The Mountain and the Book
Three Written Libraries in Meran

Davide Perottoni

The little iron banners which Hölderlin never drew himself subsequently invaded my drawings, and I am unable to answer any further the persistent question I am asked about them except to say that I have translated the last lines of Hölderlin's poem into my architecture.[1]

To translate the lines of a poem into architecture; that is the fascination from which the work presented here was born, an investigation into the uses of literature as a design tool.[2] Literature has the ability to grasp atmospheres, to look at things from many points of view, to deal with the pragmatic as well as the poetic, with creativity and subjectivity; these and other qualities offer a wealth of possibilities to design. This work tried to define both the possibilities offered and the ways in which to employ them in the traditional design process. In doing so, literature was both a tool to understand and to create, a method to engage the mind and fuel creativity. Throughout the different phases it is a tool to read, to write and to continuously challenge all the elements of a design, from analysis to scenario, from

Fig. 1. *…the mountain is the bond between Earth and Sky…*

woods and high peaks. It is not only a change of
scenery, life of man and its relation with place
is very different. In the valley you can see the
presence of man controlling and shaping nature
and its features, taking place and moulding it
to its wishes and needs in the last thousands
of years or so. In the secondary valleys and
and the mountains around, although the colonisation
and presence of man is as old as in the main valley,
his presence has to make place for itself in a reign
that is still that of nature. The "mountain farms",
called "Hof" in german and "Maso" in italian, is the
symbol of this peculiar cohabitation of man and
nature. the building has to anchor itself to
the mountain's dangerously steep slope as if it
were about to slide down if it wasn't for
its will of endurance and weight of stone and
wood. Without getting too much into this typology
and the culture it portrays – there will be time
in a separate text – the view of those valleys from

the basin of Merano works as one with the peaks
that surrounds them. They indicate the way to
unknown, harsh, mountainous paths that will lead in
the hearth of the mountains, and eventually to
those majestic peaks whose presence is as much
ideal as real.

view from Meran to val Venosta and the Ziehspitze

Although Meran is at a crossroad between two kind
of alpine landscape and two completely different
relations with the mountain, its proper valley is

Fig. 2. A travelogue made of texts and drawings.

site to detail. In this way the two key elements of the project, the mountain and the book, were defined and declined in the design of three libraries in the area of Meran in the Italian Alps. This process was carried out within the standard design phases, starting from the analysis of site and brief to the testing of the project in a scenario setting, passing through inspiration, concept and design.

> *. . . the mountain is the bond between Earth and Sky. Its solitary summit reaches the sphere of eternity, and its base spreads out in manifold foothills into the world of mortals.[3]*

Always employing a multiplicity of accompanying tools, the site was first analysed through existing literature. *'Vivid the colours / clear the air / vitreous the silence / on which amused / bounces thought – transparent / cage of light / the day, lost / among these unreachable / enigmatic valleys.'[4]* Antonio Manfredi's poem, for example, gave a poetic rendition of what Stefan Zweig before him described in prose. Ranging from social reports to myths and legends, fictional narratives as well as real accounts, poems and academic reflections, the extreme variety of available literature made it possible to gather very different point of views on the site, its culture and its history.[5] For the site visits, on the other hand, literature was used in the form of a travelogue, recording different perceptions and observations and embedding notions gathered through the texts in the actual experience of the place.

The collection of these texts led to a very broad and multifaceted understanding of the place, which was then structured and collected as a whole through writing in the definition of ten landscape characters, ten very broad archetypes that define the site and to which the design will have to relate.[6]

> *. . . The church gathers in the landscape through ritual, that is, the repeated action of man on a certain place or path. The church flock, in its entity embodied and symbolized by the church building, covers a wide area*

Fig. 3. Site and design models, the library declined in the three landscape conditions: valley (city), foothill, mountain.
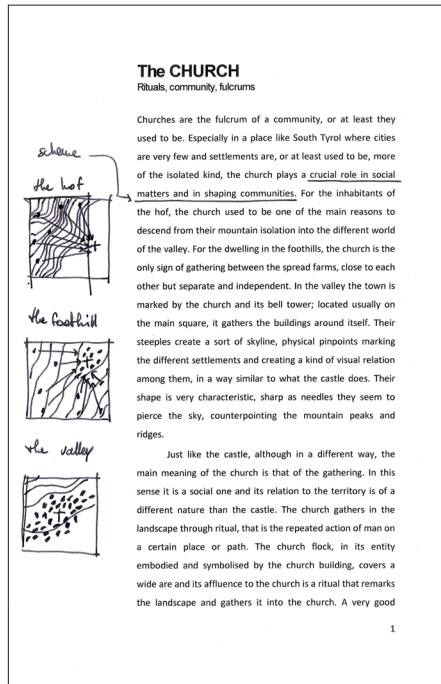

Fig. 4. Text and drawings on the church as a character of the landscape.

and its affluence to the church is a ritual that remarks the landscape and gathers it into the church . . .

