CALL FOR PAPERS
San Rocco 4: Fuck concepts! Context!

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 4 must be submitted electronically to mail@sanrocco.info before 31 January 2012.

Contemporary architecture is generally presented with the phrase "My concept is . . . ", in which the blank is filled in by some sort of notion: "My concept is freedom", "My concept is the iPad", "My concept is the Big Bang", "My concept is democracy", "My concept is panda bears", "My concept is M&M's". This statement is then followed by a PowerPoint presentation that begins with M&M's and ends with round, pink bungalows on paradisiacal Malaysian beaches.

According to concepts, to design is to find what buildings *are:* an ontology for dummies that turns banality into spectacle. Thus, the library *is* the books, the stadium *is* the muscles, the promenade *is* the beach, the aquarium *is* the fish, the swimming pool *is* the water and grandmother's garage *is* grandmother.

Concepts are a tool used to justify design decisions *in the absence of architecture.* Concepts originate from a state of self-inflicted despair in which design needs to be justified point by point, and architecture by definition has no cultural relevance. Concepts presuppose that nothing specifically architectural exists in reality: there are no spatial relationships, no territories and no cities, and it is thus impossible to obtain

any knowledge about these phenomena. Concepts are the tools used to make architecture in a world of post-atomic barbarians. Conan and Mad Max would dream up a concept for imagining how to erect their own primitive huts.

Concepts claim to *translate architecture into an everyday language.* As such, concepts claim to be *democratic,* and therefore claim that they allow people with no architectural education to understand buildings. The point here is that *translating architecture into an everyday language* is nonsensical (and, contrary to popular opinion, there is nothing democratic about nonsense). Architecture is immersed in and appropriated by language, but it is not itself a language: architecture is about modifying landscapes and shaping spatial conditions, not about communicating information or celebrating values (values can occupy architecture, but architecture cannot produce them: like a bowl, architecture can be filled, but it cannot generate its own content). So, no *translation* of architecture is possible, just as it is impossible to "translate" dance or ice hockey. Here the problem is not only the reduction of complexity that is associated with any kind of populism, but also the translation into a mediocre story of something that is simply not a story. In other words, the problem is not that of *mediocre translation;* the problem is *translation in general.* In the end, there is nothing to *understand* in buildings. And democracy is certainly not about *understanding* architecture: it is about *accessing* architecture. You just need to enter, move, look, wait, climb, stop . . . That's it.

Concepts exist because of the unnecessary feeling that architecture *needs an explanation,* that architecture *needs to apologize.* Concepts describe what architecture will do before architecture is made, thereby guaranteeing that it will not do anything else. Concepts turn architecture into something safe, predictable, tamed. With concepts, there are no nightmares in the city, no nasty jokes, no surprises, no contradictions, no complexity, no congestion, no memory, no subconscious. Concepts prevent any free appropriation; they erase any surprise. The only gestures admitted into buildings are the *conceptual* ones that were used to *explain* them. Like ghosts, concepts do not want to vacate the buildings they generated; concepts do not accept their own disappearance in the final product.

Concepts introduce a kind of rationality that makes projects automatic-pilot-justified in every step of the construction process. Concepts help decision-makers to remember and re-tell the reasons for their decisions to those who charged them with this task, whether these people are parliamentary commissions, committees of kindergarten mothers or voters. In this way, concepts start an endless chain of justifications that are certainly more bureaucratic than democratic (concepts and bureaucracy have always been allies, at least since Colbert and Perrault screwed poor old Bernini). The need to explain, justify and certify the project *now* – and to do all of this *easily* – prevents any possible future complexity in the building. Concepts operate as a form of violence of the present against the future. The period of construction becomes more important than the building's lifespan. The immediate dialogue with clients and contractors becomes more important than the future richness of the building. The design is totally dependent on the narration that is required to sell the building. (Note: this, to a certain extent, is unavoidable; what *is* avoidable is building the cultural legitimacy of architecture precisely upon its very dependence on these oversimplified narrations, or turning selling into an ideology.)

