

Breaking points

Alessandro Nannini

Architecture and intimacy.

On 2024 Beta architecture biennial of Timișoara

The 2024 edition of Beta – the Timișoara architecture biennial – was held from September 13 to October 27, 2024 in Timișoara, western Romania. This fifth edition, curated by Romanian architect Oana Stănescu, focused on cover in all the variety of its meanings (“cover me softly” is the title of the biennial). The concept of cover, the new recording of an old song by a different artist, originated in the 1950s with pop consumerism, when the main source of profit for the music industry became the sale of the song regardless of the artist performing it (Coyle 2003). The phenomenon of cover, present in all the arts, from fashion to cinema, indicates the possibility of working with what is already present. The venue of the biennial, the historic Garrison Command at Liberty Square, is indicative in this sense, as it contains in its maze-like interior a long history of covers and coverings. Originally built in 1727 as the residence of the general commander in the Banat region, it later became the headquarters of administrative offices and more recently a venue for cultural exhibitions. The work for the preparation of the biennial involved an intense effort to recover its original spatial configuration, preserving colors, fixtures, and details from different epochs and uses, striving to showcase its living memory to this day.

Inside the “archi-cover” of the Garrison Command 49 projects were exposed, which problematized different aspects of covers. In fact, studying the world of covers means investigating the various forms of dialogue that the artists engage with a broader context of pre-existing works, in terms of appropriation or remix, sometimes for homage, other times for critique, or even for theft. It also means questioning the issue of authorship and the legal institutions aimed at protecting it, such as copyright laws, as well as the concept of authenticity, and in general, the loose spectrum of fidelity to an original (Magnus, Magnus, Uidhir 2013). As the curator Stănescu points out in the accompanying volume *cover me softly* (Stănescu 2024), this issue is particularly important in architecture, where

the ideology of originality continues to fuel a cult of the original master. Architecture education itself seems complicit in the construction of the unique figure of the author, favoring personal distinction, competitiveness, and introversion (Türkkan 2023: 35), in contrast to what used to happen in vernacular architecture, which was much closer to the concept of cover in its appreciation of adaptability, repetition, use of local resources, and regenerative materials. The biennial's attempt, therefore, is to enhance the reflection about this entanglement with the world even in professional architecture, in the awareness that the building and construction sector contributes about 21 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, according to the 2023 UN Global Status Report.

The first meaning of cover being explored is that of copy, a topic that has been particularly discussed in recent literature, as shown by the newly published issue of "Aesthetica Preprint" with title: *Sul concetto di "copia" in architettura: teoria e storia*, edited by Maurizio Ricci. If we look at the history of the word "copia", it first evokes the concept of abundance, copiousness, as in the cornucopia, the horn of the goat Amalthea to which Jupiter gave the power to flow fruits and flowers, thus becoming a symbol of plenty. Yet, "copia", already during the Middle Ages, with the spread of *scriptoria*, took on another meaning, today the most widespread: the copyist, the one who produces the "copy", is primarily the one who transcribes works of antiquity. The copy, in its plural form, thus refers to the set of replicas of an original (Margolin, Merger 1994). These replicas, however, are never identical to the original, bearing some degree of divergence for arbitrary or involuntary reasons. In the activity of copying, therefore, a generativity emerges that disseminates the meaning of the original in ways that are never fully predictable, depending on the contingencies in which the text is copied and distributed. This is even more evident in architecture, where a copy is never truly possible in the strict sense, precisely because the building is not limited by the boundaries of the project design, but interacts pervasively with the territory in which it is located.