. . . It is difficult to explain, but the presence of the mountains has a power that goes beyond their shape and orientation, the shadows they cast and the way in which they direct the gaze. It is probably a mix of those things all acting together on perception to reach an incredible achievement. Being simultaneously real and ideal. They are literary topoi in themselves and here they are inextricably intertwined with what this place is and means . . .

While this was done for the site of the project, its brief was also approached through literary means. Thus, the library as a type was analysed by reading about real and fictional libraries, visiting existing ones in different cities and reflecting upon them through memory and imagination in different textual exercises.

. . . The library, still and silent, moves with the rhythm of the pages, under the green light of the reading lamps. An exponential coffer of treasures, from the library itself to every single book it contains . . . Physical and mental wanderings meet, in the experience of the library . . .

As the analysis reached not a final but a sufficient state of development, all the materials gathered were collected in a narrative in which a fictional character, working as an alter ego, bound together all of these considerations. This text, the world it created, was the frame of thought out of which the design would arise, its foundation as well as a germinal design in itself. Reading and writing here were not only ways to gather notions and point of views but also tools to define an understanding of the matter at hand, a way of looking at things that would inform how to approach the whole project. This made it possible to set forth a world, a coherent and multifaceted setting that the could be inhabited, thus designing from within it.

Fig. 5. The orography of Meran.
The presence of the mountains has a power that goes beyond their shape and orientation.
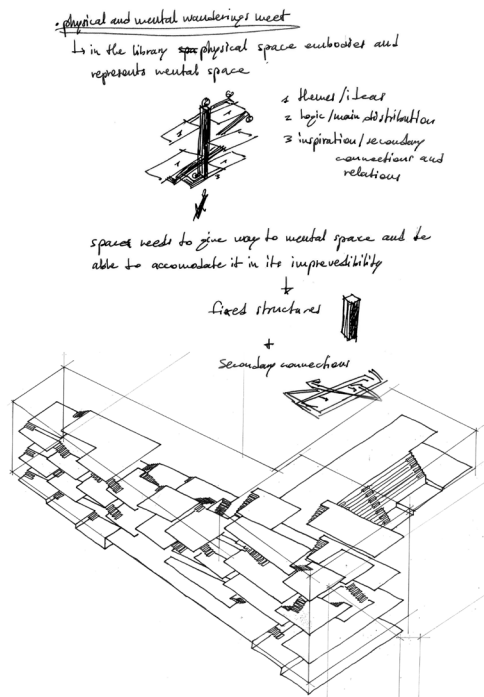

Fig. 6. Working sketches for the City Library.
Physical and mental wanderings meet, from abstraction to form.

. . . The mountains, this ethereal and yet so real presence. They are, in his mind, both an idea and a physical thing; they are the reason, at least the main one, for which he decided to abandon his native place on the seaside and travel north. North, such a powerful word. To the poet and painter it is much more than a geographical indication; it is colours and meanings, a sort of poetic covered in blue hues and grey rocks, the cold of the snow and the warmth of the candle light behind a cottage window. Window with falling snow is arrayed, long tolls the vesper bell . . .

Once this fictional yet real world was created it was time to step from within it into the second phase of the design, that of concepts and inspirations. Literature in this phase was employed as a source of inspiration, a light that illuminated the design and a lens through which to look at things. Some texts, read in the right way, informed the project and imbued it with mean-ing; they were open, resonating and reverberating, making it possible to bridge analysis with design, giving directions without creating constraints.

Window with falling snow is arrayed,
Long tolls the vesper bell,
The house is provided well,
The table is for many laid.

Wandering ones, more than a few,
Come to the door on darksome courses.
Golden blooms the tree of graces
Drawing up the earth's cool dew.

