

# Art-based References in Architecture

## Conversation with Adam Caruso about the Relationship between Art and Contemporary Architecture

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### Abstract

The conditions affecting architectural form are changing more rapidly and radically today. There is no longer a consistent canon nor a uniform guideline to follow. However, technological achievements offer more opportunities for architects; the buildings are isolated from their surroundings and become formulaic objects. Due to the increasing impersonality of globalized construction, the search for alignment points that help the integrity of architectural works has lost its importance.

This research examines those creators and their design methods who reject global trends and try to renew the emptiness of modernism. This paper has collected and analyzed alternative attempts, rich in multi-layered readings, emphasizing the value of the given place. These directions, seeking a connection to culture, history, and art, attempt to identify new points of alignment. How can these cultural elements become a guideline for the design process? How can they liberate formulaic modernity in crisis?

This essay explores the answers through a conversation with Adam Caruso. The architect's writings, teaching, and design practice are unavoidable among contemporary architects who represent a critical attitude towards the impersonality of construction and promote the importance of cultural embeddedness. The practice of his office – founded with Peter St John – is fascinating because, in addition to examples from the history of architecture, they also use art-based references to find relevant architectural answers that reflect today's problems. The conversation reveals how we can integrate art-based references into architectural creation and education.

### Keywords

cultural connection, art and architecture, art-based references, analogies

### 1 Introduction

The search for the alignment points necessary for the integrity of architectural works has lost its importance today. While until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this benchmark was relatively straightforward, now – apart from financial limitations – almost anything is possible! Globalization affects all aspects of our time, so architecture cannot be an exception. Nowadays, there is no uniform canon or universal style to be followed – like the historical eras – which would limit ideas. Even the development of technology and the distance between continents do not set limits for the design process. Global economic and social changes also significantly impact the built environment; local cultures and traditional forms fall into the background or transform (Szirmai et al., 2003).

The architectural behaviour coming from today's limitless possibilities faces increasing criticism (Caruso, 2009).

Architects following global trends are often satisfied with the formulaic design, so buildings become object-like and isolated from their surroundings (Louisiana Channel, 2017). Valerio Olgiati and Markus Breitschmid (2019) ascribes this phenomenon to the "non-referential world" based on polyvalent values, which stems from the growing heterogeneity of society, the disappearance of ideologies, and consensus-based reference points. Adam Caruso (2004) also criticizes the situation of contemporary architecture in his writing about traditions:

*"...Never has so much construction been based on so few ideas!"* (Caruso, 2004:p.77)

Due to the emptiness of globalized architecture, many designers recognize the need for a paradigm shift. To find relevant architectural answers that reflect the questions of modern life, new (or rediscovered) connection points

must be found. The British architectural office Caruso St. John is unavoidable among contemporary architects who fight against the impersonality of global construction and promote an architecture saturated with emotions. Adam Caruso (2004) and Peter St John see the solution to the outlined problem in leaving the abstract architecture; instead, they recommend universal intertwining and establishing cultural continuity (Caruso, 2008). Their works reflect their principles: their buildings are closely linked to the given place, its culture, history, and art. How can these cultural elements become a guideline for the design process? How do they implement their ideas in practice? What tools and reference points do they use to liberate formulaic modernity?

The essay seeks answers to these questions with the help of a conversation with Adam Caruso. From the interview, the British architect's creative method can be outlined, and it becomes clear why it is essential to raise Fine Arts into the architectural discourse and how the series of art-based references can be integrated into the process of architectural design and education. Besides the interview, the text also describes the theoretical background of the trends affecting the architect's creative creed.

Doctoral research examining the relationship between art and contemporary architecture provided the interview framework.

The edited and translated interview is based on the online (Zoom) conversation recorded on 22 June 2022 (Caruso, 2022).

