MAZZOCCHIOO

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NOTES ON
THE CONFERENCE OF VALERIO
OLGIATI IN BUCHAREST

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Mazzocchioo#8
Notes on the Conference of Valerio Olgiati in Bucharest

On the 19th of October 2022, Valerio Olgiati received the Doctor Honoris Causa title of UAUIM after having given an insightful conference at the Romanian Athenaeum, in front of an audience of 700 students, teachers, and architects.

It happened 14 months after the initial idea of inviting him to Bucharest came through an email exchange I had with Markus Breitschmid, the author of *Non-Referential Architecture*, regarding possible academic collaborations. He let me know that Valerio Olgiati would be interested in coming to Bucharest for a second time.[1] I wrote to their office[2] and after a lengthy and precise discussion regarding context and details, the conference was on track. In collaboration with the Bucharest Territorial Branch of the Romanian Order of Architects, Mazzocchioo won a funding session from the Romanian Order of Architects that enabled the initiation of the actual organization of the conference.

Mazzocchioo#8 echoes Mazzocchioo. Talks#8_Conference of Valerio Olgiati in Bucharest.

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1 First time Valerio Olgiati came to Bucharest in 2008, at the invitation of Maria Duda, part of the Spiru Haret University at that time.

2 Office led by Valerio and Tamara Olgiati.

Significance

As soon as word got out in UAUIM, teachers and young colleagues let me know of their interest and enthusiasm regarding the upcoming event. In the last twenty-five years, the academic environment in Bucharest has closely looked towards the ongoing architectural debate in Switzerland, to the point of having a certain tradition regarding this influence: starting with the group of four of Mario Botta, Luigi Snozzi, Aurelio Galfetti and Livio Vacchini, who have nuanced modernity redefining the architectural object on the background of a territorial scale in the thinking space opened by Rino Tami; to the local going global Herzog&de Meuron, who have taken the poetic of banality explored in their initial projects of the '80s and '90s, all the way to working with intellectual strategies when redefining program and employing materiality on vast projects; to the Swiss academic legacy of Aldo Rossi's stay in Zurich that has reconnected ties between architecture and the city; to the urbanity of Diener&Diener and Miller&Maranta in Basel and Miroslav Šik and Peter Peter Märkli in Zurich; to the unique poetry of Peter Zumthor; and, of course, to the essential architecture of Valerio Olgiati.

In this extremely rich cultural landscape, Valerio Olgiati has also created a profoundly original school of thought, by putting forward a specific way of thinking and making architecture. My reading of his work is that each of his projects wants to be a single indivisible, irreducible thought. In doing so, the main protagonist (or instrument) is space. In a radical manner – *abstract space*: defined by tectonic discourse; play in scale; a meditation on the nature of limits – walls, pedestal, roof; a contradictory and simultaneous denial and appraisal of materiality, by obsessively using concrete; masterful use of light and orientation. All these take place on the background of a highly intellectual architectural knowledge.

This forceful abstraction is just half of the way. Again in my understanding, Valerio Olgiati has defined a *subversive poetic* regarding architectural modernity, with the purpose of transgressing it. What you get is more than what you see; it is more than the modern minimalist art statement; it exceeds the modernist *sincerity* – a concept meant to describe form and way of thinking and relating to the world. I would say his architecture has

a deep complexity while appearing so simple. Its richness grows out of the unexpected contradictions between visible form and masterful interiority. This double trait is never arbitrary, nor circumstantial.

It is subversive because things are not clearly or rhetorically exposed; variations are sometimes so discreet that you cannot precisely name them, yet they have a powerful imprint on the inhabitant, such as in Paspels school, when experiencing the slight, nuanced, minor variations between floors. It is subversive in the dialectic of oneness and duality, as in Atelier Bardill or the Zernez National Park Center. Subversive is also the radical tectonic character, while the structure is being drawn with a certain freedom and lightness as in Baloise Insurance Company Office Tower where the plan form of the columns becomes a sign, or as in the Plantahof where the setting of the column challenges the perception of the natural verticality of the structure and its wholeness. In the same manner, it is polemic in the way his projects reflect the servant-dominant spaces fundamental relationship: it goes beyond the modern structuralist need to organize space. I would say the traditional function and form debate has been surpassed by a densification of spaces that poetically induce a particular experience and use of place, somewhere between the light of reason and the shadows of the labyrinth, as in Villa Além; also in Villa Além, a meditation on the limits due to their particular section: they are radical, conspicuous, yet it seems their reason is not just to enclose, but also to free up space. In doing so they gain a certain magnetism and the limit somehow becomes the center, a place in itself. It is subversive because you absolutely have no way of deducing the interior from its exterior, as it happens in the Small house for a Priest: plan and section become a single thought in order to transport the inhabitant towards the sacred, archaic nature of architecture and its hidden scales.

In the quest for irreducible thought, each of his best projects is fantastic in being *just one project*; not two, not a sum of ideas, not a gathering of details, but in the most elementary way *one architectural idea*. It may seem evident, yet it is so rare in contemporary architecture. This might reflect one of the reasons for Valerio Olgiati's fascination with the archaic temples of Inca for example.

Regarding his teaching, just as in his architecture, Valerio Olgiati has a radical strategy: out of many possibilities, the project chooses just one single idea and then takes it to its utmost extreme possible becoming. I think that, understood in the context of his built projects, this trait is the one that (intellectually) seduces young architects and professors in UAUIM (and beyond).

VO's stay in Bucharest
Since arriving in Bucharest, Valerio and Tamara shared their enthusiasm toward architecture. The talks went from what it means to lead an architectural office, the particularities of making a project in various countries, teaching and travelling, politics, art and society in general. I must say I have been impressed by the ease and familiarity they induced in all talks, meetings and walks we took in Bucharest, not just with us, but with everyone they met. As in a theatre play, scenes followed one another in Sera Eden, at the Swiss Ambassador's Residence for the dinner kindly offered in honour of Valerio Olgiati's presence, at the late hours in a wine bar on the Eminescu street.

All these led to the Wednesday evening conference at the Romanian Athenaeum. Together with our colleagues and students, we prepared the set (image, sound etc.) and opened the doors for the public at 6 PM. At 7 PM, the hall was full, architects, students and professors all waiting for the conference to begin.

As previously discussed, I met Valerio and Tamara Olgiati five minutes prior to the start of the conference at the artists' entrance. Valerio Olgiati wanted to discover the hall for the first time at the precise moment when he started talking, not before. In a similar yet opposed way as did Tadao Ando when he kept everyone waiting outside the conference hall in Mendrisio, until a few minutes before starting the conference for him to have a lengthy moment just by himself with the place.

