



Francesco Maggio
Full professor at the University of Palermo. He mainly deals with digital reconstructions of projects that have never been realised with the aid of graphic analysis. Author of monographs and essays, he was member of the UID in which he is a member of the Archives Commission.

On architectural drawing today. Notes, observations, questions

The disciplines of Drawing, as defined in the sector's manifesto, in their broadest sense, are concerned with understanding formal structure, and with analysing, conveying, appreciating and disseminating existing values, both tangible and intangible; from this derive its main fields: the scientific-technological and the social-humanistic [1]. For some years now – almost coinciding with the 'digital revolution' – we have witnessed an ever-increasing volume of scientific output that is more closely aligned with one aspect of the first sphere – the technological sphere – rather than with the second sphere or the scientific aspect of the first. Naturally, there are exceptions, but it is deeply concerning that these constitute a substantial number; for example, to mention just the content of some of them, what emerges is more a description of tools and procedures than a genuine analysis of the subject under investigation and its necessary documentation.

It may seem paradoxical, but it happens, for instance, that in a study of an architectural artefact – such as a survey – the representations relating to the plan, elevation and section, upon which architecture has built its foundations, are absent, whilst screenshots of digital processes are presented as if they were convincing, thereby distancing both the reader and the author themselves from an understanding of the architectural 'thing'. It also happens, in certain cases – whilst acknowledging the ethical value of interdisciplinarity – that studies from the disciplinary field of 'Topography' are presented as studies of 'Drawing', thereby signalling a loss of the very meaning of the discipline itself; furthermore, terms such as 'resilience', 'panglossianism' and 'post-pandemic', by contrast, are thrust into the fray with the aim of ambiguously emphasising—in a flight of fancy—a possible value of drawing.

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There is an underlying reason for all this – one that is, moreover, difficult to refute – which lies in the race to produce a large number of publications in a short space of time in order to reach ‘predefined thresholds’ [2], demonstrating exceptional capacity that allows, for example, scientific papers to be produced every twenty days throughout the year. Does a higher number mean a greater chance of saying something new? Ironically, one might argue that this could be a process which takes into account the concept of ‘sustainability’ through prudent and targeted recycling.

In a sense, the concept of moderation is lost in favour of excess, whilst at the same time forgetting and affirming that ‘man is the measure of all things; of things that are as they are, of things that are not as they are not’ [Protagoras s.d.]; it seems that ontological questions are lost in this mad rush to publish.

In an attempt to be clearer and more ‘measured’, for example, it is considered that a ‘scientific’ publication on a survey must include orthogonal projections, leaving the interpretation of what is not part of its material essence to a point cloud or a model. Images can only be something more than the expression of constructive logic – what in architecture is termed ‘tectonics’.

This publishing frenzy reveals a lack of knowledge of the history of representation, particularly amongst those who, as digital natives, find reassurance in the comfort of the screen which, as is well known, produces only images and still does not speak Italian. Images that could, on the other hand, be convincing if they were not left to the author’s discretion regarding the possibility of their ‘spectacular’ effect.

Technological progress has placed architectural drawing at a critical crossroads, marking at least two tortuous and, in any case, very different paths: passively adapting to the digital reality (essentially an image) or maintaining a scientific and informed approach. Often, current research in the field of architectural surveying is limited to the production of ‘point clouds’ devoid of any communicative value and born of an uncritical fascination with technology [fig. 1]. Conversely,



Fig. 1 - The point clouds of a bridge generated by laser scanning (above) and by SfM (below).

surveying should be understood as a process of methodological research, capable of integrating geometry, history and restoration to support and guide the necessary intervention strategies for existing structures in the current context of land scarcity and the reduction of harmful emissions. In this sense, surveying and design work in tandem when the former is not merely documentation.

The path taken by those who find the meaning of research solely in procedural aspects risks favouring a ‘knowing how to use’ (tools and software) at the expense of ‘knowing how to see’ and the profound connection between the observer and the architectural object [3].