Wanderer quietly steps within;
Pain has turned the threshold to stone.
There lie, in limpid brightness shown,
Upon the table bread and wine.[7]

Fig. 7. The mountains of Meran. *The mountains, this ethereal and yet so real presence.*

Down slopes the forest
And, bud-like, inward
Hang the leaves, for which
Down below a ground blossoms forth,
Quite able to speak for itself.
For there Ulrich
Once walked; and often, over the footprint
A great destiny ponders,
Made ready, on the residual site.
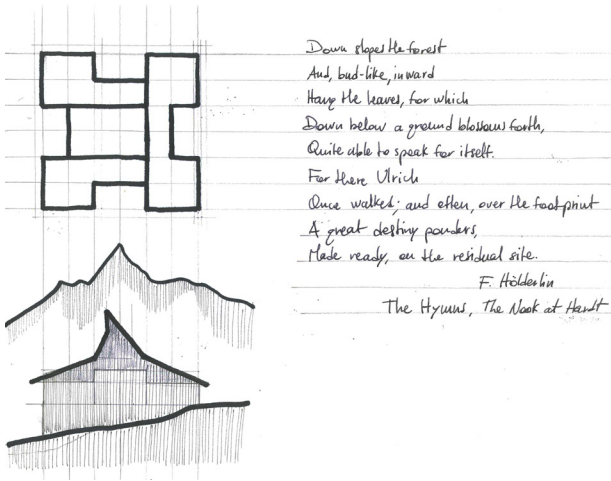
F. Hölderlin
The Hymns, The Nook at Hardt

Fig. 8. The poem defining an opening act for the design to follow.

Such images provided a particular way to look at a building; they defined a relation between man and landscape, gave an insight on materiality or charged an element with significance. They defined an opening act that set the ground where the design had to take place, defining qualities and values without impairing the freedom of the design. Literature was thus employed as a light illuminating the projects, directing the gaze and charging it with significance, while the design had to translate these poetics into spatial and material considerations.

Again reading and writing went hand in hand, but in this phase the writing became poetic; it had to create, not only to consider these images that led the design and coloured it. In writing a poem the design was constructed out of words and images that are very clear and at the same time very open; the poem set the tone and directed the design while drawing, concretized, the poetic images into formal and technical considerations. The poem below, for example, guided the definition of a library from its general shape to its materials and details.

> *A wall to the east*
> *to catch the new sun*
> *through the jagged peaks.*
> > *Thick plaster and deep windows*
> > *to bathe in the light*
> > *and suck it in.*
>
> *. . .*
> *A wall to the south*
> *looking over the valley*
> *from a mountain throne.*
> > *Wood bathes in the sun*
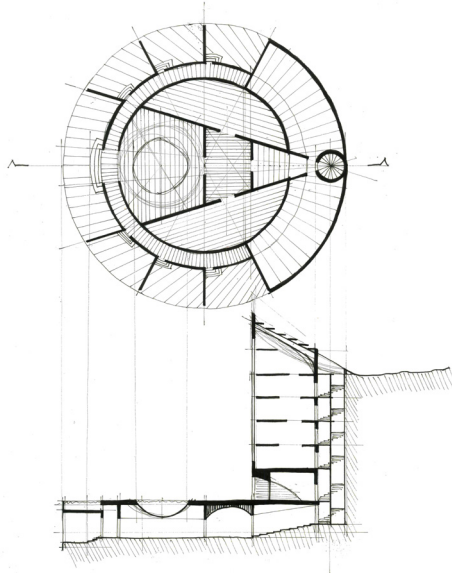> > *grass grows into plaster*
> > *being house and place.*

Fig. 9. Sketches for the Foothill Library.
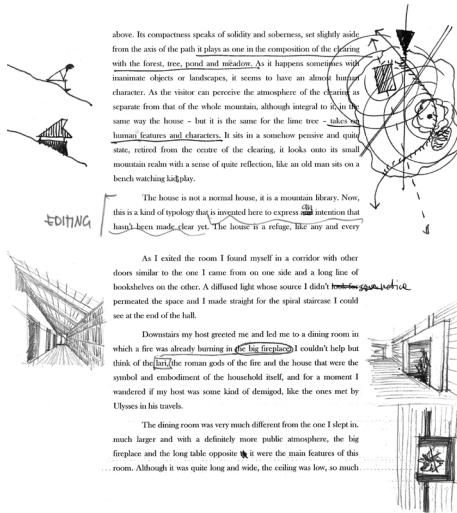A lighthouse in balance between valley and
mountains.

Fig. 10. Sketching with words and inhabiting
the text.

