UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI FIRENZE

FLORE
Repository istituzionale dell'Università degli Studi di Firenze

The roof - Das Dach

Questa è la Versione finale referata (Post print/Accepted manuscript) della seguente pubblicazione:

Original Citation:
The roof - Das Dach / F.Collotti. - STAMPA. - (2005), pp. 211-212.

Availability:
This version is available at: 2158/403599 since:

Publisher:
Birkhaeuser Verlag AG

Terms of use:
Open Access
La pubblicazione è resa disponibile sotto le norme e i termini della licenza di deposito, secondo quanto stabilito dalla Policy per l'accesso aperto dell'Università degli Studi di Firenze (https://www.sba.unifi.it/upload/policy-oa-2016-1.pdf)

Publisher copyright claim:

(Article begins on next page)

27 April 2024

The roof

Francesco Collotti

Flat or pitched roof? We are not interested in pedantically reconstructing the position of this or that person, and we certainly do not intend to play the game of those who, taking the form of the roof as their starting point, distinguish between good and bad, progress and tradition, vernacular architecture and International Style. If we had been alive in the early 1930s, we would have been forced to take sides in favour of one tendency or a tendency of a tendency. We would have chosen Modernism or perhaps even those deliberate exaggerations that prevent moderate positions in revolutionary moments. Or we would have chosen another, more traditional Modernism that was pursuing the ancient myth of architecture and trying to evocate already forgotten briefs for this discipline.

Today, we no longer have to do make such categorical decisions and can permit ourselves the liberal pursuit of a non-dogmatic eclecticism which allows us to assemble dissimilar and sometimes contrasting worlds of forms in one and the same composition. We can therefore reconstruct – with a leisurely calmness and cheerfulness – the arguments of one or other position with respect to new trends. On the one hand, we acknowledge the ability of Modernism to re-establish the discipline, but at the same time we are conscious of the dogmatic inflexibility that precluded the "Neues Bauen" movement from inspiring permanent, local monuments and turning them into stone. On the other hand, now that we have had time to reflect on the ideological polemics we can recognise the motives of that rearguard action that was in the position to conduct a dialogue with tradition, the local monuments and the slow passage of time, which for their part are linked with habits and an everyday life consisting of repetitive gestures, of normality, banality, coincidence.

The wise and moderate stances appear today to be more durable than the categorical avant-garde, also more convincing than the exasperated reactionary. In the flat-versus-pitched-roof debate everybody claims to have good reasons for underpinning the validity of his or her own proposal, and everybody wants an appropriate roof which protects and is simple. But what is an appropriate roof? Is it a roof that covers well? Or is it a roof that finishes off the building? Or is it a roof that conveys the impression of covering well and finishing off the building by remaining in the background as far as possible? Or is it a roof that beyond being a good covering and finishing off the building also presents a protective and powerful form?

Few speak about the roof as one of the archetypal and generating motifs of building work, the roof as an intrinsic form and image. The roof is related to the myth of construction and with the original instinct to protect ourselves. Perhaps the origin of the roof has something to do with the ancient idea of space, namely, the tent (in its most primitive or most cultivated forms, e.g. Asplund or Lewerentz). The nomads as tent-users and the settled tribes who built earthen or stone terraces and pyramids represent two different and separate worlds. But both can be seen in the same picture. The roof goes hand in hand with the myth of construction, this oldest of all human gestures, to cover and protect ourselves. According to the extraordinary portrayal by Piero della Francesca, the cloak of the Madonna is simultaneously protection, house, tent and roof. And even if there is apparently no roof, i.e., also if it is not clearly present, it exists (consider the well-contrived house without a roof from the exercises of Paul Schmitthenner).

So the roof is a longing on the part of the building, a desire for a covering, the promise of protection, as well as completion. The roof finishes off the building. In some countries raising the roof is celebrated. This holds even for those flat roofs that some would like to banish from the family of roofs altogether for ideological reasons, for the simple reason that we do not see them. On the contrary, we sense flat roofs, even when they are not directly visible, or we try to make them noticeable. Sometimes all the good architect needs is a delicate cornice, subtle profiling, a narrow joint in the render, a small strip of sheet zinc or copper to convey the impression of the roof. At the Tuscolano Estate (Rome, 1950–54) Adalberto Libera used the remnant of the roof, a sensitive, interrupted, gently animated line, to mark the end of the facade – and the start of the roof. It is a lightweight wing ready for take-off, a discreet but important symbol. For Le Corbusier in an apartment for Charles de Beistégui in Paris (1930–31), the roof is reconquered space, the place for a modern hanging gardens, a place removed from the tight-fisted sellers of roofing tiles and slates. It is a wonderful place, natural and artificial, a space in the city but at the same time above it, outside the hustle and bustle of the metropolis. The height of the walls that enclose the terrace is such that only some Parisian landmarks are visible – the most important ones. A place in which the city seems surreal, the object of abstract contemplation, cleansed of and alienated from context. The roof, the open hall of the house (the flat roof as living space – Sigfried Giedion).

In any case the roof is related to the mythical archetypal forms which – even after successive metamorphoses, transfigurations and alterations – are still recognisable in the elements of architecture. For centuries the gable was a reminder of the roof in the facade (e.g. Heinrich Tessenow).

