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EDITORIAL

Deeming that the connections between construction and society exist only in history would constitute an act of blindness. Even the field of construction is subject, nowadays, to catastrophes that give us cause to reflect and to remain humble. Like a boomerang, they call into question our historical field of interpretation.

Grenfell Tower, a 24-storey social housing building situated in the well-to-do area of North Kensington in London, suddenly went up in flames during the night of 14 June this year, causing the death of nearly 80 people and injuring 77 others, including 17 in critical condition. Despite the status of the ongoing investigation, it is highly likely that the cause of the tragedy was linked to the flammable insulated cladding fixed to the outside of the building during the recent renovation (2015-2016). Sparked by a refrigerator catching alight on the fourth floor, the fire proceeded to spread at a terrifying speed. How could the residents, or, more precisely, the tenant management organisation have thought of saving money on the quality of the materials, choosing to use aluminium sheets with a polyethylene core instead of zinc? Seeking accountability here leads us to consider the disastrous effects of austerity, the disregard for working-class neighbourhoods, but, above all, it elicits a reflection on the terrible effects of deregulation. Can safety inspections really function correctly in such circumstances? Upon closely examining the hazy, absurd rules decreed by a privatised organisation, one notes that they require 'limited combustibility'! The system, which consists of leaving landlords to assess their safety, flouts the entire scientific history of fire protection. Fire professionals had advised that polythene only be used when completely encased, otherwise it risked provoking a chimney effect. Finally, how can a minister responsible for housing refuse to make sprinklers mandatory, pursuant to the dogma wherein "the introduction of a new regulation must be

offset by the elimination of two existing rules?” Are we living in a modern or absurd world¹?

Could accidents not be predicted, then, even if, for Seneca, they are nothing more than unforeseen events (*accidentia non aliter excipere quam imperata / ad accogliere gli eventi della vita come comandi*). Fate is disturbing at times though. How can the façade of an architecture school cave in²? How can the main building of the European Parliament, which was inaugurated in 1993, already be so run down that they are considering tearing it down? Plagued with leaks, stability problems and faulty air-conditioning and insulation, it could not even be secured in the face of the new terrorist threats. In 2012, the building had to be closed temporarily after cracks were discovered in some of the structural beams above the plenary hall. Two engineering firms were appointed and have apparently concluded that it would be almost as expensive to renovate as to rebuild³! Are the builders the only ones involved? Did they alone reflect on this obsolescence? Do we need to rethink how we transmit knowledge? The architects Christian Girard and Philippe Morel, who set up the *Digital Knowledge* department at the *École nationale supérieure d'architecture Paris-Malaquais* (ENSAPM), believe so. Lamenting that “in the French cultural tradition, the architect and the artist are always equated”, they judge that, “the architect needs to reclaim what has been left up to the engineer”: structural studies, digital technology... and that the architect of the future will be the one to shake up design and construction so as, hopefully, to offer a better response to the recurrent question, ‘How should we live’⁴? This age-old existential question is also a practical one. And, to a certain extent, it also concerns construction historians. Conceiving the foundations of our buildings explains who we are and what we can do to avoid catastrophes, especially when they can be

1 Philippe Bernard, « Après l’incendie de la tour Grenfell, la déréglementation mise en cause », *Le Monde*, 7 July 2017, p. 5.

2 Christophe Gobin, « Une partie de la façade de l’école d’architecture de Nancy s’est effondrée, ce lundi, en milieu de journée. Aucun blessé. Un miracle. », *L’Est Républicain*, 23 May 2017.

3 Jean-Pierre Strootbants, « Parlement européen à Bruxelles: à 24 ans, le caprice des dieux sera sans doute détruit », *Le Monde*, 16 June 2017.

4 Marine Miller (statements collected by), « Nous pensons qu’il faut dynamiter la façon d’enseigner l’architecture en France », *Le Monde Campus*, 24 June 2017.

predicted. Enquiring into our societies' past can better equip us to react in the present.

