents the different types of infinities. In his capacity of enunciating and saying his name is how God creates. (Kaplan, 1997)

Since a long time ago, architecture has been considered an act of creation. According to those ancient canons, its physical actions and traces in the earth were intended to endure. Its objects were confident of their solidity and strength until not long ago. These objects were built in the world, but they have always sought transcendence both in a philosophical as well as in a material way. The act of creation is fundamental to the comprehension of architecture as a discipline and portrays its aspiration of permanence and immutability.

The biblical story of the Genesis is the quintessential story of creation: it portrays the fundamental components of the act of creating, where the enunciation (will) is depicted through a media (the alphabet) and is
presented as a sensitive phenomenon (the world). This epistemology of creation is given by two moments; the first is the enunciation of his own name (God) as the only creating power (idea), and the second one is when he gives order and represents through a 22 letter-language (document).

As architects, we are in the business of creating, or at least have we been told so for a very long time, but what does it mean to create? Which is the action within architecture where the power of creation lies upon?

Creation, in platonic terms, is the moment where the intelligible world (the world of the ideas) participates in the sensitive one (the physical world) through an enunciation (eidos) and its depiction (cause). That is, the moment in which ideas become enunciations and are therefore susceptible to a representation through any language either material or abstract. That’s the moment when they start being real and tangible for everyone else, when they ‘exist’ in architectural terms.

Architecture has always been strongly anchored to an idealistic way of thinking. Our objects are imperfect attempts to depict the biggest amount of ideas or aspirations; we establish and apply the same protocol of creation to all our objects. This idea remains until today, permeating our history, theory, and the way in which we try to capture the eternal and universal qualities of beauty, utility, and firmness in our constructions. As Plato said, our creations are reflections of our ideas expressed in a material way in the form of architectural documents. Plato called this demiurge, the Artificer.³

When Galileo was assigned by the Church to provide an argument for the scientific validation and material or numerical delimitation (measurements, proportions and settings) of Dante’s Inferno, the task assimilated that of the materialization of a project. The enunciation had already been made, but it had to have a precise location and a more specific form. Galileo used this assignment to enunciate that the universe had to be something similar: an already written book in a veiled language, in which the work of the artificer consisted in revealing its secrets through science and observation in a more accessible language. The Divine Comedy is the universe; Dante is God, and Galileo the Artificer. Hell, as a place of torment and suffering, was created as an idea when it was enunciated by Dante, but it wasn’t until Galileo’s depiction that it started existing as something which we could consider real.

From a philosophical perspective, to enunciate has always been related with the creation of something abstract, while architecture has historically focused on documenting things that survive man himself. Our enunciations (projects) seek to be materialized and therefore to prevail for as long as the ideas that conceived them do. However, not all of them reach its material quality, nor everything that gets materialized endures, and above all that, nothing endures forever.

Newton spoke in his time about our incapacity of understanding the infinite and of our necessity of having references. Architecture in the world was that reference and picture which captured space, froze time and built not architectural objects but monuments. The pyramid –along

³ The demiurge joins the universe of the most beautiful and perfect as possible, and this gives it soul and reason. The product is a gifted living cosmos of both qualities, where man is also involved. Soul and reason, or if you will, spirit and intelligence, imbued in us and in this vast universe thanks to the desire for goodness and perfection of the demiurge, our maker. The sensible world, according to Plato is somehow a copy of the ideal world; there is a Maker who has made a backup of the ideal. The ideal world is eternal, like the Artificer. The sensible world has to change first. (Reale & Antiseri, 1999)
with the wall and other classical typologies— is exactly that: a one-time enunciation meant to exist forever, unaltered, as a concept susceptible to several interpretations. An absolute idea that can be performed, depicted or documented in different ways. The document as the outcome of an enunciation provides flexibility and also survival with a cost, related not to its materiality but to its interpretation.

It wasn’t but two centuries after the ideas of Newton were established as the canon in mechanics and physics when Ludwig Boltzmann claimed that the only thing infinite was change and that every object was inevitably liable to degradation in time (Boltzmann, 1886). That statement changed the pretended unitary and absolute condition of architecture until then. Every object, despite of the effort put on its physical consolidation, would eventually disappear from earth and would cease to exist, or we would simply forget that it once did.

