



## Georg Simmel and the field of architecture. International conference (Paris-Strasbourg, 14-16 Mars 2018)

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the creation of new forms that one day will be oppressive once again, in a *perpetuum mobile* which is the stream of modern life. Objective culture frees and oppresses individuality *in the same time*. The revolt of the *Occupy Wall Street Movement* against money culture was however possible thanks to the technology – iPhones, iPads, Facebook, Twitter, etc. – created by the money culture and used by the government to control and spy the protesters themselves. “Which better symbol of this tension of the rituals, during the vicissitudes of the *Occupy* movement, raised to pay homage to Steve Jobs?” (ivi., p. 399). For Levine Simmel’s vitalist theory of culture has still a predictive and analytical potential.

ANDREA BORSARI

**Georg Simmel and the field of architecture. International conference (Paris-Strasbourg, 14-16 Mars 2018)**

1. Organized and supported by the Department and the Doctoral School of Architecture and Cultures of project of the University of Bologna, the National School of Architecture – Paris La Villette (EnsaplV), the National School of Architecture (Ensas) and the National Institute of Applied Sciences – Strasbourg, and the University of Paris Nanterre, an international conference on “Georg Simmel and the field of architecture” took place in Strasbourg and Paris on March 14th-16th 2018. On the occasion of the centenary of the death of the great philosopher and sociologist, a group of philosophers and social researchers working on aesthetics and the philosophy of architecture within the various institutions involved decided to question Simmel’s relationship with the phenomena of the city, the forms of sociability and urban life, the analysis of the elements projected and built within it, as well as the artificial and designed objects that populate our everyday life.

As Georg Simmel pointed out that the city was a place of crossroads, collision, contrasts and uninterrupted conflicts from which the inhabitant affirmed their difference, the conference – at a first level – has had as objective to decline this difference around certain themes such as landscape, ruin, bridge and gate, poverty, foreign, border, secret, network of sociability, conflict, money, urban culture, spatial organization, and – more in general – to make Simmel’s fine intuitions on modernity, space, big city, urban sociability fruitful to an original reading of the architectural and urban dimension, by crossing different disciplines (anthropology, architecture, arts, philosophy, literature, psychoanalysis).

To answer, in particular the question if we can speak of “an architectural field” in Simmel’s thought we need to reconstruct a corpus of texts and themes that refer to the urban dimension, the city, the architecture as a modality for the construction of buildings, the objects and places to inhabit the world by giving it a certain configuration, and the forms of social life that develop in their field, such as: the relationship nature culture (or spirit-nature) – decisive to understand either the specificity of historical cities (Florence, Rome, Venice) and the dynamic that produces the ruin as a return of the material to its form in distinction, or the landscape as construction, made by the subject who perceives it; the contrast hyper-aesthesis / an-aesthesis that characterizes the experience of the inhabitant of the big city, as well the fruition form of the work of art in mass condition and the modality approach to things in the stores, world exhibitions and other places for the goods. Simmel is probably the first one which allows us to focus and think how the elements of attraction used for art making have been transferred to all the external forms of the life in modern cities and societies to make all of them more attractive with the adoption of an aesthetic “superadditum”, a kind of “aesthetization of the world” or “inflation of beauty”, along with the growing abstraction and intellectualization produced by the financial economy (Andrea Borsari, Univ. Bologna).

By the point of view of the social theory, it is then very important to understand Simmel's equation "how does more of society lead to less sociability" starting from the notion of formal or pure sociability. Other said, to understand how sociability becomes the playful form of socialization, and this through the study of conversation, coquetry, board games and of worldliness. The notion of formal sociability will allow us to reflect on how to find the pure forms of society by moving to the Simmelian question "how is society possible?" (Alain Milon, Univ. Paris-Nanterre).

2. The analysis proposed by the conference was therefore oriented, on the one hand, towards the study of the changes introduced by the advent of the great city in urban living conditions and, on the other hand, towards the study in detail of forms of urban aisthesis and sensoriality, besides proposing some prospecting on the philosophical premises of a possible Simmelian architectural vision and on its reception in national contexts.

The process of social differentiation identified by Simmel in the late nineteenth century-early twentieth century societies leads to the possibility of multi-membership for each individual, more effectively with the development of the monetary economy and with the growth of great cities. Since society is possible only through these typings, the relationship with the person we are dealing with is transformed, something which opens to the analysis of the mutations of attribution of trust, thus opening up a vast field of exploration following Simmel's insights, as Erving Goffman Harold Garfinkel, Anthony Giddens and Niklas Luhmann did (Patrick Watier, Strasbourg University).

