

FOLLOWING ARMENIAN MEMORIES: IN THE MYTH OF VENICE. IN SEARCH FOR DETERMINANTS OF ARCHITECTURAL FORM



Ruzanna Meliksetyan¹, Elvio Manganaro¹

¹ Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy

Abstract: *To invoke Mnemosyne (goddess of memory in Greek mythology) is to invoke her daughter muses? If so then memory is always behind the imagination. The idea of the research grew out of interest to understand if architecture can be recognized as a physical manifestation of memory. The work is an attempt to demonstrate how remembering is experienced through architectural forms. Literature, psychological and architectural narratives provided a necessary guidance to understand where the conjunctions between the theory and empirical studies of memory lie. After the exploration of different theories comes the time to respond to the question whether memories can be matters of architecture and if they can become principal tools of form finding. That weightless transitional forces making the unconscious to travel back in time and space, somewhere and sometime that you are not anymore. What can we do with them? To seize the forces of our mind and later to submit them to control of our reason as Andre Breton was saying in "First Manifesto of Surrealism". Images, associations and all what is remembered, let them serve as paraphernalia for creative act. The discussion proceeds with a real act of memory connected to Armenian traces of Venice, an architectural experimentation with cultural, personal and contextual memories for definition of new forms on the island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni and in Armenian College Moorat-Raphael.*

Keywords: *Memory, architecture, forms, images, words, associations.*

Ruzanna Meliksetyan*

E-mail: ruzanna.meliksetyan@polimi.it

Received: 02.03.2024

Revised: 14.04.2024

Accepted: 04.05.2024

© The Author(s) 2024



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License

Introduction

"Generally people's memories are precious to them. It is no accident that they are coloured by poetry..."

Andrey Tarkovsky [1]

The enigmatic relationship between memory and space was a theme that has always inspired intense interest of scholars and artists. In ancient times the idea of remembering was more than just an act "to think of again". It was conceived as the reverse side of imagination and as one of five canons in rhetorical culture. The *art of memory* (Latin: *ars memoriae*) in ancient Roman and Greek oratorical treatises, was a technique to accurately recall facts and stories with support of places and images, and so architecture was perceived as a mnemonic device for remembering dialogues, narratives and thoughts. The idea of the research grew out of interest to understand if architecture can be recognized as a physical manifestation of memory. The following ideas will seem far from realms of architecture, but in this distant perspectives lays the key to understanding the true creative forces of our minds.

Was the same *ars memoriae* to find it's expression in complex architectural theories and also literary works centuries later. *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* by Marcel Proust was one of the exemplary novels of 20th century regarding remembrance. This work was an obvious resonance of John Ruskin's extended essay named *Seven lamps of Architecture*, that Proust was translating at times. He believed that memory is hidden beyond the reach of intellect, it is in some material objects and in sensations that they give to us. Remembering is always an impromptu experience, all of a sudden "search of lost time". As in the novel, just tripping against

two uneven stones makes to recall St. Mark's Baptistery and Venice, "it's profound azure intoxicating the eyes, impressions of coolness and the dazzling light" [2]. Architecture is the *aide-memoire* that helps to remember the moments once lived, and are the forms to trigger the mind to weave together the images and emotions. French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman in his book "Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz" affirms the importance of visual imagery for the *act of memory*: "For in each testimonial production, in each act of memory, language and image are absolutely bound to one another, never ceasing to exchange their reciprocal lacunae. An image often appears where a word seems to fail; a word often appears where the imagination seems to fail" [3].

The four photographs, around which Didi-Huberman composes his narrative, are suffice to retell about the history and to affirm their power, the ability to transmit *in spite of all*. And, indeed, what gets imprinted within us are the images; all that we recall are *snapshots* that memory retrieves from the depths of it's infinity. Time makes these images fade and get intertwined with others, and all what is remembered are not the exact same happenings but blurry reminders of former times.