This dichotomy between the conditions of development and progress, identified by Pier Paolo Pasolini more than fifty years ago, seems to be at play in research. His thinking is summarised below and is considered a solid basis for reflections concerning a possible component of the theoretical framework of ‘Drawing’ today:

“There are two words that recur frequently in our discourse: indeed, they are the key words of our discourse. These two words are ‘development’ and ‘progress’. Are they synonyms?

Or, if they are not synonyms, do they denote two different stages of the same phenomenon? Or do they denote two different phenomena that are, however, necessarily interdependent? Or, again, do they refer to two phenomena that are only partially analogous and synchronous? Finally, do they refer to two ‘opposite’ phenomena, which only appear to coincide and complement one another? It is absolutely essential to clarify the meaning of these two words and their relationship if we are to understand one another in a discussion that so closely concerns our daily and physical lives. Technology (the application of science) has created the possibility of virtually unlimited industrialisation, the characteristics of which are now, in practical terms, transnational. Consumers of superfluous goods, for their part, irrationally and unconsciously agree in wanting ‘development’ (this ‘development’). For them, it signifies social advancement and liberation, resulting in a renunciation of the cultural values that had provided them with the models of the ‘poor’, the ‘workers’, the ‘savers’, the ‘soldiers’ and the ‘believers’. The ‘masses’ are therefore in favour of ‘development’: yet they live out this ideology only existentially, and existentially they embody the new values of consumption. This does not detract from the fact that their choice is decisive, triumphalist and relentless. Who, on the other hand, wants ‘progress’? It is wanted by those who have immediate interests to be satisfied, precisely through ‘progress’: it is wanted by workers, peasants and left-wing intel-

lectuals. It is wanted by those who work and are therefore exploited. When I say 'they want it', I mean it in the truest and most complete sense (there may well be a few 'producers' who, above all else, and perhaps sincerely, want progress: but their case is not representative). 'Progress' is therefore an ideal (social and political) concept, whereas 'development' is a pragmatic and economic reality. Now it is this dissociation that calls for a 'synchrony' between 'development' and 'progress', given that true progress is (apparently) inconceivable unless the economic conditions necessary to bring it about are created" [Pasolini 2011, p. 182].

When, years ago, lecturers in the performing arts were coming to terms with the advent of infographics, two schools of thought emerged: the advocates and the sceptics. The advocates – those of a bygone era, that is – aware that they could apply science through technology, began, not without difficulty, to tread the winding path of applying technology to the science of representation [4], whilst the sceptics viewed this new 'revolution' with the mistrust of those who fear they might lose something (essentially the primacy of the hand). With the benefit of hindsight, both viewpoints can be considered reasonable because, whilst the former found new avenues of research in progress, the latter feared that development would lead to a 'Caudine Forks' and a dumping down of studies (this is not exactly the case, but it is a plausible consideration today given some of the current outcomes).

From this perspective, it may seem that the discipline is in grave danger, even if this suspicion is plausible when we see texts that have long been regarded as cornerstones of the discipline disappearing from bibliographies, replaced by manuals on procedural techniques or by a sufficient number of essays that boost their 'citation' value.

In reality, this is not the case because there is, and always will be, a resilient framework that constructs its own structure whilst firmly upholding the principles of representation; consider, for example, all those studies of stereotomy which, by reinterpreting complex systems in a digital environment, identify the model as the ideal tool for the study, derivation and validation of the properties of form, fully grasping their geometric

