

Gillo Dorfles, *Arnaldo Pomodoro e lo spazio architettonico* in ‘Arnaldo Pomodoro. Catalogo ragionato della scultura’, edited by Flaminio Gualdoni, with texts by Giovanni Carandente, Gillo Dorfles, Sam Hunter, Arturo Carlo Quintavalle, Skira editore, Milan, 2007, pp. 16-24

... The first observation, which seems obvious to me, is that a sculpture destined to be inserted into an urban context or a rural landscape must never be chosen *a posteriori*, but should be designed at the beginning by the artist for the location concerned. Only in this way can the artist adapt the characteristics of his style to suit the chosen place; thus these characteristics will succeed in “dominating” the environment, or, at other times, they will, in a certain sense, be motivated by it. These days there are not many artists who are truly capable of making use of their creations as “modulators” of space, and also as elements of “semantization” of a given territory. And I believe that Arnaldo Pomodoro is truly one of the few who, from his very first works, has been aware of this urgency: to impose his seal on the environment and at the same time to modify its appearance according to the – architectural – “function” that it must fulfil. His construction of sculptures for outdoors: for squares, gardens, large public or private spaces, has been abundant – from the *Colonna a grandi fogli* (Column of Large Plates) for Mondadori in Segrate, from 1972, to the *Obelisco “Cassadoro”* (“Cassadoro” Obelisk) for Lampedusa, 1988, from the *Colpo d’ala: omaggio a Boccioni* (Wingbeat – Homage to Boccioni) for Los Angeles, 1984 to the *Grande disco (Large Disk)* in Piazza Meda in Milan in 1972, etc. - and I believe we can already affirm that some of these installations “mark an epoch”, that they have given a new face to the environments that welcome them.

Yet we know that his activity had very different beginnings. We must not forget his early works of goldsmithery: the extraordinary characteristic of “negativization” of space in the jewel that enabled the artist “to penetrate” deeply into the personality of the person wearing it.

It is precisely from that minute and skilful goldsmithery work that the subsequent season of his sculpture was launched, to be translated into what can be considered the “privileged form” now adopted in the large, even colossal shapes that the whole world knows and admires. It is therefore precisely from the fragmenting into minimal details, into tangles and intimate fissures, into the protuberances of single signs, that the secret formula capable of also being adapted to fit the huge surfaces, such as those of the *Papyrus per Darmstadt* (Papyrus for Darmstadt), or as that of the *Sfera con sfera* (Sphere within a Sphere) in the Vatican, drew its inspiration; this ensured that the monumental statues had the same “cells” – I would dare say “futtocks” – to enable them to conserve the vitality and “creative breath” of their inventor.

After all, only a particular sensitivity for the urban or rural environment (*The Pietrarubbia Group*, for instance) enabled Arnaldo to conceive (and unfortunately, as we will see, not always to realise) some of his structures that, in reality, rather than normal sculptures, are “architecturalisations” of a natural environment or an urban fabric. This is a fact of extreme importance and subtlety, in which, unfortunately, most architects and even sculptors today are usually barely interested. Finding the right way of adding to an urban environment that is already crammed with buildings or an extra-urban environment, where nature is still partly dominant, is a concern of no little importance. We have two symptomatic examples of this: that of the project (unfortunately not realised) for

the new cemetery in Urbino, which would not have been just a plastic event in its own right, but a genuine metamorphosis of the terrain; and that in Marsala, where, fortunately, the realisation has created a structure that is both a work of art concluded in itself and an architectural element dominating the rural landscape.

At this point I am prompted to think of those ancient architectural/landscaped installations where nature had guided the hand of man; such as the *trulli* of Alberobello, the curious tufa conformations in Urgup in Cappadocia, certain graceful *hórreos* (granaries in the form of temples) in Galicia, or even the *Sassi* of Matera ... On all these occasions man has managed to enliven the environment without destroying it, creating “architectures” instead of caves or stones; he has shown the possibility of transforming orographic, geographical pre-existences into elements midway between sculpture, architecture and nature. This is precisely what happens – rarely, unfortunately – when a new plastic creation is inserted “organically” where a natural premise already exists that must be respected and, if anything, reinforced.

Pomodoro has, in fact, mostly succeeded in reconciling the environmental premise with the form of his works, even of those more complex and difficult to install. This is the case in the *Arco-in-cielo* (Arc-en-ciel) in the park of the island of Ischia; this is the case in the imposing Rocca di San Leo, at the foot of which are the bronze disks, this is the case in the *Grande disco* in Piazza Meda, where the disk represents a perfect counterpoint to the BBPR building overlooking the square.

Seeking now to analyse more closely the opportunities and also the obstacles that have accompanied Arnaldo’s most significant works in their definitive installation, it seems to me to be appropriate to refer to certain questions that always emerge from those who consider his work.

That is why, among the first elements that I would like to emphasise, I would cite something that has given some commentators, and also the lay public, much cause for reflection: what was (and is) the motivation for the constant use of those modules – to which I have already alluded – that make the surfaces of his works rough and hollowed: “Those signs”, as Armando Ginesi affirms, “which constitute an original alphabet, even if borrowed from suggestions coming from archaic writings, with particular reference to Mesopotamian cuneiform, interwoven with the minute details of Amerindian ones (Incas, Maya, Aztecs)”.

While, as Arnaldo himself maintains: “the impressions that I bore, irregular or densely packed... the wedges, the wires, the rips... recall the ancient civilizations”.