These theoretical explorations posed another question that was more about practice and performative power of images. What if we take advantage of that weightless transitional forces and start to follow fragments of past that appear in mind? Will they be able to construct new tangible narratives? Here has to be remembered that in Greek mythology Mnemosyne is not just the goddess of memory, but also the mother of nine muses. To invoke Mnemosyne is to invoke her daughter muses. Thus the memory is always behind the imagination. The following is a trial to prove this on the grounds of architecture, manifesting all the traditional conventions of form-finding and letting the memories out of any sequence to tell the direction of a travel, forging new connections, new logic and meanings.

This whim reminds the notions of Aldo Rossi about his *Analogous City* for Venice Biennale of Architecture in 1976 and in particular his definition of Canaletto's *Capriccio with Palladian Buildings* as a "remarkable collage, an imaginary Venice built on top of the real one", the construction of which "takes place by means of projects and things, invented or real, quoted and put together, thus proposing an alternative within reality" [4,5]. Venice was the backdrop also for abstractions proposed in this work, for imaginary collages and practical verifications of the aforementioned statements. As Brodsky says, this place has a molecular affair with each of us and there is a moment when we all spot the elements of our own chemistry in this city. Its myth is not merely about the magical apparition from the waters of the Adriatic Sea, or of historical reputation as an exemplary republic. It has something to do with its non conventional essence, with sensations it creates. And thus there is no better place than Venice to host the mentioned experiments. Besides the mythical nature of this city, there was another important factor that made the choice of the site stronger. The presence of own cultural memories. The connection of Armenians with this place has a long history. This work depicts two important nodes of this relation. The following projects are situated in Armenian Island of Venice and in College Moorat-Raphael. Personal, cultural, contextual remembrances became the performers of presented creative acts.

Method of Parallel Coexistence

The film *Mirror* of Andrey Tarkovsky was, perhaps, an implicit reference for all the experimentations that came to happen after theoretical explorations of remembering. That confusing and without equilibrium sequence of scenes and ideas is the state in which our mind is when remembering the things past. This work attempts to demonstrate this within the field of architecture. To start consciously with memories, leaving them free to begin the process, to collide, to prevail and thus lead to the definition of new forms. While it is true that the latter are always emerging from the depths of our experience and memories are inherent matters of art and architecture, the question is that this usually happens unconsciously, and we only recognize the familiarity of certain elements in the end or during the creative process. The logic here is to inverse the rule and start to put the images appearing in mind on a paper since the beginning, allowing everything remembered to serve as paraphernalia for creative act.

One of the prominent figures in the architectural discourse of the 19th century, Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, in his series of lectures entitled *Entretiens sur l'Architecture* has offered a methodological explanation of creative act and its link to memory. He states throughout the *Entretiens* that architecture is never an invention *ex-nihilo* and there is always a need to "recourse to the past in order to originate in the present" [6]. This return to the architectural past is not about reclamation or revival, but an act of critical imagination — an analysis to reconfigure the material structures of former times into architecture for the present. Hence, memory is the first faculty to be exercised, and after has to be made an analytical step by active imagination, that comes to compare, choose and order the confused mass recalled by mind.

When dealing with that confusion of intertwining images and thoughts, it is impossible to pass by their psychological narratives. A strong scientific foundation for the studies of memory was the work of Sigmund Freud. As he affirms, psyche is a subterranean archive where memories press their claims on the conscious mind influencing the way it deals with present reality and all what once happens to us never gets cancelled or erased but encoded within us. We carry all the truths in the depths of our unconscious till arises a need to recall one of them. With comparison to Rome he explains the infinity of our mind, and the way it saves all what has once been experienced:

"Now let us make the fantastic supposition that Rome were not a human dwelling-place, but a mental entity with just as long and varied a past history: that is, in which nothing once constructed had perished, and all the earlier stages of development had survived alongside the latest" [7].

He endeavors to compress all the layers of history into one simultaneous depiction. "Where the Coliseum now stands we could at the same time admire Nero's vanished Golden House" [7]. This Rome is perhaps new one, emerging from the superimposition of all the layers of past, without losing any sign of history. It exists all at once. 'Roma Quadrata' of the Palatine, the Rome of the 'Septimontium,' the Rome enclosed in the Servian Wall, and the other images of the eternal city of successive emperors.