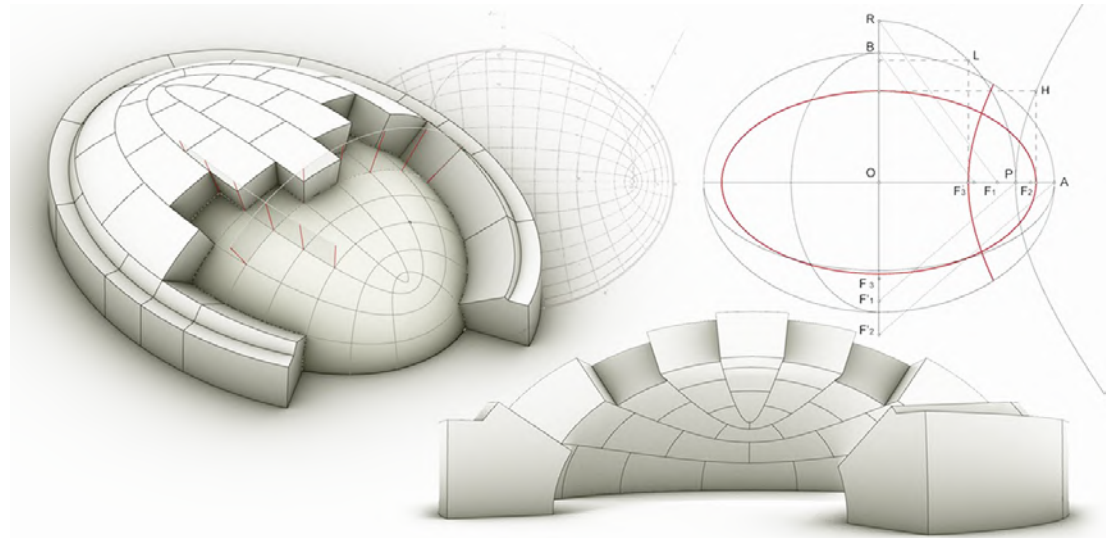


Fig. 2 - Monge's graphical construction of the ellipsoidal apparatus. Graphic design by M. Salvatore and F. Fallavolita (see note 5.)

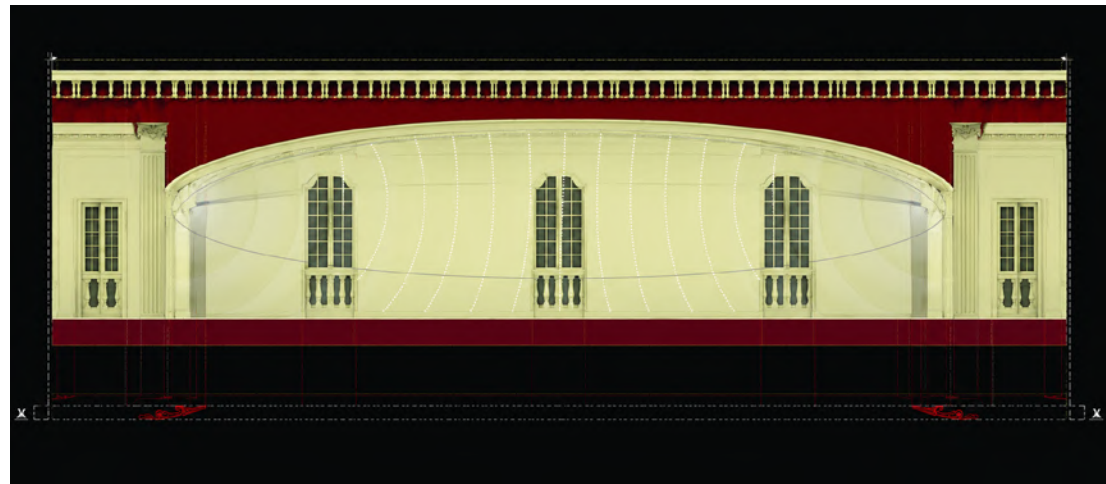


Fig. 3 - Reconstruction of a room from a project by Borromini, showing Maignan's acoustic marvels. A perspective section illustrating the propagation of sound waves. Graphic design by A. Bortot (see note 6).

