The seven ideas that form the foundation of the Academy of Architecture

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A new synthesis.
A university is not only a place of learning, it is also a place called upon to accommodate the most advanced culture of a particular field of knowledge. For a newly founded school, it is appropriate that this cultural role is paired with a strong innovative spirit that gives an exclusive prospective on today’s issues. When the project for a new school of architecture as the first faculty of USI was developed in the nineties, the question of how to make an authentic laboratory of architectural culture arose. What major issues confronted design disciplines in the post-modern era of globalization? It was clear that the Academy must not only be a new school, but a new school of thought. We decided that it would be characterized by a strong humanistic imprint: a new synthesis between technical knowledge and human and social sciences, between operational skills, traditional thinking, and critical thinking. In this way, we achieved a geo-cultural synthesis, bringing together the Mediterranean humanist traditions with the technical traditions that prevail north of the Alps.

An interdisciplinary vision.
Historical context and social landscape are central issues for a humanistic definition of design culture. From the beginning, with Aurelio Galfetti, the first director of the school, we coined the term “territorial architect”, a figure that carefully blends a project’s impact in the region in terms of landscape management, urban morphology, ecological commitment, ethical responsibility and the relationship it has with the cultural memory of a place. It was a commitment that opened an interdisciplinary process unconditionally, pushing architects’ interests towards the boundaries of multiple disciplines.

The importance of personality.
A kind of "author worship" has become common recently, often wrongly, but sometimes correctly. Therefore, during the formation of the Academy, we chose to leverage a high quality teaching staff, which gave us the opportunity to collaborate with the best representatives of the contemporary architectural debate. Among the first to form our group of designers were Galfetti, Zumthor and Koulermos. For history and theory of art and architecture, Dal Co, Frampton and Szeemann were appointed initially, followed by other
influential figures from Bertelli to Reichlin, from Gubler to von Moos and Settis, up to the current group of theorists coordinated by Christoph Frank. For the territorial culture we had luminaries such as Benevolent, Solà-Morales, Rykwert, Jacquard and Petrella; for philosophy, Cacciari and Agamben; for photography, Basil and Toscani. These international and cultural scholars had a strong interdisciplinary nature that corresponded to a strong diversity in individual projects in terms of the language of the architects responsible for each workshop. Over the years, this resulted in the creation of a broad international archipelago in Mendrisio, from Portugal to Austria, from Ireland to South Africa, all with a solid base at home here in Ticino. A school that is identified by giving space to protagonists from different disciplines and different design languages is striking. Our geographical condition as a border region was thus transformed into a condition of cultural centrality.

A laboratory of critical internationalism.
Internationality of teachers corresponds to the internationalization of students: from Western and Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, Latin America, and the Far East (now the Academy welcomes students from over 40 countries). This international profile was not a prelude to any kind of cultural assimilation. On the contrary, the different origins of professor architects resulted in the regular habit of reflection, connecting architectural practice to distinct cultures and operating conditions. In this sense, we defined the Academy as a laboratory of critical internationalism ready to confront the "territory of memory".

A need for the general architect.
The Academy’s entrepreneurial agenda led to questioning the figure of the architect. The name “Academy of Architecture" is already a distinction from the Institutes of Technology in Lausanne and Zurich. Compared to the focus on technical and scientific skills that prevails in the polytechnics, in Mendrisio we imagined an educational program that went against this trend: training new general architects who would update the traditional humanistic vision prevalent in the Mediterranean region. Based on the best disciplinary traditions, we felt it would be desirable for today’s architect to blend composite skills ranging from the construction project to the local culture, from an adaptive ingenuity to the knowledge of a craftsman, from the reuse of historical concepts to inventing new typological scenarios. We interpreted Muthesius’ architectural slogan “from spoon to town", as a mandate to keep alive the Modern Movement’s aspirations of total art (Gropius), the need for morality (Giedion), and the ethical and social value pursued by Le Corbusier, as well as the constructive control represented by the refined method of Mies van der Rohe or the hypersensitive style Scarpa.

The territory of memory.
The deterioration of cities and contemporary landscapes is due to the disappearance of large urban development models and the transformation of physical spaces that are lodged in our cultural memory. Hence the importance of re-evaluating the lessons learned from the creation of cities and from the European landscape. The speed of change we were and are still facing suggested that we must confront our memory of the territory as the very structure of a project design. In academics, this renewed relationship with the "past as a friend", as Louis Kahn famously said, was backed up with the consideration for architectural heritage, the dedication of numerous design studios to issues involved in building within
developed areas, the insistence upon giving context to urban development, and the lessons learned from history and theory.

The dual personality of Switzerland.
The Academy of Architecture was founded in an historical moment during which the cultural debate found fertile ground in the "dual personality", local and international, of Switzerland. The international teaching staff at the Academy represents one of the positive traits of Switzerland, a country often tempted to raise barriers against the outside, but at the same time open to a European and international dimension. The establishment of the Academy was one of the moments in which Switzerland showed the best of its dual personality, provincial and cosmopolitan, together.