

CALL FOR PAPERS

San Rocco 7: Indifference

San Rocco is interested in gathering together the widest possible variety of contributions. San Rocco believes that architecture is a collective knowledge, and that collective knowledge is the product of a multitude. External contributions to San Rocco might take different forms. Essays, illustrations, designs, comic strips and even novels are all equally suitable for publication in San Rocco. In principle, there are no limits – either minimum or maximum – imposed on the length of contributions. Minor contributions (a few lines of text, a small drawing, a photo, a postcard) are by no means uninteresting to San Rocco. For each issue, San Rocco will put out a “call for papers” comprised of an editorial note and of a list of cases, each followed by a short comment. As such, the “call for papers” is a preview of the magazine. The “call for papers” defines the field of interest of a given issue and produces a context in which to situate contributions.

Submission Guidelines: **A** External contributors can either accept the proposed interpretative point of view or react with new interpretations of the case studies. **B** Additional cases might be suggested by external contributors, following the approach defined in the “call for papers”. New cases might be accepted, depending on their evaluation by the editorial board. **C** Proposed contributions will be evaluated on the basis of a 500-word abstract containing information about the proposed submission’s content and length, and the type and number of illustrations and drawings it includes. **D** Contributions to San Rocco must be written in English. San Rocco does not translate texts. **E** All texts (including footnotes, image credits, etc.) should be submitted digitally in .rtf format and edited according to the Oxford Style Manual. **F** All illustrations and drawings should be submitted digitally (in .tif or .eps format). Please include a numbered list of all illustrations and provide the following information for each: illustration source, name of photographer or artist, name of copyright holder, or “no copyright,” and caption, if needed. **G** San Rocco does not buy intellectual property rights for the material appearing in the magazine. San Rocco suggests that external contributors publish their work under Creative Commons licences. **H** Contributors whose work is selected for publication in San Rocco will be informed and will then start collaborating with San Rocco’s editorial board in order to complete the preparation of the issue. Proposals for contributions to San Rocco 7 must be submitted electronically to mail@sanrocco.info before 4 March 2013.

Indifference is when you do not care or do not listen; it is when you avoid paying attention.

Indifference is the art of ignoring, of forgetting, of sparing energy. Indifference is the bear’s response to winter: go to sleep and skip it.

Indifference might seem easy or apathetic, but in reality it requires talent and precision. Indeed, like anything else, indifference cannot be universal, so it has to be selective. Indifference is a way of separating what matters from what does not, a way of protecting reason by avoiding suicidal missions: “For those seeking an explanation of all things, destroy explanation” (Theophrastus of Eresus, *Metaphysics*, VIII.5). Indifference is editing. Indeed, in architecture – as in any other activity – good work does not mean *caring about everything* (as primary school teachers and competition briefs would love to make us believe). Indifference is a strategic judgement, a way of singling out what Chairman Mao used to call “the principal aspect of contradiction” and of avoiding wasting energy on secondary issues. Indifference is a step toward quality: the less we care about, the easier the solution becomes; thus, the more indifference, the fewer mistakes. Indifference is about putting oneself in the position not to fail. Indifference is an act of suspension. Indifference produces distance, and it creates a possible space for action. Indifference allows us – for a time – not to believe in the world. Indifference erases, cleans, purifies. Indifference creates the necessary conditions for starting the job. Liberating us from the need to be good, indifference creates the space for understanding. Liberating us from the need to take sides, indifference creates the possibility of paying attention. By immediately refusing to answer, indifference ends up creating the possibility of listening. Liberating us from the need to provide an immediate solution for an immediate need, indifference activates the generosity of form, producing spaces that, in the long term, will evolve beyond the initial intentions of their producers.