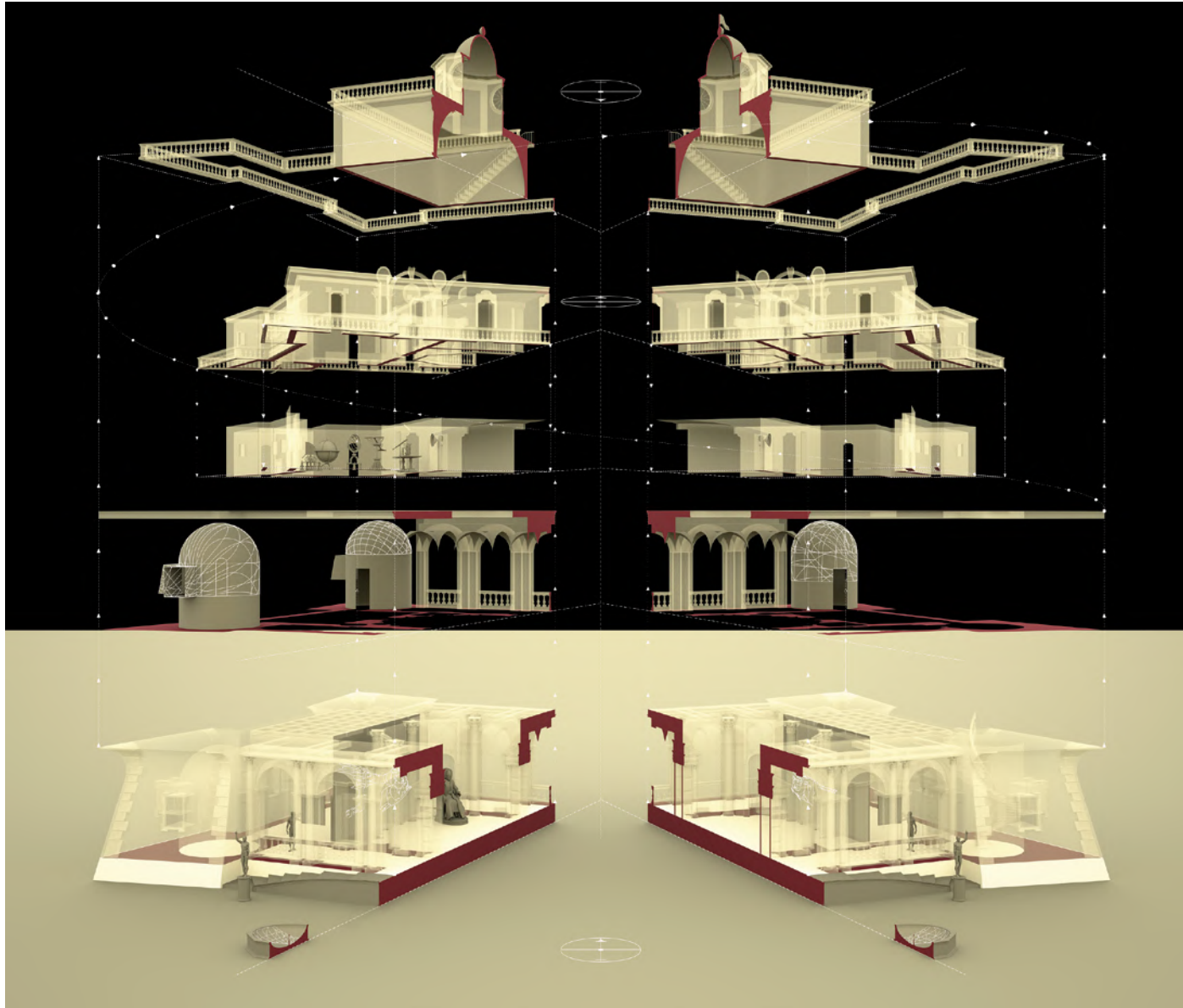


Fig. 4 - Digital model based on reconstructive hypotheses of Francesco Borromini's unrealised design for a residence for Cardinal Camillo Pamphilj, Exploded view – Cross-section. Graphic design by A. Bortot (see note 6).

significance through the language of descriptive geometry [5] [fig. 2]. And then there are those studies on the history of representation which, partly through surveying aimed at a geometric-projective analysis, use clear and effective illustrations to explain the complexity of the scientific installations by Jean-François Nicéron and Emmanuel Maignan for the Villa Pamphilj project [6] [figs. 3, 4], or those investigations into ingenious drawing instruments that streamlined the drafting of architectural designs between the 17th and 18th centuries [7] [fig. 5] and, last but not least, the extraordinary volumes which, with profound knowledge, explore representations of the depths of the ocean, the lunar surface and fossilised matter [8] [figs. 6–8].