After an initial thought on the archaic temple of Mitla from Oaxaca in Mexico, Valerio Olgiati presented four projects: Villa Além, the project for Kanye West, the Baloise Insurance Company Office Tower and the project for their new house, up in the mountains of Switzerland.

After the conference, Professor Iulia Stanciu delivered an extraordinary *Laudatio* and Valerio Olgiati was then awarded the title Doctor Honoris Causa by the Rector of UAUIM, Prof. Marian Moiceanu and the President of the Senate of UAUIM, Prof. Cristian Drughean, along the Vice-Rector, Prof. Georgica Mitrache, and Dean Conf. Horia Moldovan.

An after-party followed at the nearby garden of the Casa Mincu – headquarters of the Romanian Order of Architects. The last day we visited our University at the invitation of Prof. Moiceanu, and casa Melik. The three days visit ended.

Partners
This conference was made possible with the support of the Romanian Order of Architects, the Bucharest Territorial Branch of the Romanian Order of Architects, 'Ion Mincu' University of Architecture and Urbanism (UAUIM), the Swiss Embassy in Romania, the Swiss Sponsors' Fund, ProHelvetia.

MZCH#8.
Mazzocchioo#8 echoes the presence of Valerio Olgiati in Bucharest. The intention of this issue is to paint an image of the attention paid to the architecture of Valerio Olgiati by the academic milieu from Bucharest. I was aware of the doctorate being developed by Cosmin O. Gălățianu on the architecture of Valerio Olgiati, so, after discussing with our colleagues, we extended him the invitation to be the guest-editor of this issue. He has enthusiastically accepted our proposal and has conceived this rich and dense issue. He has invited eight young architects to write short contributions. They are part of one of the most effervescent groups in our environment, both at UAUIM and on the scene of architectural competitions in Romania. We want to thank them and to note here the appreciation towards their generous involvement with this issue of Mazzocchioo.

PHOTOGRAPHIC REPORTAGE OF THE CONFERENCE

Vlad Dumitrescu

October 19th, 2022
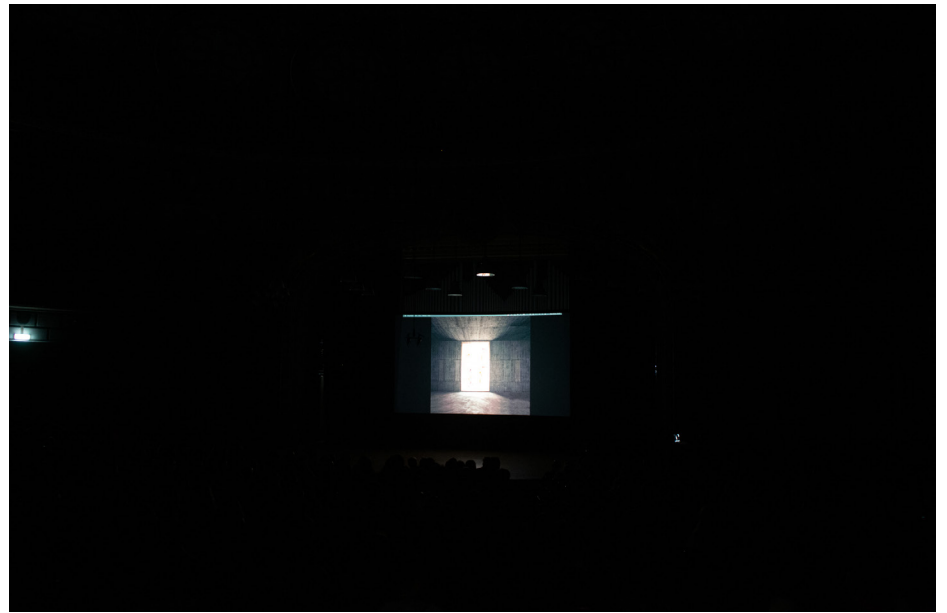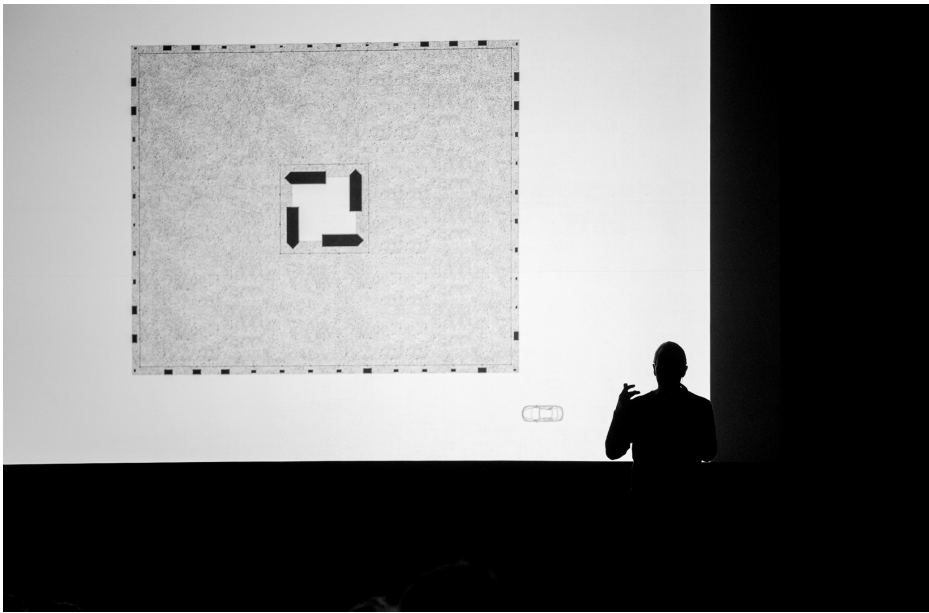Bucharest
Wednesday, 7 PM
Romanian Athenaeum

LAUDATIO

prof. dr. arch. Iulia Stanciu

Respected Professor Architect Valerio Olgiati,

Your Excellency Ambassador Arthur Mattli,

Honoured professors, esteemed architects, colleagues and students,

It is my honour today to give the *Laudatio* in this very moment that we are all part of: **an outstanding encounter**; from the early '80s when I began my studies in architecture, following the years of my practice and teaching, I can count of the fingers of one hand similar events hosted by our University. With this look-back and after the conference held by the architect and professor Valerio Olgiati, I assert that we are now hosting simply exceptional architecture.