The roof is loaded with significance: it can be indiscreet. In some cases it will do anything to become visible. The roofs of ancient Greek temples on Sicily were announced through colourful architectural features rich in motifs, metopes and triglyphs, which for their part told of even older wooden temples that used decorative elements to preserve the memory of construction techniques (the little lion half-head gargoyles on the long sides spouting the water from the hipped roof surfaces). The roof includes figures and

symbols, it terrifies those who threaten the sanctuary (Norwegian stave churches with dragons' heads; the roof as the protective shell of an animal).

It is not just by chance that the roof suggests similarities between building and shipbuilding (in the arsenal at Venice the roof also serves as a crane for building ships). In theatre design the roof becomes a very complex part of the stage machinery, a place for producing special effects and illusions (Friedrich Weinbrenner, Karl von Fischer).

The roof and the locality: the roof always generates symbols, distinguishes one place from another, and not just for reasons of climate. The roof and its materials invoke a certain town, a certain atmosphere. The copper roofs of Paris call forth the idea of city architecture. All impressions that characterise a certain town or region are expressed through their roofs. The roof covering Giovanni Michelucci's Borsa Merci in Pistoia can never be seen in its entirety. It is a drawn shadow. As in other towns in Tuscany it is a fine line, an obviously lightweight structure with a great overhang, dark, rich in shade. We feel that the roof fulfils its function, but we see only the underside of the gutting eaves.

Mario Ridolfi regards the roof as a masterpiece of craftsmanship with an ancient origin, a traditional form that again and again is made more complex and adapted to suit the demands of the plan. A thick body of terracotta tiles, a powerful motif whose principal components are the ridge and all the elements of a cultivated, hand-crafted tradition. (There is something Baroque in all this, as if Borromini had been reborn in small architectural constructions.)

Jože Plečnik created an urbane figure out of the roof by converting a nonuniform terrace of houses into large-scale urban architecture (Trnovo, 1944). The roof can unite the spirit and soul of a people: a great hall in which a whole community can recognise itself again and to which it is called at important moments (Tessenow, community assembly hall, 1941/42, and local government forum, 1941). The roof is an unmistakable place in the centre of the town, the *coperto* tradition in Lombardy: a collective urban place covered by a roof supported on columns where we sometimes find a fountain, or benches for discussing, voting, recognising ourselves as a community, or, in a pragmatic way, for exchanging goods, buying, trading. In this case the roof, as an architectural element, can become a style. The changes to and rationalisation of the *coperto* reappear in many neoclassical works. Fluctuating between a vernacular architecture that is ennobled by various architectural features, and an enlightened, cultivated and, in a way, deprovincialised architecture, such neoclassical works embody a certain ambivalence. The roof as a boundary condition, as an interrupted figure between town and country... (the Coperto dei Figini in the cathedral square in Milan, destroyed c. 1850).

Roof, character, identity: In converting many palaces and large country houses Karl Friedrich Schinkel modified the form of the roof. This gesture demonstrates an attempt to transform the rural character of the aristocracy into a learned and less provincial one.

The roof can be a structure totally independent of the building it covers, but also an inseparable element fundamental to the functioning of the construction. A room in which to dry grain and cereals, a room for the tackles, winches and pulleys for hoisting, for vehicles and bales of straw. In some examples in the Alps the roof descends from the highest point of the house to support the timber beams that run past the solid, white-rendered walls. Consequently, the roof is transformed. It is perforated; it is a thin textile material consisting of horizontal bars and a transparent timber lattice, filtering the light.

The vulnerable roof: a body that reacts to the weather, is sensitive to the prevailing wind and rain (Lois Welzenbacher's house in Grödnertal). In other situations the roof opens up to gather the sunlight from the valley, to provide a view of the mountains (Gio Ponti's Hotel Valmartello or Jože Plečnik's mountain house).

Provisional conclusions (with less certainty, many doubts and various unanswered questions): in Modernism a number of rich and fruitful positions dealing unreservedly with the subject of the roof exist and prosper alongside the official position and classification. We have noted that further in-depth research, like the current treatment of the roof, may never be ultimate, categorical or rigid. For the roof, as in the past with the facade or ornamentation, it is the attempt to find a solution that is important, not the stubborn pursuit of a principle. Take the work of ignazio Gardella. During his life he was a protagonist of the fight that led the architectural culture of our century to renew its vocabulary, but together with others – Rogers, Samonà, Quaroni – he tried to prevent the vocabulary of Modernism from becoming a new style. Modernism is an intellectual attitude, a way of behaving with respect to reality. So Gardella's flat roofs of the 1930s, when the aim was to take up a demonstrative position, are almost a manifesto; but then we have in the postwar years his roof to a church in Lombardy, the roofs to workers' houses in Alessandria, gently placed on the buildings, the variation on a traditional form of roofing to the house of a vineyard owner between the vines on the slopes...

It is for all these reasons that the roof and its form cannot be reduced to a single slogan. I believe we have to read all the forms extant in Modernism, not only those of the avant-garde. The various souls of Modernism. It ist to recognise the fact that we can no longer wallow in the belief that architectural experience begins and ends with Modernism. Today, Modernism can relate to monuments in a new light, reflect in a new way on the total architectural experience over the course of time. And it will continue to learn from these.

Excerpt from:
Francesco Collotti: *Architekturtheoretische Notizen*, vol. 1 of the *Bibliotheca series*, pub. by Martin Tschanz, Lucerne, 2001.