Simina Anamaria Lörincz

Architectonics of Poiēsis

Architectural Creation Reconsidered

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Foreword

On October 2016, I was invited to Bucharest to preside the Critical Discourses essay competition as part of the East Centric Architecture Triennale. Among many interesting contributions, I particularly noticed a promising essay skillfully describing innovative design to recover the possibility of a poetic praxis, an intervention with which I instantly resonated. Questions and discussions followed, conveying a passionate desire to recover a meditative and ethical ground for the contemporary architectural practice. This is how I met Dr. Lörincz, back then a young, ambitious and open-minded PhD candidate eager to rediscover the poetic nature of making architecture.

After nearly a decade, I am pleased to witness the results of that inceptive passion for the poetics of architecture all the more so in a context claiming the primacy of geometric complexity, formal or technical innovation as the true generators of significant designs, thus ignoring the pre-given meanings of materials, life situations and qualitative places to which architecture must respond.

Simina Lörincz's *Architectonics of poiēsis*, which grew out of her doctoral thesis (Purcaru 2018a),[1] attempts to approximate the nature and possibilities of a genuine, poetic and ethical architectural creation through a critical and historical perspective, acknowledging contemporary cultural limitations by contrast to premodern contexts, where the richness of culture was a primary condition and the architect revealed a set of common *places*, a priori recognized as meaningful, that enabled harmonious life and psychosomatic health.

This remarkably ambitious book discusses a central problem for the discipline of architecture—the meaning of creation itself and the possibilities for its contemporary implementation. The topic is approached in an unconventional and highly original fashion, organizing its argument in several sections covering major contemporary positions from within architectural theory, developing the issues through a philosophical lens that opens up the historical terms associated with creation and making, following up with a discussion of the architect as *poeta/faber* through a comparison

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[1] Partly published in two volumes: Purcaru 2019 and Lörincz 2021a.

between Filarete and Christopher Alexander, focusing on the material and symbolic character of the act of creation, involving challenging and unexpected interpretations of semiotic concepts, and concluding with a reflection on didactic *poiēsis*, examining potential applications of concepts elucidated in the book, in the important examples of Chile's *Ciudad Abierta* associated with the School of Architecture in Valparaiso, and the Romanian School of Bunești.

While discussing the creative process in a dialogue between the pre-modern context and the contemporary one, the book provides insightful philological accounts of key terms and concepts, carefully unpacking the nature of the architect as *poeta/faber*: The *poeta* is a craftsman of words, the very substance of Being and the ideal, his material is poetic *and* phronetic language, while *faber* refers to the original meaning of *poiēsis*—to make, trusting the nonrepresentational wisdom of the body (as explained by phenomenology and recent enactive cognitive science) and its attunement to materiality through habits and skills. *Poiēsis* and *praxis*, the beautiful "made" (*téchne*—art) and the just "said" (political action), are brought together through language, the practical philosophy of Aristotle, which, unlike the scientific *epistēme*, is rather driven by prudence, a rhetorical skill. *Phrōnesis*, another term brought into discussion by the author is crucial to account for poetic and ethical creativity. It concerns the discursive realm of practical philosophy, one whose "truths" are, again, not equal to *epistēme*, for they do not have the precision of *theoria* and mathematics, but are crucial "in order to account for actions beyond the merely empirical". *Phrōnesis* is crucial in that it is the origin of current possibilities for architectural discourse as hermeneutics, rather than the more common "applied science".