And this is not just the character of Valerio Olgiati's architecture, but the whole of a very especial, particular personality.

Whilst writing and scrolling through my mind what contribution Valerio Olgiati had – even from a long distance – to my student's formation, to me as a teacher, it was a really difficult task for me to decide how to make this *Laudatio*. I often felt the need to deviate from a standard presentation, as nothing complied with standards or any other architectural experience.

But just a few general things I must begin with:

Born in 1958, Valerio Olgiati studied architecture at ETH Zürich.

Having lived and worked first in Zürich and later in Los Angeles for some years, in 1996 he opened his own practice in Zürich and since 2008 with his wife Tamara Olgiati in Flims.

Among the most important buildings of Valerio Olgiati are the phantomatic Yellow House, House for a Musician (Atelier Bardill) in Scharans, The School of Paspels, The Plantahof Auditorium in Landquart, The National Park Visitors' Center in Zernez, Residential Building Zug, Torre San Felipe Lima, Pearling Path Visitor and Experience Center in the Kingdom of Bahrain, Villa Além in Alentejo.

His work received awarded recognition; among others he has been awarded the German Architecture Prize Appreciation Honor, four times the prize for the 'Best Building in Switzerland', the Swiss Concrete Award for the School in Paspels, House K+N, Atelier Bardill and Swiss National Park's Visitor Center; hard to mention them all.

As a guest professor he has taught at ETH Zürich, at AA London and at Cornell University, New York. In 2009 he has held the Kenzo Tange Chair at Harvard University, Cambridge. Since 2002 he has been and still is a full professor at the Accademia di Architettura Mendrisio at the Università della Svizzera Italiana.

I will now get back to what I previously described as my quest for the *Laudatio*.

Not because of the character of Valerio Olgiati's architecture but of the position and ideas held and opened as a statement that stroked the commonly accepted / vehiculated assumptions on how architecture is being made.

Through successive periods in his work, the architectural language expression changed, balanced into the induced contradiction from identifying the most banal expression with the doubt this cannot possibly be it, engaging the viewer's or visitor's minds, intellectually, on a complex realm on each of Valerio Olgiati's buildings.

"My architecture is not symbolic of something, and it does not stand in reference to something else other than itself. So, yes, I do not believe in anything. I could say that superstructure for my architecture is nothing more and nothing less than the significance of the architectural idea of a building."

This, together with the declaration of "designing nothing" and countered with the repeated „architecture is about ideas," gives the natural and immediate recognition of whom we are celebrating this evening.

Among the most influential and clarifying is the confessive conversation with Markus Breitschmid on the "Significance of the Idea in the Architecture of Valerio Olgiati." A view from outside onto himself that seems to foster a need to discontinue traditions, contradictory failing into leaving traditions behind, but succeeding to look at them free from social conventions, a-historically, just as pure architecture, ripped out of time and context.

There stands the affirmation that architecture is principally not contextual, but made out of itself, an architecture that is derived from a basic typology, governed by invention standing at the outset; an invention is its origin, the invention of a certain order that is not based on contextual motifs. What it reveals is distilling the shape of the archetypal house to the degree in which it seems banal and at the same time cryptic, coded.

An architecture based on ideas; an architecture of dividing based on one idea. The buildings of Valerio Olgiati reach their magnificence by means of being completely coherent according to the building's idea. As he put it, "the architectural idea is the philosophy and the figurative is the narrative of my architecture."

This *Laudatio* would not be complete without mentioning the thesis of Non-Referential Architecture, which implies a future oriented image of the architect.

"We live in a non-referential world. Therefore, architecture must be non-referential." Instead of taking recourse to the extra-architectural to imbue

buildings with sense, no other choice is left than the purely architectonic; just buildings themselves can be sense-making. I say this with admiration for the online classes I have witnessed in the pandemic years at the Olgiati Studio, for the arguments of the students, *docenti* or invited architects that did not grasp the judgements on any criteria of non-architectonic approaches – functional, economic, sociologic, politic – but on experiencing the form as sense-making.

The exposed concept of Non-Referential Architecture is based on five principles, that I briefly mention: 1. **Experience Of Space** – architects should create the experience of space with intention; 2. **Oneness** – understanding the building as a system, as unity; 3. **Newness** (not fashionable, but ingenious), that engages people creatively; 4. **Construction** – one appropriate, unique, dedicated material; 5. **Contradiction** – the disruption that stimulates creativity in the people dealing with that difference; 6. **Order** – as control and limits of the area of possibilities; 7. **Sense-making** – more than comprehensible, it adds something concrete about and in the life of a person. This is the impact of Valerio Olgiati's works, adding this true cultural value = bringing movement into society!

A sensitive approach in understanding the above mentioned is by all means sneaking into the "Iconographic Autobiography" of Valerio Olgiati, which I invite you all to do, if you have not already. There are important images that have a special defining significance, accompanied or not by a commentary, therefore with or without a rational explanation of what is hoovering somehow his whole work, his architecture. An ideational inventory that, following his pedagogy, introduces thinking in the occurrence of the idea.

In a world where students – and, let us admit it, some teachers – fill designing projects they can present for hours, stereotypical analysis with excessive obsolete explanation, Valerio Olgiati influenced generations of students with his method of teaching, abandoning the senseless formal gestures and leading the idea, their idea, that they can proudly defend and debate on.

In the name of UAUIM, of the architects, professors, and students who rushed to be here today, I respectfully express our admiration for the whole of your work and personality. Thank you, professor!

# THOUGHTS ON THE ARCHITECTURE OF VALERIO OLGIATI

Addendum to the Golden Record

It's been forty five years since the launch of the interstellar probes known as Voyager 1 and Voyager 2. The two spacecrafts were to fly near Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune and collect data for back-to-Earth transmissions. Although this was the initial plan, a greater mission was ahead as the possibility of remotely reprogramming the onboard computers could have redefined their purpose of trying to grasp the far reaches of the solar system.

But having been able to travel millions of miles every single day, this meant an opportunity not only to receive information, but also to send information. A message. A mere glimpse on our civilization for an extraterrestrial 'audience.' An inventory of references representing our technological and cultural evolution boarded in the hope that it could someday tell the story of mankind, long after it had probably ceased to exist.

Greetings in ancient and modern languages, natural sounds and music were thus encrypted on two golden phonograph records and sent into space as time capsules for any advanced civilization that may encounter them, be it alien or far-future human. Along with the audio messages, the so-called "Golden Record," one for each spacecraft, also carried 115 images – or an 'iconographic autobiography' of humanity, as I am trying to force an approach to the very intention of this text.