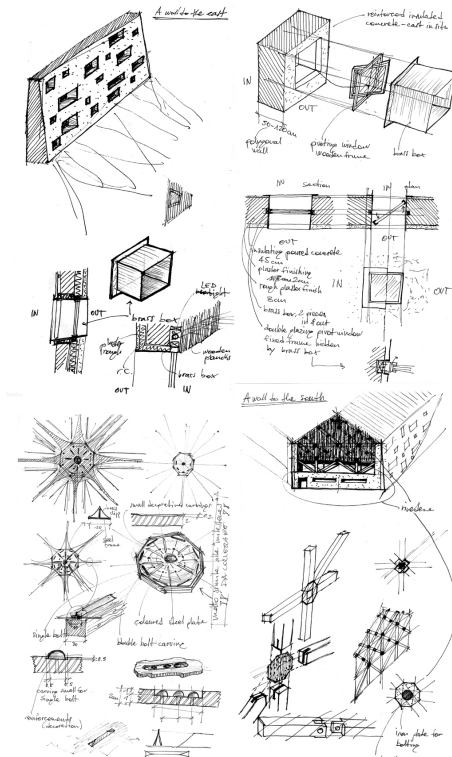Fig. 11. Roof plan and elevations. *Four walls*, from word to form.

Fig. 12. *Four walls*, from form to material.

At this point in the process actual design came to the fore with the task of giving shape and matter to the images and words gathered so far. In this phase the relation between drawing and writing was at its strongest, creating a constant loop between text and drawing, employing both in a refinement process that exploited the different possibilities offered by different techniques. Writing became a tool to inhabit the world set forth by the previous phases; it was when the engagement of creating a text yielded its maximum results; writing became a way of sketching with words. For each of the designs this particular way of sketching was carried out in different ways, always drawing from materials gathered before while engaging creativity. Designing was always a loop from text to drawing, until the whole reached an acceptable definition and coherence in all of its parts.
To do so, for each design four different texts were developed, each one exploiting different possibilities of the many point of views available to literature. A poem, which acted as a bridge with the previous phase, set the tone for the design, explored it in its poetic qualities and tried to define its essence. It provided a way to explore those aspects most difficult to deal with in drawing and provided a bridge to translate them into shape and matter.

> *. . . A tower marks the site*
> *where south turns into north,*
> *a pillar of steel, concrete and stone*
> *to gather thoughts and send them forth . . .*

A manifesto defined what the design was, how it related to its site and function, how it operated and in which way this translated in architecture. Without actually defining the design it set its core principles.

> *. . . The building, hanging on the tip of the promontory towards the south,*
> *is both castle and lighthouse; it looks over the valley and marks the*
> *beginning of the mountain, balanced between the two forces and realms of*

Fig. 13. Visualisation of the City Library 'tower' ...*a coffer of treasures...*

the landscape. In this suspension, observation can take place. Close enough to things to relate to them but still far enough to be able to observe and judge them. This is a place where stillness is not quietness but the balanced clashing of forces; it is start as well as end, arrival and departure. It embodies the forces it balances and makes them explicit, part of an organic whole . . .

A description approached the design from a spatial and material perspective, bridging the concepts of the manifesto with the ways in which they should be shaped; it fixed the vague images of the poem while allowing to envision the design by describing it, and thus inhabiting it, through the text.

. . . Inside, a coffer of treasures unfolds around a pivotal axis that connects earth and sky. Galleries laden with books grow outward and upward under a glass ceiling permeated by light that washes down the back of books, making their authors and titles glimmer, finally reaching the librarians desks down below. Like an opened toolbox, this core of galleries opens on two opposite sides on a symmetrical arrangement of rooms and nooks, shelves and reading tables. Symmetrical because in here the most important balance of Meran takes place both in the architecture and in the books it holds. Pivoted around the vertical axis where the light of the sky, shadowed by the mountains above, reaches the shiny stone floor below, one side of the tower reflects on the other, connected by side galleries. On one side the Italian, on the other the German. South and North are balanced and meet in the axis of earth and sky, up and down . . .