Borges starts one of his short stories with a Francis Bacon quote: “Salomon said: there is no new thing upon the earth. So that as Plato had and imagination, that all knowledge was but remembrance; so Salomon give his sentence, that all novelty is but oblivion” (Borges, 1997). If this was architecture’s somber future, something had to be done about it, and then a third moment in the creative process in architecture appeared: the document as a form of preservation.

I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted; places that might be points of reference, of departure, of origin (...).

Such places don’t exist, and it’s because they don’t exist that space becomes a question, ceases to be self-evident, ceases to be incorporated, ceases to be appropriated. Space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It’s never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it (...).

Space melts like sand running through one’s fingers. Time bears it away and leaves me only shapeless shreds. (Perec, 1979)

Within the cycle of creation, the document is the tool that allows the original enunciation to prevail in time regardless of architecture’s physical endurance. The document incorporates the idea of remembrance (anamnesis) as a form of creation just by the action of preserving in time the abstract memory of those physical vestiges.

Until now, the only reference to time in architecture was as something potentially infinite, where the object simply existed in time. However, when time was reflected in the object in the form of physical degradation, measurements had to be taken to maintain its relevance status, but even more important, its very existence. If documenting has in it the creative qualities of enunciation, then the document, as the enunciation, expresses itself through any depiction abstract or material.

In the moment that its permanence and existence in time depended on being once again enunciated, architecture began to show a weakness never seen before. The fact that this enunciation depended no longer on the architect, but on a second “documenter” just added to the fear:

In fact, if we sum up what we have just roughly pointed out—disregarding a thousand details of proof and also exceptions to the rule— it comes briefly to this: that down to the fifteenth century, architecture was the chief recorder of the human race; that during that space no single thought that went beyond the absolutely fundamental, but was embodied in some edifice; that every popular idea, like every religious law, has had its monuments; finally, that the human race has never conceived an important thought that it has not written down in stone. And why? Because every thought, whether religious or philosophic, is anxious to be perpetuated; because the idea which has stirred one generation longs to stir others, and to leave some lasting trace. But how precarious is the immortality of the manuscript! How far more solid, enduring, and resisting a book is the edifice!

However, The Book will destroy the Edifice. (Victor Hugo, 1917)

Architecture began like every writing system: it was first an alphabet. A stone was planted upright and it became a letter, and each letter was a
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hieroglyph, and on every hieroglyph rested a group of ideas, like the capitol on the column. Soon they constructed words. Stone was laid upon stone, these granite syllables were coupled together and the words essayed some combinations.

Lastly, they made books. The pillar, which is a letter; the arch, which is a syllable; the pyramid, which is a word set in motion at first by the laws of geometry but also by the laws of poetry in a completely new media. The old steadiness is being replaced by diversity, and architecture goes and flows with time, becoming easy to understand and accessible to everyone, multimedia, compatible and abstract. Human thought discovered a means of perpetuating itself, not only more durable and resisting than architecture, but also simpler and easier to achieve.

Consideration must be given not only to the internal attributes of a work but also to its production and dissemination in and across the media within which meaning is produced. (Burgin, 1976).

And with this change, both document and enunciation drew closer and made the architectural object more complex and less rigid, less material and more abstract, more relative to perception than its meaning. Media became an inherent part of the architectural experience, not only to the public, but also to the authors themselves. The ‘Mirror Effect’, understood as the impossibility to see the object in its wholeness anymore but through its reflection or interpretation, already foresaw the imminent need for a medium to be able to understand the whole piece now invisible in its materiality. “The mirror stage is a turning point. After it, the subjects’ relation to himself is always mediated through a totalizing image that has come from the outside” (Gallop, 1985). We reached the point where architecture was understood as a publishing process. One in which the medium is ‘the mirror’ where all the parts and pieces of the enunciation and values that are ascribed to the object (many times not materialized) return magically to the object as a complete image.

The work is only a trace or direct registration of those materials and procedures of reproduction from which it is constructed. (Hays, 1988)²

In other words, it is the technique of reproduction itself rather than the object produced through it that becomes significant (Colomina and Ockman, 1988). The document provided values to the object and made it possible for it to prevail in time, but as much as architecture needed a document, the document still needs a created object to publish.