The committee responsible for designing these plaques, chaired by Carl Sagan of Cornell University, had, therefore, the crucial task of selecting those visual references which could express both concrete information about our achievements and something that has to do with the immaterial world – the human emotion. The joy of having a family dinner party, as shown in Michael Rougier's photo, or the clumsy smile of a girl caught eating grapes in a supermarket, as shown in Herman Eckelmann's photo, may render such emotions. At the same time, putting together the last two images written on
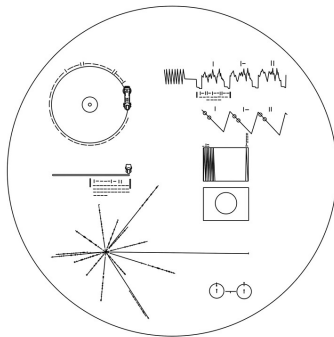
the plaque – a string quartet and the photo of a violin along with the score for Beethoven's String Quartet No. 13 (one of the music tracks on the record) – could also show the human's ability of creating emotion through their work. These very last photographs, along with the music itself, could thus describe the act of producing such work as they represent the ones that are playing (the quartet), the result of what they are playing (the actual track) and, last but not least, the convention under wich they are playing (the score).

Depictions of architecture were also scattered among those 115 images, pictures of small human dwellings, as well as more complex man-made structures, such as The Great Wall of China, The Golden Gate Bridge or The Sydney Opera House, showing fragments of our evolution regarding the act of building. But although these examples are accompanied by ones revealing the process of constructing (the building of a vernacular brick house and that of a timber frame barn), a connection between them could never be drawn. I attribute this to the fact that there is no such thing as a 'score' for architecture embedded on The Golden Record. Therefore, a holistic view on making architecture could never be achieved in understanding this kind of human practice.

The fact that the architectural object is related only to the act of building leaves the convention under which this act is possible a mystery for our supposedly interstellar bretheren. Architectural plans, sections or facades were omitted to such an extent that the idea of a project for architecture – if Beethoven's score can be perceived as a project for music – is something that is fundamentally missing from what aims to be an ambitious effort of capturing the human condition.

It is said that by the year 2025 all connections with the Voyagers will slowly pale, thus the spacecrafts will carry out our message on their own and may never be tracked again. If my humble remark proves to be legitimate, we might be facing an ultimatum for the possibility of adding to mankind's 'iconographic autobiography' an *addendum* which may embody the very discipline of architecture.

If this were to be possible, what projects would we then 'submit'?

What is it in the architectural plans, sections, and facades that can show the system in which a building is to be built, yet also describe the feeling of experiencing space within or around it?

Also, could these abstractions speak more about architecture than those photographs showing architecture itself can? I often think about answering these questions myself.

Maybe they can. Maybe there is some sort of an archaic understanding of space, its hierarchies, its ordering systems and contradictions that are beyond human condition. Maybe even aliens are driven by the same instinct for interpreting architecture as we are. If that is so, then what is indeed an alien perception of architecture?
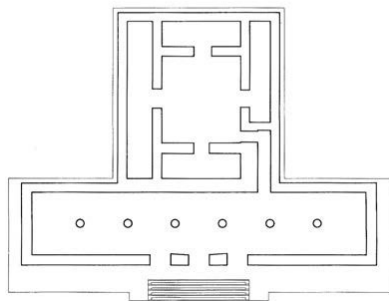
In the very beginning of his lecture held at the Romanian Athenaeum in Bucharest, architect Valerio Olgiati showed a plan representing the Zapotec Temple of Mitla, stating that in the context of not having any connection with European culture, Asian culture and so on, the building could be seen as if it was made by aliens.

> "They came to the same conclusion in installing space as we do; so there is an archaic understanding or an archaic way of experiencing space."

Olgiati selected the plan from his own iconographic autobiography – and I dare say it was not an arbitrary choice, as this is also the only image included in his notorious book, *Non-Referential Architecture*, a book that obstinately tries not to rely on such references. It is, therefore, the case of an exception. The succession of the temple's distinct spatial systems and, at the same time, the connection between them, seem to best imply that maybe in the abstraction of an architectural object – in this case, the mere drawing of a plan – lies the idea of understanding "a universality in the experience of space."

But if the so-called conventional representation can indeed speak authentically about the architectural project as the fundamental act of creating spaces which can determine a universal way of experiencing them, then what is it that is being truly abstracted within this convention?

This question may raise other, more specific ones, as we are now reffering not only to the common knowledge of a 'guild' or the historical agreement upon a way to represent and register its field of work. Architectural drawings may actually be the most referential way of visually communicating the idea of creating space to entities that are supposedly purely non-referential. In this regard, the concept of non-referentiality is to be seen not as a delineation of the architect from his own cultural landmarks, but as a necessary disruption between those landmarks and what is to be perceived in his work. In other words, it rests with the viewers rather than the author and it depends on their ability to interpret architecture.

Therefore, one can seek answers about what is there to be interpreted in the many types of representations related to an architectural project, apart from its physical dimension that can be virtually recomposed through them.

Can intuition be recorded in the very first sketches of a project? Can a project's topic be extracted from its conventional drawings? Can the scale and specificity of a territory be captured in a site plan? Can the bearing capacity of a building, its structure, be shown in a section? Can material be identified in a construction detail? Can a building's purpose be revealed by its facades? Can human propensity toward primary geometrical forms determine the very idea of a project? Can the recurrence of established models in our discipline be anticipated through all these types of representation?

Many other such connections between what we consider to be a condition for architecture and what is conventionally known as semiotics can occur. As I am now just relying on the likelihood of formulating such connections, I do not intend to answer these questions or similar ones on my own. This is merely an invitation for the authors of this issue to share their own perspective on the importance of architectural representation, an idea that was triggered for me by Valerio Olgiati's very simple and yet so enticing analogy between the human and the alien perception of space.

46°49'15"N 9°17'45"E

Four vertical lines rise 1,003.75 meters above sea level. From here they all converge at 45 degrees, 49 minutes and 15 seconds North and 9 degrees, 17 minutes and 45 seconds East at precisely 1,006.75 meters above sea level. From this point, the house begins, but like most points, it does not exist.