Research into drawing has also sparked intellectual curiosity amongst those who, aware that the production of visual artefacts and the consumption of images have become actions that today define the cultural and identity characteristics of global society, explore architecture through the transdisciplinary approach of visual culture, in which drawing, art, photography, social media, cinema and cartoons intertwine in a structured discourse in which architecture's central role does not leave the field to the image alone but, rather, becomes structural and complementary to it; and it is no coincidence that some of these texts base part of their 'ordered discourse' on those 'bibliographical cornerstones' mentioned earlier [9].

Other aspects, particularly significant given their prominence in current academic output, can be found in studies on the various applications of BIM, which even explore the relationships between treatises on stereotomy and the concept of scripting in contemporary computational modelling, presenting results from the application of visual programming techniques; among the countless works, one can indeed find a proposed study of the cylindrical vaults described in Guarino Guarini's *Architettura Civile*.

Exercises in style or exercises for future developers?

But wasn't BIM created to oversee the design, to assist with the maintenance of the building and

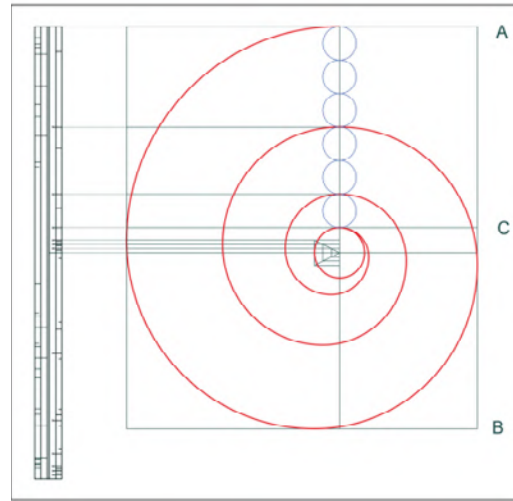


Fig. 5 - Redrawing of the Ionic volute based on Goldmann's construction, using the measurements given in the Universal Stylometer. Graphic design by E. Dotto (see note 7).

to monitor its life cycle? The possible variations in floral capitals designed during the Art Nouveau period – the result of extraordinary botanical knowledge, expressed, moreover, through exquisitely refined representations that leave one 'speechless' [fig. 9], can be parameterised; or perhaps, before creating a 'family', we need to study the drawings of the past and understand the relationship between the artist and their interpretation of natural phenomena? And what about knowledge of botany – even if only superficial (and that would be fine all the same!)? Can the natural metamorphosis of a leaf be 'frozen'? Must drawing, as a discipline, inevitably adapt to software, or should it ask itself questions and test its own principles against the software's useful processing capabilities?

If the role of the 'draughtsman' today is closer to that of a 'developer', might we fear, like Pasoli-

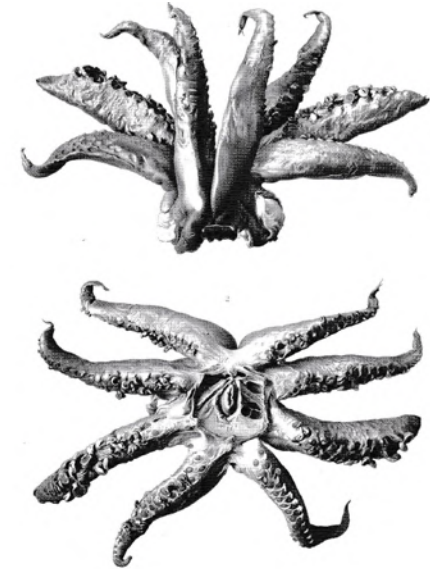


Fig. 6 - A crown of tentacles from *Cuvateuthis unguiculata* (or *Taningia danae*), in L. Joubin, *Cephalopods from the Princess Alice expeditions* (1891–1897) (see note 8).

ni, that focusing on tracking development slows down progress?

At this point, one might attempt to introduce a reflection on generative artificial intelligence, but we prefer instead to reflect further on its very name with that slowness which for years has characterised drawing and design, and to build upon the reflections of Lorenzo Tomasin [2025], with the disarming awareness that 'development' advances ceaselessly.

Little by little, design is drifting away from architecture, losing that ethical value upon which it was founded – at times even with melancholic irony [fig. 10] – to make way for an empty spectacle (that of the image at any cost or the demonstration of the machine's capabilities) which leaves architecture itself on the margins.

