

Creating reality. The work of Geert Bekaert

María Teresa Muñoz

In her speech at the Critic/all conference at the School of Architecture in Madrid (spring, 2018), the Belgian professor Hilde Heynen referred to one of her first anthologies under the title of *Dat is Architectuur* (2001); she pointed out that it was written exclusively in Dutch, a minority language to which all her collaborators had to adjust in order to write about the suggested theme: *what is Architecture*. On the other hand, Hilde Heynen herself wrote an introductory note in her most well-known work *Architecture and Modernity* (1999, this one already published in English by MIT Press), stating that one of the most important concepts that she would handle in her book -about *Mimesis*-, derived from an essay on imitation by the critic Geert Bekaert - also of Belgian nationality. However, at no point throughout the development of Heynen's text does the figure of Bekaert appear, therefore, it is impossible to establish the nature of this connection. Geert Bekaert was born in 1928 in Kortrijk, Belgium, and wrote extensively about architecture throughout his life, mostly in his language (Dutch); his essays have been collected in nine volumes published between 1985 and 2011. That same year - 2011 - five years prior to his decease in 2016, his disciple Christophe Van Gerrewey edited a book, a compilation of texts in English under the title of *Rooted in the Real*. The following comment refers to this last work.

The four parts into which Geert Bekaert's book is divided in are preceded by an extensive introduction by the editor, written in white typing on a black background, which examines the career of the Belgian critic. It gives certain ideas about the critic's interests and the impact of his ideas, highlighting Bekaert's commitment to his native language and the fact that he was situated geographically between a country with hardly any architectural tradition as is Belgium, and another with an extraordinary concentration of production and theory on modern architecture, the Netherlands. However, he mentions nothing about the necessary restrictive criteria in the selection of texts or about the aforementioned division into four parts: the first one committed to general themes of architecture, the second to commentaries on a series of Belgian architects and the other two to the work of different relevant international architects, from Le Corbusier to Rem Koolhaas. According to the editor, the title of the anthology was chosen based on Geert Bekaert's conception of architecture as an essential way to create reality. That is, in his belief, that architecture acts fundamentally as

a mediator, making life, if not better, at least more bearable and acceptable.

The first part covers a period between 1986 and 2003; two of its articles stand out especially: "The real of the discourse. *Eupalinos ou l'architecte*" and "Dante and architecture". In the first one, the author explores the text of Paul Valéry (first published in 1921) and compares it on principle with that of Heidegger on inhabiting, from which he underlines the idea that pure thought and search for truth can not aspire to something else than the discovery and construction of a form. Valéry insists on the fact that the interesting thing is not to live, but to do, and therefore, the arts of construction, such as music and architecture, should be the most valued. The destiny of man is his poesis, the creation of the otherness, the consciousness of the non-existent, the unknown, what is hidden, what is possible. Bekaert, however, does not believe that *Eupalinos* is an architectural treatise and less still an architectural philosophy, but he uses Valéry's thinking and, through numerous quotations, builds his own discourse on the pre-eminence of construction as a transition from chaos to order, as the most beautiful and complete activity that any human being is able to imagine. Bekaert asserts that every human's action structure brings disorder, that it is not possible to think of without destroying something in the process and the truth is, the artisan cannot do his work without violating or contradicting some sort of order.

The use of literary sources --such as the work of Valéry in this case-- to trace the nature of architecture as construction, is not limited to this particular essay: the first one included in the anthology is entitled "Architecture devoid of shadow" (1986). In it, the author points out the controversial nature of architecture, a discipline that must be constantly discussed and even defended. In this text, references run from Flaubert's Dictionary to Vitruvio's treatise, Hans Hollein's statements that everything is architecture, Nietzsche's philosophy and poets such as Paul Celan or George Bataille. Architecture, for Bekaert, has to do with the creation of the world, since it establishes a centre and then pinpoints a reference point in the infinite range of space and time. Indeed, he points out, medieval artists referred to the creator as an architect.

