# Marginal Theory. Restoring *Poiēsis* in Architecture

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KEYWORDS: *theōria*; marginal theory; Filarete; Christopher Alexander; poetics; *poiēsis*

*Marginalia* sounds like the realm of in-between, of ambiguous extremes, of limits. And precisely the etymology of the limit opens the perspective of what margins should stand for: the Latin *limes* as a passage between two fields, more than a barrier or a separation. In this key, the attempt at recovering the poetic dimension in architecture belongs to *marginalia*. By employing the findings of history and engaging the bearings of contemporary architectural theory, this approach enables innovation through their critical inquiry and generates a modern discourse that addresses a timeless topic. The paper attempts to explore the margins in architecture at the crossing of history, theory and critique. The aim is not to set up and cement this concept (of margins in architecture), but to offer an approach through a marginal theory; marginal because, although meaningful for present architecture, it is still away from the mainstream. "Marginal theory" refers to the essentials in architectural "making" – of either concrete, or abstract nature – essentials that may have faded away on the background of nowadays architecture, remaining thus marginal. But in the context of *marginalia*, the essence is to transcend, and that is precisely what this approach aspires to, not as a denial of the mainstream, but as a complement to it.

In order to grasp the meaning of marginal theory and the substance of *poiēsis* in architecture, this article advances a new start, therefore needing a previous discussion on what theory means.

## *Theōria* and contemporary theory

Several architects, theorists, historians, critics and philosophers draw attention to the classical origin of the word "theory" and follow its progress and shift of meaning which leads to its current acceptance. This reflection of etymological nature reveals some subtle observations necessary to the present argument. Thus, Dalibor Veselý, Alberto Pérez-Gómez and George Steiner point out that, although in the contemporary context a particular sense of the term "theory" has been cemented, its original meaning is completely different, being gradually abandoned from the sixteenth century until its actual replacement. "The word 'theory' has lost its birthright,"[1] George Steiner claims, while Alberto Pérez-Gómez insists on the inappropriate contemporary use of concepts such as "theory" and "practice" without considering their true substance:

> "Today they are used indiscriminately when referring to other historical eras and cultures, suggesting to a contemporary reader that they are timeless concepts with constant meanings, while in fact they carry a rich set of connotations that have transformed over time."[2]

Let us consider the nature of these connotations and their change over time. An interesting starting point consists in Aristotle's approach to *theōria*. Although apparently at odds with the rest of his work and scholarly debatable,[3] what is relevant to the present topic is the fact that *theōria* refers to the highest activity of the mind, contemplation, as the best way to achieve complete

1 George Steiner, *Real Presences*, EPUB file (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2013), 104.

2 Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Built upon Love: Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 2006), 147.

3 David Roochnik, "What is *Theoria? Nicomachean Ethics* Book 10.7–8," *Classical Philology* 104 (2010), 69-81.

happiness.[4] "It appears, then, that for Aristotle philosophy consists in a 'theoretical' way of life,"[5] notes Pierre Hadot. He then emphasizes the distinction that should be made between the terms "theoretical" (*theōrētikos*) and "theoretic" (*theōrikos*) despite their Greek origin, the former meaning "relative to pure knowledge or speculation," while the latter meaning "speculative; having no relation to reality or practice," and not appearing in Aristotle.[6]

Vitruvius, notices Alberto Pérez-Gómez, tunes his speech in the key of the classical Greek concept, *theōria*, as contemplative language, showing the different connotations of this concept: the contemplation of divinity by recognizing the natural or cosmic order, which is transferred to the human order, be it political, urban, architectural or artistic. Or the lexical link with *theōros* – as a non-speaking representative of the city-state at the Pan-Hellenic meetings – emphasizes a different kind of contemplation, a contemplation of a purely observational nature.[7] Also, according to George Steiner, the connotations are related both to the secular and the ritual. "A 'theorist' or 'theoretician' is one who is disciplined in observance, a term itself charged with a twofold significance of intellectual sensory perception and religious or ritual conduct."[8]

The Greek philosophical idea of contemplation and intellectual virtue enclosed in *theōria* surpasses the Middle Ages through Christian theology and Mysticism, having a shared base – the unmediated knowledge of the divine.[9]