A first-person narrative was the fourth kind of text of this design phase, and it was employed to be able to inhabit the spaces, to see them from the perspective of the visitor and to explore them perceptually and in time, filling them with life while shaping them through it. Narrative here was a fundamental tool to construct a logical sequence and to investigate values and relations while also being a way to engage creativity and to force the
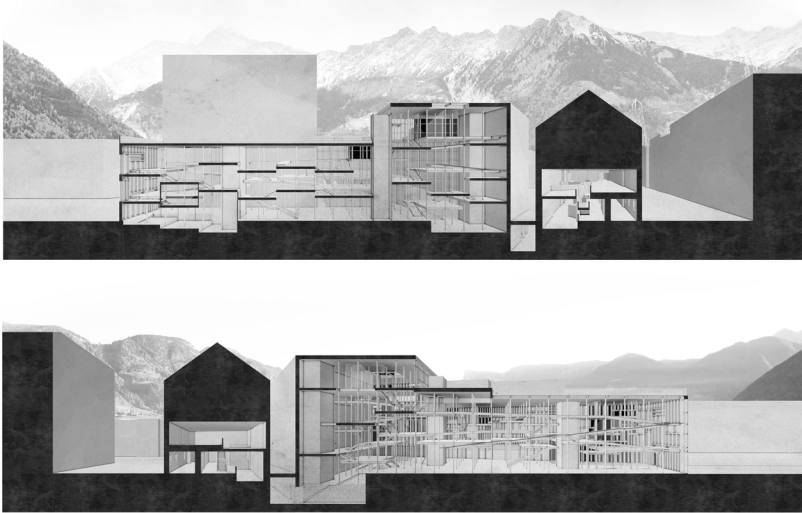
Fig.14. Ssections of the City Library 'forest'. *...walking my thoughts...*

definition of particular elements. As a way to sketch with words, writing forced the definition of things as they emerged from the activity itself, the exploration of possibilities and features that vary from the choice of forms and volumes to the definition of a certain detail.

> *. . . Here is where most of the users and the books are, an open space filled with pillars that move through a slightly distorted perspective throughout the whole space. People, light, voices, air; after the archive it is as if I stepped back into the city, which is now completely awake. A forest, as I said, and that is no casual metaphor; this is the buffer between the cave and the mountain, the place where people and books – the animals of this particular jungle – meet. If the archive is the strongbox of knowledge, the dark universe one has to gaze into to find its secrets, here another aspect of the world of books is shown. When I walk this three-dimensional maze it feels as if I am 'walking my thoughts'. Moving up, down and across gives shape to what is usually only an activity of the mind. It fills me with pride when readers tell me that while looking for a book they found ten more while making their way through this aerial world . . .*

Finally, the last phase of the process, after the design was defined, employed literature as a way to test the project. The scenario writing developed for the analysis was completed in this phase by adding the new designs to the story. The narrative was thus employed as a way to inhabit the spaces and to test the ways in which they could be lived and perceived. Writing a narrative with an alter ego as protagonist made it possible to test the designs and to conclude the whole process by tying together all the elements that took part in it; the scenario collected in a single narrative all of the elements that the analysis brought to the design and tested their working as a coherent whole.

> *. . . Upstairs, underneath the pitched roof and the geometrical drawings of its beams, he spent the first of what will be many nights in a small room*

Fig. 15. Visualisation of the Mountain Library
 ...as close to the Rhine as you are to the Mediterranean...

where wood was as much present for the eyes as for the nose. Only a few steps from his room up the well of the staircase, caressing the smooth handrail which vibrates at his sliding touch, he can reach the library, the whole reason he came here.

Looking down the meadow and the valley beyond, Antonio spends his days writing and reading about the place and what it does to him. What started out as a small trip to visit the north turned out to be a much bigger thing. These valleys enchanted and welcomed him, becoming a new home in balance between the Italian south and the German north, where one can read Hölderlin and Montale in the same way, as close to the Rhine as you are to the Mediterranean, a place where word and world meet. Not Italy, nor Germany or Austria, but Europe.

1   Aldo Rossi, Scientific Autobiography (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 44.

2   Along with Rossi providing the fascination two other works were particularly important in the development of this work: Gaston Bachelard's The Poetics of Space (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) and Klaske Havik's Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture, Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2014)

3   René Daumal, Mount Analogue (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959), 22

4   Antonio Manfredi, 'I luoghi della nostalgia e quelli del pensiero' in Antonio Manfredi, Itinera (Milan: All'insegna del pesce d'oro, 1997) – author's translation

5   An extensive bibliography would be a paper in itself, as it varies from writings by Goethe to accounts by sociologists and journalist; the variety of the available materials, thanks to the fact that the city of Meran was a famous destination for the European bourgeoisie during the 1800s and 1900s and for the interests it more recently raised as a border region provided with a wealth of very varied material.

6   The ten landscape characters were: River, Valley, City, Road, Castle, Church, Field, Wood, Hof and Mountain.

7   Georg Trakl, 'A Winter Evening'.