This idea of parallel coexistence got its reflection in works of contemporary artist Idris Khan. His layered artworks are similar to Freud's Rome. These are condensed cultural artifacts, or better to say, melancholic reminders of the passage of time. Pages of books, musical notes, photography are becoming elements of nostalgia in his works. One of the most fascinating examples is his series in homage to iconic couple of photographers of 20th century Bernd and Hilla Becher, who for decades documented types of industrial structures. This series makes to reflect not only of passing time but also of creative power of images. The amalgamation of these industrial types renders them anymore individually recognizable. There are no longer the precise and sharp outlines of industrial architecture documented by Becher, but fluctuating forms on unclear background — new architectures perhaps, emerging from layering one above the other carefully captured figures of past.

Arises a question what if to turn this into a method and to start experimenting with described compression of types, images, associations on the grounds of architecture? Liberating all the confusion of images within us on the outset of form finding process and letting the active imagination to perform further analytical steps. "To seize the forces of our mind and later to submit them to control of our reason" as Andre Breton was saying in *First Manifesto of Surrealism* [8], recognizing also the *geist* hovering over the place, that provides initial cues to the memory about where to meander.

Results and Discussion

As already stated Armenian Traces of Venice were to host the architectural experimentations of this work. Isola di San Lazzaro degli Armeni or Armenian Island of Venice, once a leper colony during Middle Ages, has been home to the Armenian Catholic Monastery since 1717, the headquarters of Mekhitarist Order and a prominent center of Armenian cultural studies. Here is where the *act of memory* started, and as in the aforementioned notion of Georges Didi-Huberman *words and images* were the ones to perform it.

When thinking of monastic complexes, the first images appearing in mind are blurry memories of *Sanahin and Haghpat*. Massive columns of medieval libraries, the narrow pathway between the churches and those old manuscripts, which are the only witnesses of times when we never were. The weightlessness of words in those writings contrasts the heavy, primordial shapes guarding them. Dedications, prayers or testimonies inscribed on both papers and walls evoke the essence of these ancient monasteries. These monasteries are enclosures, formal and ideological definitions of order, codes to demarcate borders. The shape of the Armenian island and that of Mekhitarist monastery affirm this notion. Enclosed around itself to establish order in the infinity of the Adriatic Sea, safeguarding the accumulated cultural inheritance and its spiritual essence.

These reflections evoke disciplinary memories, recalling in mind the plans of Armenian enclosed monastic complexes, coming from 4th till 12th century. Amaras, Tade, Haghpat, Geghard, Ktskonq, Havoc Tar, Sqanchelagorc, Horomos, Hreshtakapetavanq... Why exactly this nine? There is no precise answer to this question. Some because of their architectural appearance, the others because of personal emotions, and some simply because they now exist just in pages of books or in minds of those who has had a chance to see them. Unique clusters of architectural monuments; several churches, chapel, library, gavit and other buildings for monastic living.

After acknowledging these memories as tools to proceed with, their formal homology helped to find a way for superimposing them. These enclosures share geometric and semantic similarities. A circular or a rectangular tower in the corners of enclosure for observation of surroundings is common in all the compositions. This detail is recognizable also on the plan of San Lazzaro island. A little polygonal terrace on the north-western corner for following the movement towards the monastery from the sea. This element has become a constrain, a *hinge* for placing all the nine remembered plans one above the other (Fig.1).



Fig. 1. The process of superimposition of nine plans and final collage of fragments, model by the author

This was an operation of compressing all these types into one plane as the layered artworks of Idris Khan. After was another contextual reading that suggested the following steps. In his renowned *Fondamenta degli Incurabili* Brodsky writes: "There is nothing Freudian to this fantasy [...] the anarchy of water that spurns the notion of shape. It is as though space, cognizant here more than anyplace else of its inferiority to time, answers it with the only property time doesn't possess: with beauty. And that's why water takes this answer, twists it, wallops and shreds it, but ultimately carries it by and large intact off into the Adriatic" [9].