Such an identity in difference emerges in a series of projects that explore the creative possibilities of covers: in *Cover Bo Bardi*, a group of practitioners designed a cover of Lina Bo Bardi's *Casa de Vidro* in São Paulo, Brazil, in their own way; in *Solitude is good company*, curators Zeller & Moyer invited 10 architects and artists to make an intervention on *Casa Majagua* (1953-1955 and 1966), the masterpiece of Mexican modernism by Luis Barragán, in the form of a *cadavre exquis*, hence with the request for each practitioner to add a detail starting from the cover made

by the previous artist; in *Cover Brâncuși*, a series of architects were invited to design a cover of Brâncuși's childhood home in Hobița, Romania, playing a game of "telephone", where the original documentation of the house was handed to one designer, their cover passed to the next as a new original for a new cover, and so on. As evident, these methods encourage a reflection about the pluralization of meanings that covers spread out, with a specific focus on the problems that architecture poses. Take, for example, the cover of Lina Bo Bardi's house made by Misiūna and McCarthy, who in a way bring the work home by transporting *Casa de Vidro* from sub-tropical Brazil to snow-covered Lithuania, so as to better understand the adaptation skills of modernism across different geographical contexts. Here, the point is to show that the cover of the building cannot fail to take into account the place where the new building is to be located, insofar as it "covers" or provides shelter from the local environment.

This brings to light a second aspect of the cover theme, that of shielding from the weather. In the biennial, this aspect is showcased, as it were, in the very visit card with which the exhibition presents itself in the public space to visitors: Akane Moriyama's project *Thread*, a long semi-transparent piece of fabric hung over Liberty Square and the backyard of the Garrison building. The veil, in a sense, covers the exhibition itself, highlighting a series of elements that go beyond the built space, such as light and wind, and attests to the blurring of the boundary between the frontal and rear spaces. A storm during the biennial damaged part of this "thread", which was promptly readapted into a large curtain hanging from the balcony of the Garrison's façade, thus bringing to the fore the impermanence that every cover must face, as well as the necessity of making do with what we have.

Textiles are particularly suited to thematize the idea of cover as shelter, as emerges in the project *this space has no doors* by Malkit Shoshan (Anca Teslevici as project manager). The doorless space is a tent, inspired by the tents of the Tuareg people, which aims to emphasize the role of women as architects of these structures in the nomadic communities. The tent is here recognized as legitimate architecture, along a tradition dating back to Vitruvius himself, who suggested that the first architectural gesture of humankind lies in "texere" (*De Arch.* II, 1, 3), and reaching down to Gottfried Semper, who famously advocated the origin of architecture from the textile arts (Semper 1860-1863).

In Shoshan's project the fact is clear that a building, irrespective of its materials, must stand in a successful interaction with the outdoors, in or-

der to create comfortable indoor conditions for the inhabitants. The relevance of thermodynamic exchange was already clearly stated by Reyner Banham in his pioneering work *The architecture of well-tempered environment* (1969), in which the emphasis of architecture was shifted from style to environmental management, focusing on issues like thermal insulation, ventilation, heat storage, and so on. A particularly interesting project in this direction is the *Kotatsu table* by Something Fantastic, which presents an adapted model of the *kotatsu*, a Japanese table-like piece of furniture, here integrated with a high-efficiency electric heater as a micro-climatic intervention to counter escalating energy costs. The idea of the *kotatsu* is to explore the viability of heating and cooling devices, moving away from the logic of conventional closed-climate environments, which have fostered the standardization of buildings in climatically diverse areas.

Another installation elaborating on the attempt to create thermal comfort without resorting to central heating and air conditioning is the project *Climatic systems* by Atmos Lab, which compares the systems developed by Wladimiro Acosta for the subtropical climate of Buenos Aires and the winter gardens developed by Lacaton & Vassal to deal with the oceanic climate of France. Acosta's idea, which took shape in 1929 when he arrived in Argentina from the Soviet Union, is relevant because it lays bare the critical issues of the modernist movement, which had become a mere stylistic element for reasons of status-symbolizing, without real adaptation to the local climates. Acosta's response was to find an architecture that belongs to the place, for example, by introducing an opaque shading slab that allows the sun to filter into the main space of the house in winter and shields it during the summer, thus spearheading effective bioclimatic architecture. Likewise, Lacaton & Vassal, in constructing winter gardens in France, develop fully-glazed spaces that function as thermal buffers in winter and terraces in summer, thus maximizing thermal autonomy.

