



**RESILIENCE AND
SELF-RELIANCE IN THE
ARCHITECTURE'S MÉTIER**

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What an unusual word is “resilience”. Quite peculiar. The first time I heard about such word, nowadays so much in use, was in an essay by the French philosopher Matthieu Ricard. Ricard is not a representative of a mainstream academic discipline, in spite of holding a Ph.D. in Cellular genetics, but a monk who follows the path of Tibetan Buddhism. He mentions in an essay on happiness that developing positive thoughts is an evolutionary advantage that creates an upward spiral by building resilience, influencing the ways people cope with adversity.

The term resilience was originally alien to architecture. One of its widely-used definitions was elaborated by Canadian ecologist Crawford Stanley Holling in a 1973 paper, in which he defines resilience as the ability of systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables, and parameters, and still persist. Other ecologists (Berkes & Folke; B. Walker) expanded Holling’s definition as the ability of systems to self-organise while undergoing change; the ability of learning and adaptation in the context of change; the potential of systems absorb or buffer disturbances and still maintain its core abilities, and remain in a particular configuration.

Why has the term “resilience” become so popular in recent years in social sciences, economics, architecture, urbanism, etc.? A few weeks ago I was engaged in a discussion with a social scientist over resilience and globalization, as both concepts become widely used in both academic and non-academic circles to study responses to disruptive impacts. I was also particularly interested in globalization as it affected the way of teaching architecture and urbanism. It is not casual that the Bologna process was initiated as a response to globalization. Students



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need to be competitive in a global world, and in order to do so, they must adopt a broad and global vision in all senses. It is yet to be seen if the Bologna process will make architecture students more resilient or less able to learn and re-invent themselves.

Concerning globalization, in the early 1990s, the Italian economist Giovanni Arrighi emphasized that such phenomenon was not new to capitalism, which he claims it has always been global. He predicted that a cycle of financial expansion was about to reach its limits, which announced a shift of the World economic axis to the far East – Arrighi first thought of Japan, and later on of China. Globalization was not a new phenomenon, and it did not represent the triumph of a Western hegemon. Other economists such as Stiglitz(2006)believe that globalization could end favoring developing countries.

Globalization gained notoriety in the 1990s as a concept to explain the global expansion of the so-called free market policies after the fall of the Soviet bloc. It was concurrently criticized as world populations struggled to harness the promised welfare from free trade agreements. Rodrik, Stiglitz(2000), and Amoore, among many others, pointed out that globalization was not the panacea for all countries, and resistance to globalization gained attention since the mid-1990s.

Free trade barriers were not removed, they were just regulated. Social groups affected by privatization of global commons reacted against tariff agreements that actually eroded democracy and the welfare state. Some organizations, such as transnational corporations or fair-trade networks, embraced, adapted and profited from the new regulations whilst some others struggled



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to resist or perish. The misbalanced effects of globalization were the subject of innumerable academic papers.

After twenty years, as each crisis is followed by a new one, economists – or at least some of them - learnt to seek solutions to every single crisis not according to a global paradigm or a popular concept, but through a thorough analysis of each case. The phenomenon of resilience sounded more adapted to this quest for single-case solutions instead of wide-spectrum recipes. If globalization is a worldwide tsunami, resilience is the lonely boats sailing the waves.

Furthermore, a term such resilience is more needed after a big crisis, such as the one that followed the financial crisis of 2007 to 2008. In this search for resilience, each professional tend to observe this global crisis from a different perspective biased by their academic background. Sociologists discuss refugee crisis, or gentrification. Biologists raise concerns about the side effects of industrialization on global warming and biodiversity loss. Physicists work on the change of the energy matrix and how to integrate different sources in a common grid. Civil engineers struggle with obsolete and crumbling infrastructures. Architects organize debates on shrinking cities and the need of architecture of crisis while dealing with constructors looking for new opportunities of real estate speculation. Everybody seeks to shape a professional career in view of un uncertain future.

