A DEBATE ON VALUES

By presenting an example quite familiar to architects, Marx explains the need for a third element – a means – to establish a value-relationship between commodities: "In order to calculate and compare the areas of rectilinear figures" – the philosopher says – "we decompose them into triangles. But the area of the triangle itself is expressed by something totally different from its visible figure, namely, by half the product of the base multiplied by the altitude." Then, he adds: "In the same way the exchange values of commodities must be capable of being expressed in terms of something common to them, of which they represent greater or less quantity" (Marx, 1867[1990]:127). That is, in order to establish this value-relationship between different things, *a* and *b*, it is necessary to abstract the qualities of both to make them equivalent to a third-factor *x*. Thus, $a = x$ and $b = 2x$ lets us know that *a* is worth half of *b*.

Money is the most common means to establish this value-relationship. It is the *x* that links *a* and *b*. That is why economy arbitrates the concept of value: knowledge about the means of exchange gives it the status of judge over the value of things, in the same way that knowledge of the law allows lawyers to be judges regarding behavior. The problem, as usual, is when means become ends.

We know a lot about this, both in architecture and the city. An urban-land plot with an old building on it (*a*) has a market value *x*. When building a tower on the site (*b*), that urban-land plot will have a market value of 15*x*. Here, multiplying the means (*x*) has become the end, and the plot, which is the same, also becomes a means to extract surplus value. As banal and simple as it may seem, this operation is the basis on which urban-land value is calculated.

Still, we can make it more complex. For instance, by considering also the social value of the old building with regards to the new tower. Or by establishing the educational value of the historic building and so on. Perhaps the economists would be reluctant to include other factors in the value equation since it is obvious that they would try to defend a realm of autonomy, keeping the knowledge of the few variables it considers. However, it is a necessary discussion because the *status quo* on this subject only goes to the detriment of the environment.

Yet, this is not only the economists' fault. We, the architects, have not done much either. We have not been able to explain – outwards – where the value of what we do lies and why we value what we do. Since value is the result of a social relationship – a negotiation – we are missing a counterpart (maybe we are afraid that, if we include it, our elite position would vanish). Until we do it, the (insufficient but 'objective') economic logics will

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continue weighing more than our (complex but disjointed) architectural arguments.

This issue of ARQ is an attempt to articulate that complexity. In the portfolio, we see an auction in which what is auctioned is simply dust. The conversation between the Architecture Lobby members explores several concepts of value linked to architecture as a profession. The DS+R & Rockwell Group project allows us to see undeclared value transfers. Barclay & Crousse show that architectural and real estate values are not incompatible. Shvartzberg investigates the creation of a real estate index. Pérez and Quintanilla demonstrate that a new intervention can revalue the heritage. Gil explains the debates about urban value after an earthquake. Franch revalues landscape by getting rid of architecture. Correa displays the notions of value in Tafuri. Grandeza presents an architectural installation with a new scale of social values. Kovacs proposes that, in architecture, value does not depend on the price. Graw attempts to define, in twelve theses, where the value of art lies. Finally, in the debate, we have two positions regarding the paradigmatic case of Villa San Luis. Thus, each article presents different readings on value that complicate its definition.

But if we have managed to present so many different readings on value in a single issue (and there are certainly many others), why does the fact that what we do is only valued in terms of money seem so natural to us – so that we accept it with almost no resistance? Is there anything else we can do from architecture to balance the hegemony of economy when it comes to establishing value? Maybe so.

Marx also tells us that the value of *a* does not derive from its exchange for another *a*. It is necessary to relate it to something different (*b*) for value to appear. That is, the value is not an intrinsic condition: it only appears in the encounter with difference. This means, for instance, that architecture's value can only be found outside. It is not that architecture has no value or lacks a specific field; it is just that, if we want to establish its value, we must put it in relation to something else. In other words, architecture's value cannot be established from a position of autonomy: it implies, rather, sitting down to negotiate or going out to hold a debate on values. We would like this issue of ARQ to be a step in that direction. **ARQ**

Referencias / *References*

MARX, Karl. *Capital: a critique of political economy*. Vol. I "The Process of Capitalist Production". London: Penguin Classics, 1990 [1867].