Indifference defines a precise attitude toward architecture – a rational one, one based on an unprejudiced questioning of its role. “What is architecture?” is a question that indifference addresses the other way around: “What is not architecture?” “What is irrelevant to architecture?” “What is it better to forget about?” Indifference paves the way for abstraction. Indifference approaches intellectual work from a more remote position. Indifference looks at things from afar, with greater clarity and less involvement. According to the dictionary, indifference is “the absence of compulsion to or toward one thing or another”. Indifference is liberating. No compulsion, no wasted effort, no obsessive point-by-point problem-solving. Indifference creates the space for thinking about architecture as an intellectual activity lying beyond the craftsman’s obsession with control. Indifference is redemption from the compulsion to care (Client: “What is the colour of the doorhandle?” / Architect: “Whatever you like.” or “Anything is fine with me.” or “Pink. Do you like pink, too?”). Indifference is the classicist answer to the oppressive arts-and-crafts atmosphere that polluted the architectural debate from Ruskin to Zumthor. Indifference is the difference between architects and craftsmen. Indifference means the freedom not to be obliged to exhibit our talent like sword-swallowers in a circus. Indifference is somehow humble. It is a decrease in control (which is possible because important things have already been defined in advance and the rest doesn’t really matter). In this sense, less is not *more*: it is just *enough*. Indifference is the difference between classicism and eclecticism. Indeed, classicism is just *stylistic indifference* in the end. For eclectic architects (e.g., Semper, Gilbert, Stern), styles are different; this is why they matter so much. For them, styles are *content* and immediately imply certain values. For classicist architects (Bramante, Schinkel, McKim), styles are *form*, and forms are all the same (form is simply good or bad). The use of the Gothic by Semper, Gilbert or Stern is totally different from that in the work of Bramante, Schinkel or McKim. For the former group, the use of the Gothic style immediately communicates *meaning*, while for the latter, it does not mean anything: it is just the application of one of many repertoires. Indifference provides the

only possible answer to the stupidity – one that did not disappear in modernism and postmodernism – of the question posed by Eclecticism: “In which style should we build?” Indeed, indifference is the better way to express without any doubt that all styles are the same. Indifference erases excuses: given that you do not care, your work is obliged to be excellent. No explanation will help (and it certainly does not help searching for explanations from the very beginning). Indifference is clearly non-modern. Indifference does not take a position; it does not put a label on itself. Indifference has no slogans, anthems or flags. Indifference is as grey as Richter’s monochromes. Indifference wears a bourgeois outfit just like Magritte’s dummies. Indifference does not follow the Manichean alternative of modernism: us (the good) against you (the evil). Indifference is a reaction to a world that is clearly mediocre and will remain so, and that is not continuously confronted with the alternatives of collapse and redemption. Indifference is open-minded – no dogmas, no intolerance, no opposition; no avant-garde, no polemics. Indifference, however, is not tolerance.

And indifference is not patience (Bramante, the master of indifference, was also the master of impatience). Indifference is some sort of extreme sincerity: You know that we are not helping you, that we are not solving your problems. We don’t care.

Indifference is irritating.

Indifference is commitment, the only one.

Indeed, indifference is only because we *do* care. *San Rocco 7* is somehow in love with indifference. The pages that follow present a list of cases we would like to know more about.

▪ Eight Quotes by Gerhard Richter on Indifference ▪

I like everything that has no style: dictionaries, photographs, nature, myself and my paintings. (Because style is violent, and I am not violent.)

Notes, 1964–65

I blur things to make everything equally important and equally unimportant. I blur things so that they do not look artistic or craftsmanlike but technological, smooth

and perfect. I blur things to make all the parts a closer fit. Perhaps I also blur out the excess of unimportant information.

Notes, 1964–65

To me, grey is the welcome and only possible equivalent for indifference, noncommitment, absence of opinion, absence of shape. But grey, like formlessness and the rest, can be real only as an idea, and so all I can do is create a color nuance that means grey but is not it. The painting is then a mixture of grey as a fiction and grey as a visible, designated area of color.

Letter to Edy de Wilde, 23 February 1975

I don't believe in the reality of painting, so I use different styles like clothes: it's a way to disguise myself.

Interview with B. Ferguson and J. Spalding, 1978

My pictures are devoid of objects; like objects, they are themselves objects. This means that they are devoid of content, significance or meaning, like objects or trees, animals, people or days, all of which are there without a reason, without a function and without a purpose. This is the quality that counts. (Even so, there are good and bad pictures.)

Notes, 1984

Of course, my landscapes are not only beautiful or nostalgic, with a Romantic or classical suggestion of lost Paradises, but above all "untruthful" (even if I did not always find a way of showing it); and by "untruthful" I mean the glorifying way we look at nature – nature, which in all its forms is always against us, because it knows no meaning, no pity, no sympathy, because it knows nothing and is absolutely mindless: the total antithesis of ourselves, absolutely inhuman.

Notes, 1986

The political topicality of my *October* paintings means almost nothing to me, but in many reviews it is the first or only thing that arouses interest, and the response to the pictures varies according to current political circumstance. I find this rather a distraction.

