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Florenzia Andreola, Mauro Sullam, Riccardo M. Villa (eds), *Backstage. L'architettura come lavoro concreto* / Nisa Ari, Christianna Bonin (eds), *Workspace*

Milano, Franco Angeli, 207 pp. – 2016 | “Thresholds – Journal of the MIT Department of Architecture” monographic issue, n. 44, Cambridge, SA+P Press, 205 pp. – 2016

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Florenzia Andreola, Mauro Sullam, Riccardo M. Villa (eds), *Backstage. L'architettura come lavoro concreto*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 207 pp. – 2016. Paperback: € 27.00 - ISBN 978-8-8917-4420-3 / e-book: € 19.00 - ISBN 978-8-8917-4748-8 | Nisa Ari, Christianna Bonin (eds), *Workspace*, “Thresholds – Journal of the MIT Department of Architecture” monographic issue, n. 44, Cambridge, SA+P Press, 205 pp. – 2016. Paperback: \$ 20.00 - ISBN 978-0-9961166-1-9 / e-book: free - ISBN 978-0-9726887-1-0

- 1 Architecture periodically casts a glance at itself, reflected in the mirror. It doesn't happen to architects only; for sure it has happened to many of us, in some slow-down phase of some apparently stable and long-lasting relationship, showing signs of a weakening we chose to ignore for too long. Changes, stretch marks, some nevertheless fascinating flaws we can be proud of in the end. And again, we question certain choices, reactions, situations we sought or tolerated for convenience; maybe not everything will come to the surface the same easy and sincere way. And, oh, places: it becomes necessary to spend a moment thinking of where everything happened, of those spaces and perceptions produced by all the things happened and happening.
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- The image shows the cover of the book 'BACKSTAGE' on the left and a page from 'WORKSPACE' on the right. The book cover features a black and white photograph of a multi-story building with a grid of windows, and the title 'BACKSTAGE' is prominently displayed. The 'WORKSPACE' page is a layout of text and images, including a photograph of a modern office interior.
- 2 A beach body testing, a *prova costume* as Italians would call it, where *costume* is both a swimsuit and the contemporary *coûtume*¹ with which architects always strive to comply.
 - 3 The word 'periodically', then, does not fit adequately architecture, the production of self-critical and meta-professional reflection in architecture being almost equal to its output in terms of built volumes: it is nonetheless important, year after year, beach body test after test, to evaluate how relevant the cultural and geographic context, as well as the wavy historical changes, can get on such reflections.
 - 4 In times when the hiatus between Italian and international situation is once again an issue – despite the global framework of architecture being characterized by a major crisis in both epistemology and market – books like *Backstage* are powerful indicators of how architects look at themselves, Italian architects in particular; an enlightening role, mostly if put in comparison with some specific cultural 'reagents' such as the monographic issue of "Threshold" dedicated to the *Workspace*.
 - 5 The editorial team at Gizmo gives voice to different actors operating between research, theory and practice, and outlines through *Backstage* an articulate picture of current epistemological and professional status of architecture. Foundations of this research are firmly laid in the Italian context, and some regard is kept for a global contextualization as well. It is not the first time this typology of essay seduces those who sail the seas of disciplinary critique – just think of Guy Tapie's *Les Architectes: Mutation d'une profession* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2000), quoted by some contributors. Still *Backstage* appears at the end of a fierce decade for all those disciplines of the in-between, participated by humanities, technique and (despite the angry opposition shown by some contributions, but also with the support of some others) art. Little room is left, after such deep-striking crisis and fairy-tale, Godot-like recovery, for any Modernist call to arms, Tafuri-flavoured intellectual withdrawal, or even medical dissections of the profession, like Tapie did, back in 2003. *Backstage* resounds of the voice of a confused discipline, torn between concrete issues – complicating its productive process and denying architects any chance of an appropriation of their work – and more radical and apparently theoretical issues, where probably the foundations of the concrete ones are rooted.

- 6 Featuring stories about (shrinking) amounts of production – is this still a properly architectural issue? –, *brand-making*, average impoverishment and theory /practice clashes re-plunging Italy into the roaring 80s, the work generates, at least in the author of this review, a powerful lust for some extreme action.
- 7 Of course the extreme action we long for is a radical shift in the point of view, helping us to reframe all those issues that make it so complicated to be an architect nowadays; it may give the impression of a parting from contemporary and from reality. Yet, it is by taking such a risk that a change in current mindset can be generated, a chance to rewrite the framing of an identity, as the crisis is more than 10 years away and it can no longer be blamed as the only cause of contemporary dead ends (not to mention the nostalgic persistence of a Marxist critique of the Capital, still popping up as a theoretical foundation in many sections of the book).
- 8 The eclipse of the Client – an actual tragedy in terms of creativity and interaction – the twilight of the Authorship in architectural design processes, are established notions that have been accepted globally for decades. Today, they can suggest a redefinition of the architect's position in terms of an opening to a complex networked scenario, where the survival for such multifaceted professionals can be only granted by an actual and non-nostalgic awareness of their practice and knowledge.
- 9 Here is why a simultaneous reading of *Workspace*, a curatorial, cultural trip through the spatiality of contemporary practice(-s), can be of the highest interest. In a global context where production and art often swap costumes – where China creates entire villages devoted to the production of paintings; where production and distribution of sex toys are awarded a scholarly research and a proper critical *studio visit* – the *space* where all these practices are performed, the way space and practices shape one another, regain a meaning. While some first reactions could oppose a blunt rejection of an allegedly *culturaliste* approach (“Why should we care about sex toys production or artists' residencies in Wyoming, when Italy struggles with a 1architect / 1000citizens ratio?!”) – such studies offer a real opportunity to identify a territory where architects can spend their intellectual and practical uniqueness: the definition of space. This opens up, moreover, to a chance of reconnection with different fields such as the arts, and the space-related production of culture, that had been cut off the architectural debate by the recent winds of crisis. Architects can be a little less scared by the idea of considering the deconstruction of “creative genius rhetoric”, a great Leitmotiv from the 2000s, as they can live it as conscious and effective actors. Instead of playing the victim in terms of image, they can invest creative capacity in framing their relationship with other disciplinary and intellectual worlds.
- 10 The reading of both these choral works – in a strictly simultaneous and comparative way – is strongly recommended for a satisfactory architects' beach body test (and for any forthcoming reflective holiday). It can be a chance – a rare chance nowadays – to give the mirror a little rotation, stop concentrating always on the same stretch mark, and consider a change in the usual beach outfit.

NOTES

1. Coûtume must be considered in its French archaic meaning, as that component of current Law coming from practices and habits.

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