

Book Review:

Vit-Suzan, Ilan. *Architectural Heritage Revisited: A Holistic Engagement of its Tangible and Intangible Constituents*

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The book *Architectural Heritage Revisited* by Ilan Vit-Suzan represents an extraordinary effort to understand the symbolic complexity of certain monuments, not as historical curiosities, but as cultural institutions charged both with historical sense and some kind of “spirituality” that exceeds, sometimes, their cultural and geographical limits. The author asks, from the first pages of the book, “if the poetry of a ruined place can provoke strong feelings of continuity with the past, as well as promises of transcendence?” (xi).

Because of modern alienation from his own tradition, contemporary man has lost the ability to properly interpret a historical phenomenon. Hence the importance of Vit-Suzan’s book. His understanding of the studied cases through their denotative and connotative aspects reminds us of the notion of “intentional object” of Nicolai Hartmann or the notion of “concretization” of Roman Ingarden, both of whom understood the work as a “layered structure” where the physical aspect of the monument is only its ontological basis, which basis is wrapped in layers of meaning as the product of different historical visions that have been superimposed throughout history, and with the outer layers representing the prejudices of those who analyze or observe the phenomenon themselves. Accordingly, when we see a ruin or a building

we may also perceive these layers of meaning that are revealed in several ways and degrees in accordance with our sensitivity in a process that Roman Ingarden describes as a “concretization” of the work.

Vit-Suzan proposes a methodology to analyze monuments based on Gramsci’s notion of inventory, which methodology consists of two aspects: the denotative inventory which focuses on the history of the material building, (specially its different renovations and reconstructions), and the connotative inventory, which focuses on the meanings and interpretations embodied in the building during different historical periods. The first inventory reveals architectural trends of an era, the second examines the evolution of symbolic legacies related to the different worldviews occurring over time.

These monuments are interpreted as layered structures of historical and symbolic meanings that reveal social and spiritual connotations. Their interpretation reflects the different worldviews that the monument has gone through, such as the concepts of divinity or divinities, the denial of cultural loss and the tolerance between different cultures and beliefs.

For Vit-Suzan, the building’s layered structures simultaneously reveal “change and difference”. The author recognizes that there is an “intuitive recognition of the building essence, not just its current state-of-being” (172). This essence, notes the author, is somehow defined by Alfredo López-Austin as a “hard nucleus”, which represents “a kind of master narrative supported by certain systems of thought that are highly resistant to fundamental change.” To López-Austin, “this nucleus is constituted by an ensemble of deep core propositions, whose ability to resist change stems from an ability to provide a coherent interpretation of reality and by extension to develop successful mechanisms of adaptation, that is, to heighten a group’s survival. Thus, while the (tangible) appearance of heritage may change, its (intangible) essence persists” (172).

Just as the Russian Matryoshka or the suggestive image of the “Glass Onion” of the Beatles’ song, the phenomenon of the ruin is revealed within its layered complexity through the careful analysis of Vit-Suzan who, like a skilled surgeon, rips off, one by one, all the layers of meaning that cover these superb monuments. These interpretations demystify nationalisms and ideologies and represent, to my point of view, real points of departure for a future with meaning in which we can see and understand the possibility of a historical continuity despite different worldviews (Pantheon), where we will be able to accept the loss of cultural institutions in order to accept ourselves as who we are, viz., as the product of a mixture of races and cultures (Teotihuacan), and/or to visualize the real possibility of a place of diversity and inclusion (the Alhambra).

In the Pantheon, Vit-Suzan highlights how the building has had the capacity to symbolize through various changes and cultural paradigms, from the Roman Polytheism and Christian Monotheism, to that of a contemporary Museum. The Pantheon has been able, despite many renovations and changes, not only to transform its cultural denotations, but to transfer a sense of timeless universality.