Concepts protect us from running the risk of engaging with form. Why should we bother with form when we have an *idea?* Why waste time seeking beauty when we can claim that we are *solving problems?* Why think when we can happily sit around a table and do some *brainstorming?* Why take the pains to learn something when we can shout "Eureka!" in your face?

Anyhow, it is possible to escape from this *selbstverschuldete Minderheit.* Complexity exists, *in re,* in *context.* Cities and territories are here, and it is possible to understand them!

Nothing else is needed. Just pay attention; just trust silence and immobility. In the end, to design is to define contexts, to re-shape what is already there, to formalize the given. Concepts are not needed, and neither are messages or literature. The relationship between humans and buildings is *spatial,* being simply based on the fact that both humans and buildings occupy portions

of space but with this difference: contrary to humans, buildings survive for long periods of time and do not move. There seems to be a possibility for interaction between humans and architecture, one that is quite interesting and unpredictable: the possibility for built matter to operate on human behaviour by means of its own immobility. And this clumsy brotherhood of architecture and human gestures, this mute complexity, survives only if the relationship is both immediate *and* indirect, evident *and* untold. Probably nobody has ever exposed the nature of this relationship as precisely or bravely as Rossi did: "Go to an old folks' home: sorrow is something tangible. Sorrow is in the walls, in the courtyards, in the dormitory" (Rossi, *The Architecture of the City,* 1966).

"Go to an old folks' home" and "sorrow is something tangible" – there is no link between the two phrases, no explanation: sorrow and the old folks' home are just there together. The relationship is *spatial* in character in the sentence itself too: here is the building, there is sorrow. "Sorrow is in the walls". No jokes. No concepts. Sorrow manifests itself *in* space – *in* the walls, *in* the courtyards, *in* the dormitory. This crystallized sorrow that materializes as walls cannot be described, just pointed out. Sorrow is not the *concept* behind the building, nor does the building *represent* sorrow; rather, sorrow is a specific condition produced in space by the series of acts accumulated through time in a specific place. Unhappiness does not need concepts, and neither does happiness.

So, fuck concepts! Context! And fuck content! Form!

San Rocco 4 attempts to understand the genealogy of concepts and ultimately tries to imagine a new architecture without ideas.

▪ Genealogy ▪

There is a tradition of concepts in architecture, quite a serious one, with all kinds of related topics (character, *architecture parlante,* and so on): Serlio's Book VI with its houses that change appearance according to the different professions of their inhabitants, Palladio's villas, Colbert's reasonable objections to Bernini's Louvre, Laugier's hut, Ledoux's *architecture parlante* . . .

▪ No-nonsense Classicism ▪

As our world became increasingly bureaucratized, it became crucial for architects to find a way to deal with concepts. Various strategies were developed in order to react to this situation and to offer an architecture befitting the logic of bureaucrats (e.g., Durand, Schinkel, Semper). A strange kind of no-nonsense classicism appeared, one that was logically arranged, repetitive, economical and realizable in stages.

▪ Content ▪

Modernism accepted the 17th- and 18th-century infatuation with *concepts,* yet it recognized only one of these: *content,* or, in other words, *quantity.* Modernism (a truly Protestant project) was an architecture of quantity, measurable in terms of the amount of social housing produced in a year, or a given project's cost per square metre. But *content* (which is to say *quantity*) was still not a reality; rather, it was *the concept* of modernism. For its only concept, modernism also invented an entire body of propaganda, thereby creating a model of the happy marriage of concepts and propaganda that would be so successful later on. In the process, form was dismissed because modernism was about *doing the right thing,* and context was ignored because modernism was about doing the right thing *in large quantities.* Architecture had to sacrifice itself in the name of *a good cause.* But then that good cause somehow got lost. Concepts survived, though, as brutal as Bolshevik propaganda and as regressive as Lady Thatcher's social policies. How could modernism come to such a sad a conclusion? What went wrong along the way? Is there a parallel here with the depressing history of the European political left after May 1968?