Guided by these classical terms and concepts, the study discusses the relation between creation and creator, engaging two considerably different contexts, the premodern and the contemporary one. For Filarete—as the protagonist chosen by the author to represent the premodern context—the work of architecture truly "gains" in the translations between idea and realization, craft knowledge adds an unfathomable dimension that manifests as emotional, cognitive and even erotic meaning in the finished building; the indeterminate "spaces of translation" between ideas, drawings and buildings are celebrated rather than deplored (unlike today with instrumental fabrication where a one-to-one relationship between architectural digital models and building is expected). For Filarete, the operating analogy is that of a seed becoming a tree, on the model of an alchemical transmutation and not a mechanical transposition. The author demonstrates how Filarete was himself an accomplished craftsman, his skills qualified his perceptions and understanding "from the bottom-up": enactive cognitive science today understands this paradoxical phenomenon better. In addition, Filarete, like an alchemist, was alert to the poetic disclosures of such making, in the tradition of Classical *poiēsis*, an unveiling of something that is *assumed to be already there*. This is cogent with Heidegger's understanding of traditional *techné-poiēsis*, as opposed to technology.

This approach, crucial for Filarete and much premodern theory, is often left out of the contemporary discursive mainstream, differing from a top-down act of creation assumed in modernity, or from an interest in the crafts and trades of building

for the purpose of understanding intellectually the processes and incorporating them into a design equation. However, the author manages to unveil the possibilities of meaningful poetic creation in the current context, by bringing a new perspective on the contributions of Christopher Alexander—chosen as the protagonist to represent the contemporary context. Notorious for his controversial systemic, "algorithmic", analytical approach to design, and for his "functionalist" (reductive) paradigm, Alexander's late concerns and aspirations explicitly attempted to assume for theory not only the character of *epistēme* (mathematical languages), but also that of true *phrōnesis* (natural, every-day, polysemic languages). While critics may still question the practical results of his endeavour, his conceptual intentionality is revealing. The premodern understanding of architectural discourse ("theory") is at odds with any expectation to reduce such understanding to informational variables in a mathematical model, thriving in the complementarity, yet specificity and difference between *théoria* and *poiēsis*, bridged by *phrōnesis*. In the wake of the failures of his earlier design methods, Alexander insightfully understood the problems associated with events and processes of the technological society, architecture being no longer "context-sensitive". As Dr. Lörincz points out, in his late writings Alexander stressed the importance of a hands-on education and regretted the fact that in the twentieth century, despite unquestionable technical gains, our cities have generally become less successful from the point of view of our mental and social well-being.

Most importantly, the different lines of argument in this book, drawing from the contemporary positions of architects, critics and theoreticians like Pallasmaa, Steiner, Zumthor, Vesely and myself, the creative juxtapositions between Filarete and Alexander, and the philosophical and philological investigations, come together in a remarkable synthesis, showing how a renewed understanding of creativity has an impact through applications in contemporary educational contexts.

In summary, *Architectonics of poiēsis* offers a timely contribution to our understanding of ethical architectural creation, one emerging from a material and phronetic imagination, attempting to restore the value of *poiēsis* in the present context by bringing forward pertinent issues not commonly addressed in current theoretical discourses. As the author aspires, *poeta faber*, the gentle, perceptive creator that understands the profound meaning of his/her creative act, has the power to inspire the contemporary designer to overcome some of the difficulties and cultural limitations of our time.

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August 2023

Preface

The publication of a reference study in the early 1980s marks the point at which the current meaning of the architectural act starts to be questioned. That seminal study is Alberto Pérez-Gómez's *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (1983). The recipient of the Alice Davis Hitchcock Award, the book sensitively formulates the terms of a problematic situation identified at the symbolic level of architectural production. Influenced by Husserlian phenomenology, Pérez-Gómez notes the inability of the contemporary context to reconcile the two fundamental dimensions underlying the logic of any system: the formal or syntactic dimension, which corresponds to the relationships established among the constituent elements, and the transcendental or semantic dimension, which relates to the reference made by each element to the "world of life" (or "Lebenswelt"). At the architectural level, this crisis manifests as an exclusive orientation toward the rationality of architecture as supported by its functional, technical, or economic character, thereby marginalizing its symbolic dimension as disclosed by the poetic, ethical, or transcendental character of architecture (Pérez-Gómez 1983: 4–8).