In that same article, Bekaert insists on the peculiar character of architecture, which makes it impossible to reduce it to a single definition; this apparently creates an obstacle to the human impulse of establishing categories. Thus, for instance, architecture was recognized in the eighteenth century as a value in itself, regardless of its references, its specific substance or even its program or function. Its references will be the Abbé Gregoire, who recognized architecture as having formative power over human landscape, and the ability to transcend the historical society from which it arises. He will then review what Marc-Antoine Laugier stated and his strictly functional explanation of architecture; his paradigm will be the primitive hut visualized through the image

of four trunks holding a roof. Furthermore, in an almost unbelievable leap forward, he refers to what Mendelsohn told Wright about architecture being simply architecture, a space in itself. He compares the statements from these architects with the affirmations by Nietzsche defending the separation between architecture and metaphysics. Bekaert concludes that architecture is nothing else than the establishment of what is real, the creation of reality, but also, quoting Goethe, he argues that it can only face reality through his own destruction and renewal, through his constant decay.

Without leaving his literary references to one side, Geert Bekaert writes a new essay in 1989 analyzing Dante's vision in the *Divina Commedia* in relation to architecture, despite the fact that, as he himself points out, Dante hardly refers to architecture. For Dante architecture is essentially an instrument of imprisonment and the only architectural construction he considers - as Adolf Loos will do so later on - is the tomb. Neither hell nor purgatory nor paradise would be for him - strictly speaking - architecture; it can even be said that none of the three is located in a precise place since their place is the poem. However, Bekaert dares to go further than Dante himself, suggesting an analogy between the interior of the Gothic cathedral and paradise, as well as between the topographical shapes of its exterior and purgatory. Dante believes that man is not linked to any topographical or architectural context since he is an eternal nomad; in spite of that, he recognizes the beauty of the city and the countryside, especially in those places where he lives and refers to that which is vernacular with almost modern clarity. According to Bekaert, Dante is above all, a visionary who, despite not speaking specifically about architecture, really does speak a lot about it.

Geert Bekaert also quotes Bataille and Derrida and talks about of their consideration of architecture as a manifestation of power, megalomania, or at least as a rigid and inflexible structure linked to a centralized and dogmatic worldview; only the primitive hut would be free from these associations. Derrida himself would have referred to the need to de-architecturize architecture, to dismantle architecture, a version of his deconstruction. Bekaert states that it is the image of architecture that must be deconstructed, in the same way that Dante's poetry does, despite its apparent balance and hierarchical structure. To end the essay, the author refers to Dante's only explicit quote about architecture - included in paradise - where he points to an unfinished architecture always referenced to something external to itself. This would have been the starting point for Giuseppe Terragni's *Danteum* project. Terragni would have turned the structure into poetry: once inside the *Danteum* we find ourselves immersed in a Dantesque condition since there are no defined spaces, but no-places. The spiral of the *Danteum* leads us to infinity, to the absence of place; the architecture is there only to disappear. Two short texts complete this first part of the anthology. The one titled "*O ma fille tu es trop*

belle!" dating 1993, deals with the possibility of architecture being interesting or, rather, about the possibility of architecture being boring, sad, banal. Bekaert goes back to the eighteenth century, when the problem about what is interesting was formulated in relation to communication, the exchange of meanings or, in short, rhetoric; and he adds that history of modern architecture, if we examine the texts of its most outstanding architects, is nothing more than an attempt to escape from the domain of tradition and recover direct access to reality against any kind of rhetoric. This would have defended the intrinsic value of what is banal, what is banal as something really interesting in fact. On the other hand, the so-called postmodernism would only have been interesting by meaning a departure from modernity, an impasse; and, appealing to the neutrality of the architecture of the moment when he writes, Bekaert states that architecture must not seduce, but keep the secret of its hidden beauty in order to be discovered once and over again. Now his reference will be Francis Ponge and his work *Le parti pris des choses* (1942), in which he rejects the megalomania of an architecture that tries to mask reality, advocating instead for an architecture that finds its beauty and interest through the subtleness of its needs.

In the text that closes the first part, Geert Bekaert asks himself about the meaning of the noun "architect", for which he goes back to the book *Architecture* by Philibert de l'Orme (1567), a defense of architecture as an independent profession. From here, the author questions the role of the architect in society and dwells on what had been said by Manfredo Tafuri, for whom architectural culture has increasingly moved away from architecture itself, thus the architect should free himself from all this ideological atmosphere to concentrate on his own work. In relation to the role that architecture should play in the future, Bekaert expresses his belief in the supremacy of the work itself over the creator and quotes Valéry again, who states that architecture does not create fables, but constitutes the foundation from which fables arise. The author of the essay concludes that the essence and first priority of the work remains in all contemporary interpretations of art and architecture, from Adorno to Blanchot, although justifications are different in every case. In fact, a piece of work must never be justified, it must become its own justification.