Notes, 1989

I started doing "figures", then, one day, all of a sudden, I started doing abstraction. And then I started doing both. But it was never really a conscious decision. It was simply a question of desire. In fact, I really prefer making figurative work, but the figure is difficult. So to work around the difficulty I take a break and paint abstractly. Which I really like, by the way, because it allows me to make beautiful paintings.

Conversation with Henri-François Debailleux, 1993

• Marks of Indifference •

"Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art" is an essay written by Jeff Wall in 1995. However, presented as a draft, it is a very complex exploration of the way photography realized itself as a modern art in the experiments of the 1960s and '70s. Among others, Wall explores the works of Ed Ruscha, Richard Long, Bruce Nauman, Robert Smithson and Douglas Huebler, and discusses the evolution of photography as a language and the mutual influence in which it engages with conceptual art: "Photoconceptualism was . . . the last moment of the pre-history of photography as art, the end of the Old Regime".

• What the World Looks Like •

"I photograph to see what the world looks like in photographs", is one of the better known quotes by Garry Winogrand. The sentence underlines the act of seeing and the flat, object-like character of the photograph. After Winogrand died, a large number of exposed but undeveloped rolls were found in his archive. What was intended as the act of seeing was transformed into a compulsive act of photographing, a permanent condition of a "depicting action", erasing the final step of printing on paper. An attitude according to which no photograph can make a difference.

• Bramante Did Not Care •

The greatest achievement in the history of Western architecture (that of Bramante, no doubt) coincides with the greatest (and somehow frightening) degree

of indifference ever displayed. Bramante did not care about ideology (he proposed moving the tomb of St Peter, given that he could not move the Vatican obelisk due to technological limitations), style (he radically changed repertoire when moving from Milan to Rome) or construction (half of his buildings simply collapsed after a few years). He switched from one style to another as soon as he recognized the availability of a certain formal system (the one that could be decoded from the ruins in and around Rome) that was grammatically more consistent than the one he had previously used (the relatively clumsy North Italian Renaissance repertoire he had employed in Milan earlier). No values were associated with this shift, just a better grammar that could provide more refined tools for an enquiry that was always consistently focused on space.

His experimentation with space knew no barriers: Bramante felt no compunction about destroying the most venerated temple of Christendom (and he destroyed it with unbelievable speed, with the precise intention of leaving no possibility of going back) and he did not care about obliging the Pope to spend an incredible sum on the reconstruction. Indifference here went beyond imagination: classicist formal experiments did not care about economic and political consequences. Bramante was not ashamed of his colossal nasty jokes (ones which, for some reason, Martin Luther did not really appreciate). Was his indifference maybe too great? And isn't it scary that such wonderful architecture can result from such a cruel and socially irresponsible approach?

- Foster's Military Might -

Norman Foster does not care if people like his buildings or not, and he never has. In fact, he does not even care if his buildings suit their locations. Context has never been of any concern to him. Being immersed in building for large technology corporations, Foster quickly developed the idea of using mechanical perfection as an alternative to any other form of engagement. Foster's buildings have a clockwork-like precision, or at least the aura of it. Foster's buckyballs are not naïve Futurist constructions, but machines with

the razor-like precision of military weapons and warships. It is no surprise that his favourite means of transport is the helicopter: high-tech, maximal agility, no need for a landing strip.

- Entgotisierung des Gotisches -

Schinkel made a couple of Gothic buildings, most notably the Frierdrichswerdersche church.

The red-brick church is extremely reduced. It looks like a strange analysis of the minimum amount of elements needed to make a Gothic church. And of course, this detached, analytical tone kills the Gothic-ness of the Gothic church from the very beginning.

- A Short Dialogue between Cass Gilbert and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe -

CG: "I like to develop a subject in the style which seems best adapted to the purpose."

LMvDR: "I am, in fact, completely opposed to the idea that a specific building should have an individual character."

- Interviews -

Interviews – which is the medium Mies van der Rohe used to communicate about his work from 1935 on – are made up of short answers, avoided questions, fragmented statements, instances of repetition and detours all designed to control the interviewer. In Mies's case, he seldom left openings in his logic that allowed the interviewer to sneak in. The same answers, repeated over and over in the manner of a mantra, gave him the freedom not to be disturbed by contingencies. Indifference toward specific matters (no sociology, no formalism, no engagement) seems to turn into extreme precision when it is translated into design. But is this really true?

