

Alessio Assonitis,
In Extremis: Landscape into Architecture

Consecrated Spaces, Sacred Journeys

“Do you want to renounce your faith in poverty and build grand palaces?”

With this stern admonition, Dominic de Guzmán (1170-1221) vehemently reprimanded a friar for having erected the walls of the convent of San Niccolo delle Vigne in Bologna slightly taller than what was prescribed by this Order’s unwritten rules. At this very early stage in the history of the Dominican Order, the meter of aesthetic pauperism was determined more by appearance than by regulation. The founder himself asserted that friars should live in small edifices and poor cells, suitable solely for study and sleep. For a brief time only, construction tempered by a genuine espousal of *paupertas* (poverty) served as the Rule. These vague directives, however, were bound to be short-lived: an explicit pandect soon became necessary. The first Dominican Constitutions instructed Friar Preachers to live in *mediocres* (modest) and *humiles* (low) spaces, delimited by precise measurements, in buildings that would not be a cause for scandal. Moreover, their churches had to be void of *superfluitates* (excesses) and *curiositates* (distractions). Yet, even these regulations turned out to be insufficient. Dominican conventual architecture was marred by infractions and subsequent emendations to the Constitutions. In all effects, *paupertas* was relinquished in favor of practicality and comfort, not to speak of frivolity of form. During the course of the following centuries – particularly throughout the Italian Renaissance – sporadic though uncompromising pauperistic movements reacted against this laxity, but without success.

There are a number of important elements that trace certain converging trends in pauperistic aesthetics and Erieta Attali’s visual research. Many buildings featured in her photographic production incarnate a strong disdain for “excess” and “distraction”, a lack of ostentatious *majestas*, and a conscious neglect of worldliness. Eclecticism and mannerisms are, for the most part, kept to a minimum in favor of a contemporary, often anodyne, stylistic sobriety. Even the use (and reuse) of materials points to a modern reinterpretation of Mendicant aesthetics. Originally, bricks, thatch, plaster, and wood were preferred to marble and sandstone, considered to be rich materials. Furthermore, the relation of buildings to their respective environment constitutes no “cause of scandal”. Some interact with the landscape, in an attempt to blend in, modestly and silently. A few others stand apart, emerging monumentally from nature’s viscera. Attali investigates the interaction of these structures with their surroundings, challenging the viewer to detect the patterns of interpenetration between landscape and building. Even the most declamatory architecture is ensnared by the precepts of Attali’s distinctive aesthetic tenet. As the viewer perceives the relationships between the constituent parts of the photographic composition, elements of visual dissent seem to be tamed by the unifying harness of tonal and atmospheric synthesis. Even nature itself is subject to this process of homologation, which is intrinsic to Attali’s creative process.

Upon closer examination, there is a strong sacral component in this selection of images. Attali extracts hermitages, pilgrimage trajectories, and sacred precincts from contemporary structures that have marked their respective settings, oftentimes in a violently dialectical manner. She seems to begin with a palimpsest already indelibly inscribed with pagan and monastic architectural lexicons when composing her visual compositions. Private homes become isolated sanctuaries and monasteries in austere landscapes. These structures appear to be accessible to few while remaining visible to many. Some serve as refuges from contemporaneity; some function as lighthouses guiding the wayfarer to his destination. This latter theme is explored by Attali on a number of occasions, each time taking on the guise of a different ilk of wanderer. Footsteps on Maranhão (Brazil) sand dunes not only establish a record of a journey, but they also sanction human intervention in the landscape. Similarly, a road plowing through the desolate territories in the Argentine province of Jujuy evokes the harsh travel of medieval pilgrims on the Via Francigena. Attali transposes the theme of the religious itinerary to an urban context. The pathways paved with quarry detritus and ancient spolia, assembled by Dimitris Piki-onis in the 1950s, inevitably point to the religious experience of Panathenaic processions. A similar kind of ceremonial function is enacted, perhaps even on a daily basis, on the sloping brick progression of Villa Elisa, rising towards the skies like a Mesopotamian ziggurat. When we finally enter these sanctuaries, we are drawn into their liturgical spaces. Here, the surgical precision with which Attali constructs her compositions is immediately perceptible. The exterior court preceding the perspectival *fuga* towards sea and sky in the Galfetti House overlooking the Aegean and the interior of Bernard Tschumi's New Acropolis Museum, punctuated by sculpture from the west pediment, are just two examples of basilica naves carved out from private and public spaces. In both cases, the sacred precincts and their foci – respectively, the horizon line and the Parthenon – are clearly delineated for the performance of secular rituals. Furtively, almost to validate the abovementioned profane areas of congregation, an authentic nave in the Cemetery Hall in Zug is included. A reflection on the glass a partition and vertical strips of curtain, reminiscent of the colonnade in a Paleochristian basilica, partly disguise the cross.

Erieta Attali's formal and iconographical solutions – including her attempts to reconfigure the sublime – are subject to her distinctive aesthetic imprimatur. Through this filter, even the most disparate geomorphological and climatic sites appear to originate from the same general location. Not even architecture is spared by this overarching aegis. This operation, however, is performed with utter humility and simplicity, without recourse to shortcuts or curious distortions. Each image is the product of careful research, an incessant eradication of the superfluous and affected. Her personal paupertas is found in the revelation of the intimacy of sacred spaces and in the preservation of the deafening silence of waterfalls, deserts, and oceans. At all times, she remains devoted to this Rule, and is never tempted to *build grand palaces*.