The second part of the anthology is dedicated to Belgian architecture and architects, starting with a somehow panoramic view of the architecture of this country, usually considered as lacking in relevant architectural culture. Belgium appears as a void in the map of contemporary architecture; for the author, Belgian architecture is described in terms of absence, in spite of the unlikeliness of talking about a country without architecture. Considered as a common place architecture, the lack of interest from critics is logical, but not so much that from Belgian architects, for whom this could be an excellent terrain to operate in. Since in Belgium individual architects are predominant, there are hardly firms or consolidated teams. The following

essays are dedicated to some of them, such as Stéphane Beel, Luc Deleu and Bob van Reeth, whom the author considers one of the most original architects of his time. The text continues with writings on Charles Vandenhove, Maarten Van Severen, André Verroken, Paul Neefs and Xaveer De Geyter, names that will be unfamiliar outside Belgium, where they all have built their main works. Last of all, Bekaert refers to the 2008 Venice Biennale and the award given to the Belgian pavilion, the work of the architectural firm Kersten Geers David Van Severen, who limited themselves to maintain the building built eleven years before in the Giardini, without making any judgement on it, merely adding a fence that enclosed the outer front space thus allowing a new perspective. This empty place transformed the existing pavilion and turned it into an indeterminate place for the wandering of visitors, who could sit anywhere or leave the building through any door to enjoy nature, according to the Biennial's motto, *Out There. Architecture Beyond Building*.

The third and fourth parts of the anthology are dedicated to a series of international architects who, unlike Belgian architects, are widely well-known around the world, such as Norman Foster, Toyo Ito, Wiel Arets or Frank O. Gehry. Some of the writings, such as those dedicated to Le Corbusier or Rem Koolhaas, are long essays, while others are just short reviews. In the case of Le Corbusier, Bekaert focusses on the Monastery of La Tourette, an example of religious architecture especially dear to the author, who for a time was a member of the Society of Jesus. Bekaert states that, in spite of Le Corbusier's initial reluctance to accept what he called an ecclesiastical commission, there is no doubt that La Tourette was finally one of his favorite buildings. Moreover, here, the author makes extensive use of references from poets -especially Paul Valéry, almost a contemporary of Le Corbusier himself - with regard to the concern of both to clarify the difference between work produced by men and form produced by nature. He narrates Le Corbusier's first visit to the Carthusian Monastery of Ema, near Florence, a kind of new Acropolis in which the problem of individuality arised against community and which was solved through a specific spatial arrangement, a delicate architectural biology. Bekaert highlights the theatrical condition of La Tourette, the display of real events that illustrate photographs offered by Le Corbusier himself, of everyday objects such as bread, milk jug, fish, fresh flowers or a fruit tray. And, in the final part of his writing, he picks up some of his more general themes, stating that Le Corbusier shows the relevance of architecture and the possibility of modern architecture, against the opinion of intellectuals such as Tafuri or Dal Co. Again, it is poets who are called in to support his thesis: Rilke, Rimbaud, Hölderlin as well as Valéry, and critics such as T.S. Eliot or artists such as Paul Klee.

Geert Bekaert includes in the anthology two essays on Rem Koolhaas, whom he knows very well from the beginning of his career, dating 1982 and 2004 respectively. In the first

