

Preface: Vitruvius, Unwitting Hero of Our Times

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In 2010, when, together with other friends and important institutions, I founded the Centro Studi Vitruviani in Fano, Italy, it already seemed clear to me that we could not limit ourselves to portraying the Vitruvius who lived at the time of Augustus, however extraordinary his importance as a military engineer under Julius Caesar, and as a Roman architect whose treatise provides us with a uniquely complete picture of Roman culture in his era. We could not limit ourselves to searching underground for the unlikely remnants of structures built according to his precepts, nor stubbornly persist in the quest to discover the traces of his famous Basilica at Fano, a remarkable building that may never have been built, or may no longer exist. Instead, we needed to direct our efforts toward discovering another Vitruvius: the Vitruvius of the living and not of the dead, the man I have often described as the unwitting hero of our times: the era, from the Renaissance to our own day, that has been definitively shaped by his presence. We needed to call attention, in Italy but not only Italy, to a cultural figure as remarkable as he is neglected in our country, and to do so by going beyond a simple exercise in literary archaeology. The Center aimed—and needed—to give voice to the complex of values that Vitruvius, perhaps unwittingly, drew together and has transmitted to succeeding generations, to the point of determining the cultural shift represented by Renaissance Humanism, to the point of compelling Le Corbusier himself, in his search for a new architectural language on a human scale, to begin his own research on the Modulor with the third chapter of the third book of *De architectura*, the same passage that consolidated the Western canon of beauty, guiding Leonardo da Vinci's effort to give that idea a graphic visual form in his most famous drawing, the "Vitruvian Man."

It is Leonardo, above all, who detected the presence of another Vitruvius, and attempted to reread the text in a modern, contemporary sense, thus defining a much more deeply rooted relationship between Vitruvius and ourselves. Leonardo has no love for Vitruvius the Architect; that Vitruvius is not his model, perhaps because Leonardo himself never put architecture at the center of his experience. Nor did he ever ascribe that kind of authority to Vitruvius. Instead, Leonardo, the Scientist, the Inventor, the Visionary, the Master of Technology, was impelled to encounter a less well-known Vitruvius and enter into a profound relationship that reveals to us, in a surprisingly different vein, Vitruvius the Innovator, a Scientist in his own right, an Inventor, Visionary, and Master of Technology: a sort of ancient Roman Leonardo.

We need, then, to reconsider *De architectura* not simply as a treatise on architecture, but also as marvelous synthesis of ancient knowledge, a sort of first-century Roman *Enciclopedia Treccani* (the Italian equivalent of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*), full of surprises that caught Leonardo's eye, and which he attempted to recapture, in their most innovative aspects, through the construction and study of his own machines. A Vitruvius, in other words, who was already modern and new at the time of Leonardo, whose efforts to read "beyond the Circle and Square" of the Vitruvian Man provided the focus for an exhibition in Fano, the city of Vitruvius, in 2019, on the five-hundredth anniversary of Leonardo's death: *Leonardo and Vitruvius: Beyond the Circle and the Square, in search of harmony. The legendary drawings of the Codex Atlanticus* (*Leonardo e Vitruvio: Oltre il cerchio e il quadrato alla ricerca dell'armonia. I leggendari disegni del Codice Atlantico*, Fano, Museo Archeologico e Pinacoteca del Palazzo Malatestiano, Sala Morganti, 12 July–13 October 2019).

The exhibition, in turn, has helped to revive a reading of the Vitruvian text as something new, visionary, almost utopian, and strongly contemporary, in our own day as it was in Leonardo's. This contemporary resonance has also been captured in recent years by an initiative proposed by Salvatore Settis: the idea that architects should swear a Vitruvian Oath, along the lines of the Hippocratic Oath sworn by medical doctors. Two thousand years ago, Vitruvius was already posing basic questions about the relationship between an architect and public works, stressing the need to respect ethics, to respect the landscape, to create cities on a human scale, to educate architects who are not only competent, but also fully conscious of their discipline's great value. He was, in short, a true visionary in an era when architecture had not yet taken up the role that it would assume from the fifteenth century onward, as a liberal art, the product of creative inspiration, ever more directed toward attaining a Common Good that Vitruvius already included among an architect's primary objectives two thousand years ago.