## 2 The theoretical background: alternative proposals

### 2.1 The principle of "as found"

The primacy of abstract forms began with modern architectural principles, and since the 1990s, it has intensified due to globalization. The major international architectural trends and theories covering different countries: urban planning ideas, the concept of modern architecture and the CIAM<sup>1</sup> (Congrès internationaux d'architecture modern (International congresses of modern architecture)), principles of Le Corbusier, suburban ideas, and even the tenets of Russian constructivism were part of the territorial expansion of modern globalization (Szirmai et al., 2003). The Team 10

group was the first to undertake the renewal of formulaic modernity (1953). Among its members, Alison and Peter Smithson opened the question of architectural formation to a creative methodology rich in multi-layered readings. The couple was interested in the metamorphosis of seemingly uninteresting, ordinary details from everyday life and the possibility of sensitive and emotional reflection on the context. To find the integrity of the works, they used everyday situations as an analogue image tool, thus creating the iconic term "*as found*" (Wettstein, 2018). Although they harshly criticized the faults of modernism, they were not ready to reject the CIAM. Ultimately, their works could not wholly escape schematics (Márquez and Levene, 2013:p.13). Despite this remaining schematism and their small number of buildings, the vision represented by the Smithson couple greatly impacted the development of architectural thinking. The embodiment of their principles can be detected in the works of the *Whisperers*.<sup>2</sup> This group – named by Sir Peter Cook – included Tony Fretton, Mark Pimlott, Peter St John, Adam Caruso, Jonathan Sergison, Stephen Bates, Jonathan Woolf, and David Adjaye. The practice of the members belonging to this intellectual community was initially closely intertwined with various groups of contemporary artists (Young British Artists). As a result of this relationship, they learned to look at things in the world with a different eye. For them, contemporary art has become an essential source of ideas: clever and meaningful, without being mocking or ironic. Their interest in art remains to this day. The oeuvre of these architects proved that it is worth integrating art into the design process and considering architecture as a product of culture (Alkér, 2019).

### 2.2 Analogue architecture

Another important representative of the analogue design strategies was Aldo Rossi<sup>3</sup>, who – despite his short teaching career at ETH (he taught as a guest professor at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule in Zurich from 1972–1974) – had a great impact on the generation of Swiss architects who defined the turn of the millennium. The analogical design method he advocated unraveled the meaning

<sup>1</sup> The CIAM, or International Congresses of Modern Architecture, was an organization founded in 1928 and disbanded in 1959, responsible for a series of events and congresses arranged across Europe. The meetings were designed to exchange ideas about modern architecture and city design (such as landscape, urbanism, industrial design, and many others) within a European, and later, an international context. (Wikipedia (a))

<sup>2</sup> They got the name *Whisperers* because of their quiet but profound conversational style and correspondingly restrained and intellectual construction practice.

<sup>3</sup> Aldo Rossi's architectural confession was based on the complex architectural history approach of his teachers: Ignazio Gardella, Carlo Aymonino, and his mentor, Ernesto Nathan Rogers were combining modernism, regionalism, and historical aspects.

layers of the constructions with images, associations, and interpretations that are readable in multiple layers. He started with typological elements and opened the toolkit of architectural formation towards the analogue layers of memory.

The theoretical and educational methodology of *Analogue Architecture* was first continued by Rossi's assistant Fabio Reinhart, then by his student Miroslav Šik until his farewell lecture in 2018. Over the years, the interpretation of the term analogy has constantly evolved, while in the case of Rossi, the focus (at the beginning of the design) was on the analysis of the structural characteristics of the site and the search for morphological and typological analogies; until then, Šik used atmospheric images that carried moods and told stories, so he had a sensual effect on the viewer. After the initial historical references, Analogue Architecture integrated ordinary anonymous architecture (the epic of every day) and a little "dirty realism". Hence, its new face became a fusion of classicism, modernism, context, ordinary architecture, and regionalism.

Although the didactic methodology of Analogue Architecture faced much criticism<sup>4</sup>, it is statable that the sensual visualization of the context's atmosphere, the observation of the seemingly uninteresting details of the environment and learning the method that works with analogies<sup>5</sup> had a significant impact on many prominent contemporary architects (Šik's students included Christian Kerez, Valerio Olgiati, Andrea Deplazes, Quintus Miller, Paola Maranta and Andreas Hild) (Šik and Willenegger, 2017: p.9).

