

INTENSITY

Dialogue with Kenneth Frampton

PUBLISHED IN

Principia Architectónica. Mairera Libros. Madrid, 2012

INTENSITY

Dialogue with Kenneth Frampton

Just as these essays, written during my sabbatical year at Columbia University, were close to completion, Kenneth Frampton made an appointment with me to have a drink before my mandatory and brief quarterly trip to Spain in April. We had a conversation that evening at the Italian restaurant on Amsterdam Avenue where Frampton tends to go. We sat at the same table as always, he with a glass of Riesling, I with a double espresso.

While the conversation began with my enthusiastic praise for the concert I had heard a few days previously at Avery Fisher Hall in Lincoln Center, with a program of Mozart's Solemn Vespers, and Requiems by Lauridsen and Fauré we soon got on to the usual topic of architecture. Almost immediately, he used the word "intensity" as an indispensable quality for all architecture worthy of the name. And though I had already decided to conclude the series of my essays for Columbia, this conversation seemed so interesting and important that I decided to transcribe it as it took place and add it as an addendum to my *Principia Architectonica*.

I must note here that Kenneth Frampton, besides being as healthy and intellectually astute as ever, remains among the most prestigious and influential architects, professors, and critics in the world not only on account of his numerous books, such as *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, *Studies in Tectonic Culture*, and *Labour, Work and Architecture*, but also to his tireless work directing doctoral theses and research projects as Ware Professor at Columbia University. His contributions to the field in his essays, generous introductions, and lectures are too numerous to mention here, but the great tribute that was paid to him in November 2010 on the occasion of his 80th birthday was significant. No one was missing.

After saying the magic word "intensity," we both agreed on the three conditions every self-respecting architect ought to pursue: constructing radical works, in-depth teaching, and substantial research and production of insightful written work capable of communicating the logic on which the former are based. One could think about the three as if they were legs of a table: ideas, drawings, and words.

We also spoke of beauty.

Frampton argued, following Saint Augustine of Hippo, for beauty understood as the splendor of truth. After bringing up Plato –and his Symposium– from whom Augustine had taken this brilliant image, I told him how I had discovered a beautiful distillation of this idea in the last lines of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* by John Keats: "Truth is Beauty, Beauty Truth". I also told him how much of a treat it is that you can buy wonderful and very cheap books on the streets of New York City, and that my most recent find had been a book of poems by Keats in which I had made this not very original, albeit marvelous discovery.

Frampton then reminded me that the shield of the Architectural Association of London, the AA, where he studied Architecture, was adorned with the following motto: “Design with Beauty, Build in Truth.” In a certain way, that summarized everything we were talking about.

We also discussed philosophy.

Frampton reminded me about Hannah Arendt, the Jewish philosopher and disciple of Heidegger, who was persecuted and for whom Frampton feels a particular fondness. He recommended that I read her seminal text, *The Human Condition*.

I told him how he had introduced me to Osip Mandelstam, the Russian Jewish poet imprisoned by Stalin who recited Virgil’s *Aeneid* to his fellow prisoners. Mandelstam’s *Talking about Dante*, originally written in Russian, is a text of unsurpassable beauty on the topic of artistic creation and indispensable to any architect’s library. I have it in Spanish, in a splendid translation by Selma Ancira, and I gave it to Frampton in English, translated by Clarence Brown and Robert Hughes. For years, I have included it in the bibliography I give my students. I also reminded him that he was the first person to speak to me about John Donne, a 17th century English poet, relative of Thomas More, whose work I am beginning to discover.

Frampton then spoke of Ortega y Gasset, whom he knew through his dialogues with Heidegger in Darmstadt, from which the clear essay *Meditation on Technique* comes.

Having recounted to him how many times I have found ideas from that essay so fundamental for my own writing, I spoke to him of Xavier Zubiri, one of Ortega’s disciples who had written a perspicacious text in 1982 when he was awarded the National Research Award in Spain. I explained how in this text Zubiri had thanked Spanish society for recognizing philosophy as a true labor and field of research. I told Frampton how in that text, if you replaced the word “philosophy” with “architecture,” it remains valid, and moreover, very effective in explaining many of the questions we were putting on the table. I’ve already done it a few times.

We also discussed architecture.

Frampton generously asked me about my work, and I told him about my work in front of the Zamora Cathedral, in that old Castilian city. I described the sturdy box we were raising, open to the sky, constructed with large stones, the same stone as that in the Cathedral. Inside, we had placed a delicate box of the purest glass, protected by those stone walls and by the large trees we had planted there. And I described for him the huge cornerstone 2.50 x 1.50 x 0.50 meters that we placed in the corner, in front of the Cathedral, with the engraving HIC LAPIS ANGULARIS MAIO MMXII POSITO. Just like Columbia’s cornerstones, but in Latin. And the immense seamless glass panes 6 meters tall and 3 meters wide, with which we built the glass box, engraved with acid: HOC VITRUM ANGULARIS MAIO MMXII POSITO.

Frampton brought up the communist ideals of his youth, and how both he and they have been tempered over the years. He then turned to Aalto and Villa Mairea, comparing it with the Tugendhat House and Mies van der Rohe, as he has done in some of his many published books.

We both delighted in the last Pritzker award winner, Eduardo Souto De Moura. A remarkable man, producing remarkable work. We've both written texts for an exhibition organized in Porto, before the Prize. I commented to Frampton that it seemed strange that he had never been on the selection committee for the Pritzker. After smiling broadly, he changed the subject. We talked about friends like Toshio Nakamura, David Chipperfield, and Steven Holl, future Pritzkers. We once again agreed that to make quality architecture a lot of time had to be dedicated to it, resulting in fewer works. The problem of many architects in the celebrity circuit, we agreed, was that they made so many works that they were dissolved in them. We spoke extensively about Rem Koolhaas, Herzog, and De Meuron and their huge works in Asia.

I then told him about the time I accepted the invitation of a good friend, an architect my own age, to celebrate the construction of his 2,000th work. Two thousand! I recalled how, upon returning home, in a bout of vanity, I grabbed all my publications and made a count of what I had made over the course of my life, only 37 works. I recalled how a slight depression overcame me and how that night I resumed my reading of an entertaining biography of Shakespeare by Bill Bryson in which, on the page I opened, he noted that the bard had only 37 plays. I told Frampton how happy I was ever since I discovered that fact.

Finally, we returned to the subject of intensity: a condition that is as essential as it is difficult to find in so many of the works being constructed during this long, superficial epoch. I didn't ask Frampton if he had been present when the RIBA Gold Medal was awarded to Lubetkin in 1982, since the sound and amazing speech the author of the London Zoo's penguin pool gave contains many paragraphs that refer to this lack of rigor in the architecture of our time and to many of the other issues we were debating here. His judgments were so on target, it could have been written today.

We agreed that this intensity in architecture speaks not only of the truth necessary to reach beauty in a work, but also of the strength it must have to produce that suspension in time in us which only the best artistic creations can produce. Accordingly, "suspension of time" is the title of my last essay.

The long dialogue was so interesting that it felt very short for both of us. We were so at ease there, however time was running out and we had to finish up. The cup of coffee and the glass of Riesling were empty, but we were happy and fulfilled.