In this context, a particular professional niche emerges and continues to develop, which aims to respond critically to the identified problematic issue. In so doing, it seeks to return the symbolic dimension of the architectural system to the contemporary discourse and practice in its various forms: from the psycho-somatic perception of architecture and its ethical concern for people (collaborators or users) and the environment (natural or anthropic) to its attempt to articulate the higher levels of reality (metaphorical, ritualistic, or spiritual). Thus, in the situation Pérez-Gómez identifies, and in the spirit of the prevailing attitude within the referenced professional niche, the present research seeks to draw into the ongoing discussion those "lost" or marginalized dimensions of architecture, with the aim being to recover and test them in the contemporary context. Born of the personal conviction gained, on the one hand, through direct architectural exercise and, on the other hand, from sensing the impact of the semantic and symbolic obliteration that feeds the current professional crisis, this book deals with the way in which architecture is defined over time as a creative act that is both material and symbolic.

The materialization of this topic lies within the scope of a classical concept—namely, *poíēsis* or the act of creation understood in both an abstract and concrete way, whose meanings are explored in the architectural key. This is accomplished by observing their projections in the context of the above-mentioned contemporary concerns and identifying their essence in the architectural ideas and practices of two professionals from two different periods who nevertheless exhibit the same profound understanding of architecture as a creative act, both materially and symbolically: Antonio Averlino "Filarete" and Christopher Alexander. The former, a Quattrocento architect, sculptor, and theorist, applies a novel approach that juxtaposes the medieval understanding of architecture as a mechanical art with the Renaissance recognition of it as a liberal art. Best known for his treatise *Libro architettonico*, Filarete exhibits a firm grounding in the practical aspects of his profession, being well versed in the technical, economic, and administrative aspects of building, while also possessing a profound understanding of the symbolism involved in the creative act, which pertains to ideas such as goodness, beauty, and divinity. The latter, a renowned contemporary architect and theorist, impresses through the striking evolution of his approach, which transitions from a scientific mode of exploration of architectural creation (*A Pattern Language*) to a holistic understanding of the creative act, with its ethical, symbolic, and spiritual implications always searching for balance between the top-down and bottom-up approaches (*The Nature of Order*, *The Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth*).

The choice of these two professionals as the protagonists of this book is by no means accidental: their shared concern for the materiality of the creative act, along with their deep understanding of its meaning, suggest them to illustrate through their practice and conception the concept of architectural *poíēsis*. Over time, both their approaches and works demonstrate a truly poetic relationship with architectural creation, emphasizing not only the expressive, ideal, or emotional character to which poetics is often limited but also its concrete, material, or tangible aspects, thereby recalling architecture's grounding in *technē*/practical skill and its connection with *phronēsis*/practical wisdom and *praxis*/action guided by virtue. In this sense, the "architectonics of *poíēsis*" need to be understood as constituting a dynamic of the architectural creative process that oscillates between the material and symbolic, aiming to discover its lost or obliterated meanings in order to eventually locate their place in the contemporary context of the profession. It is precisely for this reason that the present research does not address the themes that concern the contemporary production of architecture (technical innovation, management, sustainability, etc.); rather, it seeks those dimensions that are often overlooked in the current context. The marginal approach proposed in this study must therefore be understood not as an alternative to the mainstream but as an instrument that complements it.

The attempt to define architecture as a material and symbolic creative act through identifying its "marginal" or marginalized dimensions can be regarded as a critical reconsideration of architectural creation inspired by the past and interpreted in such a way as to meet current requirements and needs. Situated at the crossroads of architectural history, theory, and criticism, this research seeks an integrated way of

engaging these three dimensions, (re)discovering a (new) humanistic approach to architecture in and for the contemporary context, and using it to better understand architectural creation.