The first signs of change seem to appear with the dawn of modernity. Renaissance fabricates its own image of Antiquity, an image that slowly makes the shift from *vita contemplativa* to *vita activa*, leaving behind the initial meaning of *theōria*. "If knowledge of the world is gained passively by contemplation in the Middle Ages – spelled out in terms of either divine illumination or abstraction from sense perception – it is won through active reconstruction in the modern age."[10] The famous architectural treatise of Leon Battista Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, witnesses this change, ambivalently placed at the articulation of the two worlds, as Françoise Choay observes.[11] Trying to elevate architecture from *ars mechanica* to *ars liberalis*, Alberti achieves through his treatise an inaugural status for architecture: an autonomous discipline, founded on reason alone.[12]

The significance of the concept *theōria* starts to dilute in the second half of the sixteenth century and with the context that frames the events that mark the period. The theorist becomes the one who creates and maintains speculative hypotheses. The shift from cosmologic to egocentric, along with Descartes and Newton, transforms the nature of the concept. The engine of theorizing remains the personal consciousness related to the subjective, but the theory is valid only when it is moving towards objectivity, being tested and proved by the evidence of empirical reality. This model inherits what will later become the rationality of natural sciences and technology.[13]

In *Architecture and the Limits of Modern Theory*, Dalibor Veselý offers a similar explanation, yet more accessible.[14] The contemporary meaning of theory is the result of a fusion between the classical concept of *theōria* and the theoretical notion borrowed from the natural sciences.

4 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp, X (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1177a12- 1178a6.

5 Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2002), 80.

6 Ibid.

7 Pérez-Gómez, *Built upon Love*, 147-148.

8 Steiner, *Real Presences*, 104.

9 Peter Case, Peter Simpson and Robert French, "From *theoria* to theory: Leadership without contemplation," *Organization* 19/3 (2012), 348-349.

10 Elizabeth Brient, "From *Vita Contemplativa* to *Vita Activa*: Modern Instrumentalization of Theory and the Problem of Measure," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 9/1 (2001), 20.

11 Leon Battista Alberti, *L'art d'édifier*, trad. Pierre Caye et Françoise Choay (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004), 15-17.

12 Ibid., 19.

13 Steiner, *Real Presences*, 105-106.

14 Dalibor Veselý, "Architecture and the Limits of Modern Theory," in *Architecture & Theory: Production and Reflection*, ed. L. King (Hamburg: Junius, 2009), 46-71.

The author shows that *theōria* was initially closely linked to two other antique concepts: *praxis* and *technē* – understood as practical life and art. In the case of architecture before the rise of modernity, this link was made visible through the holistic character of rooting many of the building principles in other areas that could not be classified as theoretical sciences such as theology, philosophy, liberal arts, literature or painting. With the eighteenth century, this traditional link established between *praxis*, *technē* and *theōria* dissolves under the influence of a radically new theoretical model that falls under the incidence of mathematical reason. What has followed, explains Dalibor Veselý, is the transformation of the creative possibilities of traditional arts (*technai*): "As a result, the classical 'techne-poietike' was absorbed in the newly emerging 'techne-theoretike', the foundation of modern technology. (...) It distances itself from practical knowledge, spontaneous creativity and skill, in a process dominated by new goals, economy, efficiency, perfection of performance (...)."[15] Thus, architecture leaves behind the cosmological, metaphysical model, changing the vertical articulation with a horizontal, historical one, concerned with origins, primitive model and historical styles.

This perspective leads to an interesting and critical remark on the theory of architecture, which Dalibor Veselý finds, in terms of forms and concept, improper and ambiguous mainly due to the misunderstanding of the true meaning of theory and essence of architecture, as creative activity. The following passage has to be quoted at length:

> The spectrum of knowledge involved in any genuinely creative work includes inevitably certain amount of theoretical rationalisation, but also practical knowledge of skills, visual intelligence and deep experience of practical situations. It is difficult to see how such a rich and diverse spectrum of knowledge could be reduced to (and substituted by) one level of knowledge presented as theory. And yet this is exactly what has happened in modern times. Today we seem to have theories of almost anything, including a theory of architecture, judging by the ease with which the term is used in current publications, professional debates and in the name of research and academic departments. And yet, at the same time, we do not seem to have a plausible definition of architectural theory, to say nothing about the agreement as to the content and meaning of the term.[16]

Although this debate about the antinomy between *theōria* and theory seems only of academic interest, in the current architectural context, there are voices arguing that it could offer much more than a historical tracking of facts or a pure understanding of a past phenomenon. Approaching contemporary theory through the substance of the classical *theōria*, should clarify arguments like the previous one and should open new perspectives on how to relate with reality.

