



**Lacaton A., Vassal J.P., Walker E., Puente M. (a cura di)  
lacaton&vassal: free space transformation habiter / espacio  
libre transformación habiter**

Walther Konig, 2021

Pressoché nessuna concessione a eventuali bizzarrie editoriali, niente “giochi” grafici finalizzati a sollecitare lo stupore del lettore; tantomeno nessuna celebrazione di una firma di livello certamente mondiale, ma contraddistinta da un atteggiamento *low profile*, con il quale affronta ormai da decenni temi terribilmente seri. La sensazione, nettissima, al termine della lettura di *free space, transformation, habiter* è di avere tra le mani un prodotto editoriale concepito in totale armonia col lavoro di Anne Lacaton e Jean-Philippe Vassal: in altre parole, la traduzione in libro di quello spirito che da sempre muove l’opera del duo con studio a Montreuil, vicino a Parigi. Chiunque volesse non solo informarsi, ma soprattutto *capire* l’essenza dell’impegno di Lacaton & Vassal – comprese le lungimiranti opinioni sulle politiche immobiliari – trova in questo volume, in perfetto equilibrio tra testi e immagini, un formidabile alleato. Un non facile ma riuscito tentativo di progetto editoriale che intende analizzare senza annoiare e illustrare senza magnificare gli aspetti che legano l’intera loro produzione, dalle realizzazioni degli anni ’90 fino al 2020, anno del progetto per l’area Maag Areal a Zurigo. Il libro nasce in occasione della mostra tenutasi al Museo ICO di Madrid dal 6 ottobre 2021 al 12 gennaio 2022 ed è aperto da una conversazione con Enrique Walker, della Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, incentrata su una delle loro opere più rappresentative, il Palais de Tokyo a Parigi. L’indagine parte da qui, focalizzata

su tre temi fondativi: “free space” (*as much as possible, generosity of space, efficiency and comfort*), “transformation” (*never demolish, always add, transform, expand*), e “habiter”<sup>1</sup> (*life, uses, making the space one’s own*). È in tale contesto che è possibile cogliere in maniera adeguata i richiami alle architetture che citano quali loro riferimenti: dalla piazza Djemaa el-Fnaa a Marrakesh, in continuo mutamento, al Fun Palace di Cedric Price; dalla maison Dom-Ino di Le Corbusier fino alle Case Study Houses.

La capacità di presentare il lavoro di Lacaton & Vassal in maniera intelligente ed esaustiva, e di trattare un argomento attuale e di grande criticità quale l’approccio al social housing, restano tra le principali eredità del libro, caratterizzato da una sobrietà che si vorrebbe forse vedere più spesso nelle narrazioni di architettura. Un volume dal quale traspare pienamente quello “spirito democratico dell’architettura” che li ha effettivamente guidati a partire dalla fondazione dello studio nel 1987. Uno spirito che emerge anche dalla motivazione del Premio Pritzker, a loro assegnato nel 2021: «*Through their ideas, approach to the profession, and the resulting buildings, they have proven that a commitment to a restorative architecture that is at once technological, innovative, and ecologically responsive can be pursued without nostalgia*».

In tempi di semplificazione, quando la tentazione di proporre soluzioni facili a problemi complessi è purtroppo una presenza costante, Anna Lacaton e Jean-Philippe Vassal vanno, scommettendo Álvaro Mutis, “in direzione contraria”, consapevoli che probabilmente (anche) da loro “dipende l’ultima goccia di splendore”<sup>2</sup>. In opposizione all’approccio “start-from-scratch”, che chiede la totale demolizione di quanto (erroneamente) con-

Almost no concessions to any editorial oddities, no graphic “games” aimed to arouse the reader’s amazement; least of all, no celebration of a firm that is certainly world-class, but characterized by a *low-profile* attitude, with which it has been dealing with terribly serious issues for decades. The sensation, very clear, at the end of the reading of *free space, transformation, habiter* is to have in your hands an editorial product conceived in total harmony with the work of Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal: in other words, the translation into a book of the spirit that has always moved the work of the duo with a studio in Montreuil, near Paris. Anyone wishing not only to get information, but above all to *understand* the essence of Lacaton and Vassal’s commitment -including their far-sighted opinions on real estate policies- will find in this volume, in perfect balance between

texts and images, a formidable partner. A difficult but successful attempt at an editorial project that intends to analyze without boring and illustrate without magnifying the aspects that link their entire production, from the works of the 90s to 2020, the year of the project for the Maag Areal area in Zurich. The book was born on the occasion of the exhibition held at the ICO Museum in Madrid from October 6<sup>th</sup> 2021 to January 12<sup>th</sup> 2022 and is opened by a conversation with Enrique Walker, of the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, centered on one of their most representative works, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. The investigation starts from here, focused on three fundamental themes: “free space” (*as much as possible, generosity of space, efficiency and comfort*), “transformation” (*never demolish, always add, transform, ex-*