But it is precisely the presence of these modular elements (derived, as I said, from his very early goldsmithery works with lost wax casting) that gives all his work that homogeneous and immediately recognisable character. This can be easily appreciated in his “bronze carpets”: the huge sculpture, *Papyrus per Darmstadt*, made of cement, bronze and Corten, composed of three large elements, for the Darmstadt post office, which crosses the square in Darmstadt almost like a huge moving carpet, where: “rythmisch variierte Innenstrukturen drängen hervor und erzeugen den Eindruck einer dramatischen Aktion” (“rhythmically varied impressions and structures emerge, prompting the sensation of a dramatic action taking place” – K. Wolbert, *Arnaldo Pomodoro. Papyrus*, in *Bilder und Skulpturen. Kunst für ein neues Haus*, Deutsche Bundespost, Darmstadt 1993). It can also be appreciated in the huge Roman *Novecento* (2000-2002), the grandiloquence of which thus becomes more “domestic” and human precisely

because of their presence; and this can be ascertained in the *Sfera con sfera* outside the United Nations headquarters and in the *Grande disco* in Piazza Meda or in the *Cercatore Oscillante* (Rotating Drill) from 1987-1990.

This, I believe, is one of the things that have enabled Arnaldo to move on from the refined but “personalised” jewel to the almost architectural construction of some of his larger works. Take, for example, (Earthly Solar Motion) also called “The Symposium of Minoa” (1989 – 1994): in this case we are faced with a sculpture-wall, a high relief made of cement, with an evolving plastic form that, in this case, is clearly differentiated from those previously cited by the materials used: the cement skeleton with various metal grids, “cast” onto which, again in cement, was the definitive form, where, as Aldo Colonetti comments acutely, “the movement of the work that seems to emerge from the water that wraps around its extremes is the result of this extraordinary complementarity between formal invention and structural solution”.

In this case too, the work is essentially architectural; that is, based on and originating from precise spatial “functionalities”, such as imposing their necessary nature upon the plastic element. First and foremost, Arnaldo is a “spatial operator”, as a sculptor should always be (yet they often restrict themselves to “filling” the space with sterile abstraction or obsolete figurations), and as the architect should be all the more when not subject solely to construction-related motivations and orders; when he can afford to realise a structure that is able to obtain an authentic inhabitable and plastic disposition of masses from the encounter between internal and external spatiality.

In reality Pomodoro has long perceived this architectural urgency; already in his youthful works, such as the *Colonna a grandi fogli* for Mondadori in Segrate that, being mirrored in the artificial lake surrounding the Mondadori building by Oscar Niemeyer, adds very effectively to the (not entirely convincing, even if historically important) construction by the great Brazilian architect.

Another of his most significant projects (unfortunately it was not realised) had a wholly different charm: the *Project for the New Cemetery in Urbino*. In short, it is about the positive rendering of a “spatial negativization”, as Arnaldo has long used through the age-old lost wax technique used for his jewels, where every hollow becomes the mould of the positive form.

The *Project for the New Cemetery in Urbino* (also taken up in the project *The Site of Silence* for the large Memorial Garden in Grand Rapids, 1999) remains a unique example of the genre, fascinating precisely on account of the mystical and also “metaphysically functional” atmosphere of its structures. The burrows, ditches and trenches that traverse it – almost extraterrestrial abodes for the deceased – are among the works in which Pomodoro has best been able to achieve the encounter between his sculpture and the surrounding landscape and territory. Not only this, but they are an example of this capacity to interpret “sacred” motifs, as he has in fact demonstrated in the case of the *Cross and Altar for Padre Pio* for the large sanctuary of Padre Pio, built by Renzo Piano, and on another occasion that is still *sub judice*: that of the *Porta dei Re* (1997-98) for the cathedral in Cefalù, where a huge gilded sphere is held back by the sides of a solid bronze door that opens towards the inside of the cathedral, here too creating an inversion of the spatiality full of charm.

In the *Project for the New Cemetery in Urbino*, the *Memorial Garden* and *The Pietrarubbia Group* are the works where Arnaldo has most directly involved a

non-urbanised territory, the one, on the other hand, that constitutes the most solemn example to date is the large spiral *Novecento* for Rome (2000 – 2002).

Destined for a location from where it can be contemplated in its entirety, this gigantic work (21 metres high by 7 for the base) is presented first of all as an architectural element, given its dimensions and given the presence of an “internal” spatiality for the spiral (which can be walked on, albeit only for technical reasons, but the presence of which can be noticed also from the outside).

There are very few cases of a “sculpture” in our time that imposes itself as a decisive factor for the structuring of an autonomous spatiality. I could perhaps revisit some works by Chillida on the rocks of San Sebastian; or Kiesler’s *Galaxy* for Philip Johnson’s house in new Canaan...

But in those cases too the sculptures “rested”, either on the rock formations or on the pre-existing building nearby.

In the case of the *Novecento* (as in that of the *Sfera con Sfera* in the Vatican and in that for the United Nations in New York) we have the example of a work in its own right, as an Egyptian pyramid or a Mexican or Persian Ziggurat might be; both sculptural and architectural works therefore, and as such capable of handling by themselves the task of becoming elements “semantizing” a surrounding area: the latter is a fundamental function, too often ignored by our urban planners or only devolved to the often unnecessary presence of a skyscraper.

In the case of the large spiral, we find ourselves – a very rare fact today – faced with a construction that could be placed on the same plane as other monuments, such as that of the Caius Cestius pyramid in Rome.

Naturally, there is no analogy between the two works, unless from a dimensional standpoint. But it seems to me to be a truly good omen to think that Pomodoro’s spiral may already at the start have that “duration over time” that the Roman pyramid has had; and to reflect on the fact that its characteristic shape might arouse wonder (enthusiasm or perhaps – in a millennium- sacred terror?) in our distant descendants. They will seek in vain to identify from what “alphabet” the tiles, arrows, *aculei* – hollowed out or protruding- that enrich its golden surface are composed.