### 3 Art-based analogies

The British firm Caruso St John is exciting among those contemporary architects who emphasize a critical attitude towards the impersonality of construction and whose confession is based on the late modern traditions and the alternative tendencies that span the twentieth century. In their projects, besides the precedents from the history of architecture, Adam Caruso and Peter St John also use art-based references to find architectural answers that reflect today's problems. Their work is intertwined with Fine Arts in several ways (St John, 2000). The roots of their integrative work method are related to their previous commissions from the field of Fine Arts, their interest in the Arts, and Adam Caruso's studies in art history before the architectural practice. They have collaborated with contemporary

artists on several works<sup>6</sup>. Even in their lectures, writings, and teaching activities, they use Fine Art references to convey ideas (Caruso, 2012).

Their works (Caruso St John Architects (a)) and creative creed are presented in their numerous publications (Caruso St John, 2022), high-end magazines, dedicated special issues to the architects (Márquez and Levene, 2013; Caruso St John, 2019), with several architectural theories and design methodology research (Alkér, 2019; Falvai, 2013; Nagy, 2013; Zombor, 2014) referring to their writings. Alkér (2019) described their design tools and these intellectual roots in detail. This study showcases the British tradition of architectural design and educational methodology and lists analogical and multi-layered readings, the influence of Alison and Peter Smithson's "as found" principle, and Florian Beigel's effect on the group of Whisperers.

In his interview entitled *Novelty is Nonsense*, Caruso (Louisiana Channel, 2017) talked about the art-based references applied to that architectural behaviour, which is also sensitive in a global context (Louisiana Channel, 2017). He referred to the first period of their practice when to discover the hard-to-find beauty of the cityscape and to learn about its historical, social, and cultural layers, they called upon the works of contemporary artists connected to the given place.

In his inaugural lecture – entitled *What is modern?* – at ETH, he also used an art-based reference that discusses the relationship between the modern and the postmodern (Caruso, 2012). In the speech, he stated the creative attitude of Eduard Manet as an example to be followed because the painter was able to renew his artwork at a time when artists were rebelling against academic pressure while respecting the achievements of the past. He attributed Manet's masterful feat to the combination of the innovative subject and the use of historical predecessors' tools. In the painting *Breakfast outdoors* (Fig. 1), the colour scheme and the dark-light contrast quoted Goya, and the works of Velazquez inspired the illusionistic spatial effect.

However, the choice of subject – instead of presenting heroic historical figures – depicted the new characters of the modern world: the life of dandies, courtesans, and people spending their free time – so Manet integrated the

<sup>4</sup> In 1992, Benedikt Loderer described Analogue Architecture in the past tense: "Analogue Architecture is dead." (Šik and Willenegger, 2017:p.37).

<sup>5</sup> Later, Šik consciously called them only references.

<sup>6</sup> Caruso St Jones' works created with artists: Newport Street gallery with Damien Hirst, New Art Gallery with Catherine Yass and Richard Wentworth, Gagosian Gallery with John Richardson, Pavilion at Kvadrat Headquarters with Thomas Demand, British Pavilion with Marcus Taylor, Kalmar Stortorget with Eva Löfdahl.



**Fig. 1** Eduard Manet: *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Lunch on the grass), 1863 (Wikipedia (b))

familiar themes of his own time into his art (Caruso, 2012). Caruso (2004) supports this conscious approach. He emphasized that a contemporary designer needs to find a connection to the past; it is essential to study the history of its discipline thoroughly, as this is the only way to create the principle of cultural continuity.

Art-based references also appear in Caruso's teaching method (Studio Caruso, ETH, Zürich). The cultural and critical milieu that supports work can be seen throughout the semester assignments in his studio since 2012 (ETH Zürich Studio Adam Caruso (a)).

How does the use of art-based references help architectural design in practice? In the following conversation, Adam Caruso was asked about the background and results of his method based on art references.

#### 4 Interview

In Section 4 the interview with Adam Caruso can be read.

**Anett Virág:** In many lectures and interviews, you illustrate your thinking with examples of Fine Arts. When or how did the fine arts become important to you? Why is it essential for you to elevate the co-arts into an architectural discourse?