Guy Debord, with his ability to see the underlying pattern in things, had foreseen the profound

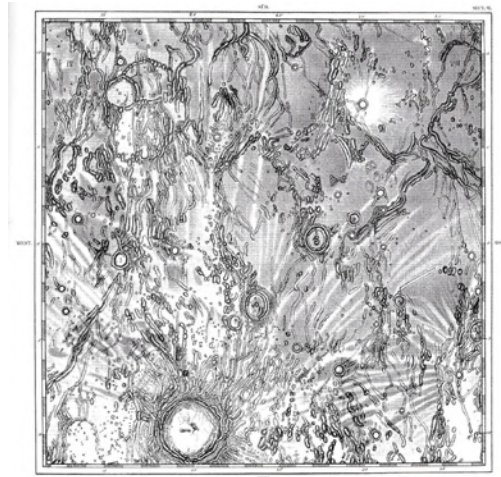


Fig. 7 - The Copernicus crater in J.F.J. Schmidt, *Charte der Gebirge des Mondes*, 1878 (see note 8).

Fig. 8 - Fossil of an Iguanodon, the so-called 'Maidstone stone', in R. Owen, *A History of British Fossil Reptiles*, 1849–1884. Drawing by J. Dinkel (see note 8).

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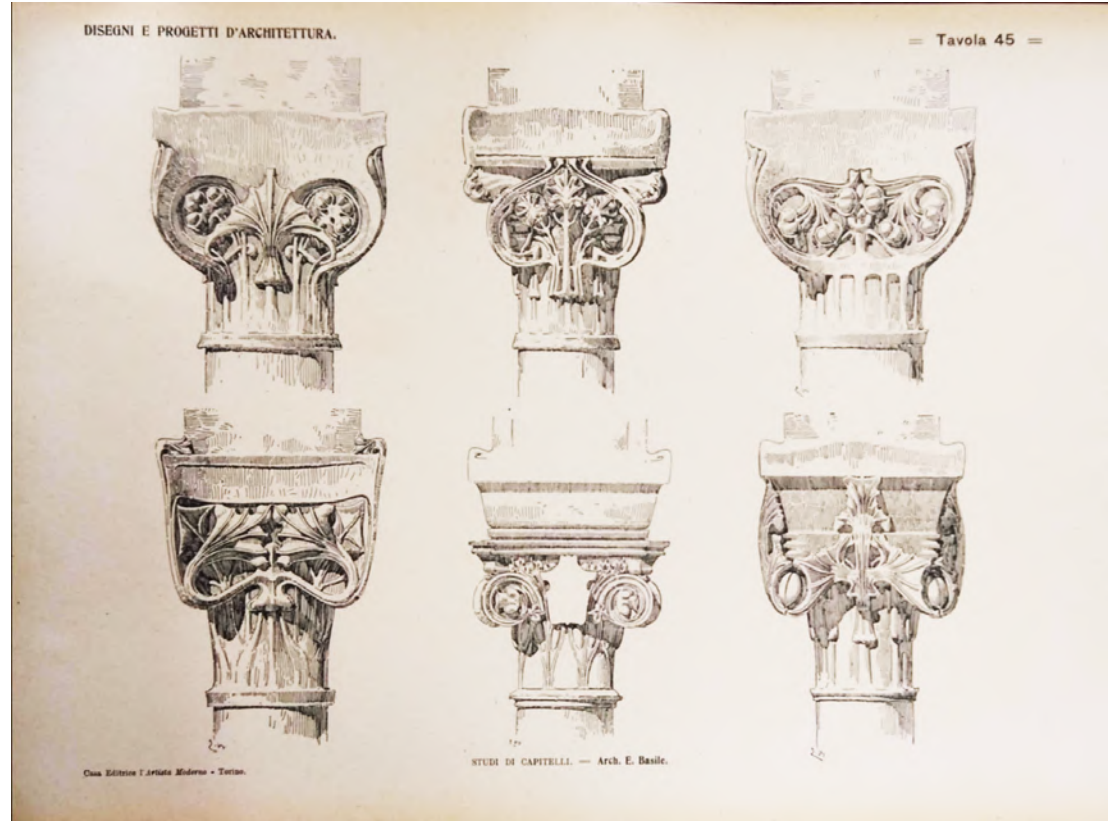


