

## TWO ISSUES CONCERNING RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF ARCHITECTURE

*Cristina Bianchetti\**

\* Polytechnic of Turin – Turin, Italy.

Coordinator of GEV08a, Architecture VQR 2011-2014 - President of Evaluation Committee of IUAV University of Venice

### Abstract

This article covers considerations formulated some years ago, following the process of evaluating the quality of research in the area of architecture, drawing attention to two issues. The first is that of conformism (or "increasingly similar research"). The second is that of reconfiguring new or renewed relationships between academic critical reflection and professional and design practice. Both issues are relevant in the field of architecture.

### Keywords

Architecture, Conformity, Critical Theory

#### 1. *Research work is experiencing rapid and radical changes*

There were ten years between the first and second VQR, Evaluation of Research Quality (2004–2014). In these ten years, the field of architecture was subjected to dynamics that had already emerged in other fields, and which had serious implications for it. Over that period, there was a fracture, an evident threshold that took the field elsewhere and requires being understood and overseen. It is not just a question of preferences that have changed, of updates or of cultural climates, as had already happened in the past, but rather an abrupt change in the profiles of researchers, in concrete research practices, in policies in support of its quality. The change seems to be radical, while at the same time maintaining elements of strong indeterminacy. Let us quickly look at some key aspects.

##### 1.1 Hierarchies

Research in the field of architecture develops against a background marked by major inequalities. At the end of the ten years, there were 1899 researchers (few) belonging to 61 university institutions (very many). 10% of the institutions (6, the largest ones) produced more than half of the research. During those ten years, polarisation was exacerbated with a decrease in the number of "large" institutions (from 8 to 6). The 6% decrease

in the number of researchers, however, did not affect the hierarchies, but made them more evident.

This is a structural aspect that cannot be circumvented in any analysis of research in architecture. The dispersion and concentration of researchers was a perverse outcome of the university policies of the 1990s, a period when scientific sectors were reshaped and there was a proliferation of courses, teaching posts and locations. Policies that, while aiming to redistribute locations and university places, actually generated the opposite: a highly unequal system, characterised by a very high dispersion of locations and by a concentration of researchers only in some of them.

Dispersion and concentration outline the condition within which concrete research practices are redefined, even before work themes and traditions. It seems that it is very difficult to change this situation in the medium term.

##### 1.2 Alliances

Alliances in scientific production have their *raison d'être* in participating in complex projects. In addition, they are also part of co-authorship in its various forms. Co-authorship for sharing objectives or projects is different from co-authorship geared towards protection, and different again from co-authorship as a strategy that is implemented to escape from isolation. The

first ones are alliances built on the object or methods of research, and they express cooperative forms of action. The second ones develop within asymmetries of relationships and hierarchies, and are marked by a barely masked paternalism. The third ones are the result, not entirely unexpected, of that dispersion mentioned previously: those who find themselves in situations of isolation must by necessity form alliances, and almost always do so with the same co-authors, using the same publishing channels.

It is remarkable to find texts in the field of architecture that have 9, 12, or 15 authors. Though in reality small in number. While texts with more than six authors are increasing, in particular in the fields of design and planning. In simpler terms, we can say that research in the field of architecture is two-thirds individual research and one-third shared research. Given the cultural tradition of the field, a third is by no means little: it is as if the increasing precariousness of the conditions under which research develops has contributed to the redefinition of cooperative behaviours and collective identities. Sometimes temporary. More often stable.

### 1.3 Times

In those ten years, research became faster and faster. Productivity models are generally preferred to slower ones; linearity and segmentation are preferred to recursive trajectories that turn back on themselves. Of course, it would be wrong to think that the research whose outcome is an article is uniquely faster than the research whose outcome is a monograph. That is not always the case. However, it is true in a good number of cases (and despite the referral mechanisms). If we take the production of articles and monographs (in the latest VQR: 26.45% against 23.47%; in the previous one, 19.20% against 24.27%) as an indicator (of second order) to reflect on research times, we see that something is pushing, with great determination, towards shorter research times. The forces are exogenous. However, the reasons and effects are clear. Where do monographs hold up? Curiously, but not overly, where there is funded research. Some of which are marked by real publishing bulimia. In the background, there is the problem of publications that are not very selective and not very interested in tackling the market and the complicated problem of academic, scientific, association, self-produced, paper or

online magazines.... With the appearance, even in this field, of so-called "predatory" behaviour.

This issue of fast and slow is quite important when analysing research in the field of architecture, because it refers to the progressive standardisation of formats. Today, architecture as a whole is still a real *bundle of knowledge* that includes very different products: from critical edition, to patents, to design, to curatorship.... Ever faster research pushes all of this on one type of product: the article, preferably in English, published in international journals registered in databases and subject to bibliometric evaluation.

