

Ștefan Simion

*Ambiguity of the Masterpiece.*

*Livio Vacchini through 11 Dialogues*

Bucharest: Editura Fundației Arhitect Design, 2017, 319 pages, including illustrations, ISBN 978-606-8645-03-2

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Reviewing *Ambiguity of the Masterpiece. Livio Vacchini through 11 Dialogues* I discovered a work that is carefully crafted like a building following Livio Vacchini’s principles: the book is a sequence of spaces where the reader literally listens to architects and theorists confessing their friend, Livio Vacchini. Just like the hard kernel of Vacchini’s work, the content of the book is spatial and relational. It is reconstructed by the dialogues as a process, as a construction, as a construct, as a criticism, as a state of mind, a lifestyle, a credo. The tone of the discourse is also noteworthy: on the one hand, it projects the reader into the intimate space of the architect and his circle of friends, collaborators, critics, etc.; on the other hand, it urges/implies respect towards a lifetime’s work and a *modus operandi* that is in search of eternal perfection, all the while acknowledging the ambiguity given by the constraints of the present. The ability to underline subtle criticisms is also something that makes this book an important piece of the puzzle that is trying to understand the work of Vacchini.

The precision of the narrative construction also fosters an ambiguity in the way in which the book creates both a public and a private space for the reader. The original and final text written by the author can be interpreted as the walls of a house, as a spatial enclosure. Simion allows Vacchini to generously open the door himself and invite us in, through his self-portrait text, “My client. A Short Story”. Once we get in, we find Vacchini’s friends - architects and critics, confessing Livio. Everything happens around a table or maybe in a patio, as a confession to which the reader is also invited. The surprise is this radial space (public space for Vacchini) of the confession (interior) arriving from the one with bilateral symmetry (private space for Vacchini), an impression given both by the two limits created by the author and by the physical format of the book.

Between structure and content, the text wrapping is also dual and symmetrical. The preface, written by Pierre von Meiss, creates a classic link between the Romanian and Swiss architectural culture. This text corresponds at the end to the notes about those present in the book, the acknowledgements, the illustrations and the list of works by Livio Vacchini. All these fragments together shape the territory in which this (editorial) project is inserted. Ștefan Simion’s start and end texts — *Ambiguity of the masterpiece* and *Inner Duality* — create the conceptual boundaries of the project. The body of the book is also divided into two parts: dialogues with practitioners and theorists. The perfection of the symmetry is accomplished through yet another ambiguity, for if one considers Vacchini’s self-portrait as part of the interviews with practitioners, the book becomes the sum of twelve texts, strictly divided in half amongst practitioners and theorists.

The eleven interviews shape a living image of Livio Vacchini becoming the architect we know, especially through the projects made after the completion of his own house in Costa, a concrete and glass self-portrait in itself. Reading through the interviews, the reader’s interest is constantly fueled. The pages are dense, full of new information, no matter if the reader is already acquainted with the architectural works that are discussed. The desideratum that the author expresses in the

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Ambiguitatea  
Capodoperei

Livio Vacchini prin  
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introductory text promising “a book that wants to satisfy the curiosity of Vacchini’s connoisseurs and to arouse it in those who do not yet know him” is, upon reading the text, fulfilled.

More than Vacchini’s discovery or rediscovery, by asking questions and through the silence that invites to confession, Ștefan Simion gradually introduces the reader to his dialogue partners as well. Each dialogue has its own rhythm, interventions are shorter or longer depending on the personality of the interlocutor. Thus, not one, but twelve portraits are being revealed, because each architect and theorist confesses himself to the extent that he confesses Livio Vacchini. We learn about Vacchini’s lifestyle and architecture, but also about the lifestyle and architecture of his colleagues and friends: Luigi Snozzi, Aurelio Galfetti, Mario Botta, Silvia Gmür or his daughter Eloisa Vacchini. Architects testify to the connections with the modernist filiation — Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Kahn — or with the territory in which they design, be it a physical, cultural, political or economic.

In the second part, the theorists weave contemporary ties with Peter Zumthor, Christian Kerez. They explain the context of “critical regionalism” by which Kenneth Frampton embraced the architecture in Ticino. They call into discussion art, music, gastronomy, humor — all fundamental elements for the complete understanding of the architect’s *modus operandi*. We see the way in which critics (theorists) accompany the architect’s work and how the work in turn is itself always a critique. I think this is one of the main features of Vacchini’s work that the book clearly succeeds in bringing to light.

The text of the interview itself is enhanced by two other elements that complement it and can offer reading alternatives – illustrations and notes. The illustrations accompanying the interviews are well found and the text is accompanied by short marginal notes that mark precise moments in the interview. If I were to criticize something, it would be that the ten projects presented at the end of the interviews are in fact redrawn by the author, and not the original Vacchini designs. Conversely, this may prove to be another point of interest because, unlike the original drawings, one can see in them, in the way they are presented, the subtle criticisms made by the interviewees on the projects.

Since this review is also a kind of architectural criticism applied to the book, I must also refer to the physical object that serves as the vehicle for bringing Vacchini into the public space. I cannot fail to mention the few wording mistakes; although noticeable, they do not distort the text, or the ideas transmitted. The graphics and layout support the general concept of the book. At the release, when I first saw the book, it seemed to me from the beginning a beautiful object, and the roughness of the materials it is made of – covers, paper, etc. — deters it from becoming an object of adoration. Instead, through the intrinsic quality of the materials used, as well as through its content, the book demands to be read, worn, reread, not just looked at. As such, the book does not allow an artificial distance between itself and the reader, just as there was no distance between Vacchini and the one with whom he was in dialogue. What the object of the book conveys, implicitly to the text as well, is a form of respect toward the partner of a conversation, one that appeared naturally in any dialogue with Livio Vacchini. The book is also very far from the precious character that nowadays insinuates itself in architecture as well as in the materials through which architecture is transmitted. The book-object does not lend itself to fetishism, illustrating in this way how the architecture of Vacchini was itself rough, well made, clear, elegant. For the book, as well as the Vacchini’s buildings, the material is what it is.

The reader will understand things; many things in several layers depending on his knowledge of Vacchini’s work. Each page, through its text, notes, and images, delivers rich and precise material for understanding the architect’s work. Because his work crystallized in the same time with its criticism, the theory that accompanies it becomes a relatively hermetic subject, one that is hard to comment. I think the author has managed to open this core, or rather to recompose it in a complex, yet approachable manner.

Reading and re-reading the book I felt a joy of a classic balance, which I am convinced that other readers will find whenever they read it, in whole or in part, for it is a book that you cannot put away after the first reading but is offered for multiple readings and interlocking interpretative layers.