The Vitruvian Oath, then, is not simply some vague call to responsibility; it is rather a validation of, and a summons to, a role and function for the architect that our society today must rediscover as central to its own evolution and its search for a Common Good. Thus perhaps, in a provocative manner one might say that Vitruvius, defined as the Prince of Architects, is not so much an ancient Roman as he is an authentic, plausible contemporary figure, still intent on providing answers to the great questions that the ancient Roman architect posed two thousand years ago. In one of the most extraordinary, prophetic, and utopian texts ever written about architecture, Book 1 of *De architectura*, Vitruvius describes (two thousand years ago!) what architecture is and where it is headed today, as if these values were still current, modern, and attainable.

Let us not forget that the architect is the most influential generator of beauty in our cities and our civilization. A concept, beauty, on which Vitruvius insists emphatically, referring his concept of beauty back to that of harmony, understood as the relationship between a whole and its parts. In architecture's anthropomorphic logic, it is moving for me, a non-architect, to read the way he compares a Temple, the supreme architecture of his time, to a human body in which every part interacts with its neighboring organs and contributes to the general harmony and to the health (which is beauty as understood by the ancient Greeks) of the body itself. Architecture, Vitruvius tells us, expresses itself completely when every part is entirely functional to the whole. Perhaps for this very reason the architect must be competent in each one of the disciplines that contributes to generating an architectural creation by integrating both theory and practice into its shape, each inseparable from the other.

The architect thus emerges from the Vitruvian text almost as a metaphor for the very architecture that will be created, in harmony both with the self, and with the surrounding world. This is why, even today, *De architectura* may be the greatest monument to the role and value of the architect. All the more if we consider that Vitruvius seems to apply so many of his criteria to himself when we watch him at work in describing the one building he ever constructed—at least according to what we can discern from his text. Here, rather than in fetishistic archaeological operations, is the sensational novelty of his connection with the *Colonia Fanum Fortunae*. In Book 5, he describes his famous Basilica of Fano, a kind of ancient skyscraper with a giant order of Corinthian columns that rise up a full twenty meters, an unusual height for ancient architecture, a building that many archaeologists have defined as “visionary,” at least considering the level of technical and structural knowledge in Rome at the time, a building that Andrea Palladio would describe as “of supreme majesty and beauty.” And thus, yet another instance in which Vitruvius seems to push ahead of his own time, so far ahead, perhaps, that the building could not yet be constructed by a workforce that lacked the full technical preparation needed to bring it to fruition. But it hardly matters. In these pages Vitruvius the architect tells his own story in the same way that we read his *De architectura* today, the way that we today read his teachings in a modern, contemporary key: an architect who strives to experiment, who strives to overcome technical and economic challenges, who strives to build to a human measure, who strives to look toward the future of the discipline as he strives to create a harmonious mix of what truly seem to be the three magic words of the profession: theory, practice, and ethics.

But there is more, much more. Another remarkable legacy that takes us back to the Vitruvian Man, read not as a synthesis of ancient thoughts and

reflections about harmony and beauty, but as a logic that defines, narrates, develops, and exalts, in its own extreme sense of perfection, that unbreakable and eternal bond between Art and Science that has always stood at the foundations of every Renaissance of our civilization. With that concept, and with that book, Leonardo da Vinci will distill that perfect marriage and harmony which he will transform into one of the most extraordinary artistic and scientific works of our humanity. But that same bond stands at the base of every Humanism, every necessary Humanism, even that digital Humanism (the new Renaissance) which we identify as one of the most authentic keys to interpreting a new progress that will once again put Humanity at its center, a Humanity once again (as in the Renaissance) in control of innovative technologies conceived for human benefit rather than some sterile, insubstantial universe of aimless technological proficiency. Hence Art and Science are indispensable today for sustaining and governing the land, indispensable for transforming the past seamlessly into the present for a civilization that in every moment of its development has had to reckon, consciously or unconsciously, with Vitruvius and his *De architectura*. Art and Science generate Beauty, an essential word in the Vitruvian legacy, and for the desire for Renaissance that is ever more linked to our remarkable heritage: artistic, cultural, architectural, civic, environmental, the real engine of our society and of our national and local communities.

Here, then, is another unconscious but perhaps definitive Vitruvian legacy: Art and Science generate Beauty, the true image of a correct politics whereby we may value and govern our territory, our cities, our everyday life, for which innovative technology, today as ever, provides the expressive languages to create a dialogue with the global world, founded on the eternal and indelible Humanism of which Vitruvius may be the most authentic father.