**Adam Caruso:** Sometimes I wonder if it was a lucky chance or if it would have happened anyway. In the late seventies, I studied art history before architecture, but after three years, I got bored because of the way art history was taught. It was extremely analytical, rather a Hegelian method: we carried out a lot of formal analysis along a strict chronology. Though I really enjoyed all those things, I still had a serious sense of loss because, as a provincial university, we lacked the study of new

art history and the latest trends, and we did not touch upon the social and economic critical connections of art either. So, I switched instead. My architectural education was also quite conventional and did not have much to do with art. However, I feel very fortunate that I did not attend school during neo modernism. In the early eighties, the prevailing postmodernism was an extremely open and full of potential period, thanks to this, the history of architecture became accessible and extremely significant to me.

Peter did not study art history but was always interested in contemporary art. That was what really connected us. The launch of our practice in 1990 coincided with the flourishing of London's cultural life and the development of the visual art scene (e.g., Young British Artists). We were particularly inspired by the works of Lee Friedlander, Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark, and the artists of the Düsseldorf School of Photography (Fig. 2) (Caruso, 2022).

Analyzing contemporary art – from the late '60s to 1990 – and mastering its sensibility helped a lot in the way we looked at the city so that we could see the potential beauty of London, which was at that time an incredibly depressing place. We initially worked on smaller projects, typically renovating existing buildings. For example, at Swan Yard – with very little money – we tried to create something that almost completely preserves the previous state and creates something new and exciting with minimal intervention. In Walsall, which at the time was an extremely damaged post-industrial city, with every bit of energy and money we put into the project, we tried to make a 'magic mirror' that would help us see the beauty of the surroundings. Later, we looked at the works of nineteenth-century painters such as Manet, Cezanne, and Braque, who presented buildings and landscapes as one coherent thing in their paintings.



**Fig. 2** Düsseldorf School of Photography – Bernd and Hilla Becher, 1931 (Wikiart (a))

This new idea of the picturesque became very important to us and still forms completely the way we think about architecture (Caruso, 2022).

*AV:* In the historical ages, there was a close connection between architecture and Fine Arts, especially between architecture and painting. Is there any link (direct or even conceptual) between these two branches of art today?

*AC:* You would think sculpture and architecture are much more connected, but I experienced something different during our university trip last semester. The students and I went to see the art of Florence, and we saw that fourteenth and fifteenth-century paintings and architecture – for example, the works of Piero Della Francesca and Bramante – were much closer to each other. I think we could observe the first use of the antique in the works of the painters. For example, in his paintings, Piero often depicted a scene with the Virgin, the Child, and various saints with a kind of classical setting on the back (Fig. 3) that did not even exist in Urbino then. So, he projected a later style. It is even possible that Bramante learned classicism from him.



**Fig. 3** Piero della Francesca: La Vergine con il Bambino e santi (Sacred conversation), circa 1415–1492 (Wikipedia (c))

Regarding today, this question is quite difficult. But if we take the relationship broadly, there can still be a connection between these two branches of art. For example, the facade design of Swan Yard<sup>7</sup> was influenced by a Robert Ryman painting (Fig. 4 (a)). At that time, there was a great Ryman show at the Tate, where we opened the catalogue and immediately found the facade idea (Fig. 4 (b)) we were looking for. But basically, I study art to understand something about the world and to 'steal' things. If I can draw from art, I am very happy (Caruso, 2022).

*AV:* Can you highlight a branch of art that particularly inspires you?

*AC:* Not really. I study the works of different artists for different purposes. For example, I enjoy Pierre Huyghe's work. Although I couldn't really tell you what his work is about, it is incredibly challenging, intelligent, and provoking. But I could also mention the performance artist Andrea Fraser, whose work is about institutional criticism. There is some content connection between the ideas of these two artists. So, in teaching, I often use their works to bring ideas or problems up in the studio. Lately, we have also been using a lot of literature, but we use texts or art rather instrumentally.

This integrated approach is not about "being too intellectual". We look at artists who convey something important about today's world. They don't have all the financial, political, and institutional "heaviness" of architecture, which is why they are faster, lighter, and often smarter than architects (Caruso, 2022).

*AV:* You have worked with artists on several projects (Newport Street Gallery, New Art Gallery, Biennale Pavilion). How can we imagine such a collaboration? In which phase of the design do you involve the artists?