### *Theōria* and the meaning of the real

In order to grasp the connection between *theōria* and the meaning of the real, two preliminary observations need to be made. Firstly, let us return to the core meaning of *theōria*, which referred to something deeper than a way of looking at things (*thea* – sight or view, *theōrein* – to look at, observe), it referred to an ideal way of life. In fact, for the ancient Greeks, the two – philosophical discourse and philosophical way of life – were impossible to separate, as Pierre Hadot explains:

> "There is no discourse which deserves to be called philosophical if it is separated from the philosophical life, and there is no philosophical life unless it is directly linked to philosophical discourse."[17]

As both discourse and way of life, *theōria* served to ideally situate oneself in the world addressing Wisdom (*sophia*), Love (*philia*), Truth (*alētheia*), Beauty and Goodness (*kalon*), and thus unveiling a profound meaning of the real.

15 Ibid., 54.

16 Ibid., 50.

17 Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 174.

The second observation regards the shift that the modern age takes from *vita contemplativa* to *vita activa*. This change, observes Elizabeth Brient,[18] implies the instrumentalization of theory, which no longer is contemplation, but becomes hypothesis applied for the reconstruction and betterment of the world. Thus, the meaning of the real engages in a different direction guided by science and practice towards utility, following an end-means schema. But as highlighted before, *theōria* embodied both *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*, for it was simultaneously and inseparably knowledge and practice.

These remarks on the connection between *theōria* and the meaning of the real being outlined, it is interesting to investigate the meaning of the real in the light of architectural theory, precisely because of the fact that these prior observations seem so remote from the contemporary reality in which we find ourselves so pragmatically grounded. According to Dalibor Veselý, whom I quote again, there are several levels of reality and the contemporary meaning of what is real only reaches one of these levels – what is meant by the real mainly refers only to the pragmatic everyday reality, the one defined by politics, economics, technology or, at a more sophisticated level, by science. However, emphasizes the author, there is also the sense of the daily life reality, ranging from ethic, psycho-somatic, sensorial, critical to symbolic, which cannot be validated objectively, precisely because of its strong personal character.[19] Roger Scruton poetically doubles this opinion: "The world as we live it is not the world as science explains it, any more than the smile of the Mona Lisa is a smear of pigments on a canvas. But this lived world is as real as the Mona Lisa's smile."[20] It is precisely about these different levels of reality (objective – economic, technological, political, scientific and subjective – ethical, psychosomatic, sensorial, symbolic, spiritual), that range in a certain hierarchy relative to the closeness to the essence of life. In his book, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*: *The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production*, Dalibor Veselý shows that architecture has this ability to harmonize different levels of reality, which cannot be denied, but the problem emerges when their hierarchy is overturned. [21] A conflict arises then between the instrumental and the communicative level, between the means and the meanings of reality: "reality is idealised and adapted to the means, possibilities and limits of representation rather than presenting and revealing itself."[22]

What is frequently overlooked in this rationalistic approach – Roger Scruton argues in his turn – is the aesthetic experience together with the values that this experience implies.[23] The philosopher distinguishes between what values and needs/requirements mean, emphasizing that modern architecture mainly employs the latter concepts, passing them over to contemporary architecture. "Needs" do not separate us that much from the animal world: clean air, health, sports, food. Values, on the other hand, follow what is good and right, giving depth and order to human experience.[24]

We must then search for that core of experience, for that 'surplus' in which we find ourselves reflected, not as creatures of the moment, consumed in the present activity, but as rational beings, with a past, a present and a future. We must try to re-capture what is *central* in the experience of architecture. Like Alberti, Serlio and their followers, we will find that we can do that only if we reinstate aesthetic values at the heart of the builder's enterprise, and allow no question of function to be answered independently of the question of the appropriateness of a building, not just to its use, but to a style of life.[25]

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18 Brient, "From *Vita Contemplativa* to *Vita Activa,"* 30.

19 Dalibor Veselý, "Architecture as a Humanistic Discipline," in *The Humanities in Architectural Design: A Contemporary and Historical Perspective*, ed. S. Bandyopadhyay et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 189.

20 Roger Scruton, *The Soul of the World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 127.

21 Dalibor Veselý, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 2004), 7-8.

22 Veselý, "Architecture and the Limits of Modern Theory," 52.

23 Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (London: Methuen & co, 1979), 260.