Fig. 9 - E. Basile. Study of capitals, in E.A.F. Klingemann, *Disegni e progetti di architettura*, n.d.

meaning of the 'spectacle' to which we are constantly subjected today. "It is the unity of misery that lies hidden behind spectacular oppositions. If different forms of the same alienation battle it out under the various masks of total choice, it is because they are all built upon repressed real contradictions. Depending on the requirements of the particular stage of misery that it both denies and sustains, the spectacle takes the form of either a concentrated or a diffuse manifestation. In both cases, it is nothing but an image of blissful unifi-

cation surrounded by desolation and dread, at the tranquil centre of malaise" [Debord 1997, p. 81]. We are all deeply curious about the outcomes of the 'digital transition' and its possible scientific implications, but let us always remember that "there are periods in our history when, in order to look ahead, we must look back. As in Homer's time, and as today. Achilles, Hector and Odysseus had something to say to those living a thousand years after them, and they still have something to say to us, now that another three thousand years

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have passed. Something that neither television nor the internet nor our neighbours could ever tell us" [Vassalli 2004, pp. 204–205].

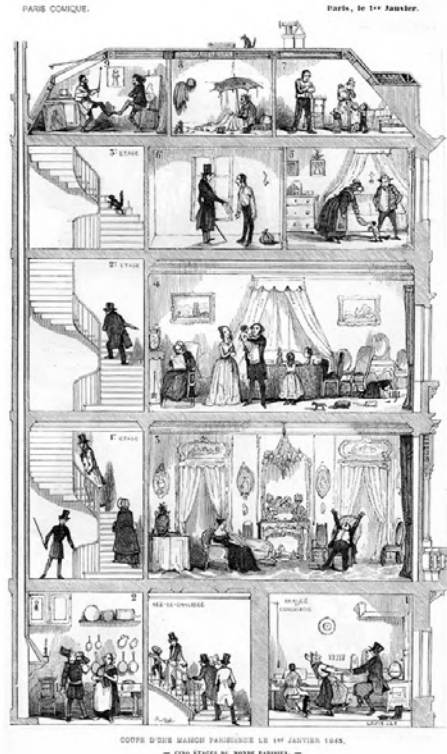


Fig. 10 - Charles Albert d'Arnoult (Bertall), The Five Levels of Parisian Society, 1845.

NOTES

[1] See, in this regard, the statement by the CEAR-10/A Scientific Disciplinary Sector. At <https://www.unioneitalianadisegno.it/wp/declaratoria/>

[2] This is an openly polemical reference to the university recruitment system, which is currently undergoing reform.

[3] The reference to 'knowing how to see' is to Bruno Zevi's 1962 book, *Saper vedere l'architettura*, the contents of which are still considered relevant today in terms of the relationship between subject and object.

[4] For further reading, see: Migliari, R. (Eds.) (2004). *Disegno come Modello*. Rome, Italy: Edizioni Kappa.

[5] An example of this type of study can be found in: Salvatore, M., Fallavollita, F. (2020). *Stereotomy of Vaulted Systems of the École Polytechnique*. Nexus Network Journal, vol. 22, pp. 831–851.

[6] See, for example, Bortot, A. (2020). *Emmanuel Maignan e Francesco Borromini. Il progetto di una villa scientifica nella Roma barocca*. Siracusa, Italy: LetteraVentidue.

[7] Cfr. Dotto, E. (2022). *Gli strumenti per il disegno degli ordini di architettura. Compassi, regoli e quadranti tra il XVII e il XVIII secolo*. Alghero, Italia: Publica.

[8] This refers to the three volumes by Emanuele Garbin, entitled *Palaeographica*, *Bathygraphica* and *Selenographica*, published in 2016, 2018 and 2021 respectively in the 'Corpi' series by Quodlibet Studio in Macerata.

[9] See Quici, F. (2023). *Architettura e cultura visuale*. Melfi (PZ), Italy: Libria.

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