### 1.4 Internalisation

Another aspect that illustrates the change in research practices that has taken place in these ten years concerns the real object of desire, namely internationalisation. An aspect to which we aspire, for which we equip ourselves, on which we are evaluated. This push towards greater internationalisation of the field is evident in large and small schools. Reasoning is rarely reoriented by asking how Italian research is received "from outside". The impression is that Italian research is no worse than others (at least European research) and is gradually becoming professionalised, but also that its quality cannot be a driving force for international advancement. Funding is probably needed. We need to rediscover the role that non-university institutions (starting with the Biennale and the Triennale) have played in the past. We need infrastructure capable of supporting this orientation. This latter issue directly brings into question the metamorphosis of university departments.

In the ten years considered here, there was a clear acceleration in the modification of the departmental structures according to a functionalist principle, aimed at progressively increasing the number of components and, with this, the number of disciplines. To aggregate rather than to distinguish. The departments increasingly tend to be large, hybrid and poorly specialised structures, equipped for the internal political games of universities and, in this sense, opportunistic. The evaluation of the research raises the issue of whether, for the purpose of producing research, it is better to have a landscape of structures of this type rather than targeted structures, of medium-small dimensions, which gather together researchers belonging to a few fields, where it is easier to identify strategic lines

and research objectives on an international front (in the background there is the problem, which is still unresolved, of how the structures and their policies are evaluated).

## 2. *There are two issues*

The previous ones are, in my opinion, the most evident aspects of a definitive detachment from previous practices and financing mechanisms. It is clear to me that the question of research should be framed within broader processes that concern the way in which knowledge today becomes a matrix of value production. Since it is in the new mechanisms of value production that the fascination for the new styles that I have described lies: fast; capable of giving recognition to small circles; attracted by quantitative methodologies and methods of measurement; able to measure themselves against the international front in a number of ways; in many ways shrewd (I don't know if it is de Certeau's cunning (Certeau de, 2001), but surely astute). Including that (in any case appreciable) greater professionalisation of research.

All this raises at least two questions. The first, as already mentioned, concerns conformism. Certainly, everything has changed: the allure of internationalisation is still there; the (dramatic) problem of the lack of public resources leads to the standardisation of research based on standards imposed by European projects; doing research in small and dispersed locations often implies instrumental alliances... on closer inspection, all this generates a cloying conformism of research formats, bibliographies, styles and practices. We just need to look at doctoral research. Moreover, this happens while at all levels there is talk of the quality of the research.

Conformism leads us away from the proud pluralism (not only methodological) claimed in the past in the various sectors of the field. Namely, by their difference on fundamental options, survey practices, criteria of quality and relevance. Again, any automatic and unique relationship would be incorrect, but there is no doubt that much of the research in architecture today risks a reductionist practice towards objects (more and more frequently the same) and the ways in which they are treated (increasingly fascinated by the numerical dimension, by the modelling of *computational sciences*, ontological models, game theories).

An irresistible tendency to conformism is rampant under the pressure of stronger social pressure and greater competition for resources. Conformism in the technical sense of the term, as an orientation to work on projects that aim to obtain community consensus (i.e. resources, acknowledgments), rather than trying paths that might seem controversial. The issue of innovation no longer seems even on the agenda as it was in the 1980s and 1990s, within a connection with the Kuhnian concept of anomaly (Kuhn, 1999). Or else it resurfaces associated with everything (and it is a lot) to which smart adjectivisation is attributed, underestimating the ambiguous and uncertain nature of any social process aimed at strengthening intelligence.

*This first issue raises the question of whether it is useful for "artisan" (if we want to use the term of Boltanski and Esquerre, 2019) practices to persist, which are now somewhat criticised despite the advantages in terms of freedom, and above all flexibility, in carrying out a project that can constantly redefine and reorient itself according to the results obtained. Is not this also an expression of quality?*

The second issue refers to an older problem of the balance between so-called theoretical-academic research and practical-professional research. There is no doubt that the field today is facing extremely complicated issues: lexical (the relationships between words and objects are once again becoming a source of ambiguity, as in Foucault's time), as well as growing inequality, the reconfiguration of the links between territory-economy-society, environmental and social fragility of all kinds, environmental and climate issues ... The changes are undoubtedly very profound. Do they facilitate (and how?) new or renewed ways for critical reflection and the design-professional sphere in architecture to relate with one another? Is the disjuncture between the two spheres increasing, despite the repeated rhetoric, no longer finding ways to innervate each other?

