

Renato Rizzi

With Ernst Struwig, NMMU
Jean-Pierre Basson, NMMU

Assistants: Theodor de Goede

For almost three decades Ernst Struwig lived in Venice. I met him in 1985 when he just arrived in Italy, during the first design course given by Peter Eisenman at IUAV (University of Architecture in Venice), in which he participated and I collaborated as teaching assistant. In 2012 I said goodbye to a colleague, after years of his working with me as teaching assistant and in my practice in Venice. These biographical references are only to justify that my presence at the NMMU is not just by chance, but by a bond. A bond of friendship and esteem towards a person who had to struggle a lot in life but notwithstanding has never lost his dedication to architecture. Or perhaps it can be seen as the plot of a story in which different lives and places are intertwined. So South Africa slowly suffused through my imagination through the almost daily rhythm of his familiar stories: happy and painful memories, dreams and disappointments of life experiences.

The Strength of Silence

Extension to the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum (NMMAM) in Port Elizabeth.

The Resistance of Values

South Africa and Venice have much in common. Although far from the equator, between these two realities, there flows an invisible energy. Something underground, and because of this it is even more powerful, uncontrollable. We are talking about an energy that belongs to the spirit of men like the soul of things: the 'resistance'. That common substratum, which binds in the same way human virtues and natural powers. It is the same for us and for things. In fact, in the 'resistance' coagulates the principle of conservation of life, of survival. For this reason, its intimate and profound core is indestructible, inexhaustible. Also because it does not depend completely on us. It is a metaphysical-universal condition which belongs to the origin. Its indomitable powers nest inwards, are wedged in matter, and are molded in shapes. Mandela-Venice, have had, we can say without exaggerating, something in common.

In South Africa the 'resistance' opposed apartheid. In Venice, the resistance opposed 'segregation' from its own form. In both cases, the process of opposition has asserted itself thanks to a stubborn will, to an inflexible obstinacy. The purpose? To save or safeguard the identity. Of whom? Of man, of the city. Yet one is reciprocal to the other. In fact, the fundamental theme of 'resistance' is superimposed by that of

'coexistence'. Or rather, the forms of 'coexistence', human and urban. The presupposition of each civilization in its endless variations: political, civil, religious, cultural, economic, linguistic.

The resistance of names: Architecture, Nelson Mandela, Port Elizabeth. An inalienable triad. We are in a faculty of architecture; in Port Elizabeth, faced with the unique name "Nelson Mandela" for two distinct locations: University and Museum (the theme of the workshop). What should be highlighted in this sequence relates to the permanence of the opposite powers which we find in the names and, consequently, their underlying meaning. The double root of 'architecture' converges: the uncontrollable (arché) and the controllable (techné). A bond completely ignored by our technical-scientific culture. In fact, the controllable (techné) has 'segregated' the uncontrollable (arché). This is an epistemic paradox and, therefore, aesthetic; the profound and ignored cause of the insignificance of the project, of the formal banality.

The figure of Nelson Mandela converges: the universal ideal and the spatial restriction. The value of freedom and the cell on Robben Island. Twenty-seven years of physical 'segregation' and spatial isolation have allowed the translation of the universal ideal into a real condition, possible and perfectible. The name of Port Elizabeth converges: the pain of the individual and the suffering of the race. The irredeemable pain of a stranger, Sir Rufane Donkin¹ rises as a monument; pierces through the tragic pain of people; that pain which absorbs every colour to become the name of a community, the effigy of a city.

The Resistance of Places

Port Elizabeth in the Indian Ocean. Robben Island in the Atlantic Ocean. Despite their distance, the two places are connected by the same parallel: 33 degrees south. Their latitude differs by only 7 '. That minimal physiological difference, which still allows (facilitating it) the passage from geographical coordinates to spiritual ones. As if the Cape of Good Hope (one of the three theological virtues) now proposes another type of passage: from the physical level to the metaphysical. From the immanence to the transcendence. It's been barely two centuries since the founding of P.E. Too short a time for the growth of a city, but long enough to reflect on its forms. On the forms of the values. And here emerges a huge paradox. The urban development of P.E.² has erased every metaphysical-transcendental dimension that has always been the soul of places. As always it was embodied in the spirit of the people. Eliminated the interiority of places, eliminated the interiority of people. Here is the big internal and metaphysical "segregation", which is the work of pragmatic functional contemporary culture. As if the

ideal line of the Cape of Good Hope had now become an impassable wall that splits in two the entire nation like the brains of people. No passages no connections.

P.E. was designed and built on the abstract and neutral idea of a flat space, homogeneous, continuous. Not of place. But the personality of places is there, present in the 'resistance' of their forms. Their uncontrollable energy is perceptible in all matter. As it perceives the metaphysical-transcendental dimension through their geology. They are the invisible powers of the visible whole.

The Outline of the Project for the Extension to the NMMAM

The museum is situated at the entrance to St. George's Park, at the top of the plateau overlooking the city and the ocean below; this seems like an unexpected and significant paradigm compared to what has just been written. First of all, for the theme of memory that transcends any historical chronology. Then for the two pavilions. Their volume seems to incorporate pairs of opposing powers just described in the preceding three paragraphs: values, names, and places. But only now we are able to outline the main features of the general program for the extension of the museum. In fact, the project's program is divided into two main areas, obviously, strongly interconnected.

A – The program of the arché: epistemic-iconological; synthesis of the three \ paragraphs dedicated to values , names, places.

B – The program techné: pragmatic-functional; the space and performance

requirements were drawn by management of NMMAM³. The functional program_B finds, therefore, its system in the epistemic program_A. While the epistemic program, through the method of models, predisposes the foundation of the formal language of the project.

In fact, during the three weeks of the workshop seven preparatory models were developed (in different scales) for the study of the landscape and of the place, and eight models for the development of the new architectural proposal for the extension of the museum.

The purview of the project

The theoretical links.

1 – the plan of the city generates the new "vision" of the park;

2 – the “vision” of the park generates the new “scene” of the Museum;

3 – the “scene” of the Museum generates the support of the “ideal”;

4 – the “ideal” generates the substratum of the “real.”

The spatial constraints of the museum area:

1 – one of the most elevated areas of PE (approximately 100m above sea level);

2 – to the park entrance;

3 – facing east, towards the ocean;

4 – compressed between the road, the stadium and the cemetery.