In the case of Teotihuacan, the analysis shows that, just as the ancient *Mexicas* interpreted the abandoned Teotihuacan ruins as the place where the gods were sacrificed for the Universe to continue its

flow, constituting the ethical example for systematic human sacrifice, contemporary Mexicans want to see in these ruins a dubious cultural legacy and a fictitious cultural continuity. While there are many things to learn from the Teotihuacan ruins, this interpretation is contrary to the reality of contemporary Mexicans who want to deny their corresponding part of Western culture. Hence the risk of returning to a mythical time and avoiding the acceptance of loss; and hence also evading reconciliation with one's own self. The author argues the need to recognize the loss of cultural continuity and reminds us of the importance of keeping a critical distance from nationalist demagoguery when analyzing monuments (170). In this sense the author suggests that the Teotihuacan ruins: "under the mantle of vegetation, may be hard to swallow; however, it is an honest image of the past, which may stimulate a better future" (171).

In the case of the Alhambra in Granada, the analysis reveals that, because of its geographical conditions it has served as a refuge for marginalized groups which have flourished and developed a tradition of cultural inclusion. In this sense the Alhambra is a great example which shows that coexistence, tolerance, and intellectual exchange are possible among heterogeneous groups. In the Alhambra, for a relatively long period of time, the "other" was seen as the "same". The author makes it clear that the respect for social diversity can and must be preserved against the homogenizing tendencies of technological modernity, the latter an heir of a vision of the "One True God", which only produces intolerance towards anyone who thinks differently. He clarifies that "the reversal of exclusion could reinstate the legitimacy of alternative views of reality (heterodox worldviews) as integral constituents of major expressions of human culture" (171). The author tells us that the antidote by which to avoid the "cyclical return of inquisitorial intolerance" is "a thorough revision of the ideas of democracy, equality, and solidarity to strengthen the belief that another world is possible. That is why we cannot inherit these traditions uncritically" (164). It is necessary, therefore, that the initiative for action "must be driven by grassroots movements, not paternalistic aid from Westernized elites" (170).

Herein lies the richness of these monuments and the need for sophisticated hermeneutics, for precise interpretation based on evidence, without losing sight of their own questions and interests: compassionate, in order to understand the "other", but critical as well of imposed worldviews. The analysis of monuments as layered structures helps us to understand the processes in which different groups have had to deal with the question of the "other", allowing the possibility of understanding ourselves as "Pagans", "Infidels", "Christians", "Muslims", "Jews", "Indians", "Mestizos", "Ancient", or "Modern" ... the ruins finally representing an image of our own circumstances as humans. In this sense, the book reveals that it is important to preserve cultural identity from the homogenizing process of modernity and totalitarian ideologies.

Finally, it should be noted that since the discipline of architecture has alienated itself from its cultural roots since the Enlightenment, it has been problematic to integrate historical heritage with architectural practice. With notable exceptions these attempts have been superficial, e.g., the historicism of the nineteenth century or so-called postmodernist movement of the 80s in the twentieth century, which

both have been limited to making copies of purely formal elements. Contrastingly, I think it is through non-superficial interpretations that history is going to be seen again as meaningful and represent a real point of departure. The author shows that the ruins still have the ability to revive our capacity to dream as we lead the way towards a possible return to our cultural heritage for the practice of architecture and other disciplines. In that sense, despite the dangers of falling uncritically into nationalism and ideologies, we must reinvent a tradition based on architectural history. The idea of inventory by Gramsci, or Hartmann's "intentional object", or Tarkovsky's "mystical rationalism", can give us the tools for preserving existing ruins and provide us with elements for imagining a possible better world.

About the Author

Santiago de Orduña was born in Mexico City in 1965. He completed a degree in architecture and a master's degree in philosophy at the Universidad Iberoamericana (1984-2000) where he taught various subjects from 1990 to 2000. He has held a CONACYT Fellowship and received his Masters and Ph.D., directed by Dr. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, in History and Theory of Architecture from McGill University in Montreal. He lives with his wife and two children in Coatepec, Veracruz.