Quality, Complexity, Sustainability: a contemporary "trilemma"

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ABSTRACT

At a time of looming global economic and financial crisis, even of threatened default of sovereign funds, we assiduously watch with interest at any theory that try to prove us right by the present events and to suggest some plausible directions for the future.

Sometimes these theories appear - just paraphrased - to provide unexpectedly the keys to our job as designers. A job that in the opinion of many seems today to be unable to meet the challenges posed by issues such as quality, complexity control, sustainability of architecture and of town reality. This, in a truly "glocal" perspective, played between local identity and global opportunities for design.

This way, economy ends to form a metaphorical significance for the project activities, activities which, moreover, as we all know, have always been, if not conditioned, at least strongly interrelated with economic issues.

Dani Rodrik is an Harvard economist, careful analyst of present and author of “The Paradox globalization”, a text translated into several languages in which he has recently highlighted a new version of the almost classical economic theory of the trilemma, a dilemma between three factors in which the third is always excluded in a choice of two. This updated version of the trilemma opposes democracy, national self-determination and economic globalization in the contemporary reality.

Briefly, Rodrik argues that it is impossible, but perhaps even undesirable, anywhere and at the same time promoting the advancement of democratic institutions, of national identities and of the global opening of the markets. If we want globalization we have to waive or nation-state or political democracy, if we want democracy we have to choose between the nation-state and international economic integration, if we want to preserve self-determination of the nation-state we have to choose between strengthening democracy or globalization.

There is no doubt that this is a hardly realistic point of view. But unfortunately the essay is very well supported and after all it is better to be realistic that deluded.

Let us replace, in Rodrik’s paradox the terms democracy, self-determination of peoples and globalization, with other three current terms, popular and seemingly indispensable in the
context of architectural design: quality, complexity and sustainability of the building. I think we are again in front of a trilemma.

The quality of architecture, whether of performance and formal choices, is without any doubt, and it is good that it remains so, a local factor. We cannot define in global terms a concept so deeply rooted in the local culture. From the standpoint of the forms, attempts to generalize have been many, in the course of recent history: or rather, any movement, avant-garde or trend, has tended to put his qualities as universal in its nascent stage, only to be later engulfed by the context and led to produce perhaps his most interesting results in a contaminated mode. The programmatically universal icons of rationalism have not broken through the boundaries of the Western industrialized word in the first half of last century and in what has exceeded those geographical and temporal limits, we appreciate the authenticity of Chandigarh or of Brasilia rather than the frigid International style of U.S. corporations.

This applies even more for quality performance: what is first recognized as a global value is later constantly stressed by the contest with the places and with the customs of places. The quality of performance is democratic in itself: first for the right to be paid to the minority of dissatisfied that the performance leaves in different percentages, by unanimous admission of all evaluators, always behind. But mainly because what is accepted as positive, new and progressive is always called to deal with the time. Any position, brilliant of the general consensus of a generation, pays the subsequent advent of new positions.

In urban and architectural terms this happened to the concept of verticality. Once universal indicator of quality for any general issue related to a profitable use of land, has subsequently shown the ropes in every situation in which local culture strenuously defended, or claims today back as a fundamental right, the individual direct relationship with the natural soil.

The complexity instead is a global figure, not so much because the design procedures have reached anywhere comparable operative levels of sophistication, but mainly because everywhere, pushed by the globalized economy, the diagram of the relations between factors having role in the project and complexity of their management evolved from a pure linear to an asymptotic, tending to infinity, figure that only carefully planned procedures are able to control.

The project of a building in a developing country depends at the same time on the financing trends of the International Monetary Fund, on the technical skills of contractors and subcontractors to be chosen on the global stage, on the availability and quality of local industry components, on the balance between local professional attitudes and working organization of global design offices thousands miles apart. It is impossible to avoid that the design procedures cannot any longer evolve linearly, according to a process of successive addition of subjects to involve and operations to be performed on a temporal branch having an origin and a verse. It is inevitable to produce a graph manageable only in terms of a complex mathematic. Directly: the management that rules a design process whose responsibilities are distributed on a global scale according to opportunities and advantages, implies a quality expressed by the possibility of finding the best on the wider available horizon. The project concept from an international competition, the realization project by legions of wide world operating advisors, the project financing from multinational banking institutions, the building by contractors and subcontractors of different origins.

But is this globalized complex quality still what we called locally as the quality of architecture? And above all is this complex quality always and everywhere liable in terms of what we mean in terms of universal quality with the word sustainability?
Sustainability is a value that should be pursued at the global scale, but based on actions taken at the local level, with special attention to the framework of resources as configured in the project site.

In Reykjavik, a few years ago, the competition for the transformation into new town district of the city airport clearly stated that, despite of the inclement climate of Iceland and of the severe problems of social isolation arising from, the island was equipped with almost unlimited renewable energy from geothermal sources. In this way the competition letter moved the designers to an idea of sustainability as architecture centered on the site in the broadest sense of its logic: oriented to the social needs of the population even before the energy balance of the building. The competition was launched on a global scale and was the universal world of design to answer the call. The same world that produced the meantime the global air-conditioned nightmare – a non-renewable as the oil resources nightmare - the Dubai model. The realization of the project, assigned by the competition to the multinational design office of Owe Arup, flanked by a constellation of other international design firms, could had been perhaps illuminating for the topic we are arguing, if the financial crisis of 2008 had not frustrated any hopes of developing Iceland, pushing back the island to its historic role of lost territory in the Arctic Ocean and the competition to no more than a generous review of ideas.

We have therefore defined the architectural quality as a value that unfolds its best in local contexts. Contexts in which it is convenient to report also the regulatory frameworks, the directions and local operating procedures. Complexity in architecture is given instead as the implicit result of global management of the project: a necessity, since the market has located work and projects according to a geography that crosses continents and since the information revolution has minimized, if not eliminate, the thousands of miles and time zones. We concluded that quality produced by complexity managed at a global scale, is consequently of a different order and type.

With sustainability breaking now into the scene as general quality parameter, we have the substance of the trilemma of contemporary architecture clearly displayed in front of us.

If we pursue architectural quality as a local value, we grasp the meaning of sustainability but we miss the opportunity of managing the complexity of the global context; if we care of complexity and of its control by design, we could produce sustainable projects but we must give up the local roots of architectural quality; if we place the center of our design on sustainability we must choose between pursuing global or local quality of the project.

As with any dilemma or trilemma that it is, the solution lies in coming off the fence. Dani Rodrik, as economist, concludes having no doubt: between democracy, self determination and globalization he favors the first two. He takes sides with an intelligent globalization, able to keep this into account. We can do the same advocating a management of design complexity able to keep in mind the reasons of globalization but choosing for local quality and sustainability of architecture as indispensable values.