In times of crisis, resilience is an ability we desperately search and want to adopt. However, as one can observe, resilience is not common to all human beings, or to all communities. Whilst some people who were once shocked by the most terrible



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circumstances are capable of getting up, rebuild themselves, and retake their previous lives by learning from such traumatic experiences, some others fall prisoners of chagrin, obsession, or sadness. As some societies get their strength from a crisis that makes them rebirth from their ashes as a phoenix, some others remain devastated for decades. Haiti, a recipient of a massive influx of foreign aid after the 2010 earthquake, in a classic example of failed international cooperation, continues in disarray and despair. Japan, a country that has endured, in the last century, both conventional and atomic bombing, a military defeat, several earthquakes and fires, a nuclear accident and a recent economic stagnation, has quickly recovered from every shock. Whence is such strength coming? A possible explanation could be found in the intertwining of the concepts “self-reliance” and “resilience”.

In *El Croquis Monográfico* magazine, Spanish architect Javier Vellés recalls an incident with Francisco Javier Saenz de Oiza, who was at the time his teacher and mentor at the ETSAM. Vellés and two other students submitted a joint work to Oiza, who examined the project and told them that it was a remarkable exercise which would have deserved a 9 out of 10 mark. “However”, he continued, “as you students are three, if I had to divide a 9 mark among three students, each would only get a 3” - too low a mark to pass an exam. “What a great lesson is the one from this singular individualist!”, Vellés noted.

In 1991, Juan Daniel Fullaondo, who worked and attended Oiza’s class, recalls the same incident in *La Bicicleta Aproximativa*. Fullaondo disagreed with Vellés and pointed out that, paradoxically, Oiza often used to teaming with other architects.



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Therefore, Oiza’s pretended lesson of individualism clashed against his own professional behavior. Shall his professional outstanding 10-mark work deserved a 3.33 mark? Fullaondo considered that it was more important to value the quality of a work, elaborated either by an architect or many, that stressing the contribution of each individual.

I revisited the incident and cogitated that Oiza gave a lesson not of individualism, understood as competitive selfishness, but of self-reliance. Inspired by Oiza’s teachings and personal life I considered that every architect student should be able to develop a project without any assistance, conduct their own research into every single aspect of a project until an acceptable proposal was found. A student of architecture should not try to cover their gaps of knowledge in certain areas by relying on other people’s knowledge. Architects must be able to struggle on their own to face all obstacles in order to achieve their goals, or would not survive to any critical circumstance. If they could not defend a whole project by themselves, they would have little chances of finding someone else to do it.

Oiza was a kind of “renaissance man”, a Leonardo Da Vinci with a state-of-the-art knowledge of several disciplines, a holistic professional able to discuss architecture, painting, sculpture, or structural engineering. The more an architect, or any other professional, would learn about other disciplines, the bigger their resilience. As nobody knows which skills would be the most wanted and praised in a decade or two, it is too risky to bet for one specialization based in today’s society. Furthermore, a holistic knowledge provides common ground and vocabulary to engage in a fruitful discussion with representatives of other



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disciplines. An architect, a structural engineer, a sociologist, and a geographer would find it easier to collaborate and work as a team in an urbanism project if they all have certain knowledge of each other's disciplines.

As soon as in 1961, José Antonio Coderch in an article published on *Domus* magazine, stressed that what it was needed were not genius architects, the ones thinking of Architecture with a capital A, the tallest or fanciest buildings, big money and big projects, pretending to be a new Le Corbusier as soon as they graduate. Coderch's article may be regarded as a critic to the star architects who monopolized the merits of their big teams. He complained about the antihuman urbanizations popping up along the beautiful Mediterranean Coast and believed that an average architect should create a living work with dedication, good will, and honesty. Coderch advocated for what was left of the traditional elements of construction, for a return to the origins of architecture (as a *métier*, I would add) and to moral integrity.

In this sense, Coderch sounded closer to Ricard on building resilience, which according to the latter involves discipline and continuous practice, learning through our own experience, and altruism. Ricard shares with Coderch this urge to foster altruism and to pursue happiness in things well-done. He called the attention to the human being behind a building or urban project.

It is necessary to have a common field of understanding and language to feel empathy for others. If we teach architect students to enjoy and appreciate the practice and the traditional knowledge of their *métier*, to learn from different experiences and disciplines, to foster altruism, they will increase their ability



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to adapt to changes in a globalized working environment. Every time I meet Spanish architects working abroad, it's their thorough knowledge of the traditional elements of architecture, their technical knowledge of structures, and of other disciplines (in other words, their self-reliance) what makes them resilient.

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