24 Ibid., 30-32.

25 Ibid., 36.

Christopher Alexander identifies at the core of the present confusion, the nineteenth century mechanistic-rationalistic model of the world (or Cartesian model in his words), which was transmitted to the contemporary world, penetrating it to the depths.[26] In his view, escaping from the trap of this way of perceiving the world, lies within architecture's potential to carry life and order.

Trying to investigate the sphere of the real, Christopher Alexander raises the problem of "life," noticing the inability of the twentieth century science to provide a relevant definition for it and, consequently, the need for a more comprehensive definition of the concept.[27] The author proposes a hypothesis in the first volume of his tetralogy *The Nature of Order*, entitled, *The Phenomenon of Life*. As it appears from this hypothesis, "life" – defined by a wide range of issues of formal, geometrical, structural, social, biological and holistic nature – is the one capable of giving and bearing a change in the mechanistic-rationalistic-Cartesian way of being. According to him, the essence of this change comes from syntonizing the objective, general and subjective, personal levels of reality. "We resolve the Cartesian dilemma, and make a view of order in which objective reality 'out there' and our personal reality 'in here' are thoroughly connected."[28] This is seen by Christopher Alexander as a method of observation complementary to the mechanist-rationalist-Cartesian one and not substitutive, since some aspects of reality can still be better explained by one method rather than the other.[29] Through this the author requires a certain coherence in approaching reality.

### Marginal theory: *theōria* and *poiēsis*

As it turns out so far, the semantic shift of *theōria* and the narrowing understanding of the concept of the *real*, draws architectural theory into a marginal status, faced to the richness of the subject. To reconsider architecture through the lens of *theōria* syntonized with *realness*, which differs from the contemporary point of view, pushes the rediscovery of architecture at the edge, on the range of *marginalia*. But, as stated in the beginning, *marginalia* is about transcendence, about rising above and going beyond. And by clearing that out, the call upon *poiēsis* in this context is not at all accidental, for it refers, in its original Greek sense, to bringing into being, "pro-ducing" into presence and should not be confused with *praxis*, which means "doing," in the sense of acting.[30] Giorgio Agamben explains that *poiēsis* was understood in connection with knowing and not with doing. "The essence [of *poiēsis*] is found instead in the production of truth and in the subsequent opening of a world for man's existence and action."[31] This affirmation enables to situate *poiēsis* closer to *theōria*.

There is another reason for bringing together these two concepts: the fact that the contemporary context has altered or put aside their actual meaning. *Theōria* became theory and completely changed its denotation, while *poiēsis*, once clearly different from *praxis*, is now substituted for it. The central experience of *poiēsis*, pro-duction into presence, is replaced by the question of the "how," that is, of the process through which the object has been produced. At this point, all human "doing" is interpreted as praxis, as a concrete productive activity (in opposition to theory, understood as a synonym of thought and abstract meditation). And praxis is conceived in turn as starting from work, that is, from the production of material life that corresponds to life's biological cycle.[32]

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26 Christopher Alexander, *The Nature of Order: An Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe, Book One: The Phenomenon of Life* (Berkeley, California: The Center for Environmental Structure, 2002), 7-8.

27 Ibid., 28-30.

28 Ibid., 22.

29 Ibid., 369.

30 Giorgio Agamben, *The man without content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 68.

31 Ibid., 72.

32 Ibid., 70.

*Theōria* as contemplation and *poiēsis* as leading into being are interesting to be put side by side in the context of architecture. To be more specific, *theōria*, as a way of life, brings a certain profoundness of our relating to the world and its understanding. And *poiēsis*, as unveiling, transforming truth into presence, opens up a new perspective on the issue of creation and creativity. The present context needs such a reminder of essentiality. "*Theōria* is nevertheless crucial to ensure a meaningful architecture. It enables the architect to frame rituals appropriately and to reveal the order of the cosmos in our worldly lives. It is the necessary knowledge that guides *poiēsis* toward truth and goodness."[33] In this way, Alberto Pérez-Gómez explores the possibilities of reconsidering the original sense of theory in order to find a meaningful approach to architecture, gaining substance and depth. Architecture encloses the power to allow man to poetically dwell on earth, if only he should see that. And remember that seeing, looking and observing were once referred to as *theōrein*.

Restoring poetics in architecture passes through *poiēsis* and *theōria*. "What characterizes a way of making as poetic is the situatedness of the results in the communicative space of culture."[34] That is, to respect and understand the given reality by acting in continuity, supporting architecture's communicative role, its ability to transmit, communicate knowledge, situations, experiences, sensations.