To twist, to wallop and to shred. It Probably will sound Dadaistic, but if to translate these verbs into formal operations, they will be *to rotate, to overlay and to cut*. This were the steps with which the act went on. After overlaying of plans just knowing these three operations one unconsciously starts to search for an order. While *rotating* the plans, the shapes of the monastery were somehow giving hints for directions. And as Aldo Rossi was wondering while looking to Punta della Dogana how the figure of fortune on the golden sphere moves [10], this plans were also finding themselves and their places by *fortune*. But this does not mean that the control was totally relinquished. In the mass of these geometries later the *logic* was to search for new meanings and *to cut or to choose the pieces of the whole* for establishing new connections, sometimes forcing to stay together things that are not supposed to (Figs. 2,3).

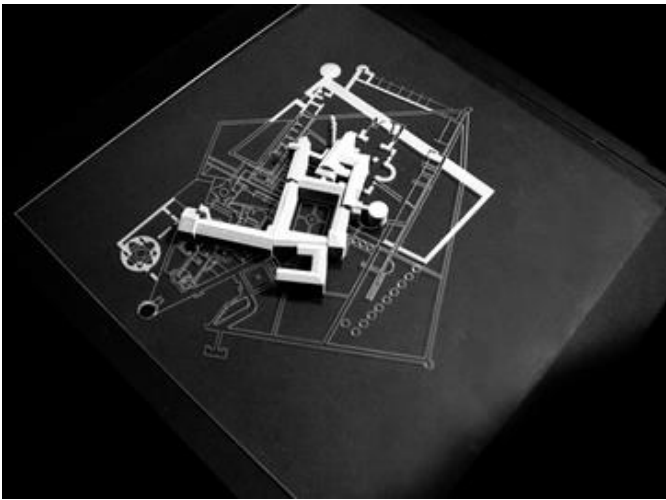


Fig. 2. *Final composition with remaining fragments, model by the author*

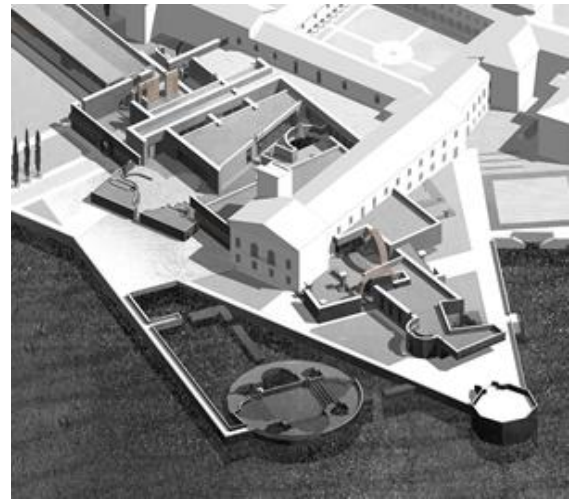


Fig. 3. *Axonometry of final composition by the author*

After all the mentioned operations all the former unities result into fragments, pieces of a mechanism whose overall sense is lost [10]. The monasteries are no more recognizable, but there are still some signs recalling back to them. Gavit of Haghpat or the chapel of Khtskonq. They partially remained as they appeared to be, thus becoming elements of nostalgia within new composition. This new narrative from reassembled pieces is, perhaps, that space designated by Rossi as laying *between logic and biography* [10].

Another verification of creative potential of memories took place in the Armenian College of Venice. A prominent educational institution that has hosted thousands of pupils till the end of last century and that is still and silent today. With every step in this splendid palace memory gets into some tension. Classrooms, scientific, artistic rooms, canteen, chapel...Opening the doors of sequential rooms, even just touching the decorated handles one seems to be in a long forgotten jewel box. And the most precious piece here is the Mirror Hall or Sala Nobile, with immersive paintings of Louis Dorigny and Tiepolo. Upon entering to this room, there is a moment when consciousness gets lost in time. One sees his own reflection but thinks about those who previously stood in front of these mirrors. Memory transfers somewhere back in time and brings some images laying in the depths of the mind. This is perhaps when surreality, that absolute reality comes to happen. You are in a certain space now but mind floats in another time, "memory takes pleasure in weakly retracing for him the circumstances of the dream, in stripping it of any real importance, and in dismissing the only determinant from the point where he thinks he has left it a few hours before" [8].