of them, he refers to his book *Delirious New York*, dating from 1978 and his first projects, such as the extension of the Parliament of The Hague or the Rotterdam residential towers, all of them prior to 1980. The second one, entitled "Dealing with Koolhaas" goes beyond an examination of projects to delve into issues such as Rem Koolhaas's own personality or the relationship between the practice of OMA and the theory of AMO. The author highlights the media dimension of Rem Koolhaas, as a former journalist, and screenwriter, but also points out the fact that he has not succeeded in breaking the barriers of architecture to expand his notoriety to other fields. Koolhaas's immunity to criticism is based on the fact that he never negotiates, but governs by decree; he never argues with his colleagues, thus, creating the impression of being an exception to the rule. His beginnings were stunning, declaring - already in 1970 at London's AA, through a student work - that the Berlin Wall was a piece of architecture of surprising beauty. The *Exodus* project and the book *Delirious New York* would become the aftermath of his work on the Berlin Wall. From here, he will expand his vision to the metropolis and will elaborate his theory on bigness, the sole thing capable of breaking even urban fabrics. According to Bekaert, one of Koolhaas' peculiarities is that he tries to make compatible his assertion on the impossibility of architecture with an independent professional activity. Theory and practice are autonomous fields: neither do theoretical reflections derive their authority from constructed buildings, nor does the opposite happen. The author concludes that separation between theory and practice can be seen in Koolhaas as a strategic momentum, a commercial technique which he does not hesitate to describe as cynicism.

In the same essay, the author reviews some projects by OMA, from Rotterdam's Kunsthal of 1992 to the Zeebrugge terminal or the Library of France, both dating 1989. However, no matter how relevant the detailed analysis of these works may be, Bekaert states that the most important thing is the paradox laying in Koolhaas consideration that architecture has become impossible, while he continues erecting buildings as a vital function of contemporary society. On the other hand, Koolhaas in his projects tries to offer an infinite collection of data and an endless list of possible types, before --and without there being a causal connection between them-- presenting his own design. Examples of this procedure would be his intervention in the Kassel Documenta X of 1977 or the Prada store in New York, a subversive attempt to destabilize the image of the brand. The author acknowledges that there is no possible conclusion to be drawn from this analysis of Rem Koolhaas's activity so far, as it constantly oscillates between the urgent need to tell provocative stories and the irresistible desire to give a lasting expression to his inspiration in his personal architectural work. A similar scheme is used to deal with another Dutch architect, Wiel Arets, confronting the architecture developed by him with his own texts. Arets builds, but also makes comments

about his production through his writings and even makes explicit his sources of inspiration and his mental processes. However, for Bekaert, these statements, despite their value, do not provide an adequate interpretation of his work, since they remain to one side. Once again, the figure of Valéry arises to clarify the condition of the architectural work; for Arets it would be characterized by its intangible character and its autonomy, as something that can be reached, as a favour of the Muses, something similar to the epiphany in Joyce or the event in Derrida. The work is there, it simply exists. As in the case of Koolhaas, the biography of the architect is very important. Arets adopts personal positions and uses non-architectural references, such as literature, film or photography, but it also has architectural references, such as Tadao Ando or his compatriots Bakema, van Eyck and Hertzberger. The rest of the essay is dedicated to examine some of his projects, such as the Academy of Art and Architecture in Maastricht (1989-93) or the University Library of Utrecht (1997-2004), to conclude that Arets moves between two worlds: the solid and tangible and the fluid and elusive, between the open and the fixed and permanent. He actually makes reference to the oxymoron used in one of his texts, "Raster and rhizome". Other essays dedicated to the work of different architects are focused on architectures made in the vicinity of his country, in France for example, with the examples of Norman Foster in Nîmes or Torres and Lapeña in Sant Pere de Rodes. The exception might be the Japanese architecture, examined collectively in a 2002 text dedicated to Tadao Ando, Yoshio Taniguchi and Toyo Ito. However even here there is an attempt to connect anthropologically Japan and Belgium.

In any case, Bekaert remains in his essays on individual architects faithful to his method of first presenting his idea of what architecture really is and then going on to identifying the particular features of the author in question or of one of his specific works. There is a certain unity of criteria throughout the book, even though it covers a rather long time frame (between 1982 and 2008), and it addresses a vast diversity of issues, including even an obituary or a book review. As its editor points out in the Introduction of the book, for Geert Bekaert architecture is first and foremost an essential way to create reality by Mankind, it does not solve anything, but mediates, expresses and tries to make possible human existence with all its consequences. Even now after his death, It is important to draw attention on the dimension and importance of Bekaert's contribution to architectural critical thinking, at least through this beautiful anthological book that --only partially-- shows us the author's ideas poured through a minority European language.

Geert Bekaert
Reality
Belgian architecture
Paul Valéry
Le Corbusier
Rem Koolhaas

Traductor: Rafael Guridi