

The geometric shape

Is there a power of fascination for the geometric shape?

Without a doubt. As a perfect shape, in contrast with the chaotic aspect of the world (even if natural forms heavily borrow from geometry).

I think of that Stanley Kubrick film "2001, a Space Odyssey", where a cuboid symbolises, in its successive amazing appearances, an enigma within the material world. Beyond the scope of our understanding, it strikes us as a form whose purity, whose perfection is divine or extraterrestrial. In one of its appearances, which coincides with an astral conjunction, time and space are abolished : a true geometric ode. The mystery of the universe takes on its full dimension. This minimal form magnetically catches the eye and gives the film its magical character.

There is no need to wonder about the power of the geometric shape in the history of human creation. Examples abound since antiquity with the erection of the pyramids to symbolise abstract thinking, the pure projection of man's desire for eternity. It is the first mystical fervor of the matter towards the sky, the old totemic link that unites the terrestrial world and the celestial one –a link between the earthly and the heavenly. The Egyptian pyramid is first and foremost the architecture of a tomb as a pathway to infinity.

And we find, even in projects by architects of modern times, some examples as majestic and ambitious: Newton's Cenotaph, by Etienne-Louis Boullée, is a giant sphere designed as a tribute to science, to the reflection of man faced with the mysterious mechanisms of the universal order. Boullée was attracted by the plastic beauty of simple and spacious shapes. This architect displays a pure style, free from any ornament, and which symbolizes a revolutionary thought.

What about the project by Vladimir Tatlin, a tower dedicated to the Third International, to the new model of Russian communist society?

An oblique, spiral and dynamic metal structure, it contains three transparent geometric volumes (cubic, pyramidal, cylindrical) turning on themselves in different time frequencies (one year, month, day), each one with their particular function (venue for political meetings, information center). In the early twentieth century, this tower symbolizes an act of faith in an atheistic world firmly focused on human progress.

I will also mention the Seagram Building in New York by Mies Van der Rohe and Philip Johnson. It reflects the undisputable ambition for a new democratic society in the mid-twentieth century. It is a sober work, with a very high technical quality and aesthetics (its minimalist character brings us back to the pure shape in the Kubrick film). We also find the characteristics of the architecture by Mies Van der Rohe, the last director of the Bauhaus: the refined and mastered use of steel and glass. The glass skin, the weaving

of orthogonal metal rhythms, then becomes the paradigm of the new international architecture. It will still be the ornament of many postmodern buildings.

Today, our boldest architectures do not celebrate our faith in science or the revolution. Even the laws that govern our universe stopped providing certainty, despite the constant evolution of our knowledge. As for faith in a new social order, after the collapse of collectivist utopias, this aspiration has become obsolete and anachronistic. The great architectures of culture are the new cathedrals of our time, like the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, a concentrate of our technological knowledge and a manifest for new architectural forms at the end of the second millennium.

What does the new architecture say?

Postmodern architects convened and combined the old styles. They deconstruct modern forms by playing on weight and opacity. The skylines of large cities are enriched with unusual geometric volumes. And it is not in the race for height that the performance of new architecture can be measured. It is in its hybrid character and fun: suspended volumes, subjected to bending, flipping or expanding space.

Any creation is free to build its own rhythms and combine the infinite variations of its volume and materials. Sometimes architecture is a simple proposition that interacts with its environment and becomes an event. Sometimes it shows (off) its status as a new modernity icon. All creations belong to their time and convey their values: our architecture is the mise en abyme of an entertainment society, the image of a new baroque thought where structure, through its complexity, is free from useless ornamental richness ; we play with rupture, discontinuity, deformation, anamorphosis, optical effects. Volumes can dissolve in their own transparency or combine with the mirage of their own reflection (examples abound in the book "Architecture tomorrow" by Francis Rambert, éditions du Terrail - Paris 2005). Soon perhaps the advent of a more discreet architecture, ephemeral and nomadic, which will respond more adequately to the more measured footprint of man on nature.

But let's go back to our first film example. We cannot only talk of one architectural form. The cuboid is neutral like a minimal sculpture. And we can then query the field of sculpture. The history of sculpture is different: it depends on its subject matter and at the same time as painting, detaches itself from it in the first half of the XXth Century. It then claims differing forms of expression, one organic, the other geometric as illustrated by Russian Constructivists. The relationship between sculpture and architecture has now become more tenuous because the created geometric shape has the properties of a structure.

Certainly, it was not meant to be inhabited, although installations (made) by sculptors accept the movement of more or less active spectators. The sculpture becomes an assemblage of concrete materials arranged in a concrete space. Thus the geometric sculpture captured new materials as well as new spaces and its reflection is closer to that of built forms. As such, ie an arrangement of volumes, it only reflects itself as an

autonomous structure with its plastic characteristics and its capacity to explore shapes, volumes, the most basic to the most complex, playing with their infinite rhythmic combination. You cannot ask more than to perpetuate a language fit for human thought, a universal visual language of inexhaustible wealth.

Philippe Vacher – 2000