The present attempt reengaging *theōria* and *poiēsis* opens a possible dialogue with the current understanding of architecture (both theoretical and practical), offering it a potential enhancement, by showing two powerful examples of poetical "making". And *poiēsis* is precisely that: derived from the ancient Greek term *poiéō*, which means "to make," "to bring into being," *poiēsis* refers to the idea of creative process, and may be a key in understanding the purpose of architecture, as a discipline and profession concerned with "making."

Since marginalia means "written on the margin," this paper could be considered a commentary on architectural *poiēsis*, its present condition and its becoming.

## Two distinctive architectural writings

This annotation of the architectural theory opens the opportunity of a dialogue. The paper is based on a critical inquiry into the *poiēsis* of architecture, as reflected in two particular architectural writings, belonging to different times – the Renaissance and the present: Filarete's *Trattato di Architettura* (around 1464) and Christopher Alexander's *Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth* (2012). The first one is a fictional construction diary of the ideal city of Sforzinda, which, despite merging into the dream of the Renaissance for an ideal society, offers a solid, non-utopian perspective that is strongly linked to reality.[35] In its twenty-five *libri*, the writing combines reflective considerations on the origins of building, the purpose of architecture and the status of the architect, with practical issues such as the right choice of materials, costs, work force and technical implementation of the project. It takes the form of a dialogue between the architect and his Prince, offering a didactic approach to architecture and, *in extenso*, to righteously "being" in the world. One of its most special features reflects the capacity of holding together different scales of "making": finding and organizing the site along with conceiving the buildings that frame the city and envisaging different kinds of architectural details. The second writing is a real construction journal of an existing college and high school campus in Japan, near Tokyo, built by Alexander and his collaborators in the 1980s. Structured as well in twenty-five chapters, the book brings forward the pursuit of an ideal, meaningful architecture as a struggle between two world-systems: A – mental-emotional and B – physical-economic. It offers an original and personal, yet critical and detached view of the project from inception and design stage to implementation

33 Pérez-Gómez, *Built upon Love*, 148.

34 Veselý, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation,* 387.

35 Hubertus Günther, "Society in Filarete's *Libro architettonico* between Realism, Ideal, Science Fiction and Utopia," *Arte Lombarda* 155/1 (2009), 56.

and development throughout the years. Although it aims to achieving an ideal architecture, the discourse does not exclude the practical, economic and financial aspects of building, but approaches them differently, in order to create a living environment. This different approach is reflected in the way of "making" architecture, and includes the author's attitude towards users and collaborators and even towards architectural education.

In the light of the previous considerations on *theōria* and *poiēsis*, the choice of these two architectural writings is not arbitrary. Firstly, what makes them likely to be regarded together is their power to truly engage *theōria*, being at the same time valid exponents of theory. It seems that these works can be simultaneously "theoretical" (*theōrētikos* – "relative to pure knowledge or speculation") and "theoretic" (*theōrikos* – "speculative; having no relation to reality or practice"), as mentioned earlier. They both possess an objectified perspective about the "making" of architecture, with a clear discourse founded on solid arguments, but they also show a certain symbolic trait, which subtly guides this objectified perspective, giving it depth, and somehow a higher goal.

Secondly, in what regards *poiēsis*, as a way of unveiling, transforming truth into presence, the two proposed architectural writings open up a new perspective on the issue of creation and creativity. Both works show that architectural "doing" has an ulterior motif besides its functional, economic, political ones and that is the general well-being in relating to the world and understanding of it. Creation is engaged by both pragmatic and poetic values and its purpose transcends the immediate.

Finally, both *Trattato* and *The Battle* transmit, besides the "technical," professional information, this powerful ability to connect through architectural "making" with this realness discussed previously. In other words, they are a true testimony of *vita activa*, while still regarding *vita contemplativa*. These writings, each one in its historical context, reach practical situations, financial, economic, organizational aspects, portraying actual architectural "making," and at the same time, keep alive the poetic meaning in the process of edification, be it of symbolical, spiritual or ethical nature.

The presentation of this binomial of architectural writings does not stop at a mere comparison, though their similarities and differences are looked upon. The final purpose remains the critical assimilation of the two, their passing through the filter of judgment in the light of the new problematic of the architecture of today. Therefore, the study will focus on some aspects that are relevant to the present context and that are echoed in the two authors' discourses: the idea of wholeness, the condition of the architect in relation to the commisioner and towards the profession itself.

