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concinnitās

Cover: *Surreal City, 2013*, Neil Spiller

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Contents

Introduction
Concinnitās

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Concinnitas—
The state of being skilfully put together or joined;
a beauty that comes from the harmony, proportion, and congruity of
the various parts of a whole assembled according to principles

Borrowed from the art of rhetoric, Leon Battista Alberti used *concinnitas* to describe the inherent beauty of nature from which architecture ought to be inspired. In Alberti's view, the 'art of building' went beyond the physical form and was equally concerned with the effect of buildings on their users, their surroundings, and the city. This beauty was neither innate nor insular, but was created from a correspondence and relationship with a context, an outside. This notion of a discursive 'beauty', deriving from rhetoric— the art of discourse and persuasion—is not solely about relationships, but also representation: the ability to make intelligible a form of argument that unites the various parts of a building and clarifies their relationship:

> Him I consider the architect, who by sure and wonderful reason and method, knows both how to devise through his own mind and energy, and to realise by construction, whatever can be most beautifully fitted out for the noble needs of man, by the movement of weights and the joining and massing of bodies. To do this he must have an understanding and knowledge of all the highest and most noble disciplines.[1]

The architect then, becomes an agent of beauty; architecture moves away from the art of *creatio ex nihilo*, and positions creativity and *invenzione* in the hands of man. Characterised by Jacob Burckhardt as Alberti's 'most expressive term', concinnitas,goes beyond a mere aesthetic concord, and, based on decorum, prerequisites a purpose. Harmony is reached and fulfilled through the realisation of form and content; an underlying principle in the history of design and architecture ever since Vitruvius formulated them, and still salient today.

If there is, perhaps, a common trajectory among architects, the demiurges of form, it is that design and the consistent desire of architecture to reach 'beauty' is never achieved in the same way. It is a composition, a negotiation, a combination, a juxtaposition, a dialogue, a conflict of at least two parts, that together construct a 'whole'. For Vitruvius, *firmitas*, *utilitas*, *venustas* (stability, utility, beauty) were the sacred basis of an architectural unity. Alberti elaborated his principles by combining those of painting and mathematics, and as a refinement of Brunelleschi's perspectival building methods. Walter Gropius, when founding the Bauhaus, advocated towards a progressive design curriculum based on arts and technology. Le Corbusier's 'architectural revolution' strove to construe an aesthetic language using 'scientific' and mathematical sequences. Whereas the Modernists adopted Mies Van de Rohe's 'Less is more', striving to eliminate the plurality of parts, Robert Venturi, representing an emerging post-modern ideal, claimed that 'less is a bore', reopening the immeasurable possibilities towards an architecture of contingency.

Not all of them followed Alberti's intellectual pursuits; some of them vehemently rejected the historical precedent, antiquity's canon, and the notion of a pre-defined system of principles. Nonetheless, the tenet that architecture exists in the unity of its counterparts, that the building is an entity comprised of separate components, and that design is unavoidably transdisciplinary and engaged with the uncertain, resonates with Alberti's ideas of a 'beautiful whole'. In the modern period, even the humblest of projects embodied an ambition towards social reform and individual expression. Today, political, economic, cultural, regional, environmental, personal, (and the list grows indefinitely) agendas are not only multiplying but seem to have become indispensable for the process and future of architecture.

Scroope 28 gathers contributions that propose a new genealogy of *concinnitas*, including critical and theoretical explorations of the term as well as reinterpretations by practicing architects, that attempt to mediate the interdisciplinary nature of architectural discourse and the complex processes that shape contemporary architectural praxis.

The issue opens with an interview with Amanda Levete (AL_A), whose recent works, such as the extension of the V&A on Exhibition Road (London, UK) and the MAAT Museum (Lisbon, Portugal), reflect a contemporary commitment to a concinnitas in which architecture emerges as a relational set of ideas and simultaneously a discursive object, through a careful articulation of concepts, elements, materials, and scales. From the early phase of design, dialogue becomes the leading method to communicate and exchange ideas among clients, users, and other stakeholders, coalescing into a project that unfolds as a narrative, inscribed with qualities of material, construction techniques, form, and programme, formulating clear relationships with its public and the urban realm.