By placing thermodynamic exchange at the center of the debate, the cover as an interface that divides the inside from the outside ignites a broader reflection about the relationship between building, architecture, and site. As recent ecological approaches to architecture have emphasized (see for example Decroos, Dimitrova, Mandias, Ronner 2022), no building can be considered as an element abstracted from its context, but is in continuous and mutual interaction with the site on which it stands, no matter how indefinite this may be. The thematization of the site and its vagueness plays a central role in various installations of the biennial, such as in *The cannonball effect*, which documents the journey and the shift in

context of the *Walker guest house*, completed by Paul Rudolph in 1953, from Sanibel Island, Florida, to Yucca Valley, California, after detachment from its foundations. The indefiniteness of the site can also stand out because of the complexity of the ecosystem of which it is part. This is the case of *Carpathia* by ECOU studio, recording the construction of a resilient ecosystem at the Făgăraș Natural Park in the Carpathian Mountains over the last fifteen years, where the forests (re)cover themselves through projects keeping together ecological restoration, regeneration of communities, and development of sustainable businesses.

More generally, site boundaries can be uncertain because architecture does not deal with environmental issues only in the finalized project, but also in the course of its making. We can take as an example *The Marble Journey*, a project by Laurian Ghințoiu consisting in a film about the extraction and transportation of thirty thousand tons of marble from a quarry in Europe to its final destination, the façade of the Perelman Performing Arts Center at the World Trade Center site in New York City. The video unravels the multilayered transition of marble from raw material into translucent panels that underlie architectural creation and connects very different places and activities. Another case-study of the entanglement of architecture and environment before the construction of the building is *In Opera* by Inst and Carlos Casacuberta, a project also staged at the Uruguay Pavilion at the 18th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale. Here the young forestry law regulating the exportations of cellulose pulp in Uruguay looks in the mirror and sings to us its attempt to understand how the forestry industry transforms the region's landscapes. Also in this installation, architectural thinking, far from being confined to the straightjacket of the ground plan, poses a radical question about the configuration of space.

The fact that architecture is concerned with the configuration of space is not surprising today. Space was first acknowledged as the core element of architecture by August Schmarsow in *Das Wesen der architektonischen Schöpfung* (1894), and then became a mantra in 20th century discourse, from Siegfried Giedion's *Space, time and architecture* (1941) to Cornelis van der Ven's *Space in architecture* (1978). According to Schmarsow, architecture is "Raumgestalterin" because, in its historical evolution, it has always given a concrete shape to the bodily feeling of space (*Raumgefühl*). How can we reinterpret this claim in light of the above-mentioned projects? One answer may come from aesthetics. The beginning of aesthetic interest in space is usually traced back to Lessing's *Laocoon* (1766), where the adherence of contiguous pictorial signs to the spatial object

was the premise of aesthetic illusion; however, the problem of the positioning of the body was already well present at the origins of aesthetics as a discipline with Baumgarten, for whom any perception, hence also any *aisthesis*, always occurs “according to the position (*positus*) of the body” (Baumgarten 2013: § 512). If the position of the body is the root of architecture, we might claim that aesthetics has from the outset an architectural inspiration.

The interesting aspect for our purposes is that the term “positus”, position, is not immediately spatial in Baumgarten, unlike the more usual “situs”. “Positus” does not indicate the site of the body taken as a benchmark, but rather its positioning in a network of connections that branches out into the whole universe (Nannini 2022: 106-7). If architecture is still *Raumgestalterin*, then, the projects of the biennial suggest that the space being configured goes well beyond the sense of a material enclosure (room) or of an abstract and homogeneous extension, but may be more profitably understood in the sense of “positus”, hence a plot of relations that is indefinitely vast and also includes time and memory. This temporal aspect is apparent in *The Pilgrimage* by Ana Miljački and the Critical Broadcasting Lab of MIT, where a video presentation synthesizes memories from elementary and high school visits to nine memorial Yugoslavian monuments, which are barely recognizable under the cover of aging collective memory. And it also emerges in *Under Covers* by Karamuk Kuo, a large communal bed whose multilayered covers pay homage to the tradition of Romanian houses and handmade throws and pillows, telling stories of real and metaphorical weaving.