There may be one observation to be made before engaging into the inquiry concerning the fact that an early modern architectural writing is considered along with a contemporary one. Again, although the choice may seem arbitrary, it is not. The idea of this binomial was to show the contemporary re-discovery of the poetic dimension of architecture and to trace it just before the moment this way of "making" architecture changed its signification, that being, as mentioned before, the dawn of the modernity.

To set the frame of the present discussion, it is necessary to return to the Greek term in the title. *Poiēsis*, as previously shown by its etymology, contains the idea of "making" and takes a particular form through *mimēsis* (as creative interpretation), which applied to *praxis* (as practical life) generates the work of art,[36] including architecture. Although the present format of the paper does not permit their proper evaluation here, it is still relevant to mention this triad *poiēsis – mimēsis – praxis*. Investigating the poetic value of present architecture, Dalibor Veselý observes that this triad offers the key to the contemporary problems of architecture, in the sense of reconciling the

36 "So it follows that the first principle of tragedy – the soul, in fact - is the plot, and second to that the characters: it is a *mimesis* of an *action (praxis)* and therefore particularly [a *mimesis*] of men-of-action in action." Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. George Whalley (Montreal & Kingston, London, Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 1450b3–4 (75).

instrumental/technical and the communicative/poetic role of architecture.[37] In other words, the purpose of architecture may be achieved by reflecting the creative process (as *poiēsis*) through the creative interpretation (as *mimēsis*) of the everyday life (as *praxis*). By reconsidering the value of "making", architecture is closer to recover its ideal dimension. Within this frame, two observations have to be made:

The first one refers to Christopher Alexander's book *The Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth* and identifies the importance of creative production in a technologically driven society.

> "Making, when conceived properly, and with its true meaning intact, is creation. The act of making, when properly understood, is the act of creation. It will help us keep our focus, if we acknowledge to ourselves, as often as possible, that our production system needs to be thought of as a creation system. It should not be reduced, merely, to that technical status. Nor should it ever be regarded as a technical system that exists merely for our use or convenience."[38]

The battle he uses as a metaphor in the title should be more likely perceived as a search of balance between the two world-systems that cannot successfully run separately. In his opinion, what contributes to this achievement of harmony is the architect's ability of not only designing the project but also of endowing it by participating to its realization. *Poiēsis* as "making" is able to bring back in the contemporary context a rare, almost forgotten dimension, the one that could reveal architecture as both *ars liberalis* and *ars mechanica*.

The second remark, within the frame of the present discourse, points at Filarete's *Trattato di Architettura*. Here, the link between intellectual capacity and technical-manual ability is residing under the sign of *ingegno*, and finds its symbolic representation in the allegory of Virtue. Following the wish of his commissioner, the architect is to conceive the most important building of the ideal city of Sforzinda, *la Casa del Vizio e della Virtù.* To state its concept and prepare its materialization, Filarete draws the personification of the *Virtù in sé:* Virtue is represented by a winged male figure, holding in his right hand a date palm (*dattero*) and in his left one a laurel (*alloro*), standing at the top of a diamond, from which springs a flow of honey surrounded by bees (*api*).[39] One contemporary interpretation of this allegory is of particular interest. Ulrich Pfisterer identifies *dattero* with the physical virtue, assigns *alloro* to the intellectual ability and associates *api* with the manual capacity, converging to understanding this representation as one allegory of the artist – artisan.[40] The ideal architect should, hence, be the embodiment of virtue through an intellectual approach doubled by manual skill. In the light of the modern call upon the triad *poiēsis – mimēsis – praxis*, the ideal dimension of architecture, as it emerges from the Renaissance, bears the intellectual as well as the practical, managing *praxis* through *mimēsis* and *poiēsis*, as mental ingenuity and technical creativity.

## Revisiting the essentials: wholeness, architect – commissioner – architecture

The paper spotlights three aspects encountered in the two architectural writings, which demonstrate their relevance in the pursuit of contemporary architecture, by revisiting the essentials in architectural "making": the idea of wholeness, the condition of the architect in relation to the commissioner and towards architecture itself.

**Wholeness.** Talking about the concept of wholeness, Christopher Alexander pictures it as the word to describe the ideal purpose and dimension of architecture and links it to the example of

37 This is a recurrent topic in Dalibor Veselý's writings, discussed in his book *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, and in articles such as "Architecture and the Limits of Modern Theory" or "Architecture and the Conflict of Representation."

38 Christopher Alexander, *The Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth: A struggle between two world-systems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 384.