- Why OMA Is Not OMU -

Rem Koolhaas is a good architect and Oswald Mathias Ungers is not. At the same time, however, Koolhaas

and Ungers are *the same architect* (and, in a manner of speaking, Ungers is even the *original* one). They produce architecture in the same way. So what makes Koolhaas good and Ungers bad?

The difference is indifference. Koolhaas is able to accept the world around him and let it enter into his architecture. His buildings immediately accept life, react to contexts and change according to the times. For Koolhaas, abstraction is not literal. There is no need to clad buildings with squarish white panels. The real is rational and vice versa. Reality can be accepted: fancy pillars are OK, orange beams are OK, a bit of "design" is OK. The intelligence of his projects is not found here, and consequently there is no risk in introducing some fanciness. Why oppose a fashion when you can simply declare it irrelevant? Isn't opposing a fashion really just a way of fighting for a different one (and thus of accepting this point of discussion)?

In the end, the truly Schinkelian architect is Koolhaas, not Ungers. Indeed, Schinkel never condemned contemporary society and did not bother making trashy Hollywood-style paintings about contemporary history (the fire of Moscow, the battle of Leipzig, etc.).

(Maybe here we are attributing too much "Cunning of Reason" to Koolhaas, but why not? He is so good.)

• Stirling's "Periods" •

Stirling never really cared about the *style* he was using. In contrast to Cowan's employment of the "style for the job", for Stirling there was never a cause-effect relationship between architectural style and the job. So while there were different *styles*, none of them had anything to do with any *particular job*. Stirling's "periods" were simply vast stretches of time in which he digested influences from the outside in order to perfect his own vocabulary. There was always the sense of a disconnect between what he did and the fashion of the moment. One could consider it either a delay or simply stubborn indifference. Looking at his own physical self-expression one can only see it as the bluntest refusal to engage with in the world in any way. He put his corpulent body in between the job and the discipline, somehow protecting his delicate little drawings behind his oversized mass.

• Surviving Fashion: Carlo Rainaldi •

Carlo was unlucky. He was born ten years after Bernini, Borromini and Cortona, so he had to accept the Baroque as a given. His taste did not really match the fashion of his day. Still, Carlo made no complaint. He accepted fancy mouldings and became a virtuoso of dramatic light effects. He even tried employing an oval plan at Santa Maria in Campitelli, although he was clearly not convinced of what he was doing and was probably happy there was no money to fund the project in the end. He never accepted the spirit of the Baroque: no fluid membranes, no pulsating-jellyfish architecture, just sequences of clearly defined, entirely orthogonal spaces simply connected to one another in incredibly complex series (there is something of the Hindu temple in the plan of Santa Maria in Campitelli, but punctuated with a perfectly orthodox use of the classical orders). Still no polemics: if you ask me to make Baroque architecture, then that's what I'll do, you just can't ask me to be convinced about it.

• John Nash, Son of a Bitch •

John Summerson introduces his excellent biography of John Nash (which has an exquisitely Vasarian tone) with these words: "When John Nash died in his castle at East Cowes in 1835, few kind things were said about him. The general view was that he had built a great deal of very questionable architecture, had been hand-in-glove with a monarch whom nobody greatly revered, had made a lot of money for himself and now deserved only to be forgotten."

Nash died in his own castle. And he needed to die in his castle because, of course, he hadn't had a castle when he was born the son of a Welsh millwright.

Nash worked under Robert Taylor, then started business on his own, immediately went bankrupt, then turned to Wales where he built several houses for the local gentry, then met Price and Payne Knight and made several picturesque country houses and later became the architect of the Regent. Nash wanted to make money and obtain power (he even tried to enter the Parliament, but without success). It did not bother him to build in all sorts of styles, from the surreal

Hindu-Islamic pastiche of the Royal Pavilion at Brighton (with Chinese interiors!) to the ghostly Gothic of Ravensworth Castle. At any rate, Nash never lost his classical tone, nor his formal economy (all his buildings are actually relatively commonsensical, compact volumes with few frills and just a bit of fancy decoration). Subtly disguised by a picturesque appearance, Regent Street and Regent's Park are still the one and only piece of "city" to be found in London. If the picturesque is the only acceptable way to produce the "city", then even the picturesque can be okay.