In an attempt to further elucidate this threefold "organic" engagement of history, theory, and criticism, we propose the Borgesian metaphor in *Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote* (Borges 1984 [1974]). This text, which exists in the form of a critical literary work, presents the figure of a fictional French writer from the twentieth century and his attempt to (re)create Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quijote* on a word-for-word basis. Reading this theoretical work of fiction in an architectural key draws attention to a significant aspect: the creator's reference to the past is eminently critical. Thus, Menard does not choose to be Cervantes—that is, to learn seventeenth century Castilian, to become Catholic, and to fight against the Moors or Turks—but instead chooses to be Menard, which leads to the fact that while his "creation" is identical to that of Cervantes, its significance is completely different, precisely because of the critical reference to history. Through Menard, Borges offers an example of the essence of criticism: assuming the work, passing it through the filter of one's own judgment, and in that way, completely changing its character. Etymologically, this is precisely what the term "to criticize"[1] implies, thus coming close to the meaning of "to interpret." "This game of solitaire I play is governed by two polar rules," says Menard. The passage continues, "the first allows me to try out formal or psychological variants; the second forces me to sacrifice them to the 'original' text and to come, by irrefutable arguments, to these eradications…" (Borges 1998: 93). This observation may have a positive influence on the architectural field. The encompassed attitude toward the past is not a reiteration of it but instead a critical transposition of it. In other words, the role and contribution of history in relation to the process of architecture (both conceptual and constructive) is not disclosed through mimicking its forms and concepts but rather through its assumption relative both to the context and to one's own judgment.

In his interpretation of the Borgesian metaphor, Luis Rojo de Castro transposes the discussion in terms of the complexity of producing meaning. While he notes that the current critical discourse of architecture has become poetic, he emphasizes the importance of its materialization in the actual object of architecture (Rojo de Castro 1999: 7). This is also the meaning suggested in the present study: a dynamic attitude toward history that, through its critical reassumption, becomes an instrument used in the theoretical (abstract) and practical (concrete) outlining of the contemporary architectural phenomenon.

In this context, the present research's method becomes an attempt at critical hermeneutics, which entails taking over the interpretative process of hermeneutics and placing it in a broader historical, cultural, and economic context by subjecting it to consideration from a dialectical perspective. John Thompson, in *Critical Hermeneutics: A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas* (1995

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[2]The etymological root of the verb "to criticize" is the Greek κρίνειν/krínein—to separate, to sift, to select, to judge, to interpret. See Chantraine 1968: s.v. "κρῖνω."

[1981]), contemplates this approach, critically investigating two patterns of thought through a constructive project aiming to determine their association. The first model, that of "hermeneutic phenomenology," developed by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, which is based on the merging of the discipline of interpretation with the procedures developed by Edmund Husserl, is followed by Thompson from the perspective of Paul Ricoeur's contribution. The second model, that of "critical social theory," anchored in the writings of Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Karl Marx and developed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who sought to build a theory of society that preserves a moment of critique, is highlighted using the work of Jürgen Habermas. Therefore, according to Thompson, at the intersection of these two models, critical hermeneutics consists of "the elaboration of a critical and rationally justified theory for the interpretation of human action" (Thompson 1995 [1981]: 4).

Dalibor Vesely endorses the importance of modern hermeneutics in the architectural field, referring to "a new mode of interpretation based on the dialectics of part and whole" (Vesely 2004: 334), which is essentially congruent with the critical hermeneutics method. Vesely shows that the recovery of the depth of edification—as both a formal and a communicative act—lies in the power of this approach, thereby supporting the articulation of the multiple dimensions of architecture. Pérez-Gómez also sustains the decisive role of critical history and perception in contemporary architectural theory, emphasizing not backward-looking or utopian-ideal models but rather the creative understanding of the past in light of contemporary concerns. In his opinion, "critical hermeneutics rejects the historical flattening and the homogenization of deconstruction and proposes the valorization of experiential content, the mystery that is human purpose and the presence of spirituality" (Pérez-Gómez 2012: 165). Furthermore, George Steiner notes from a tangential perspective that the acts of interpretation ("hermeneutics") and assessment ("criticism") are indissolubly associated with the artistic process, whether it be plastic, architectural, or musical (Steiner 2013 [1989]: 89–90).

