

Free Plan versus Free Rooms. Two Conceptions of Open Architecture

During the Renaissance, composition included the determination of a static, fixed entity within which nothing could be added or changed.

In 1450, Leon Battista Alberti insisted on this determinism of the architectural whole. In his *De re aedificatoria*, he tells us that "beauty is the harmony, regulated by a determined proportion, which reigns between the whole of the parts of the whole to which they belong, in such a way that nothing can be added, subtracted or changed without making it less worthy of approval"¹.

This statement of harmony, fixing the relationship of each part to the whole, animated architecture until the 19th century, and even beyond, at the beginning of the 20th century.

This inability to remove an element from a building is what Emmanuel Pontremoli refers to as composition. He tells us that "to compose [...] is to arrange the different parts of an edifice in such a way that the interdependence of each of the elements makes it an organised body and where each of them is in such a right place that nothing seems to be able to be modified, changed, without completely ruining the balance of the composition"².

The composition is then a static order, frozen in time, incapable of adapting without mutilating the compositional system that presided over its conception. His aesthetic is an "aesthetic of eternity"³, imposing on the world, "autonomous and closed figures, des "choses en soi"⁴.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the modernist architects questioned the compositional unity of the room, and moved towards the quest for the "ABSOLUTE FREEDOM OF THE PLAN"⁵.

For Le Corbusier, the freedom of the plan offered by the development of the post-and-slab framing system is a fundamental questioning of the "'paralysed plan' of the stone house"⁶. It is therefore the fixity of things that Le Corbusier questions when he proposes the free plan.

With the free plan, "the organs have become characterised, have become free with respect to each other"⁷. The free plan incorporates the ability "to modify the basic plan later for years"⁸.

Mies van der Rohe himself took up this question. In his work, the use of an apparent structure of columns, stripped of all ornamentation, frees the space of all characterisation and creates "neutral frames in which people and works of art can lead their own lives"⁹.

More recently, the architects of OFFICE KGDVS have investigated the potential of the free plan. In order to do this, Office usually uses a simple line to define its "perimeter"¹⁰. In this way, the architects have "not focused on what happens (inside), but on how it (the space) is framed"¹¹.

¹ Leon BATTISTA ALBERTI, *L'art d'édifier*, translated from latin by Pierre CAYE and Françoise CHOAY (Paris : Le Seuil, 2004, Livre VI), 278-279.

² Emmanuel PONTREMOLI, *Propos d'un solitaire* (1959), p.23

³ Kisho KUROKAWA, *Metabolism in Architecture* (London: Studio Vista, 1977), 10

⁴ Richard Llewelyn Davies, "Endless Architecture", *Architectural Association Journal*, no. 67 (1951):106-112

⁵ LE CORBUSIER and Pierre JEANNERET, « Les cinq points d'une architecture nouvelle », typed texte, dated from July 27th, 1927, sent to Alfred Roth

⁶ LE CORBUSIER, *Précisions sur un état présent de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme* (Paris : 1994), 123.

⁷ LE CORBUSIER, « Où en est l'architecture ? », *L'Architecture vivante*, autumn and winter (1927) : 24

⁸ Robert KRONENBURG, *Flexible. Une architecture pour répondre au changement* (Paris : Norma Editions, 200), 50. Kronenburg refers to the following publication: Gustau GILI GALFETTI, *Model Apartments : Experimental Domestic Cells* (Barcelona, Editorial Gustavo Gili, 1997)

⁹ Mies VAN DER ROHE, Christian NORBERT SCHULZ, *Conversations avec Mies van der Rohe*, (Baukunst und Werkform, 1958), in Fritz Neumeyer, *Mies van der Rohe. Réflexions sur l'art de bâtir* (Paris: Le Moniteur, 1996), 241

This focus on the perimeter, rather than on determining the program, can be explained by the fact that "buildings often outlive their use"¹². The architects add that what remains "is the figure"¹³.

This figure circumscribes a field, a theme that recurs in the Office's work.

Another key theme in the recent work of the Belgian architects is a return to the notion of the "room".

This observation about the importance of the room is raised above all by Louis I. Kahn. For him, "the room is the beginning of architecture"¹⁴ and once assembled, they form within the plan "a society of rooms. The rooms talk to each other and decide on their position"¹⁵.

The term "room" thus acquires a double meaning. The room is both fragment and space. In this sense, it opens up the question of the different ways of assembling these fragments to achieve "the realization of the form in an order"¹⁶.

In the 1960s, Robert Venturi questioned the scale of the piece as a vector of flexibility, and thus possessing an indeterminate, non-specific character, thus moving away from earlier conceptions. In his book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, he states that "the multifunctional room is a possible response to the modern architect's concern for flexibility. The room with a generic rather than a specific purpose, and with movable furniture rather than movable partitions, promotes perceptual rather than physical flexibility"¹⁷. The generic aspect of the room encourages multiple uses. It does not have a fixed character. It is "infinitely open"¹⁸.

This indeterminate character leads us to put forward the concept of the "free room", a concept opposed to the free plan, since it reintegrates the spatial fragment, the room at the centre of the project.

For the Belgian architects OFFICE KGDVS, this interest nevertheless finds its first expression of a major issue in the house they have built in Buggenhout. The plan proposes a series of rooms of the same size, taking place within a figure divided into nine squares.

The rooms do not have a conventional character, but follow one another identically throughout the floors and only suggest ways of living, leaving the owners to find an identity for each of them.

This renewed interest in the room does not, however, express a return to static composition, but allows the user to constantly reconfigure his or her architectural universe.

¹⁰ Kersten GEERS and David VAN SEVEREN, « Plan as Perimeter », in Go HASEGAWA, Kersten GEERS, David VAN SEVEREN and Giovanna BORASI (eds.), *Besides History* (Montreal, London: Canadian Centre for Architecture, Koenig Books, 2018), 13

¹¹ Enrique WALKER, « A conversation with Kersten Geers and David Van Severen », *El Croquis*, no.185 (2016): 19

¹² See « A conversation with Kersten Geers and David Van Severen », in *A+u*, no.591 (2019): 186

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Louis I. KAHN, « La pièce, la rue et le contrat humain », in Louis I. KAHN, *Silence et lumière : choix de conférences et d'entretiens 1955-1974* (Paris : Éditions du Linteau, 1996), 225

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 254-255

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19

¹⁷ Robert VENTURI, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd edition (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977 [1966]),34

¹⁸ Peter COOK, « Indeterminacy – Relaxed Scene », *Archigram*, no.8 (1968), n.p.

Conversely, the open design of free rooms mitigates the effects of obsolescence "by making buildings internally adaptable and thus hopefully more sustainable"¹⁹. In our context of climate emergency, understanding this concept seems to us to be essential.

Our abstract proposes to trace the historical origin of these two concepts, free plan and free rooms, in order to extract a sufficient theoretical understanding.

Once the theoretical foundations have been laid, we will investigate how these two concepts have crystallized in the work of the architects of OFFICE KGDVS by means of a "comparative structural method", seeking to identify "whether formal properties offer homologies and which homologies, contradictions and which contradictions, or dialectical relationships that can be expressed as transformations"²⁰.

¹⁹ Daniel M. ABRAMSON, *Obsolescence. An architectural History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 79

²⁰ Claude LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris : Pocket, 2003), 104