Thanks to this theoretical perspective, it becomes possible to explore the matrix of urban experience made up of entities that have been hitherto impalpable like "extraneousness", "superficiality" and "tact" as objects of social research (Pedro José García Sánchez, Univ. Paris Nanterre). The sociological theory of the great city provides us with the instruments to frame the mechanisms that cause fragmentation of citizenship in

contemporary social reality, and thanks to the contribution of Georg Simmel we can study the developments, which lead to a growing social fragmentation in urban aggregations, as well as their consequences for access to citizenship rights (Gregor Fitzzi, Univ. Potsdam). In the case of cities, we are caught between the temptation of aesthetic apprehension, aspiring unconsciously to find a coherence, even a design / drawing in the growth of the urban fabric, and an ecological approach, which takes the city as a natural phenomenon, whose stages of growth can be traced with regularity, as promoted by the Chicago School in its early days. In this way, the city can become a testing ground for Simmelian hermeneutics – and, in particular, for one of its most fruitful concepts, the “objective spirit” – halfway between the aestheticism that often has been reproached to it and the urban ecology (Denis Thouard, Ehéss – Paris/Berlin).

3. The research direction that aims to explore the mental life of great cities as a great “sensorium societatis” and that interprets mental life as a sensitive life (Barbara Carnevali, Ehéss Paris) shows all its fruitfulness analyzing aesthetic phenomena outside the domain of art. In this sense, Simmel’s “sociology of the senses” constitutes a systematic reflection on human sensoriality in a phase of great spatial density, and can be read in continuity with the subsequent developments made by Walter Benjamin for the redefinition of modern urbanity and aesthetic of the urban environment (Henrik Reeh, Univ. Copenhagen).

The program focusing on the aesthetic dimension can be specified in different directions. A first direction investigates how it is possible to obtain, starting from Simmel, some innovative considerations on the relationship between architecture as a built environment and the “inhabitant citizen” and his/her human condition. Many phenomena of contemporary life fall into this perspective, like, for instance: the tattoo now omnipresent as a “self-technique” which can be understood as a postmodern variant of self-appropriation attempts on the irreducible nature of the body; or, in contrast, the fact that aesthetic phenomena

formerly “pure”, such as listening to music or artistic photography, seem de-substantiated, “depurated”, by constantly reducing the levels of quality in favor of total availability (Ingo Meyer, Univ. Bielefeld). A second direction is aimed at reconstructing at least the most original aesthetic concepts identified by Simmel to outline the extra-artistic phenomena, as is the case of the landscape. Simmel’s discovery – in a general cultural sense – of the real landscape from the pictorial landscape, as contribution to the general discovery of the landscape at the turning of the nineteenth century which, opens to read it in existential sense as something that realizes the inhabitant of the metropolis by “going out” in the landscape and as a counterpart to the experience lived in the intensification of the nervous life of the great city (Paolo D’Angelo, Univ. Roma Tre). A third direction works on the philosophical articulation, on the metaphysical and anthropological instance that supports the Simmelian aesthetic approach, and – considering his *Intuition of life* – focuses on the notions of “space”, “frontier” and “symbol”, and interprets human beings as “boundary beings”, characterized by the “being border that has no boundary”: the question of the frontier is in fact the nervous terminal of the Simmelian intellect (Fabrizio Desideri, Univ. Firenze).

4. Alongside the echoes of Simmelian categories in specific cultural areas, such as the “bridge” in landscape architecture and human relations (Sidi Omar Azeroual, Univ. Marrakech), or the tension between landscape and city in Korean and Chinese cinema (Sun Jung Yeo, Univ. Paris III and Seoul), the conference documented the reception of Simmel in the architectural culture of Italy and France (Cristiana Mazzoni, Ensa - Paris Malaquais, Alexandra Pignol, Florence Rudolf, Ensas - Strasbourg) and concluded by reflecting on some philosophical implications of the Simmelian discourse, the duration (Christiane Vollaire, Cnam Paris) and the political subjectivation (Isabelle Chesneau, Ensa - Paris Malaquais), and summarizing its general meaning for the relationship with architecture (Manola Antonioli, Ensaplv - Paris)

and the aesthetic-metaphysical plan of the relationship between totality and multiplicity connected by the concept of reciprocal action as a link between the practical-sensitive dimension and the practical-moral dimension (Jacinto Lageira, Paris I - Sorbonne).

In conclusion, while the choice to test the construction of Simmel's thought through the series of contrasting terms and relationships that link it to the field of architecture has confirmed the reasons for its interest, the stimulus to Simmel *Forschung* has also highlighted its tendency to retrace familiar paths and automatisms already traveled. As well as, finally, the research direction that aims to deepen the connexion between sensuous experience and theory in Simmel has proven to be the richest in prospects and results expected.