*This second issue leads, in particular, to the question of how the role of theory (critical reflection) is redefined within the sphere of neo-liberal research policies. Namely, within the emphasis on economic discourse (in research). Discourse that presents itself as technocratic*

*therapy, as financial management of research and defines the primacy of the economy (rather than economic orthodoxy) in judging not research, but rather its ability to deal with complex issues (on its quality). Radically reformulating the functionalist notion of impact.*

### 3. Conclusions

How do we remain inside a growing conservatism? How can themes be redefined in a non-conformist or least conformist way? How can we rethink the relationship between theory and design? How can we introduce reflexivity and flexibility within a framework of rigid structural conditions? Maybe they are (only) old issues. The picture that emerged from the first two VQR clearly highlighted them again. More generally, this picture shows us how it is not easy to reverse current trends. I think we are obliged to stay within this framework. However, within them, we can work to ensure that research reshapes itself in forms that are not entirely disadvantageous. Without being guided by moralism or nostalgia. Trying to develop critical thinking about research and its evaluation processes, which must be increasingly sophisticated and capable of

modelling themselves on changed conditions. This means being imaginative: small infrastructure close to big ones; attention to magazines that appear to be a minefield for several reasons; defence of variety and marginality without taking on the compassionate tone of the defence of protected species; defence of all the degrees of freedom that open up within an increasingly rigid and unequal framework; strengthening of cultural institutions and defence against the lobbying behaviour of numerous scientific associations; frank comparisons with an international arena. Finally, the ability to look inside the institutions (academic, cultural, evaluative) and consider them, as von Förster (2007) -but also Bernardo Secchi (1989)- wrote, non-banal machines within which norms, cultures, ways of doing, of seeing, rites and argumentative structures act.

*In VQR 2011-2014 the Group for 08a Area Evaluation, Architecture (GEV08a) was a really evaluation laboratory because it evaluated product different from all the others, such as drawings and project drawings as highlighted in the table in Fig. 1 from VQR - Evaluation of Research Quality 2011-2014 Area 08 – Architecture Final report.*



Tipologia di prodotti	2011	2012	2013	2014	Totale	%
Altro	4	3	4	7	18	0,52
Articolo in rivista	154	214	219	326	913	26,42
Banca dati	0	0	0	1	1	0,03
Brevetto	3	1	4	2	10	0,29
Composizione	0	0	1	0	1	0,03
Contributo in Atti di convegno	48	101	116	183	448	12,96
Contributo in volume (Capitolo o Saggio)	154	252	245	348	999	28,91
Curatela	39	45	41	48	173	5,01
Disegno	1	1	1	1	4	0,12
Edizione critica di testi/di scavo	1	2	0	0	3	0,09
Monografia o trattato scientifico	145	350	142	168	805	23,29
Mostra	2	2	1	0	5	0,14
Nota a sentenza	0	0	0	1	1	0,03
Performance	0	0	1	0	1	0,03
Prefazione/Postfazione	0	4	0	3	7	0,2
Progetto architettonico	19	12	10	9	50	1,45
Prototipo d'arte e relativi progetti	1	2	0	1	4	0,12
Pubblicazione di fonti inedite	0	1	1	1	3	0,09
Software	0	1	2	0	3	0,09
Voce (in dizionario o enciclopedia)	1	3	3	0	7	0,2
<b>Totale</b>	<b>572</b>	<b>994</b>	<b>791</b>	<b>1099</b>	<b>3456</b>	
<b>%</b>	<b>16,55</b>	<b>28,76</b>	<b>22,89</b>	<b>31,8</b>	<b>100</b>	

Fig. 1: VQR - Evaluation of research Quality 2011-2014. Area 08 – Architecture Final report. Table 2.5a. Products conferred to the Area divided by type of publication.

## REFERENCES

- Bianchetti, C. (Ed.) (2018). *La ricerca in Architettura Temi di discussione*. Siracusa, Italy: Lettera Ventidue.
- Boltansky, L., & Esquerre, A. (2019). *Arricchimento: Una critica della merce* (A. De Ritis, & T. Vitale, Trans.). Bologna, Italy: Il Mulino (Original work published 2017).
- Bonaccorsi, A. (2015). *La valutazione possibile: teoria e pratica nel mondo della ricerca*. Bologna, Italy: Il Mulino.
- Certeau, M. de (2001). *L'invenzione del quotidiano* (M. Baccianini, Trans). Roma, Italy, Edizioni Lavoro. (Original work published 1980).
- Dal Lago, A. (Ed.) (2013). All'indice. Critica della cultura della valutazione. *Aut aut: rivista di filosofia e di cultura*, 360, 1-152.
- Donna, G. (2018). *L'universita che crea valore pubblico: modelli di strategia, governance, organizzazione e finanza per gli atenei italiani*. Bologna, Italy: Il Mulino.
- Foester, H. von (2007). Cibernetica ed epistemologia: storia e prospettive. In G. Bocchi, & M. Ceruti (Eds.), *Le sfide della complessità* (pp. 88-116). Milano, Italy, Bruno Mondadori. (Original work published 2006).
- Kuhn, T. S. (1999). *La struttura delle rivoluzioni scientifiche* (A. Carugo, Trans.). Torino, Italy: Einaudi. (Original work published 1962).
- Secchi, B. (1989). La macchina non banale. In *Un progetto per l'urbanistica* (pp. 355-365). Milano, Italy, Feltrinelli). Torino, Italy: Einaudi.