A point can only exist if it is differentiated from its surroundings. Information must be added to this coordinate in order for the point to become a place. Not by pinpointing it on a map, for this would only underline its existence. Not by adding imagery, for this would limit its presence. Rather, by reading the project's drawings with the lowest form possible of subjective interpretation.
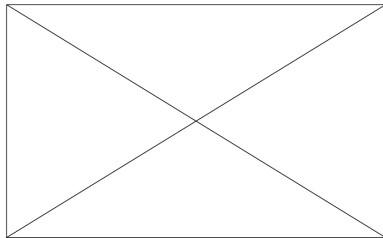
From that point, the roof's seemingly unbearable weight starts pushing away anything that comes near it. Water is carried down by the roof's four slopes and then onto the room's ceiling where the point is reiterated in its center. Everything up until this point is held together by four square columns. However, the floor plan does not have a square shape, it is a rectangle, orienting the house towards *something*. A responsive *something*, which appears to be consequential. It sends the servant space back and away from the center until it becomes contiguous with the outside. Underneath, a house with two walls is slowly surrounded by *something* substantial. It can be seen through the opening, from the room in the second basement. This room is smaller than the other one yet it doubles in height. The two walls never touch. They are parallel, protecting the house from *something*. Between them there is an empty corridor, a staircase and a way out. At 45 degrees, 49 minutes and 15 seconds North and 9 degrees, 17 minutes and 45 seconds East there is a place where an unbuilt house rests on *a beautiful, untouched spot[1]*, a place that can only be witnessed through its representation.

1 Valerio Olgiati, The Lake Cauma Project, *El Croquis* 156 (2011), 85

'Le degré zéro'

In his book of literary criticism, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953), Roland Barthes distinguishes the concept of 'language' from that of 'style' and 'writing', in an effort to emphasize the fact that literature should seek autonomy in the very act of writing, dispossessed of any meaning outside itself. Ideally speaking, this close to impossible quest for the 'zero degree', or 'colorless writing'[1], would somehow be able to authentically transcribe into writing the primordial Adamic language[2] without any sort of mediation. By means of analogy, if we rid ourselves of style, be it fashion or idiosyncratic manner, and we reductively assimilate architecture to language for the sake of this experiment, we may come across the fact that the true nature of 'Adamic architecture' would reside in a so-called 'zero degree construction.'

In this line of thought, it is not at all surprising that, when speaking of his obsessive pursuit of a non-referential architecture, Valerio Olgiati often hints to a certain propensity of his architecture for achieving a 'monolithic condition'. On the one hand, this certainly has to do with the paradigmatic difference between what he calls 'the divider' and 'the composer', another reiteration of the centuries-old debate between 'the stereotomic' and 'the tectonic' transferred into the architect's choice for his practice – articulating separate constructive elements or creating architecture with the use of a single

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1 To Roland Barthes, 'colorless writing' would stand for a literature that is put together unlike that of the 'well-behaved revolutionaries' that was still evidently 'well-written' in pre-determined literary tropes and metaphors. "A colorless writing is one that is freed from all bondage to a pre-ordained state of language." See Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero,* English translation by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967).

2 The language in which god spoke to Adam, or, alternatively, Adam named all the things surrounding him in The Garden of Eden.

fig. 1

homogenous material. On the other hand, though, speaking of monoliths inevitably brings into question the act of lifting a block of stone upright for the very first time in history, regardless of whatever ritualistic or symbolical meaning – the T0 moment.

This sort of chronological 'zero degree' may explain some of Olgiati's choices of words when talking about his work. Valerio Olgiati's architecture seeks to be 'archaic' not just through discourse, but through its very material nature. At the same time, any reference to a specific site seems to be topographical and geological rather than geographical in a conventional way – 'the territory' as the framework of a homogenous pristine natural space, rather than 'the city' as a manmade construct of specific places. The continuous search for a non-referential architecture therefore brings into question an artificial reinstatement of the Adamic *status quo* as the most necessary condition for this pursuit.

Even though the very first gravity-defying act of raising a single massive block of stone in an upright position may appear sufficient for the invention of architecture, it certainly is not. Pure statics does not suffice, and architecture must therefore be not only free-standing object, but also containing space / receptacle.[3] A monolith can possibly be a shrine, but it may never be a temple! For this very reason, the quest for the 'zero degree' in architecture is not concerned simply with the history of the monolith, but also with the well-known odyssey of the primordial hut, the very first human shelter.

This essential double condition is to be found in architecture in general, yet Valerio Olgiati's effort towards the non-referential is one that focuses exclusively on these two aspects refusing anything else as part of architecture's constituent fabric. The Plantahof Auditorium in Landquart is the epitome of all these things; it is nothing but the pure monolithic expression of its physical condition and structure, a statics diagram devoid of any other unnecessary accessories and translated as such into architecture.

3 "Architecture is the making of spaces and objects. That is what architects do: They make spaces and objects!". Valerio Olgiati in Markus Breitschmid, "Valerio Olgiati's Ideational Inventory", *El Croquis* 156 (2011), 31.

fig. 2

The building is literally a concrete slab that rests on a beam supported by a robust buttress, but also an enclosure with an entrance apparatus and windows that overlook the territory; it is merely the structure, the three walls, the roof and, possibly, even the schematic gutter and gargoyle system for collecting rainwater.

The Auditorium summarizes a concise, yet everlasting testimony of the primordial hut as a monument, but, at the same time, it manages to put together, in a didactic manner, an accurate description of the physical and atmospheric conditions it encounters; it is the 'zero degree construction' *par excellence*, an object stripped of everything to its very archaic nature, something essential that lies beyond abstraction or so-called 'minimalism.'

Valerio Olgiati's project in Landquart is the equivalent of Roland Barthes sought-after 'colorless writing'. It is 'colorless architecture' reduced to its animality, the 'white representing nothing' (fig. 1) rather than the "golden representing everything" (fig. 2).

The mere drawing of a plan
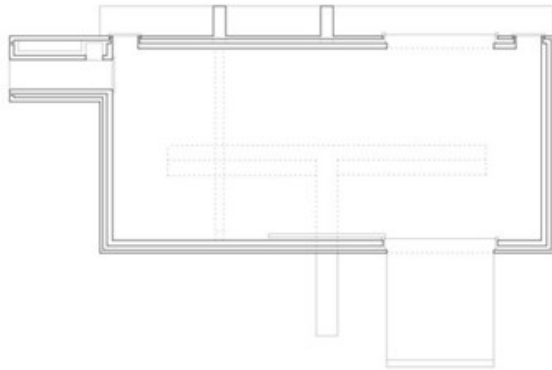
People have evolved so much that no one really knows who created language. No one is intrigued by how and who made it, it just seems native.