*AC:* For me, the cooperation that starts right from the beginning is the most interesting. Although artists can have tasks of various scales in the project, we always try to avoid using them as a kind of 1% at the end of the design. Even if the intervention is not huge, it is worth involving them as soon as possible because you can benefit a lot from the discussions. Currently, we work a lot with Thomas Demand.

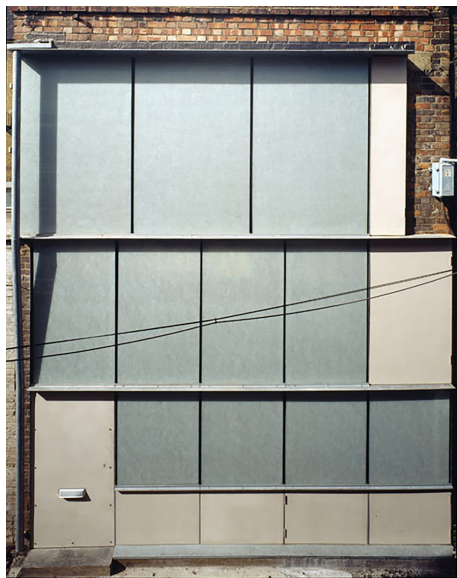
We first worked with him in 2000 on his exhibition at the Fondation Cartier in Paris, and then on various other of his exhibitions. We are now finishing a pavilion building for the textile company Kvadrat in Ebeltoft (Fig. 5).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Studio House, North London (Caruso St John Architects (b))

<sup>8</sup> The Triple Folly (Caruso St John Architects (c))

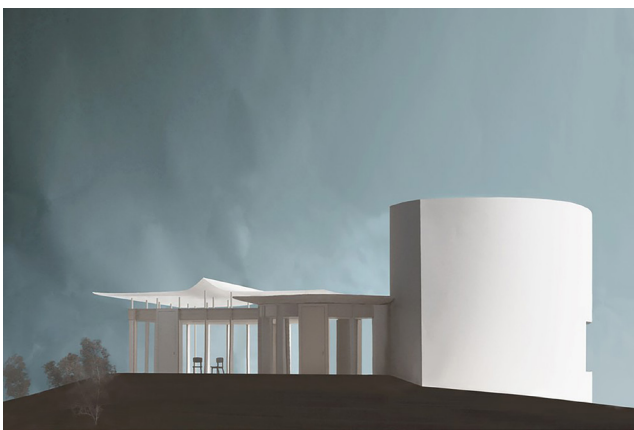


(a)



(b)

**Fig. 4** (a) Robert Ryman: Surface Veil, 1970 (Wikiart (b)); (b) Caruso St John– Studio house - Swan yard, London, 1993–1994 (Caruso St John Architects (b))



**Fig. 5** Caruso St John: The Triple Folly pavilion in collaboration with Thomas Demand, Ebeltoft, Denmark 2017–2022 (Caruso St John Architects (c))

During the competition and design work for the square in front of the Kalmar Cathedral<sup>9</sup> in the south of Sweden, we worked with an artist we did not even know before. A friend got in touch with Eva Löfdahl, who worked for us as a cultural interpreter and a kind of agent during the entire project. She could handle the very different social and political environment, but she could behave like a real artist, who completely subverted the situation. In the end, it was a great collaboration and a brilliant project (Caruso, 2022).

**AV:** How do you work together: with common discussions or sketches?

**AC:** For me, collaboration is mainly about discussions. We try to talk about the given topic as thoroughly as possible. Of course, sometimes we misunderstand each other, but it can lead to even more interesting things. We send each other photos, references, or even drawings. But sketching is not always lucky, as it can get you stuck in formal issues ... and maybe it's not the most important thing to fall in love with. Other approaches could be more significant or last a bit longer (Caruso, 2022).