39 Antonio Averlino (detto il Filarete), *Trattato di Architettura* [Treatise on Architecture], a c. di Anna M. Finoli e Liliana Grassi, tomo I, II (Milano: Edizioni Il Polifilo, 1972), tomo I, 533-34.

40 Ulrich Pfisterer, "I libri di Filarete" [Filarete's Books], *Arte Lombarda* 155/1 (2009), 102.

a Persian carpet. It consists of a matrix of interlocking elements, which at any scale is forming one whole, being harmonious individually as well as together.[41] Although it is rather difficult to explain scientifically this notion, Filarete's *Trattato di Architettura* and Christopher Alexander's *Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth* seem to offer a solid illustration for it. This is acquired in both writings by the capacity of "making" architecture at different scales, treating it as a whole of different stages and components that make sense from the generality of the building-site's organization to the particularization of architectural objects and finally to the specificity of the detail. Filarete himself, contrarily to the practice of architects in his time, emphasizes the importance of having a holistic approach to architecture, by the double process of designing and actually building – "le cose degne da me ordinate e anche fatte."[42]

"Making" had a special dimension in architectural practice of the Renaissance. In fact, as James Ackerman observes,[43] building following a precise, elaborate, final graphical representation was not at all common at that time. The drawings that accompanied the building site were merely preliminary sketches. "Builders, rather than work with detailed specifications, got the gist of the design from the model, and when they encountered problems, they simply got the answer from the architect or supervisor by word of mouth."[44] The process of edification was not entirely programmed ahead, but only generally outlined, allowing decisions on the spot. Christopher Alexander makes similar remarks about his way of edification: "Any time something new comes up in the design of a building, we are very likely to try and invent the best way of building it."[45] And also, "to achieve a successful building – one that has life – we must focus our attention on all the crafts and processes, and then, as architects, ourselves take direct charge of the making."[46] Besides the idea of treating the architectural process at all of its extents, this wholeness encloses a higher aspiration: harmony itself.

**Architect and commissioner.** A different status of the architect emerges from this inquiry. This is modelled by the relation between the architect and the commissioner. Filarete puts it poetically: the commissioner-Prince plays the role of the father, the architect plays the part of the mother, who harmoniously "make" together the building which, thus, becomes their child.[47] And by the force of example, he opens in his treatise an ideal dialogue between architect and owner, from which no wish of the latter is neglected and no proposal of the first remains unheard.[48] Beyond the didactic purpose of this dialogue, there is a reciprocal communication that sustains the act of "making." Somehow, the patron – architect hierarchy fades away in front of a relationship based on equal trust and commensurate contribution of know-how.

The approach of this topic in Christopher Alexander's discourse is more systematic, in the form of a pattern language, developed and applied by the author throughout the years.[49] At large, this pattern language enables both the commisioner and the context to "speak" in order to embody the building. It also offers a background to project the contention of the two previously mentioned world-systems. The result is a meaningful, living environment that meets at its best the needs of the inhabitants also fitting in the cultural and physical context.

41 Alexander, *The Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth*, 414.

42 It was customary among the architects of the Renaissance to gain recognition through numerous commissions, sometimes in different places, fact made possible by conceiving the project and supervising it distantly without actual participation. For more details see Ulrich Pfisterer, "I libri di Filarete".

43 James Ackerman, "Architectural Practice in the Italian Renaissance," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 13/ 3 (1954).

44 Ibid., 8.

45 Alexander, *The Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth*, 299.

46 Ibid., 263.

47 Averlino (detto il Filarete), *Trattato di Architettura*, tomo I, 40.

48 Hans Hubert, "Filarete – der Architekt als Tugendfreund" [Filarete – the Architect, Friend of Virtue], in *Die Virtus des Künstlers in der italienische Renaissance* [Artists' Virtues in the Italian Renaissance], ed. Joachim Poeschke, Thomas Weigel and Britta Kusch-Arnhold (Münster: Rhema-Verlag, 2006), 41.

49 Among the works of Christopher Alexander that treat this subject are *A Pattern Language*, *The Nature of Order*, and, more recently, *The Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth*.