Imagine the moment before architecture became architecture, standing at the exact moment architecture starts. Far away from ancient structures such as the Parthenon, somehow, from a nebulous, abstruse place, architecture began to exist. As stated in the main text, there is an intuition that there exists a universality in the experience of space. It is the space that transpires wherever people exist. This immaterial presence is sought to be surrounded, captured, measured and mastered.

The mere drawing of a plan is sense-making. There is an agreement that a plan is the result of cutting horizontally through buildings, then taking a preposterous look from above – a fifth view. This settlement plays a crucial role in human endeavour, as it establishes a unit of measurement – a set of symbols and signs, dimension, a standardised quantity for space to be quantified. With all these variables, when one examines a plan, it occurs that throughout the history of architecture, plans have changed the least. Albeit restive evolution, a plan abided to some sort of tranquility and stillness.

A plan is quiet, obscure in a sense of being inviolate.

A plan has clarity. What lays in the human mind is cautiously (in a way that deliberately avoids harm or errors) translated into abstract language.

A plan has distinction. The act of drawing a plan is a cognitive avowel of oneself.

A plan is self-sufficient. Valerio Olgiati's representations of buildings, for example, always lack context. Plans are secluded, kept away from any disturbance. The Plantahof Auditorium is pictured as an isolated, right-angled,

autonomous room, where the pillar traversing the wall is a dotted line, almost invisible.

However, the most striking is the fact that *a plan has some sort of timelessness.* It carries over time an immanent presence, along with the peculiarity of finding strong resemblance between space.

The burden of a possible addendum has to do with neither the universe or how an alien would like some plans of architecture, nor to a brief summary of the history of building.

It bears the weight of the stupefaction of human mind.
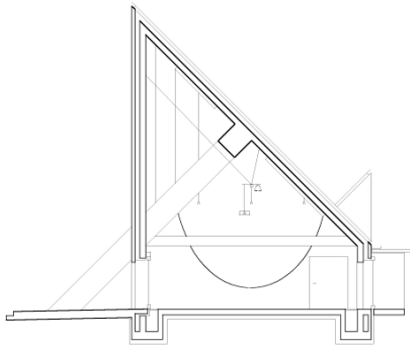
What we imagine is the experience
of space

Architecture creates space by passing it through the filter of imagination and representation. In the age of digital media, the image in architecture is becoming the main tool to persuade and fascinate. But can the true experience of space be captured in the medium of image?

In the summer of 2021, I had the opportunity to visit Villa Além and Peiro de Cha, two houses designed by Valerio Olgiati in Alentejo, Portugal. If we study the two floor plans, we easily deduce the theme around which both houses are ideated: the garden.

What we do not see in the textured floor plans is the context. On the plans, both buildings appear to be invention-like, buildings that stand for themselves, independently of the site. Indeed, the floor plans suggest the way one moves through the houses. They indicate similarities – e.g., both living rooms face the garden – but also significant differences: Villa Além appears to have a more formal character, the hierarchy between spaces being strictly determined, while the character of the rooms in Peiro de Cha appears to be rather informal and domestic.

However, by visiting the houses, one discovers new aspects of the projects. Villa Alem is placed on a hill, while Peiro de Cha is located in a valley. In Villa Alem the garden is enclosed by four strong walls. The house itself is part of the enclosure of the garden. The garden opens towards the sky, in virtue of the inclined walls. In Peiro de Cha the walls relate differently to the surroundings. The house itself is placed like a precious object in the garden. The garden blends visually into the valley, having no boundaries. Villa Além has thus a citadel-like character, where the contact with the vast horizon is framed by the openings in the walls. Peiro de Cha has instead the character of a plateau, expanding into the valley, while being protected by it.

While conventional drawings communicate all the information necessary to understand intellectually the main topic of the project, a building can be fully experienced only in person. The drawings rationalise and intellectualise an architectural intention, but there is a significant difference between representation in design and the concrete experience of space. When we architects design a building, we do not think of it in terms of an image. The purpose is not the plan, the object is not the representation. What we imagine is the experience of space. This is what drives us in design. While we must give this experience the form of an image, we should not confuse what is being represented with the representation.

Library of Babel

It is a bit selfish and naïve to consider that our probes will encounter worlds that are identical to ours, but we also considered, for some time, that we are the center of the universe. Probably we never truly got passed that phase.

Worlds found inside the Goldilocks zone (the circumstellar habitable zone – the zone that holds the potential for intelligent life) are subjected to an almost infinite set of combinatoric sequences that output the very same number of results. This generates a fluid set of attributes that each world (and its inhabitants) may, or may not, inherit. In the event of first contact, our golden records and the perception of their data, our heritage, are also subjected to this particular set of rules that govern the newly discovered spacefaring civilization. Thus, if the sun is too far, maybe their sense of sight is not that developed, if at all, rendering our images imperceivable. Or, if the atmospheric composition is not similar to ours, then Beethoven's String Quartet will instead sound as either a 'chipmunk' version (thin atmosphere – sound propagates faster) or a 'lo-fi' one (dense atmosphere – sound propagates slower). It's fair to assume that other such elements that we take for granted here on earth are, on other worlds, subjected to contorting forces that, by our conventions, falsify their familiarity.

Elements that stray from the familiar tend to become agents of anomaly, perturbing factors that corrupt the reference framework in which they are, or better said were, part of. Thus, considering the almost infinite number of reference frames (each world has its own), I suspect that the answer to the question of representation of space as a universal experience must lie in the existence and implications of an element that is infinitely familiar.

Hinting at this, Valerio Olgiati shared a moment of reflection at the 2018 Venice Biennale. To these dispossessed columns the Corderie offered the framework of a foreign world, one in which seemingly infinite galleries

This is the 6398970699265370th image generated by the Babel Image Archive. Instead of letters and punctuation marks (as in the case of the Library of Babel), the Image Archives permute the 4096 colors, and rather than a page of 40 lines each with 80 characters, the images are pixel grids with 416 rows and 640 columns. This conveys the possibility of the Archive to hold every image that ever has been or could be created within these dimensional and chromatic constraints. Strangely, this includes every work of art ever created or yet to be created, it evokes past events as well as future ones, and, strangest of all, it includes images of every person who ever lived, including your own life, from birth to funeral. When unmoored, the Babel Image Archive contains 4096^{266240} ($\sim 10^{961755}$) unique images.

describe events of hastily, uninterrupted transition. Evoking the moment of first contact, the distortion of data by new constants, one might be puzzled by the uncanny apparition of this ghostly cluster of columns. Strange in their totality yet eerily familiar in their self-enclosed roundness, they offer a spatial riddle in which, similar to Bramante's tree trunk corner column in the courtyard of Sant'Ambrogio, the apparent anomaly emphasizes the presence of all of the other columns.