Driven by critical hermeneutics, and seeking to respond as eloquently as possible to the chosen subject and its "ex-centric" character, this book is divided into three parts that correspond to a gradual *parcours* from the general to the particular and from the abstract to the concrete. The first part establishes the substance of the research, delineating its cultural-architectural context and specifying the relevant tools. It opens by outlining the thematic area, critically selecting the perspectives that build the context of the professional niche in question that are considered relevant to the study. The perspectives of Christopher Alexander, Peter Zumthor, and Juhani Pallasmaa, as well as of Vesely, Pérez-Gómez, and Steiner, converge to a common point here—namely, the need to find an integrated way of approaching architecture that is capable of balancing the different dimensions that currently polarize it (technical, economic, sustainable, and scientific, but also ethical, psychosomatic, symbolic, and poetic), leading to a way of restoring architectural creation in the contemporary context. This first part then focuses on identifying within these critical views some of the polar dimensions that have confined the definition of architecture over time. Art–science, theory–practice, mechanic–liberal art,

scientific–humanistic approach, real–ideal: all these binomials have their own inner dynamics from the perspective of which architecture as a creative process is understood. Moreover, they prepare the central substance of the work, appearing later as leitmotifs in the discourse.

The second part constructs its discourse using the concepts and dimensions advanced in the first part, which become either arguments in their own right or subsequent points of reflection. Under the sign of *poíēsis*, this central part of the study brings to the forefront a new binomial, which is again apparently contradictory—the architect as *poeta faber*. Outlining the cultural-architectural context and highlighting the dimensions that polarize architecture contribute to the understanding of the architectural creative act as being both material and symbolic, thus integrating the formal and transcendental character mentioned in the first part. In addition to the voices called upon previously, two protagonists are prominent in this part: Alexander and Averlino (Filarete). A dialogue emerges through their works and ideas, bringing together two cultures, the contemporary one and the Renaissance, which are symbolically chosen for their importance in redefining the profession. The two chapters that comprise this middle part speak, by reference to the previously identified context and binomials, to the reorientation of architectural creation toward its material-concrete and poetic-symbolic dimensions. First, by considering *poíēsis* and *faber* together, a different approach to actual architectural creation is suggested. The discussion focuses on the architect's manual experience and practice, the importance of revaluing the manual act in architecture, the philosophy of "making," and the mechanisms of its implementation in the professional reality. Then, the association between *poíēsis* and *poeta* proposes an affective and symbolic recapturing of architectural creation. The discourse invites building architectural creation upon sensitivity and perception, as well as rediscovering the passion and joy of the creative act, along with its ethical and symbolic meaning.

The third part of this book seeks to tailor the discussion by re-enacting the central themes of the study from a more personal perspective and focusing on one specific issue: education in the spirit of *poíēsis* as a key tool for restoring architectural creation. First, the potential of applying this material and poetic restoration of architecture in the educational context is traced and commented on, identifying its possible means of realization. Second, two case studies are proposed—the School of Buneşti and the Open City of Ritoque—projects which provide remarkable illustrations of *poíēsis* in the contemporary context at different scales, rediscovering architectural creation through the learning experience.

Finally, the conclusion returns to the initial aim—that is, finding a meaningful way of re-engaging architectural creation from a plenary perspective, considering both its material and symbolic nature—thus proving the significance and usefulness of such an approach in relation to the general contemporary context of the profession.

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Acknowledgments

Rome, which facilitated extremely valuable research work. To the *Biblioteca Marciana* in Venice, especially Susy Marcon, I am thankful for the extraordinary chance to examine the Marcian manuscript of Filarete's treatise as well as for the edifying discussions I had in that context.