▪ Into the Ears of Millions ▪

Concepts correspond to the need to *whisper into the ears of millions* (as Jeff Koons has said, "At one time, artists had only to whisper into the ear of the king or pope to have political effect. Now, they must whisper into the ears of millions of people"). To do this, contemporary

architecture enthusiastically embraced all sorts of trashy allegories. But did this populistic attempt really work out? For all its love of cheap slogans, contemporary architecture is still highly non-communicative, misunderstood and neglected. Any other art form works better, and any other expressive medium (considering architecture, just for the sake of argument, as an expressive medium) has higher returns. Why should we not learn from this failure? Why should we not accept this situation and make use of it? Consider how successful contemporary art has been in being deliberately obscure. Maybe what is wrong with contemporary architecture is precisely its (modernist) humbleness, its desperate eagerness to sacrifice itself in the name of something else.

▪ A Defence of Concepts ▪

Over the last four centuries, concepts have been very popular. As a result, a large majority of our readers might be irritated by (or at least have doubts about) our argument against concepts. So, please explain to us why we are wrong. You know we are open-minded.

▪ Stirling's Non-dogmatic
Accumulation of Formal Knowledge ▪

Stirling is often considered a stupid architect, probably partly because (at least in the second part of his career) he didn't write, and what has appeared in print is indeed a mishmash of statements, vague interviews and sloppy prize acceptance speeches. It is also probably partly because he seemed so strangely inconsequential in his trading in of British industrialist brickwork for pink, oversized railings. In his "inconsequential" actions, however, Stirling was a fundamental contextualist, though his context was not the gloomy universe in which he was supposed to place each of his buildings, but the one that he constructed himself along the way. For Stirling, the series of preceding formal solutions created the context for the new ones he would develop. In each of his commissions, reality turned out to be confrontational yet fertile. Over time, Stirling put together a body of non-dogmatic formal knowledge

comprised of imprecise sources, inconsequential fascinations, bad jokes and out-of-place erudition. But then again, imprecision can generate a world if one is stubborn and consistent and ignorant enough not to care too much about it.

▪ Le Corbusier, a Contextual Architect ▪

Despite his initial claims for a new universal, machine-inspired architecture, a number of essays from *L'Esprit nouveau* (later to be included in *Vers une architecture*) communicate Le Corbusier's deep interest in specific landscapes such as the Acropolis in Athens or the city of Rome. Le Corbusier considers the Acropolis to be an architectural device that provides the key to the interpretation of the entire landscape lying between Piraeus and Pentelikon. Convincingly enough, Colin Rowe states that the La Tourette monastery acts in the very same way with respect to its context. On another scale, it is easy to consider the series of projects ranging from *Plan Obus* to the sketches for South American cities as obvious members of the same family. Among the apparently most un-contextual operations, even the *Plan Voisin* or the Beistegui attic clearly fit within the very specific Parisian context of the Haussmannian erasures and the cult of the urban axis, curiously coupled with the surrealistic excision of the Cadavre Exquis.

▪ Why Architecture by O. M. U. (Peace Be Upon Him) Always Looks So Bad ▪

The architecture of Oswald Mathias Ungers is always uncomfortable, uneasy and fundamentally unhappy. And the worst thing about it is that you always suspect that there is some sort of reason for this; you always have the feeling that its failures exist on purpose, or that its shortcomings are supposed to tell you something. Ungers's architecture is an example of how concepts can destroy all good presuppositions. In fact, Ungers was right on almost every level. He was intelligent, educated and realistic, had a precise notion of monumentality and an impressive understanding of the city, and he did not lack good taste. He may also have had some sort of (German) sense of humour. Still, he felt the need to turn

all his impressive architectural knowledge into *arguments,* and so he never made a decent building.

▪ Vanna at the Door ▪

In a famous photo of her house, Vanna Venturi stands next to the entrance. The photo is frontal: it shows the house as in an elevation. In the image, Vanna hides in the shadow, almost unnoticeable at first glance. The owner and the house are clearly two separate things. The house is clearly not a portrait. Robert Venturi is extremely delicate with his mother: architecture must keep its distance from the world of feelings. A house for one's mother, however, is a house just the same, and Vanna Venturi's house is a masterpiece of abstraction and, as such, a masterpiece of respect. It clearly corresponds to the rigorous mannerism of Robert Venturi's early production. The house is not an icon; it has no message, and it develops no argument.