The enigma lies in the cluster's spatial center, its singularity. Passing towards it, one is amazed by the tightening effect around the white columns since, like objects with great mass, they also bend space. The center holds the most mass as the accretion of columns around it defines a clear order. This raises the suspicion that a massive phantom column resides in this center, a great attractor, a column of infinite density that ultimately becomes an element of infinite familiarity; as in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* Hegel writes that all bodies seek a center outside themselves.
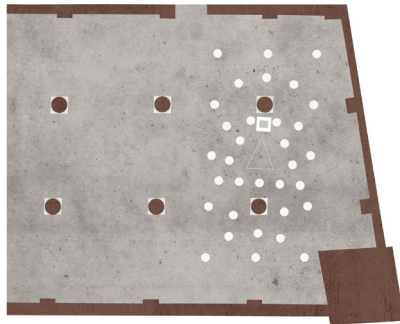
Therefore, the question of a universal experience of space is forever sealed within this totalizing phenomenon, giving architecture a sense of inevitability as it reveals its subservience to gravity (or more precise to the effects of mass). Yet, in our world, architecture developed the tools needed to bypass gravity's infinite familiarity enabling us to gain access to a higher degree of presence. This is done through the virtual representations of the architectural project.

Much like the way maps allow us to gain simultaneous presence on all parts of the world at once, orthogonal projections make use of a dimensional 'step back', giving us concurrent access to all of the building's rooms or levels at once. A simultaneous experience of space. More so, through symbols and diagrams, they allow us to make sense of hidden rules that govern our world, even gravity itself (diagram of forces). An analytical experience of space Being virtual slices of space itself, they also offer us the ability to experience space not only from within it, but also from outside it. This means that they enable us to conjure spaces that not only don not exist anymore, such as artefacts of old cultures, but even spaces that did not exist at all, such as the early intuitive instances of a new project. An archival experience of space.

As Valerio Olgiati speaks of the distortions caused by the cluster of columns as an oscillating condition between *an emotional and intellectual reading of space*, I suspect that he is in fact referencing the infinite familiarity of gravity seen from within this higher degree of presence. Thus, one can argue that the architectural project, through the virtues of its representations, holds a sort of universal validity.

Yet, by taunting our obsession with knowledge, it also reveals a very human condition in which, similar to the pious librarians that pursue divine enlightenment inside Jorge Luis Borges' Library of Babel, we are disruptive in our eagerness to learn and vain in our desire to show what we learned, even if our conversational partner is in a galaxy far, far away.

Reading exercise. Entrance *and* the Grisons Parliament

At first sight, the project appears to be an addition placed in front of an existing building, but its monumental presence could allow the observer to believe that this concrete entrance was built first. In this sense, despite its real age, the main building may be understood as the actual extension. However, when you first look at a place, you do not immediately build a narrative. You do not really see an addition on either side, or a specific timeline whatsoever. Just a closeness between two foreign entities.

There is a heavy roof over an upward base and a foremost column with an outer pillar. Two by two elements. A ramp measures or sets the width of the building while the shadow of a roof on a facade shows variations of closeness. A doorway is partially hidden and doubled by a tangential column which seems to posses the symmetry of the building, even though it is not precisely central. As a witness, a light pillar stands aside at one corner of a room. The white concrete structure gives a sense of newness and at the same time it might express a constant renewal of what is known to be older.

Is the building's ground floor raised from street level in order to share a floor with the white base, or is it the other way around? The observer does not know. He is not aware of time. Instead, he perceives them simultaneously. By looking at drawings, he can learn about differences in the representation of objects. Whilst the entrance room is marked with technical information like dimensions, the building stays in the background.

Is it an addition or a reference? The observer does not know, nor does he look for an answer, yet when there is a desire for certainty, only closeness is revealed.

Imagine a small building

Scale relates to a particularly humane dimension of architecture. At the same time, scale predetermines many decisions which are strictly architectural. Scale systems are imprinted in the process of imagining certain spaces, or their unraveling beyond one's own specific standpoint. These processes entail a kind of *feeling of* scale, which is based on basic conceptual conventions that we have become familiar with. However, if we were to refer to Valerio Olgiati's Atelier Bardill, the contradiction between the needed object and the scale of the given site cuts off the mechanisms of reflex imagination from the physical act of spatial perception. Despite the scale dictated by the precinct, *we are speaking of what is in reality a very small house.* But Atelier Bardill is not the familiar way to imagine a small house.

The basic act of imagining a specific kind of building must have been always at hand for people – perhaps by means of storytelling. Descriptions themselves contain a potential for scalability – such as 'the prince's palace', 'the watcher's tower', 'the witches' hut' or 'the poor man's shelter', all designating building typologies by employing a specific archetype. Spatial archetypes are cultivated by the culture of storytelling through various descriptions of places or events occurring in the respective spaces. Early in life we learn to imagine buildings we never actually visited, departing from archetypal description and depictions of such buildings. In other words, the basic process of spatialization that takes place in someone's imagination is usually triggered by means of abstraction, such as words and representations.

To some extent, architectural representations are a more exact language to communicate coordinates for spatial imagination. However, when trying to imagine 'a small building', scale acts as a layer of reality which is more difficult to represent – it becomes a secondary support system for relating representation to reality. While the subject's presence is essentially removed

"Imagine a simple small building! Imagine you would enter a room of that building and you would find a staircase. Human beings do not contemplate how this building is laid out; rather, they just know that there is something upstairs because there is a staircase."

Valerio Olgiati in Markus Breitschmid, "Valerio Olgiati's Ideational Inventory," *El Croquis* 156 (2011), 16-39

from the convention of drawing, the clear instruction to 'imagine a small building' places them at the core of the process: it becomes a matter of distance measured in relation to one's own dimensions, which also indicates the approximate necessary duration to walk across the entire building to determine if it is indeed small.

The relativity of both systems of abstraction and the difficulty in communicating the human understanding of scale relates to the fact that 'smallness' is not a direct attribute of a building, but a kind of judgement on it. If that is so, by removing scale systems, any kind of perception of architecture becomes alien.
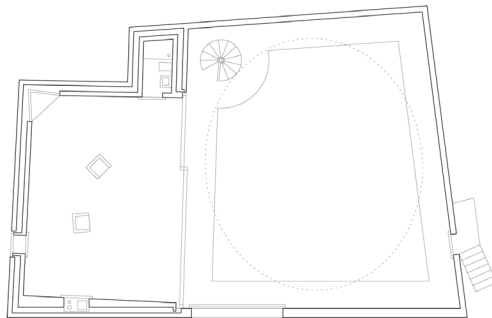
"La grandeur magistrale, l'ordre, l'ampleur magnifique: vous êtes chez un Romain. A quoi servaient ces pièces? C'est en dehors de la question. Après vingt siècles, sans allusions historiques, vous sentez l'architecture et tout cela est en réalité une très petite maison."[1]

1 Le Corbusier, *Vers une Architecture*, chapter „L'illusion des plans", with reference to the Casa del Noce in Pompei. (Paris: G. Crès et Cie, 1924), 149.