Josep Quetglas’ essay on the German Pavilion for the 1929 International Exhibition in Barcelona is on its own a meta-narration, in which not only the pavilion that no longer existed was reconstructed, frozen, preserved and reproduced, but also provided the values that transformed that pavilion—which almost nobody knew—into a reference

² Michael Hays said this in reference to the work of Hannes Mayer.
for everyone of Mies van der Rohe's work (Quetglas, 2000). It turned it into an icon of modernity.

The pavilion was rebuilt. The document had returned its existence quality not only in the abstract world, but in the material one as well. This was a turning point, even though the story of the pavilion had come from an existing material object, the image that allowed the second pavilion to exist and be relevant came uniquely from the memory and meta-narration of the essay. The document had enunciated architecture.

Michel Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge* talks about the inversion of existence as a fact regarding the document. From a classical point of view, history and its reconstruction are made from what the document says. History has altered its position regarding the document. By developing it from within, it has changed its condition as inert material to history which tries to rebuild what man has done, and instead defines from within the documentary material itself: unities, totalities, series, and relations. “History is what transforms the document into a monument” (Foucault, 1972). History, as architecture, aspires to an archeological condition, to the intrinsic description of the monument. The history/document relationship in which the second one always follows the first, as Beatriz Colomina talked about, had been inverted to open up the path for the document to take the role that architecture feared so much it would: the document had begun to enunciate architecture; to document was to enunciate (Colomina, 1988). Without a document to enunciate there is no story to be told; the document is history itself. Giving materiality to the document had provided the ability to build, and to build in time. The document was not only contained in the foundation of these edifices. Following this structure for instance, Solomon’s Temple was not simply there to protect the sacred book; it was the sacred book itself.

Architecture as a material object has ceased to be a reference; the document is now an entity free to create, and architecture has started to become expendable. Images are increasingly more abstract and have lost their architectural value, becoming just images while architecture remains a fact on the ground. An absolute and universal enunciation, as old as the pyramids, filled with ideas that intended to reinvent the world. This architecture slowly ceases to exist and it’s upon its ruins, where new speculative, abstract and fictional architectures have taken its place. These architectures begin to build possibilities, to build versions of uncertain futures on a testimonial level. Everything can be whatever you want it to be and with each new vision the previous one disappears.

Architectural objects have become an abstract entity which could be reinterpreted *ad infinitum*, losing definition but gaining spaces otherwise unreachable to a static object stochastically fighting against time. Architecture’s frailty is felt today more than ever. The possibility of losing itself in the document and that its existence depends on someone else, makes it necessary to rethink itself.

Due to its determining quality of being static, architecture’s unmovable condemn today is the impossibility to adapt itself to current times. Architecture, before depicted in space, is now forced to venture into time and to absorb the document’s transformative and editable condition if it pretends to recover its condition as a whole. To reinvent itself towards self-documentation and enunciate itself again: the era of documental architecture. It is within this transformation that architecture will meet again with its absolute ancestors. With each change, it will enunciate again; therefore exist again and once more create.

In the creation, *Alef* and *Bet* (creation and depiction) were enough letters for classical architecture to maintain its existence condition. Today it has discovered that it needs the 22 letters in the alphabet (multimedia condition) to reach the ability to endure through time it always aspired to. Pyramids are the last bastions of that mythological, archetypical, unitary and eternal physical architecture. And those ruins that you now see, remind you of what we once were and still accomplish to tell you what
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you will be. The inheritance of time in space transcends ‘flesh and stone’ and it lives in our senses and memory.

Architecture’s material degradation is the archeological evidence of the imperious necessity of a change in the way in which we have historically conceived it. New media as new tools, the invention of artificial spaces or the extension of others, requires their own typologies and a completely new way of documentation. This versatility will allow us to survive in a mercurial environment where architecture is present in everything, from object-oriented philosophies which can only be depicted as images to a multi-disciplinary environment which includes both science and philosophy, and many other fields or frontiers that are waiting for our exploration.

History is also remembrance, and any architectural object has to be documented not only as a way of preservation but also as a tool of transformation. The outcome of all these new ways of preservation and interpretation only enriches the limited frontiers of our conservative discipline. Those ancient artifacts made in stone are still here to see how architecture faced its degradation with optimism, embraced it and explored the ruins with the avidity that novelty provided.

Today, after many centuries of stealing, sacking and decisions made against the archaic and well-born discipline of architecture, maybe the only thing we can acknowledge after researching about its current condition is, like the pyramids, the incredible fact of still being here, just as planned. ARQ

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