This space triggers the machine of memory to get accelerated, working with constant collision of images. Taking distant fragments of time and putting them together *according to the law of chance*. The snapshots redrawn here are of different nature, from Parajanov's allegoric shots, appearing in this emptiness burdened with memory, till the arches of the cathedral of Ani and stones of those monuments left back in time and history.

All these images laying between imagination and present moment are laying one above the other amounting to abstraction. "*The metaphysical will find it all the more interesting to migrate*, for whoever wants to follow it, into the space between one image and the other. In the BETWEEN, in the conjunction AND lies the sense of any new juxtaposition" [11]. The measure of this distance is transparency, which, as Colin Rowe defines, is the synonym of words "space-time, simultaneity, interpenetration" [12]. It makes their collision stronger and after suggests different geometrical possibilities for new order (Fig.4). It allows ambiguity and ambivalence. And here is not the chance to decide but logic to recognize new forms.

The collage of this images is similar to the state of mind, to the pathways and chains of that machine which gets into tension when recognizing some elements in space recalling own history. That memory machine itself is not constructed of anything else then the same instants it triggers. From memories and for memories; for that eternal collision and remembrance to happen (Fig.5).

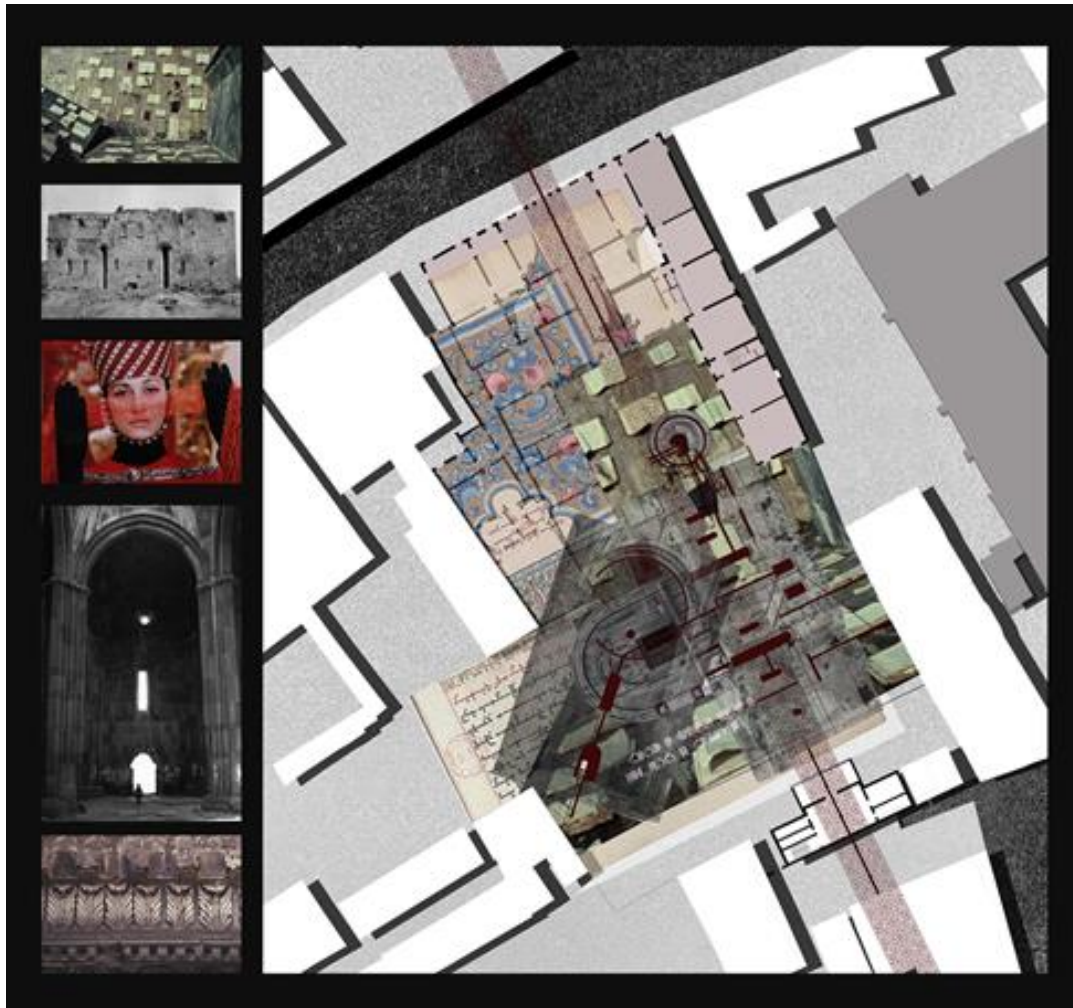


Fig. 4. *The chart of recalled images and their collision on the backyard of Armenian College Moorat-Raphael, by the author*

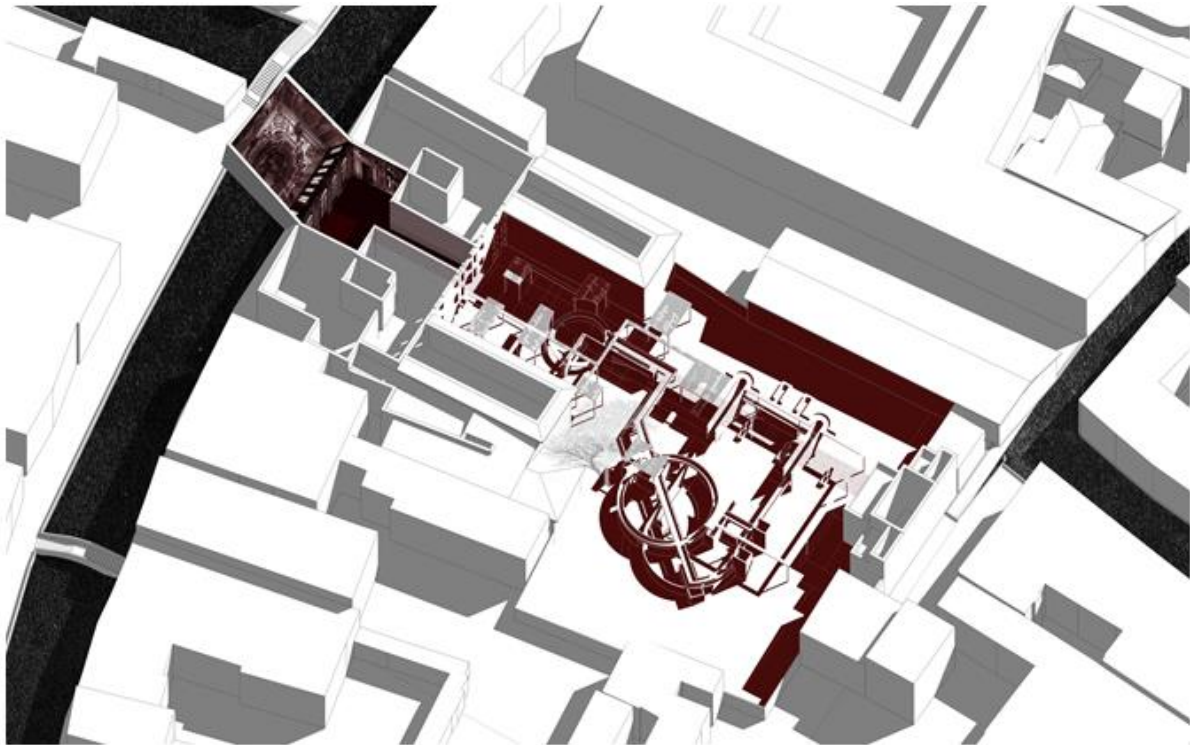


Fig. 5. *Axonometry of the Machine of Memory on the backyard of Armenian College Moorat-Raphael, by the author*

This Machine is a proposal for an installation in the courtyard of Collegio Armeno Moorat-Raphael (Fig.6). The forms derived from this experimentation are all serving for projections of memories starting from the ones of famous alumnae's of the college, visible from interior, till experimental works of Armenian modern artists - surreality by projecting and reflecting images and texts accompanied with notes of Armenian chants.