Unfathomable weight

Villa, from a historical point of view, means detachment from the city, usualy to the countryside, in the center of a vast domain, a place from where a landlord could oversee and control the vicinity.

Besides the physical autonomy of a villa, a house with no contextual constraints, there is also a particular idiosyncrasy coming from the owner's needs. Consequently, despite its rich growth in time, the concept of a villa could be deemed as an unhistorical concept, being understood without any references.

Before the construction of the villa, the site does not exist; it does so only as an immeasurable anonymous field. In this spatial uniformity, dwelling is a necessary disruption. Proximity follows only after the act of building. The site emerges.

The only reference point for the villa is the villa itself, so, arching inward becomes mandatory. Collapsing in on itself, the villa becomes the expression of (the deepest) human need for isolation, for inward reflection. For instance, Palladio achieved this improbable concentration of great mass, unfathomable weight, into one central point by making four identical façades.

Villa Além is unfamilliar, quite peculiar and foremost timeless. One might be inclined to confuse it with an ancient temple. This difficulty of placing it in an epoch does not occur because of pure geometry or because of the earthy, rough material. It occurs from the plan itself. The plan of Villa Além is an abstract representation of the villa's universal concept.

Somewhere, on dusty ground, between the old cork oaks in Alentejo, we bump into a foreign object.
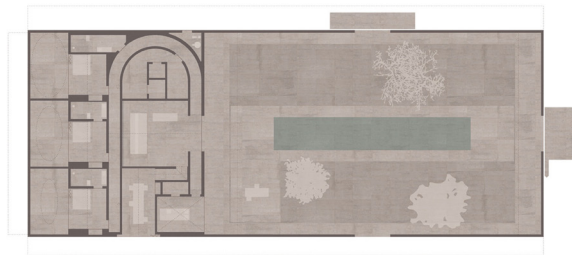
The invisible hollow contained within four walls seems to have an immense pressure, such as the whole atmosphere being compressed into a 20x35 meters courtyard. A pressure vessel has no cracks. Even if the garden has four big horizontal openings, two for each of its axis, the air inside seems to be so thick that no particle is able to escape. One's gaze is not oriented toward something, everything around is the same, there is nothing to look at.

Inside one of these four openings there is a room. A slit into one of its walls ushers you through a long, thin fissure, a tenebrous path.

DARKNESS

It all comes down to Villa Além

Not many plans can speak for themselves like the one for Villa Além does. In fact, there is a special quality in all of Valerio Olgiati's drawings that can induce such level of understanding. His projects are complex, yet their representation is rather simple and straight-forward when it comes to communicating the idea behind them. This does not mean that the ideas themselves are simple, but the fact that their first concretization through architectural drawings can describe so faithfully the actual creative thought has to do with something that is beyond convention. And maybe this is why architects were so struck by Olgiati's work, starting with the distorted square in the plans for the Paspels School. I dare say that this is what strikes them still, although recent works are often associated with some sort of an *olgiatian mannerism*, an *olgiatism*. This is mostly because now, after two monographs and the book *Non-Referential Architecture* as his theoretical project, one may try to delineate a conceptual line in Valerio Olgiati's work.

"A discussion of Valerio Olgiati's work must start at Paspels School."[1] Jacques Lucan's statement comes before the project for Villa Além; more precisely, in-between Olgiati's two monographs (2008 and 2017) and also before *Non-Referential Architecture* had its impact on our collective professional consciousness. I wonder if he still feels the same now. I wonder if still "remarks about it (i.e. the Paspels School) can apply to the architect's other projects and creations, which include certain devices that are even more intense."[2] If there is such thing as *olgiatism*, one must not seek it in his architectural motifs, or in certain aspects that are recurrent in his buildings. Of course, we could point out that the entrance to The Grisons Parliament

1 Jacques Lucan, "Textured Spatiality and Frozen Chaos", *2G* 37 (2010), 6.

2 *Idem*

Building, the Perm Museum XXI or the UAE Medical Center share the same notorious structural petals, or that the corridors in House K+N and Villa Além emphasize a distinct spatial type, but I question if a conceptual line in Olgiati's work can truly be derived from these particularities.

I also question if he himself thinks of his work as a natural chronological succession in search for the non-referential, or towards something that is yet to be discovered, but which for now cannot be articulated. Maybe his work's *degré zéro* is indeed the Plantahof Auditorium, or maybe the *closeness* in the entrance to The Grisons Parliament Building, as much as the unbuilt coordinates of The Lake Cauma Project speak of such a primordial moment. Many of Valerio Olgiati's buildings could carry this genealogical statute, each of them being entitled to claim being *the first*. This in itself can be considered a professional quest: to always make a new building as it would be your oldest.

I consider Villa Além to be such a building, striving to be *the oldest* not only in reference to Olgiati's previous work, but in reference to architecture itself. I reckon that its timelessness and its *unfathomable weight* can indeed coagulate such reasons to believe that this is in fact the *olgiatian* pursuit. I also argue that, above all, this particular building can be seen as the sign for such a pursuit. It is, after all, the case of an exception in his work, because it rests on the exceptional situation in which the architect is his own client. Therefore, we are dealing with 'his own architecture', a privilege, a radical takeover of an act that is socially acclaimed of being altruistic. But building your own house has nothing to do with such a condition, be it cultural, historical or social. It is rather the case of regaining the lack of condition in the archaic act of building *the primitive hut*. However, it goes without saying that the main contradiction in this analogy is that, as long as it has a *project*, there is nothing *primitive* about Villa Além.

Timelesness does not elude the project, it restores it. The Zapotec Temple of Mitla is, therefore, timeless not because we cannot trace its conceptual origin, but because we can restore an archaic understanding of space throughout architectural convention, even though we manage to do so by means of an *a posteriori project*.

This being said, in Villa Além, the idea of a secluded garden is in itself so graphical that we all understand it through its project. It is, in fact, not drawing as a second language for architecture, but architecture as a second language for architecture.

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