**AV:** Can you highlight a good or memorable collaboration?

**AC:** All the projects with Thomas Demand were good, as he is also extremely organized and efficient. In 2015, we also built a house for him. He is more like a friend now with whom we work permanently. However, there are also cases when collaboration is only about helping the artist design the exhibition. We believed for a long time that the best way to do this was to create homogeneous spaces of different sizes in the galleries. However, a few years ago at the Gagosian, we made the Picasso works on paper exhibition with John Richardson. Since he is the most important biographer of the artist and has already curated five Picasso exhibitions, we could not avoid him; it was essential that he was satisfied with the result. He had a particular vision about the show: he wanted to create a vulgar setting that was both "dirty" like an arena ("you could smell the piss on the walls") and highly theatrical. To accomplish this, we broke so many rules that we would normally have held to or previously thought would only result in chaos. We created a complex and dramatic setting, which ultimately gave a great overall picture. After this experience, we became a bit looser to exhibition spaces. We can learn a lot from these initially surprising situations, so we are deliberately looking for cooperation like this.

<sup>9</sup> Kalmar Stortorget (Caruso St John Architects (d))

However, collaborating with artists and using art-based references are two different things. Although working with an artist can give you another view of contemporary art practice, understanding and using references is a much deeper and more essential process (Caruso, 2022).

*AV:* In your studio at ETH, you gave art-based descriptions (2017 Describing Beauty, – 015 Seminar week – Claude Monet) several times. What was the purpose of these semester works? What role did Fine Arts play in the design process?

*AC:* We use much broader art-based references, not just in a particular semester. In fact, it permeates our entire teaching method. However, in the last 3–4 years, the circumstances affecting architecture have significantly changed: the environmental crisis, the consequences of the pandemic, sensitivity to social inequalities, etc. As a result, I am trying to determine what role architects should have in these new social conditions. Finding the proper position is challenging, but it does not necessarily mean the death of architecture; rather, it means that architecture must change radically. In the traditional canon, you cannot find many answers to the mentioned questions, but we must realize that the artists are already ahead of us. Their works can quickly, easily, and currently reflect on today's questions. We often invite guests into the studio from outside the architectural profession to discuss these topics. Recently, the director of an activist theatre in Zurich visited our courses several times, which was very novel and inspiring. Overall, it is worth studying all branches of contemporary art for freshness and actuality.

Describing Beauty<sup>10</sup> was a tough semester. Together with Maarten Delbeke – who joined ETH at that time as a professor of architectural history and theory – we selected twelve objects from museums (Fig. 6) in Zurich and Basel. The students had to conduct thorough research on the artefacts, and then, based on that work, they had to prepare the projects. The difficulty was that among the selected elements were artefacts which related to landscapes and cultures that were unknown to us. This fact almost led to us bleeding out. Another similar example was the Hidden Interior semester, in which we gave each group an interior drawing (from the works of Eileen Grey, Percier Fontaine, Corbusier, and Eisenman); after an extended analysis, the students had to prepare the projects.