Fig. 6. *The Machine of Memory on the backyard of Armenian College Moorat-Raphael, Projection of "Land" by Martiros Saryan and typographical experimentations of Fred Afrikyan, visualization by the author*

Conclusion

There was a constant recourse to Aldo Rossi's *Scientific Autobiography*, when carrying out this investigation around memory and its relevance in architecture. The memory is nothing else but our own biography, as all what we have lived gets imprinted within our cells, encoded in our biological tissue. These inscriptions are laying dormant in the depths of our unconscious till that instant of time when by the help of appropriate reason we reactivate them and force them to become part of new narratives.

These trials, with surrealistic desire to take an advantage of those forces within us, are as already said between own history and logic. Perhaps this is also where the imagination resides. The images and thoughts from own formal background are getting directly manifested within architectural creative acts. These attempts might have resembled to whims, forcing to stay together disparate images or exhausting possible operations from the pages of books. The experimental steps might have seemed irrational, sometimes aggressive and violent, as they are challenging nowadays understandings of design process, making a return to *critical imagination with forms of past*[6] described by Viollet-le-Duc. May be judged the final content of this *surreality* and may be questioned the *logic of this dream* [1], that is far from any functional diagrams and has something to do with more sensitive side of architecture. All this was just to restate that there are still better truths for the form to follow, and concerns that we give to us today are leaving in shadow the real values that architecture has to convey. Has to be remembered that all what we create is an embodied dimension of meanings and understandings of the time. Ruskin once said that there are two strong conquerors of the forgetfulness, poetry and architecture, and the latter in some way includes the former [13].

Whether foreshown attempts to prove the creative potential of images and the infinite search for the shapes of poetry were successful or not has to be judged by others, but there is a certain feeling after this process. "A desire to remake, not in order to effect some change but out of a strange profundity of feeling for things" [10], a certain satisfaction remaining after the end of all these acts, when seeing that resulted forms are not merely old fragmented remembrances but new narratives and new meanings for places strongly linked to cultural history.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in relation to this research, whether financial, personal, authorship or otherwise, that could affect the research and its results presented in this paper.

Financing

The study was performed without financial support.

References

- [1]. A. Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*. University of Texas Press, Austin, 1989.
- [2]. M. Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*. Vintage, New York, 1996.
- [3]. G. Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008.
- [4]. A. Rossi, *The Analogous City: Panel*. Lotus International, 13, 1976, 5-8.
- [5]. A. Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1982.
- [6]. E.E. Viollet-le-Duc, *Discourses on Architecture*. James R. Osgood and Company, Boston, 1875.
- [7]. S. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*. The Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1989.
- [8]. A. Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*. The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1969.
- [9]. J. Brodsky, *Watermark: An Essay on Venice*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1993.
- [10]. A. Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*. MIT Press, Cambridge, 1981.
- [11]. E. Manganaro, *Durand incontra Balestrini a Venezia*. LetteraVentidue Edizioni, Siracusa, 2022.
- [12]. C. Rowe, R. Slutzky, *Transparency*. Birkhauser Architecture, Basel, 1997.
- [13]. J. Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. Dover Publications Inc, New York, 2000.

Ruzanna Meliksetyan, Master in Architecture and Urban Design (Italy, Milan) - Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture, Built Environment and Construction Engineering, ruzanna.meliksetyan@polimi.it
Elvio Manganaro, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Architecture, researcher (Italy, Milan) - Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture, Built Environment and Construction Engineering, elvio.manganaro@polimi.it