After a first issue consisting of a selection of varied contributions, this second installment of *Ædificare* takes the form of a thematic issue on "Building Techniques in Architectural Treatises: Construction Practices *versus* Technical Writings." The topic was taken up by Caterina Cardamone, an independent scholar, and Pieter Martens, a researcher at KU Leuven and Visiting Professor at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). All the articles went through the double blind peer-review process applied by the journal. What role does technique play in the work of Leon Battista Alberti, the uncle and nephew, Giuliano and Antonio da Sangallo and our dear Philibert? Though they have already been extensively debated, these questions remain highly topical, between text (scholarly thinking) and image (figurative representation of technical achievements). We will allow the coordinators to introduce their case.

In the history of construction, it is useful to draw upon texts in order to get a feeling for the standard practice. In the *varia* of the present *opus*, Jacobo Vidal-Franquet has edited forty or so Catalan texts from the Middle Ages from a corpus comprising over a thousand, which he has put together for his thesis. The texts are mostly extracts of debates in the town council of Tortosa, one of the most important towns in Catalonia in the medieval and modern period. They date from between 1347 and 1515 and allow us to determine the extent to which the management and physical layout of the town (which could be compared to town planning nowadays, or road maintenance previously) go hand in hand with construction and architectural questions. While the town fulfills three objectives (to equip itself with municipal services and infrastructure, organise the public space and embellish it and decorate the city to render it more beautiful and prestigious in the eyes of the crown), the author has selected testimonies from the latter area which, even if it seems like nothing more than an aesthetic impulse, is no less negligible. Indeed, the archives illustrate how, in such circumstances, municipal power establishes the effects of construction work – beyond renown, beauty, or utility – in terms of a common good⁵.

5 Bénédicte Sère, « Aristote et le bien commun au Moyen Âge: une histoire, une historiographie », *Revue Française d'Histoire des Idées Politiques*, vol. 32, n° 2, 2010, p. 277-291.

Equally, the discovery in Africa of the only existing work by the famous French engineer Robert Le Ricolais delivers a call for help to safeguard this piece of building heritage destined for a scheduled, if not certain, disappearance, like the one issued by Werner Lorenz in 2014 to safeguard the Shukhov broadcasting tower in Moscow, Russia, also known as the Shabolovka tower, which ended up paying off. Gilles-Antoine Langlois repositions this hangar, or 'administrative garage', built in 1950 by colonial France in Yaoundé (Cameroon), within the work of this unlikely, brilliant engineer-poet whose achievements still seem difficult to inventory. The technical system used in the building was invented by Le Ricolais, and involves the principle of a three-dimensional framework "based on a spatial triangulation that renders the framework rigorously undeformable", inspired by the hexagonal frames of radiolarian planktons, which were conceived and patented by the engineer during the Second World War. Gilles-Antoine Langlois analyses the construction system and the achievements it yielded. He presents a well-argued, iconographical case for the current status of this sole testimony, which constitutes an indisputable technical success warranting an international mobilisation and rescue effort.

We could not end this editorial without announcing the sudden, cruel passing of an eminent member of our scientific committee. Sergio Poretti passed away suddenly on 29 July this year⁶, at just 73 years of age. He made a tremendous contribution to research in the history of structural engineering, the history of construction, and the restoration of modern Italian architecture. After starting out as a young professor at Sapienza University in 1980, he joined the newly-founded University of Rome Tor Vergata in 1982, which provided him with the ideal setting in which to dedicate himself intensely to research. A passionate, pioneering scholar, he carried out innovative research there and continued to publish original studies unremittingly.

His works on the construction of the post offices of Rome during the Fascist period (1990), on the Casa del Fascio in Como (1998) and the

6 We would like to offer our warmest thanks to his longstanding partner, Tullia Iori, for providing us with the information to write this chronicle, and to extend our deepest sympathies to her.

Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana (2002) profoundly transformed the history of construction in Italy. In these studies, Sergio Poretti shifts the angle of attack of his observations by concentrating on the work of art itself, or more precisely on the built work of art. And his research becomes a veritable all-round enquiry. Thus, in the manner of a detective, he seeks out evidence in the archives of the sponsor as well as those of the company, in the photographs taken by the foreman, in the correspondence between the designer and the construction manager, in the full set of plans, as well as in the diagrams of the stability calculations. On the strength of these leads, which are generally overlooked, his account offers a comprehensive take on Italian architectural work, especially in the twentieth century.

He also took part in two exemplary Roman restorations: of the post office situated on Via Marmorata, built by Adalberto Libera; and of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana. Thanks to his invaluable study of the sources and the restoration design work that he undertook, these buildings recovered all their original splendour. His analysis brings to light the technical experimentation typical of modern architecture, with all its congenital fragility, thanks to the restoration that he liked to term 'invisible work', like that of *Pierre Ménard, the author of Quixote* imagined by Borges.

In 2008, Sergio Poretti published his major work on *Italian Modernisms* as part of the collection *Architecture and Construction*, published by Gangemi and translated into English in 2013. The book is illustrated with a number of his own architectural photographs. That same year, he dedicated one of his most prized books to Rome, his beloved city, in the form of a collection of images.

With the advent of the new millennium, Sergio Poretti set to work on a new topic: structural engineering. In 2011, he was awarded the prestigious European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grant for the project SIXXI, the history of structural engineering in Italy in the twentieth century, to which he devoted himself full time up to the end, together with Tullia Iori and a team of young researchers⁷. Sergio Poretti devoted his life to understanding the reasons for the strong identity of the works of the Italian school in general, all while revealing

7 The three latest volumes of the series «SIXXI – Storia dell'ingegneria strutturale in Italia», which has already been written, will be published soon.

his ‘humanist’ character. The community of construction historians has lost an immense researcher, a true master⁸.

May this issue be dedicated to him!

Robert CARVAIS

8 His main works are: Sergio Poretti (with Tullia Iori, ed.), “La Scuola italiana di Ingegneria”, special issue of *Rassegna di architettura e urbanistica*, 148, January-April 2016; *SIXXI 3. Storia dell’ingegneria strutturale in Italia*, Gangemi, Rome 2015; *SIXXI 2. Storia dell’ingegneria strutturale in Italia*, Gangemi, Rome 2015; *SIXXI 1. Storia dell’ingegneria strutturale in Italia*, Gangemi, Rome 2014; Sergio Poretti, *Roma. Figurine di architettura del novecento*, Gangemi, Rome 2013; *Italian Modernisms. Architecture and construction in the twentieth century*, Gangemi, Rome 2013; Sergio Poretti (with Tullia Iori, ed.), “Ingegneria oggi”, numéro spécial de *Rassegna di architettura e urbanistica*, 137-138, May-December 2012; *Pier Luigi Nervi. Architettura come Sfida*. Roma. Ingegno e costruzione. Guida alla mostra, Electa, Milan 2010; Sergio Poretti, *Modernismi italiani. Architettura e costruzione nel Novecento*, Gangemi, Rome 2008; Sergio Poretti (with Tullia Iori), *Pier Luigi Nervi. L’Ambasciata d’Italia a Brasilia*, Electa, Milan 2008; Sergio Poretti (with Tullia Iori; ed.), “Ingegneria italiana”, special issue of *Rassegna di architettura e urbanistica*, 121-122, January-August 2007; Sergio Poretti (ed.), *Il restauro delle Poste di Libera*, Gangemi, Rome 2005; *L’INA Casa: il cantiere e la costruzione*, Gangemi, Rome 2002; Sergio Poretti (with M. Casciato, ed.), *Il Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana. Architettura e costruzione del Colosseo Quadrato*, Federico Motta Editore, Milan 2002; Sergio Poretti, *La Casa del fascio di Como*, Carocci, Rome 1998; *Progetti e costruzione dei Palazzi delle Poste a Roma 1933-1935*, Edilstampa, Rome 1990. For more information about his work and research, see: www.sergioporetti.eu.