*pand*), and “habiter”<sup>1</sup> (*life, uses, making the space one’s own*). It is in this context that it is possible to grasp the references to the architecture that they cite as their references: from the ever-changing Djemaa el-Fnaa square in Marrakesh to Cedric Price’s Fun Palace; from the Dom-Ino house of Le Corbusier to the Case Study Houses.

The ability to present the work of Lacaton & Vassal in an intelligent and exhaustive way, and to deal with a current and highly critical topic such as the approach to social housing, remain among the main legacies of the book, characterized by a sobriety that one would perhaps like to see more often in architectural storytelling. A volume from which the “democratic spirit of architecture”, that effectively guided them since the founding of the studio in 1987, is fully evident. A spirit that also emerges from the motivation for

the Pritzker Prize, awarded to them in 2021: «*Through their ideas, approach to the profession, and the resulting buildings, they have proven that a commitment to a restorative architecture that is at once technological, innovative, and ecologically responsive can be pursued without nostalgia*».

In times of simplification, when the temptation to propose easy solutions to complex problems is unfortunately a constant presence, Anna Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal go, quoting Álvaro Mutis, “in opposite direction”, aware that “the last drop of splendor” probably (also) depends on them<sup>2</sup>. In opposition to the “start-from-scratch” approach, which calls for the total demolition of what (erroneously) is considered unusable and its replacement with ready-to-use building objects, the road showed by Lacaton & Vassal proposes to always save what can be saved; a

siderato inutilizzabile e la sua sostituzione con oggetti edili di pronto uso, la strada indicata da Lacaton & Vassal propone di salvare tutto ciò che è salvabile, sempre; una strategia conservativa che, tra l'altro, consegna un'amplissima libertà ai progettisti (*"economy as a tool of freedom"*, usando le loro parole).

Il pensiero base di Lacaton & Vassal va dunque molto oltre le convenzionali operazioni di riqualificazione e/o efficientamento energetico degli edifici. *"Doing just what is needed"* è uno dei temi ricorrenti nell'intervista, un aggiustamento di rotta rispetto al *"doing almost nothing"* proposto da Walker nel corso del dialogo: intervenire solo dove è necessario, letteralmente elemento per elemento, colonna per colonna; (sempre in riferimento al Palais de Tokyo, Jean-Philippe dice: «*We had to do the project element by element, column by column, beam by beam [...]*»). Lacaton & Vassal hanno seguito tale approccio in diverse occasioni, dalla Scuola di Architettura di Nantes, alla Cité du Grand Parc a Bordeaux<sup>3</sup>; dalla riqualificazione delle 60 unità residenziali nella torre a La Chesnale, Saint-Nazaire, in Francia, fino alla minimale Latapie House a Bordeaux, del 1993.

Un approccio al progetto che Lacaton & Vassal definiscono simile a un *filmmaker*, il quale ha sì la visione d'insieme, ma procede definendo pezzo dopo pezzo quello che infine assemblerà nel montaggio finale<sup>4</sup>: *«Through the development of this mode of thinking and doing, our work establishes affinities with film, and more specifically, film construction. Unlike the architect, who traditionally sees the project as a whole before developing small details that depend on an overall coherence, the filmmaker, even one who bears in mind an overarching idea for the whole film, proceeds by manipulating individual fragments, successively filmed shots that they then juxtapose, cut, assemble, contrast, edit. [...] This is how we proceed when designing our projects: we approach them like filmmakers,*

*[...] This is how we proceed when designing our projects: we approach them like filmmakers, by gradually constructing broad visions, while working with intimate, pin-point decisions».*