**Architect and architecture.** *Poiēsis* captures a different tone of the relation between the architect, his creation and the act of "making". This relationship stays under the sign of love and joy, calling for ethics. Alberto Pérez-Gómez considers that architecture, generally and most ardently in our present times, is seeking for the reconciliation between poetics and ethics to find its grounding in love.[50] Likewise, the architect is, ideally, driven by desire: the pleasure of imagining, of creating and finally of seeing his work accomplished. It is precisely what Filarete states:

> "Building is nothing more than a voluptuous pleasure, like that of a man in love. [...] When a man is in love, he gladly goes to see his beloved. When she is in a place where he can see her, he is not sorry for the time spent nor is he bored. So he who builds goes gladly to see his building, and as often as he sees it the more he wants to see it and the more his heart swells. [...] His soul is drawn to it and he always desires the things that he thinks are best for it, exactly as a man in love [would] do. There is no half way for him; he loves it."[51]

This may be one of the most beautiful and poetic definition of architecture ever. It is the essence of the relation between architect and architecture. The congruence of poetics and ethics is reflected as well in the joy and liveliness of the process of creation. A very interesting representation of this joy appears on the back of Filarete's bronze doors at St Peter's in Rome. The relief envisages the architect and his six assistants embracing in a joyful movement similar to a dance. The inscription that accompanies this relief "CETERIS OPER(A)E PRETIVM FASTVS [??]MVS VE MIHI HILARITAS" was recently interpreted as "For others, the reward of the work [is] pride or money; for me, [it's] joyfulness."[52] *Hilaritas* outlines here the true spirit of creation. Not in the sense of superficial merriment, but as deep passionate bliss of 'making', reflected both in the act of creation and in the attitude towards the others, collaborators or beneficiaries. This is an important insight on the rapport between architect and architecture, which is present in Christopher Alexander's approach as well. The accomplishment of the project pictured in his book lies within the joy of "making", of getting together activities engaged in joy.[53] This joy should not be understood only at an abstract level, as a mental-emotional state, it also has a tangible dimension, one embodied in actual "making", that implies finding solutions, enjoying and discovering the potential of materials, inventing details.

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Thus, this annotation of Filarete's *Trattato di Architettura* and Christopher Alexander's *Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth*, reconsiders the value of architectural *poiēsis*, by opening the perspective towards a different theory, maybe a marginal one, yet pertinent and meaningful for today's architecture. Despite being off the mainstream of the contemporary architectural phenomenon, the purpose of this "marginal theory" is to complement and enhance the current architectural practice and understanding, and by no means to discredit it.

*Poiēsis*, as creative process, addresses architecture on different levels. Firstly, at a pragmatic level, it contains the key to balance *ars mechanica* and *ars liberalis*, by meeting the requirements of execution, technology, efficiency, economy and the values of aesthetics, ethics, poetics. Secondly, at a moral – ethical level, *poiēsis* calls allegorically upon the virtue of the architect, perceived both as artisan and artist mastering *mimesis* and *praxis* along with *poiēsis* – as creative interpretation, practical life and creative process – in the attempt of building living environments. Thirdly, at a deontological level, it holds the art of relating to partners and commissioners and to architecture itself, by showing the joy and liveliness of the creation process. Finally, at a philosophical level,

50 Alberto Pérez-Gómez discusses this issue in his book *Built upon Love. Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics*, outlining the importance of this kind of approach in the contemporary context, by showing the connections between ethics and poetics of architecture in the light of love, as both *eros* and *philia*. *Eros* is seen as seduction and is linked to the poetic image in architecture, while *philia* uncovers the ethical dimension of architecture.

51 Antonio Averlino (Filarete), *Treatise on Architecture*, trans. John R. Spencer, vol. 1 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965), 16.

52 Robert Glass, "Filarete's Hilaritas: Claiming Authorship and Status on the Doors of St. Peter's", *The Art Bulletin* XCIV/4 (2012), 550.

53 Alexander, *The Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth*, 386.

it embodies the idea of wholeness, as a way of seeing and putting things together, interlocked in harmony, showing a holistic way of perceiving architecture.

This critical inquiry casts the light on a new prospect, unveiling a realm of extremes. *Marginalia* contains an alternative to the present way of making architecture, one embodied in *poiēsis*. "Alternative," inherits the meanings of its lineage – the Latin *alternativus*, *alternatus*, *alternare* contain the idea of sequencing, rotation, while *alter* leads to the idea of otherness. In this manner, the alternative way of understanding and practicing architecture can refer to another approach (*alter*), marginal, outside the mainstream, but at the same time insists on the complementarity of the two. Although it is different and has different operating principles, it does not seek to deny the other, but tries instead to enhance it by working with it.

In conclusion, despite the current understandings of the term "theory," which parts so much with the classical *theōria*, a new-old approach emerges at the margins of architecture. Its means rely on restoring *poiēsis* in architecture.

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