This research has been supported by several collaborations with specialists from both inside and outside the field of architecture, without whose help and kindness I would not have managed to properly embrace the multidimensional character of this profession. I am much obliged to Professors Neil Leach and Sanford Kwinter for valuing my work and encouraging me to publish internationally. I have particular gratitude to architect Dania Sfarghiu for opening up the horizon of architecture for me and to fellow architect Șerban Sturdza for helping me discover that the poetics of architecture cannot be divided from the architectural practice itself. I want to thank Professor Ștefan Vianu and Dragoș Grusea for both their guidance in the field of philosophy and the specialized bibliography made available to me, as well as Professors Mariela Pavalache-Ilie, Elena Cocoradă, Cornelia Cocan, and Monica Purcaru for their advice in the fields of psychology and education sciences. I am also grateful to Elena Ștefan, Isabela Stoian, and Petre Guran for the translations, comments, and observations regarding the classical texts, and to Professors Smaranda Bratu Elian, Elena Buja, and Anca Maican, as well as to Aura Pandele and Alexandra Stan, for their guidance in the linguistic-literary field and the translations of some of the modern texts.

I wish to express my profound gratitude to the staff at Springer, particularly Dario Martinelli, Christopher Coughlin, and Shanthini Kamaraj for their openness and enduring support throughout the complex and tangled publication process.

For their overall aid and support, I am deeply grateful to all my friends and colleagues, especially Florina Pop, Ioana and Bogdan Brăescu, Milena and Ciprian Pătru, Tudor Elian, Matei Stoean, Radu Popa, Matei Păvălucă, Monica Rîtan, and Ionela and Lucian Mihaiu. I have shared my thoughts and dreams with them, and they have unfailingly inspired and encouraged me, always helping me promptly and unconditionally.

My deep gratitude goes equally to all those who have financially, morally, or spiritually supported me in this work, offering their friendship and helping ease my way, as well as to all those who, whether directly or indirectly, have assisted me in getting here.

Finally, my greatest debt is due to my family for their immeasurable support, without which this book would not have been possible. Their love, generosity, devotion, and creativity have helped me overcome the difficult moments, encouraging me and making this whole experience sheer bliss. This book is dedicated to them.

Contents

Part I
Architecture as Poetic Creation

The peculiarity of the present research topic—that is, the question of $\pi o \acute{\iota} \eta \sigma \iota \varsigma$/*poíēsis* or the creative act in architecture—requires preliminary study, given its "ex-centric" and marginal nature in terms of contemporary architectural preoccupations (both theoretical and practical). A closer look will reveal a thematic niche that gains increasing ground over the decades and produces a paradigm shift by symbolically restoring the architectural act.

This niche draws on a phenomenological approach to architecture and appears explicitly in the 1980s[1] as a desire (and need) to (re)discover a deeper relation with the reality of architecture (as a discipline, profession, practice, and product). The increasing orientation of architecture toward solely its technical and economic dimensions over the past 150 years inspires the exponents of this niche—architects, theoreticians, historians, critics, and philosophers—to find and restore those dimensions of architecture that have been left in the shadow of the prevailing way of thinking. Thus, issues such as understanding and experiencing architecture from a sensory-emotional perspective, endorsing an ethical preoccupation with architecture when it comes to the well-being of its users, showing concern for the natural, anthropic, and cultural contexts, and recovering the poetic and symbolic value of architectural creation all crystallize the substance of what underlies this new architectural paradigm.

To understand architecture as poetic creation in the contemporary context, this chapter proposes a closer critical inspection of the niche in question, with the aim being to confront some of its core ideas concerning the dichotomic definition of architectonical meaning making. Therefore, on the one hand, some perspectives on the present condition of both architecture and culture are identified, which are critically selected to eloquently highlight the poetic quest in relation to architectural creation, and on the other hand, some essential but contradictory dimensions of the discipline are brought into the light, such as the opposition between $\tau \acute{\epsilon} \chi \nu \eta$/*téchnē*

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[1] The roots of this architectural approach can be traced back to the second half of the twentieth century and even earlier. However, it began to gain global definition mainly during the mentioned period.