Vanna was lucky: Bob designed her house before learning all the *ideas* that his wife would later discover in his architecture – brilliant ideas, but ideas nonetheless.

▪ The Concept Is "Concept" ▪

Whether you consider Eisenman's, OMA's or Tschumi's entries for the competition for the Parc de la Villette, the contest was clearly about concepts even if nobody understood what those concepts were. Maybe the concept was just "a concept" – the concept of a concept, or a manifesto about the potential of an architecture of pure concepts. In fact, the proposed pavilions had no programme, no message and no reason. They were expensive and they clearly did not do any good for the surrounding urban fabric. They were also uncompromisingly ugly (as the ones that were built still testify). The question is: Why red? Why did concepts in architecture appear in 1983 as something entirely unintelligible, apart from the fact that they had to be red?

▪ Vito Acconci, Architect ▪

Could you please go back to masturbating under art gallery floors?

▪ Examples ▪

San Rocco is also interested in contributions analyzing concepts and contexts in the buildings included on our lists of the Top 25 Contextual Masterpieces and the Top 25 Conceptual Disasters.

San Rocco's Top 25 Contextual Masterpieces:

- ▪ Flatiron, New York, USA
- ▪ Forum Nervae, Rome, Italy
- ▪ Seagram Building, New York, USA
- ▪ Annunziata, Ariccia, Italy
- ▪ Portico dei Banchi, Bologna, Italy
- ▪ Bowery Savings Bank, New York, USA
- ▪ Currutchet House, Buenos Aires, Argentina
- ▪ Haus am Michaelerplatz, Vienna, Austria
- ▪ Brasília, Distrito Federal, Brazil
- ▪ Twin Parks Northeast Houses, New York, USA
- ▪ Satellite Towers, Mexico City, Mexico
- ▪ Economist Building, London, UK
- ▪ York Terrace, Regent's Park, London, UK
- ▪ Kiefhoek social housing, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
- ▪ San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, Rome, Italy
- ▪ John Deere headquarters, Moline, Illinois, USA
- ▪ Sokollu Mehmet Paşa Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey
- ▪ Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France
- ▪ Public Library, Seattle, USA
- ▪ Stone House, Tavole, Italy
- ▪ Santa Maria della Pace, Rome, Italy
- ▪ Fire Station No. 4, Columbus, Indiana, USA
- ▪ Casa Milà, Barcelona, Spain
- ▪ Gehry House, Santa Monica, California, USA
- ▪ National Farmers' Bank, Owatonna, Minnesota, USA

San Rocco's Top 25 Conceptual Disasters:

- ▪ Tour Eiffel, Paris, France
- ▪ Tallest tower in the world, wherever it is right now
- ▪ Fred & Ginger, Prague, Czech Republic
- ▪ Bibliothèque François Mitterand, Paris, France
- ▪ Casa del Fascio, Como, Italy
- ▪ Villa Capra (a.k.a. "la Rotonda"), Vicenza, Italy
- ▪ The Calatrava project of your choice
- ▪ Fondation Cartier, Paris, France

- Dubai, United Arab Emirates
- Louvre, Paris, France (except the pyramid, of course)
- Einsteinturm, Potsdam, Germany
- NEMO Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- Cemetery of Modena, Modena, Italy
- Olympic Stadium (the so-called Bird's Nest), Beijing, People's Republic of China
- Reichstag (the old and the new), Berlin, Germany
- Aqua tower, Chicago, USA
- San Ivo alla Sapienza, Rome, Italy
- Kubuswoningen, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
- Mountain dwellings, Copenhagen, Denmark
- J. P. Getty Center, Los Angeles, USA
- Capitol, Dhaka, Bangladesh
- Central library, Delft Institute of Technology, Delft, The Netherlands
- McCormick Tribune Campus Center, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, USA
- Dutch Pavilion, Hannover, Germany
- Wissenschaftszentrum, Berlin, Germany

Following pages: Flatiron Building, photograph by Francesco Giunta Tour Eiffel, photograph by Giulio Boem