▪ **"Sous le soleil exactement" ▪**

You can love luxury, wear a vicuña coat lined with ocelot and exhibit a huge medal chiselled by Benvenuto Cellini. All of this can be tolerated. What you cannot do is present yourself as a sort of Savonarola of architecture who almost halves the construction costs of housing. In doing this, you screw the profits of everyone involved in the building sector, and as a result, you surely create an army of enemies. Fernand Pouillon paid the consequences of his very first false step and went straight to court and then to jail. Under the Mediterranean sun, many of his buildings age brilliantly.

▪ **Let's Just Make More Square Metres ▪**

Anne Lacaton and Jean Philippe Vassal think that any (social) issue related to architecture can be resolved by adding more square metres. If they have to design a school, they design a parking lot; if they have to make residences, they just double the necessary surface area. And if the consequences of their multiplication of space might appear awkward, they simply don't care. (And by the way, how can they market themselves as the most environmentally conscious office when they systematically build twice as much?) Fascinatingly, their strange aesthetic is a French version of the Smithsons' "non design". For the Smithsons, non design was a compromise between an excess of moralism and the search for an aesthetic that, due to a lack of talent, they would never manage to master. For Lacaton and Vassal, architecture is a matter of pure indifference

and amphetamines – and the very French idea that everything good is simply *grand*.

▪ **Paint It White ▪**

(Michelangelo at the Baths of Diocletian)

Michelangelo did not do anything there: he just located the entrance in an obvious yet unpredictable place and suggested painting the vaults white.

▪ **Álvaro's World ▪**

Álvaro Siza has been singlehandedly held responsible for recent European architectural contextualism. As an architect from a slightly provincial part of Europe, his curves have been categorized as some sort of combination of nostalgia, craftsmanship and folk culture, and thus immediately deprived of cultural relevance and treated as a harmless curiosity from the countryside. It is hard to think of another architectural superstar whose very reason for fame is based on such a profound misunderstanding. Siza is so indifferent that he did not even bother to oppose this ridiculous reading of his work.

If there is something that keeps Mr Siza ticking, it must certainly be his relentless desire to make the most disconnected geometrical compositions in ignorance of the pre-existing context. His world is somewhere else. With careful carelessness, he re-appropriates every single piece of architectural vocabulary he might encounter, whether in books or from his travels. In his radical reification of the smallest of thoughts, Venturi and Machu Pichu are indifferently the starting point of his erudite experiments. The re-creation of the entire world, bagatelle by bagatelle . . . Perhaps it makes him the most cosmopolitan of the local architects.

▪ **Sir James Goes to the Far East (Before He Dies) ▪**

The Kyoto Centre and the Temasek Polytechnic Institute in Singapore, both designed in 1991, seem to overcome the redundant pastiches in Stirling's work of the second half of the 1980s and mark a return to the amazing consistency of his golden age. The un-built *depato* in Kyoto

sports a massive in-line body composed of a homogeneous socle supporting a collection of architectural objects: two voids mark the entrance to the train station and the plaza, in correspondence with two inhabited bridges crossing the railways. The whole complex elegantly makes fun of some emerging tendencies of the time: high-tech, free-standing glass façades clad all the volumes, while an emaciated but equally high-tech Japanese gate stands in front of the plaza. The big hall plays with echoes of Russian Constructivism better than Jon Jerde will do some years later, and it is dominated by two enormous screens, for if the project had been built, Nam June Paik would have been one its advisors.

The gigantic, built-by-Wilford Temasek Polytechnic shows an impressively composed array of urban forms and succeeds in the desperate attempt to invent an identity for the institution. Stirling did not have a problem with combining pseudo-modernistic façades with pagoda roofs and the trademark cross-plan tower. A John Wood-ian crescent meets an Italian garden . . . Postmodernism is over! Long live pre-modernism!

▪ Less Is Enough ▪

Less is not more. We are tired of asceticism, tired of this rhetoric.

Less is not even a bore (even if . . .)

Less is just *enough*. Enough for a world that is already too crowded.

Don't ask too much. Use your *(dis)illusion*.

Less is enough.

▪ Notice to Hipsters ▪

Indifference also means always doing the same thing, over and over, without explanation, without variation and yet, somehow, also without repetition. It is white noise: always (almost) the same thing.

Richard Meier: the next cool thing.

Next page:
Karl Friedrich Schinkel,
Friedrichswerdersche
Kirche, Berlin, 1824-31