Theories of design and making are explored in the contribution by James Forren and Claire Nicholas, in which a rich literature drawn from philosophy, anthropology, and architecture informs an interdisciplinary collaborative project, *Lap, Twist, Knot*, made with a unique fibre-cement composite. A participatory project with an interdisciplinary approach is similarly presented by Sarah Breen Lovett and David Kroll in the *Kandos Art Facility* project, which was primarily conceived as an artwork and public engagement project before materialising into a physical space.

The relationship between the natural and the built environment is addressed in Sarah Bonnemaison's text, re-reading Eileen Gray's E1027 house through Virginia Woolf's *The Death of the Moth*. Building on the notion of organicism, the article mourns the growing gap between humans and nature, emotions, and spirituality. Illustrating its fatal counterpart, this romantic atmosphere is disturbed by Charline Ouellet's exploration of Manhattan's skyscrapers, projecting a dystopian future of New York in 2050: a gated community accommodating the 1% super-rich of the world following increasing unaffordability and an ensuing housing crisis.

In a different geographic context, Xiang Ren's contribution revisits concinnitas through the Chinese philosophical concept of 'harmony between the Heaven and Human.' Illustrated by the project for the *Yuanlin Zhang Gallery*, an expansion of the Source Museum in China, the reuse of existing parts of a building from the traditional 'Hui prefecture' in the contemporary addition posits notions of temporality and materiality as central to a specifically Chinese alternative notion of concinnitas. Juxtaposition is also used as method in Behrang Fakharian's photographs, which flatten volumetric forms to contrast scale and proportion in the densely-built environments of Stockholm, Kuala Lumpur, Qazvin, and Bogota.

Temporality is central to Vasiliki Zochiou's analysis of the Kolumba Museum in Cologne, as it exposes palimpsests of the site's history in both the completed proposal of Peter Zumthor and in David Chipperfield's competition entry. Questioning the role of contemporary extensions in environments of cultural heritage and historical value, the essay unravels the different possibilities and interpretations that articulate the two proposals as they respond to the challenge of combining layers of history and a contemporary brief. Constructing a virtual technological palimpsest of sorts, Matthew Turner's 'Fictional Glitch' is a deconstruction of Edwin Lutyens' Castle Drogo, drawn from five Instagram images and disembodied parts of the building, and reassembled as virtual frames.

Shifting from reality to perception, and from the physical object to its representation, Daisy Ames, through the superimposition of three artworks by Mary Corse, Rachel Whiteread, and Tauba Auerbach produces drawings that play with light, altering the viewer's experience of the pieces. Deconstructivism reaches its apex in Neil Spiller's drawings of the Surrealist City, in which complex clusters of architectural elements and contemporary cityscapes combine in a cacophonous construction of virtual and actual geographies that follow no rules, dogmas, or doctrines. While these papers and projects propose to deconstruct and reconstruct a unity of elements through a harmonious articulation of parts, Cameron McEwan translates three projects by Aldo Rossi into a series of montages to purposefully disarticulate, cut apart, and separate their parts and forms, illustrating visually Rossi's theory on the analogous city.

Finally, the issue's epilogue by Mario Carpo, invited to contribute on the pertinence of Renaissance humanism, architecture, and rhetoric today, proposes making 'architecture easy for everyone'. It reconsiders Serlio's revolutionary stance towards a pedagogical structure firmly established in Ciceronian Latin, and his aims towards an architectural language—a system of standards and methods—that despite its monotony and banality would be legible to the 'mediocre' architect. This ideological and social project, moving away from elitist trajectories of inequality, bias, and discrimination, underlines concinnitas' urgency in our contemporary society: the search for a harmony of diverse positions coming together in a consensual whole.

Note
[1] Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans by. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor (Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 1988), p. 3