Non ultimo, il progetto grafico risulta efficacemente declinato in funzione delle sezioni; la prima, *“free space”*, infatti, non contiene foto ma solo piante e sezioni dove, con un elegantissimo uso di un singolo colore viene evidenziato lo spazio aggiuntivo (*“a sort of volume that, we could say, has an undefined function. It is a sort of extra space, and a space of combination”*). Nella seconda sezione, *“transformation”*, entrano, accompagnate da render e disegni di progetto, le foto, che diventano infine l'unica forma di rappresentazione nella terza, *“habiter”*, interamente occupata da fotogrammi tratti dal video *“Construire l'échappement, une histoire d'air, de vide et de lumière”*, anch'esso firmato da Karine Dana e realizzato in occasione della Biennale di Architettura di Bordeaux del 2019. Una rassegna di immagini che assume la forma di un reportage; dai territori di frontiera dell'architettura, dove pensare in direzione contraria è ancora lecito.

Massimo Rossetti

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Va sottolineato come il termine *“habiter”* sia l'unico tra i tre rimasto invariato nel testo sia spagnolo che inglese ed è l'unico che viene riportato in corsivo nel titolo.

<sup>2</sup> Álvaro Mutis, *“I viaggi”*.

<sup>3</sup> Illuminante, in questo caso, il cortometraggio *“Imaginaires de Transformation”* di Karine Dana.

<sup>4</sup> Non a caso nel testo trova posto una citazione tratta da *“The enigma of Kaspar Hauser”*, diretto da Werner Herzog nel 1974.

conservative strategy that, among other things, delivers a very wide freedom to designers (*“economy as a tool of freedom”*, in their own words).

The basic thinking of Lacaton & Vassal, therefore, goes far beyond the conventional redevelopment and/or energy efficiency of buildings. *“Doing just what is needed”* is one of the recurring themes in the interview, an adjustment to the *“doing almost nothing”* proposed by Walker during the dialogue: to intervene only where necessary, literally element by element, column by column; (still referring to the Palais de Tokyo, Jean-Philippe says: «*We had to do the project element by element, column by column, beam by beam [...]*»). Lacaton & Vassal followed this approach on several occasions, from the Nantes School of Architecture to the Cité du Grand Parc in Bordeaux<sup>3</sup>; from the redevelopment of the 60 residen-

tial units in the tower in La Chesnale, Saint-Nazaire, France, to the minimal Latapie House in Bordeaux, in 1993.

An approach to the project that Lacaton & Vassal define similar to a filmmaker, who indeed has the overall vision, but proceeds by defining piece by piece what he will finally assemble in the final assembly<sup>4</sup>: *«Through the development of this mode of thinking and doing, our work establishes affinities with film, and more specifically, film construction. Unlike the architect, who traditionally sees the project as a whole before developing small details that depend on an overall coherence, the filmmaker, even one who bears in mind an overarching idea for the whole film, proceeds by manipulating individual fragments, successively filmed shots that they then juxtapose, cut, assemble, contrast, edit. [...] This is how we proceed when designing our projects: we approach them like filmmakers,*

*by gradually constructing broad visions, while working with intimate, pin-point decisions».*

Last but not least, the graphic design is effectively declined according to the sections; the first, *“free space”*, in fact, does not contain photos but only plants and sections where, with an elegant use of a single colour, the additional space is highlighted (*“a sort of volume that, we could say, has an undefined function. It is a sort of extra space, and a space of combination”*). In the second section, *“transformation”*, the photos, accompanied by renderings and project drawings, appear, which in the end become the only form of representation in the third section, *“habiter”*, entirely occupied by frames taken from the video *“Construire l'échappement, une histoire d'air, de vide et de lumière”*, also signed by Karine Dana and made for the 2019 Bordeaux

Architecture Biennale. A review of images that takes the form of a reportage; from the borderline territories of architecture, where thinking in the opposite direction is still legitimate.

Massimo Rossetti

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> It should be emphasized that the term *“habiter”* is the only one of the three that has remained unchanged in both the Spanish and English text and is the only one that is shown in italics in the title.

<sup>2</sup> Álvaro Mutis, *“I viaggi”*.

<sup>3</sup> In this case, the short film *“Imaginaires de Transformation”* by Karine Dana is enlightening.

<sup>4</sup> It is no coincidence that the text contains a quote from *“The enigma of Kaspar Hauser”*, directed by Werner Herzog in 1974.