In this sense, the biennial makes a case for the transition of the architectural focus from the idea of three-dimensional space as site *in* an environment to the idea of a positioning within a multidirectional ebb and flow of actions and reactions *with* the environment, ranging from thermodynamic exchanges of individual buildings through the modeling of medium-size ecosystems to global-scale processes such as deforestation. The aim of several installations in the biennial is precisely to allude to the pervasiveness of this “meshwork” as the specific, yet elusive medium of architecture, by giving salience to some of its impermanent crystallizations.

Conclusively, I would suggest that the idea of architecture emerging from the biennial is precisely related to intimacy, as the soft embrace of the textile-enclosed bed that invites the visitor to pause at the entrance of the exhibition. However, just as the bed as the sanctuary of private life is made here a platform for public conversation, intimacy should not be taken for a kind of indoor atmosphere to be preferred over others – an

“introflection” into a house-shell (Benjamin 2002: 220) reinstating the protection of the maternal womb – but should be rather understood as a centrifugal or “extroflected” intimacy, an intimacy as an inextricable density of mobile relationships with the environing world from which every form of dwelling arises. If home indicates the experience of “intimate warmth”, to quote Juhani Pallasmaa (2012: 63), then intimate warmth is here rooted in a broader tangle of exchanges, from which the “outside” itself is not excluded. In fact, as Berleant puts it: “Where is ‘outside’ [...]? Is it the landscape that surrounds me where I stand? Is it the world outside my window? The walls of my room and house? The clothes I wear? The air I breathe? [...]. There is no outside. Nor is there an inner sanctum”. (Berleant 1992: 4). To express this decentralized intimacy, architecture can only take the form of a cover, in the awareness that the original and the copy, the covered and the covering, the subject and the object of architecture are not separated a priori but are embedded in the same canvas. *Cover me softly* is a call to this “interwoven” sensibility, which questions architecture and aesthetics in their original and current meaning at the same time. The exhibition can be visited online through a virtual tour at <https://betacity.eu/en/>.

Bibliography

- Banham, R., *The architecture of well-tempered environment*, London, Architectural Press, 1969.
- Baumgarten, A.G., *Metaphysics*, Engl. transl. C.D. Fugate, J. Hymers, London, Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Benjamin, W., *The arcades project*, ed. H. Eiland, K. McLaughlin, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Berleant, A., *The aesthetics of environment*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1992.
- Coyle, M., *Cover song*, “Key Words: a journal of cultural materialism”, 4 (2003), pp. 17-39.
- Decroos, B., Dimitrova, K., Mandias, S., Ronner, E. (eds.), *Ecology and aesthetics*, special issue of “OASE. Journal for architecture”, 112 (2022).
- Giedion, S., *Space, time and architecture* (1941), Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Magnus, C., Magnus, P.D., Uidhir, C.M., *Judging covers*, “Journal of aesthetics and art criticism”, 71/4 (2013), pp. 361-70.
- Margolin, J.C., Merger, A., *Copia*, in G. Ueding (Hrsg.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, vol. 2, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1994, coll. 385-94.

Nannini, A., *Somaesthetics in Baumgarten? The founding of aesthetics and the body*, "Estetika. The European journal of aesthetics", 59/2 (2022), pp. 103-18.

Pallasmaa, J., *The eyes of the skin: architecture and the senses*, Chichester, Wiley, 2012.

Ricci, M. (a cura di), *Sul concetto di "copia" in architettura: teoria e storia*, special issue of "Aesthetica preprint", 135 (2024).

Schmarsow, A., *Das Wesen der architektonischen Schöpfung*, Leipzig, Hirsemann, 1894.

Semper, G., *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten, oder praktische Ästhetik. Ein Handbuch für Techniker, Künstler und Kunstfreunde*, 2 voll., Frankfurt am Main, Verlag für Kunst und Wissenschaft, 1860-1863.

Stănescu, O., *Cover me softly*, in O. Stănescu, C. Gallis, *Something Fantastic* (eds.), *Cover me softly*, Cologne, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2024, pp. 13-26.

Türkkan, S., *The architecture of the making of the author*, "OASE. Journal for architecture", 113 (2023), pp. 25-35.

Van de Ven, C., *Space in architecture*, Amsterdam, Van Gorcum Assen, 1978.

© 2025 The Author. Open Access published under the terms of the CC-BY-4.0.