

On continuity and discontinuity. Interview with Alexander Schwarz

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Abstract

The James Simon Galerie design of Museum Island in Berlin seems to us, one of the few projects that give back unity to a great urban system like that of Berlin, that, after the war, it's been characterized by a hard and continuous discontinuity in its building fabric.

We had wanted to meet Schwarz and ask him in depth the reasons for the design choice, if and how this dialogue with urban morphology. We wanted to ask to one of the protagonists of contemporary architectural culture what were the reasons that had guided the intervention, if, as it appeared, there had been an attempt to go beyond the restoration and beyond the temptation to sign, with a strong sculptural gesture, the scene of the historical centre of Berlin.

Abbiamo invitato Alexander Schwarz a tenere una conferenza a Roma nella Facoltà di Architettura della Sapienza, in particolare per il progetto del James Simon Galerie del Museum Island di Berlino. Ci sembrava che questo intervento, ormai quasi concluso, fosse uno dei pochi progetti che restituiscono unità all'organismo storico urbano, che provano a ricomporre l'insieme di un grande sistema urbano come quello di Berlino, frazionato, nel Dopoguerra, e caratterizzato da una forte e continua discontinuità nel suo tessuto edilizio.

Volevamo chiedere ad uno dei protagonisti della cultura architettonica contemporanea le ragioni che avevano guidato l'intervento, se, come ci appariva, ci fosse stato il tentativo di andare oltre il restauro e oltre la tentazione di firmare, con un gesto scultoreo forte, la scena del centro storico di Berlino. Ci è sembrato un intervento misurato e ponderato. Un gesto inventivo, tettonico e complesso che ha aggiunto un tassello alla storia della città. Un frammento che dialoga col passato senza effimeri protagonismi.

Da studiosi della forma urbana e dell'espressione architettonica volevamo incontrare Schwarz e chiedergli in profondità le ragioni della scelta progettuale, se e come questa dialogasse con la morfologia urbana.

Questa intervista vuole aprire un ciclo di incontri e dialoghi con i protagonisti di una architettura meno autoriale e mediatica per provare a individuare quel sentiero che ha guidato nella storia

We invited Alexander Schwarz to give a lecture in Rome at the Faculty of Architecture "Sapienza" specifically on the design of the James Simon Gallery on Museum Island in Berlin. It seemed to us, that this promenade, now almost concluded, was one of the few projects that gives back unity to a great urban system like that of Berlin, which, after the war, has been characterized by a hard and continuous discontinuity in its building fabric.

We wanted to ask one of the protagonists of contemporary architectural culture what were the reasons that had guided the intervention, if, as it appeared, there had been an attempt to go beyond the restoration and beyond the temptation to sign, with a strong sculptural gesture, the scene of the historical centre of Berlin. It seemed a measured and considered intervention. An inventive, tectonic and complex gesture that added a stone to the history of the city. A fragment that dialogues with the past without ephemeral protagonists.

As scholars of urban form and architectural expression we wanted to meet Schwarz and ask him in depth the reasons for the design choice, if and how those dialogues with urban morphology.

This interview aims to open a series of meetings and dialogues with the protagonists of a less authoritative and mediatical architecture to try to identify the path that has guided the hand of architects in history and tradition and which, sometimes in contemporary expression, has been abandoned for the easiest way of the fantastic and the "bigness".

P. C. - We know you studied at the "Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule" of Zurich back in the 80's, when Hans Kollhoff started to teach at the school. What kind of relationship did you have with personalities such as Aldo Rossi, Oswald Mathias Ungers, Egon Eierman, during your learning process?

A. S. - I was very much aware of them and of their critique of modernism. O. M. Ungers was especially influential in Germany as a teacher, while in Switzerland, at the ETH of Zurich, where I studied, we had teachers like Kollhoff; I listened to a lot of his lectures, but I think I come from a slightly different background, so I never considered myself as "one of his", a follower of the typical 80's New Urbanism in Germany. I was also studying with Chipperfield, who has a different approach, more pragmatic. It takes the best from modernity and from, let's say, the historical critique of modernity. The questions that were in the air in the 80's were: "How do buildings create public space?", "How can we use the modern vocabulary to build cities again and not just objects next to each other?". I think we're still struggling with those questions.

P. C. - H. Kollhoff, in a lecture he held here (Rome) in October, claimed that there is a fundamental connection between tectonics and architectural expression in the development of his designing research. What is, in your opinion, the relationship between form and tectonics in architecture?

A. S. - When I think of tectonics, I think of the tradition that goes back to Karl Friedrich Schinkel and Gottfried Semper. Kollhoff is very much a follower of