

## REFERENCES?

**Keywords***Process**Project**Academy**Avant-garde**Subjectivity*References:  
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There is always something suspicious about the term 'referent.' Perhaps it is because it is often used to conceal the lack of proper reflection. Or maybe it is because the word has a bureaucratic smell around it. In any case, what follows is an attempt to distinguish between a use and an abuse of the so-called 'referent.' And, in the process, a defense of its use in times when its resurrection seems propitious.

A first idea is that there is a historical way of using references – one that considers the referent and its circumstances – and that is given through examples, quotes or precedents. That is why the comparison between law and architecture is pertinent: we can solve 'cases' by means of *exempla*. In painting, when Cézanne said he only painted for museums, he was referring to this, since for him the museum was the place where his painting had to be measured against the accumulated knowledge of art. This is also the idea behind Rossi's *architettura per i musei*, which considers architecture as a series of compromises enabling exceptions, and not the other way around.

The second way – the abuse – is ahistorical. It works at the level of mere image, since it isolates the referent from the set of events, ideas and practices that originated it. Thus, a minimalist sculpture can be a reference, just like the texture of a vegetable or the poche of a baroque plan. In this case, the use of 'referent' justifies formal decisions rather than design arguments. Here it does not matter to know whether the Baroque used the poche to

A potential threat if seen as straitjackets restraining originality or a guarantee if understood as anchors to accrued disciplinary knowledge. Despite having emerged almost in parallel to the academic institutionalization of architecture, and a century after being questioned by the modern avant-gardes, the practice of using references in the design process is still controversial. Thus, for this debate the question could not be other than how valid is the use of referents as a design method?

## Against imitation in design practice

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The use of referents in architectural design processes has become a nasty habit. As such, its permanence over time has turned it into a cultural asset that seems to have existed forever. Installed at a cultural level, the habit has become incombustible. The very idea of questioning it is uncomfortable, reprehensible and dismissible. However, we write these lines to argue the normalization of this practice in architecture schools around the world.

As it is well known, the fiercest battle faced by the avant-garde artists defending the principles of abstract art in the early twentieth century was against the notion of art as mimesis. The target of their attack was the idea that, in order to produce an artwork the artist had to choose an element of nature – a tree, for example – and use it as a model to be so closely imitated as his skills would allow for. The creative process was thus governed by the ‘rule of imitation,’ according to which the depicted tree was always an imperfect copy of the original. Art imitated life. By questioning the mimetic function of art, showing the boundaries that separated art and life, and installing the notion of ‘art for art’s sake’ – that is, of abstract art – the avant-garde believed they had forever banished imitation from artistic activity.

Mimesis was also considered the fundamental function of classical architecture. And, although the image that best summarizes the idea is Laugier’s eighteenth-century engraving of the ‘Primitive Hut,’ ever since the Renaissance and given the actions of some artists, Ancient Greek architecture was seen as a ‘second

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deploy less conventional functions within the building, or if the dissolution of perspective in a work of art came to question our perception of reality. In its apparent lightness, this branch has an ideology: it divorces the referent from its context, makes it a trivial object, and puts it into circulation only by virtue of its appearance.

- If the first use of the referent is always a comment about architecture and its methods, the second seems to be a vehicle for personal expression organized around problems of subjectivity: architecture as therapy. It is not that subjectivity cannot have a place in the first category; it is just that the understanding of architecture as a collective knowledge neutralizes subjectivity for the benefit of broader consensus. If the use of the referent implies a political potential, its abuse does the opposite.

There are reasons why the 'precedent' – perhaps the most conflictive category of the referent – has come into question almost in parallel to its systematization during the Renaissance. An obvious one is antiquarianism. In fact, it was quickly understood that, in order to keep the tradition alive, it was imperative to 'betray' it with some frequency: the game between *tradere* and *tradire* Tafuri speaks of is at the center of the debates of the time, immediately presenting the referent as a critical tool. In this way, one can adopt a reference to correct it (a usual aspect of the deal between the Renaissance and the ancient world), resignify it (Piranesi in Campo Marzio) or intensify it (Ungers in Roosevelt Island). All these examples establish a non-cosmetic – yet critical – relationship with history.

It is hard to imagine, then, something less seductive for neoliberalism than the first meaning of 'reference': too much prescription, too much intellectuality, too much scholarship. But while that regime turns into a series of populisms and demagogues, we are slowly speaking again of rules and norms. In that sense, it is not by chance that we are discussing references in architecture. The fact that it is based on genealogies rather than traditions tells us to what extent we have left behind the universal ambitions of the classical world, or the equally totalizing modern *tabula rasa*. As in games, where a referee mediates between parties, if there is something that references embody is the search for a certain agreement between past and present, individual and society. **ARQ**

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nature.<sup>1</sup> Buildings from a distant past were discovered, located, exposed, measured and drawn. Plates showing plans, facades or views of such buildings circulated through architectural treatises and were available to anyone interested. Greco-Roman architecture became the 'original' to be imitated, the authority against which any new architectural form was to be measured. From then on, design implied selecting, from a catalog of buildings belonging to the past, a model to be imitated as faithfully as the architect's knowledge and talent allowed for. Over time, the catalog was expanded. By the early nineteenth century, the practice of assembling fragments taken from different models began to be well esteemed. The result was called 'eclecticism.'

Today, the catalog of buildings has grown disproportionately. It is expanded collaboratively, in real time and without any selection filters. The models supply has multiplied to the point of paroxysm, becoming the dream – or nightmare – of an Enlightenment architect. Given that this catalog enlargement makes its direct use impossible, some studios ask students to build their own sub-catalogs, which, turn to be collections of images showing 'scenes to be imitated.' It is only with this collection of scenes that the student embarks on a design adventure which, as 500 years ago, will be ruled by imitation and mimesis. Pedagogically speaking, imitation might be the means but certainly not the end.

Thus, we do not intend to support the figure of the noble savage. It was not against Ancient architectures that modern architects were raised a century ago, but against the practice of imitating past buildings fixed in a catalog. Many of them accurately dissected architectural pieces to discover 'principles,' to refute them or to test variations. It is essential not to confuse the patient and cautious study of buildings with a catalog of scenes to be replicated. Therefore, students should be taught to develop a critical and challenging attitude, through which each project may be seen as an opportunity to generate new disciplinary knowledge, rather than adopting a submissive attitude towards the authority of referents, which sentences them to their imitation or, even worse, their reinterpretation. **ARQ**

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