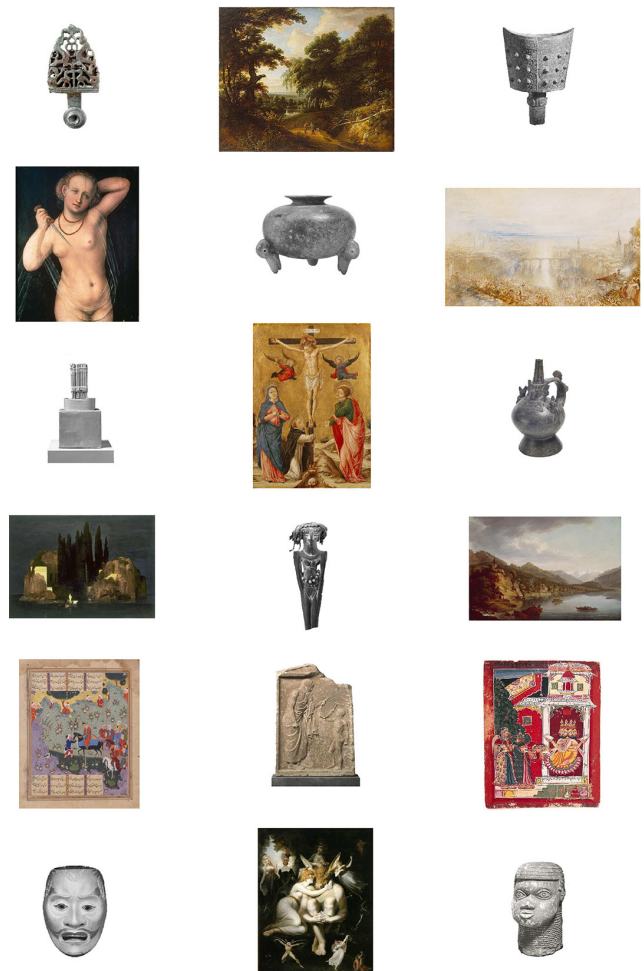


Fig. 6 Studio Caruso: The artefacts of the Describing Beauty semester, Zürich, 2017 (Caruso, 2017)

Nowadays, we use the work of eight different artists, such as Sophie Calle, Taryn Simon, etc., as a reference for the design by analyzing their methodology and conceptual thinking. For me, success is when students understand the sensibility, the intellectual content, or the methodology of the artists. I think this method – even if the connection between the reference and the project is sometimes didactic – results in extremely fruitful works. The way we used the references, and the teaching method was the same for all semesters: we used a specific starting point to develop an intellectual and critical structure, and then, after mapping the site and compiling the program, we created the project. But I'm not too fond of formulas; it is important that the process should not become mechanical. On the other hand, art has no magic; I don't want to mystify its role or consider it exclusive. The use of art-based references helps to create an emotional or intellectual connection to the project and to find the relevance of the architectural response (Caruso, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> ETH Zürich Studio Adam Caruso (b)

**AV:** I was faced with a special connection between art and architecture during the rehabilitation of the buildings of István Szőnyi Open School of Fine Arts in Zebegény. This is my master work related to my doctoral research. Thanks to this project, I got acquainted with the work of the painter István Szőnyi and the Plein air painting method he represented. The question arose during the design process: is it possible to express the artistic intention of Plein air painting in the language of architecture? What do you think of the term Plein air architecture?

**AC:** Compared to architecture, visual arts have much more freedom. Remember that artists usually exhibit their works in the galleries only for a few months, and they are not expected to appeal to everyone, even in this short time. The task of architecture is much more complex and has more significant environmental and collective responsibilities. Especially when you are doing a building in the city; this is even more public, and besides the client and users, passers-by walking on the street willingly or not become affected.

Art at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including Plein air, appealed to a much broader audience than in earlier eras. It was no longer just the privilege of the aristocracy but also reflected the desires of a wider strata of society. The theme of the Plein air paintings was the love of leisure and everyday scenes. As a result, I would interpret Plein air architecture as a critical method by which we can delve into much deeper layers, in addition to exploring the context and history of the given project and questions of design. Expanding the range of associations and terms related to Plein air painting, it is visible that "engager" or "committed architecture" would be a possible analogy to Plein air architecture (Caruso, 2022).

## 5 Conclusion

Art-based references do not target an exaggerated intellectual environment but rather help delve into the issues of a particular era and can build a cultural and critical framework for a design project. This is how Katalin S. Nagy (2007) explains the information-condensing role of art in her art sociology writing:

*"The artist and the group of connoisseurs – during their regular contact – exchange their opinions, ideas, and emotions in continuous and multifaceted communication.*

*The artist translates and conveys his ideas that are formulated in him during this verbal and non-verbal communication into a visual language. In this way, the social group to which the artist belongs is included in his work"* (S. Nagy, 2007:p.56)

An artist and his works are closely related to the society surrounding him; their relationship can be defined as a delicate social network (S. Nagy, 2007). Studying the work of different artists – whether contemporary or historical – learning their artistic attitude, sensibility, and conceptual way of thinking can not only influence the attitude towards architectural design, but it can also be a great source of learning about the context.

By examining the works of artists belonging to a particular area, we can gain much additional information: the relationship to the context can be deepened, and we can gain insight into social factors, the openness of the audience, and social behaviour patterns. So, we can uncover hidden layers that would not appear at first sight or only become visible with long empirical observations. Among the new directions used to overcome the impersonality of architecture, art-based references provide only one kind of possibility. Their use does not have to be treated as an exclusive method but as a means of helping emotional and intellectual connection, guaranteeing freshness and topicality.

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