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ENGLISH TEXTS



## TITLE OF THE ISSUE

## Rites of Passage of Contemporary Italian Architecture

## EDITORIAL. TODAY'S MYTHS

The great changes we are currently experiencing create new political, economic and financial equilibriums and, consequently, periods of settlement and the slow acclimatization of the social body. The penetration of the new may instead be rapid, though also not entirely painless. During the last twenty years phenomena such as *globalization*, the *information revolution* and *real-time communications* have also affected Italy, as other nations around the globe, with the overpowering force of a transformation without precedents and with uncertain outcomes. The enormous benefits resulting from these new conquests are not without their counterparts, instability and excesses, which manifest themselves during periods of rapid transformation. Myths are born that are not easy to control and restore to reason. The rapidity of the changes impedes the rational assumption of an understanding of the situation and favours misunderstandings, and the transformation of conquests into myths that are difficult to control.

Globalization was born and has developed through the intensification of commercial, as well as political and cultural relations between different populations. Unification and standardization in all sectors, based on progressively more elevated standards founded on complex technologies, are the logical consequence of a search for affirmation at the planetary level, not only by nations, but also by individual cities. All the same, strong social imbalances and differences often impossible to sustain are created. As with development and increases in employment that, while procuring wellbeing, destroy situations rich with history, culture and local traditions.

Even the information revolution can be mythicized and lead to incorrect interpretations. There is a tendency to confuse information with knowledge, to confound the properties of the one with the other, annulling any differences. In reality, information slips like water across a stone, without leaving any residue; knowledge infiltrates and, like an oily liquid, slowly soaks into any porosity capable of containing it. Architecture is now capable of acquiring information anywhere, bewildered by the presence of thousands of examples and models, it has neither the time nor the desire to learn and investigate.

A climate of diffuse standardization produces the myth of the surprising, of the fantastic, of all that has the power to attract or seduce. The architecture of the archistar is born. The Bilbao myth attracts approximately one million visitors each year and becomes the supermyth that embodies those of technology, mass communication, the search for the new and the exceptional.

Italy, by its very nature, is particularly attracted to myths, and, given its fear of marginalization, tends to wander down the wrong paths. Why commission a talented, creative architect rooted to his land and his territory to design a museum if this will attract only one tenth of the possible visitors to a work made famous by an archistar? This is the power of the myth.

Our cities, unable to compete in terms of size and development with the world's other great cities, borrow their most evident qualities: the presence of skyscrapers, the diffusion of anonymous building technologies, destructive

for the very cultural identity of our country. Italian architects remain perplexed or, not without their sins, lack the means to intervene; with a few exceptions, they have for some time renounced any interest in technology, leaving it in the hands of engineers, specialists, building contractors or industries during construction. It is a deleterious division that robs the very matter of architecture of any contents, hindering them from developing deep roots and primarily denying them any suitable possibilities for experimentation.

Yet, as our era's changes come rapidly, we must now operate to ensure that myths are short-lived. As Roland Barthes stated, they are inevitable and often deform reality, though in some cases they eliminate the dregs and remove encrustations. In Italy it is necessary to start over from here in order to erode, down to the very core, the image of the myth using the force of reason.

The universal diffusion of awareness may affirm itself without necessarily turning to processes of globalization or standardization. Our cultural, artistic and naturalistic heritage is a primary asset to be defended at all costs against any myth of false modernity and subservience to progress. Our historical cities must be respected in their essence, valorized in their *specificity*, and proposed to global attention. The reappropriation of technology by Italian architects is a necessary condition for its mediated and correct use, without preventions of any kind or external impositions, as a highly ductile tool in the hands of those capable of intelligently bending it to their will. Even the information revolution will clarify with time the specific field of the validity of its conquests, the effective role to be played in the diffusion of knowledge. At this point we will see that even in Italy the myth of the archistar will quickly dissolve, that the work of the architect will be appreciated not for being surprising and exceptional, but for the intrinsic meaning of its values. We can think once again, as suggested by Persico, of architecture as the «substance of things hoped for», though we must operate to ensure these hopes become reality. Myths, assailed by reason, tend to dissolve rapidly to leave us trustingly «awaiting a new history».

With this intention the authors of this issue of «Rassegna», edited by Franco Purini, offer us an examination of the evolving situation of Italian architecture at the turn of the this century and suggest approaches and possibilities of action for overcoming the «rites of passage» that accompany great epochal transformations.

M.R.

## A MILITANT ISSUE

This issue of the magazine intends to offer its readers a *militant* panorama of contemporary Italian architecture. Militant because, while planning and compiling it, our intention was not to assume a *neutral* point of view, or to be too external or artificially *bipartisan*. On the contrary, we sought to expose the cultural and productive condition of architecture in Italy, expressing strongly focused opinions that, for this reason, are intrinsically *dialectic*. It is well known that Italian architecture is unable to produce enough innovation, due less to an intrinsic insufficiency, as much as to the particularly difficult context in which it now finds itself

operating. The primary objective of this issue is that of exposing a number of factors that hinder the development of a *normal* architectural activity. The panorama that has been delineated, by necessity incomplete with regards to the arguments being confronted and partial in terms of their investigation, is thus intended as the outcome of a problematic recognition of events from recent years, with the goal of identifying particularly relevant lines of evolution. The need for the historiography of modern and contemporary architecture to truly face up to the decline of ideologies; a more complex conception of the historical phases through which architectural culture has been constructed, from [Italian] unification to the present; the

events, mediatic moments-exhibitions and important publications of recent years; the story of the *Letter of the 35*, which represented a crucial node in recent architectural debate; a critical compilation of the themes and works presented in The Italian Pavilion at the most recent Venice Biennale; the new questions emerging from a historiography that seriously confronts the global condition. These are the principal points of the reflection proposed in this issue. A reflection on the general aspects and details of Italian architecture that a carefully curated illustrative chronological list consents us to better understand in all of its implications.

Franco Purini

## DEBATE

### Awaiting a New History

Franco Purini

*Memories: If we plough the past we discover, in the fabric apparently united by time, sudden fractures, distances in which time and space take a sudden leap leaving behind that which no longer serves: a filter is dropped into this flow, or coagulates. Beyond the dregs consumed there continues only the "origin" of flowing and the sign of the symbols is changed, a future is born. Privileged moments of the birth of human times.*

Maurizio Sacripanti

The story of twentieth century Italian architecture has been constructed layer by layer around a number of problematic nodes that have for some time grown into an equal number of *narrative spaces*, elements of a true *mythology*, now accepted by almost the entirety of disciplinary culture without advancing any doubts or nurturing any reservations. The distance assumed from the excesses of the avant-garde, whose easy to metabolize proposals were laboriously selected; the suffered mediations between different directions of research; the criticisms of the separation between city and architecture present in the principal theorization elaborated around the Modern Movement; the need to identify a *national line* in relation to European and global architecture, constitute some of these problematic nodes. Others must be added, such as the relation between innovation and tradition; the iterations between the fragment, intended as the *symbolic form* of the ancient, and the whole, iterations that permeate the work of a protagonist such as Carlo Scarpa, for example; the alternative between generalisation and specialization; the distinction or integration of architecture and politics; the choice between the autonomy and the heteronomy of architecture; the relations between the architect and the world of manufacturing; continuity or discontinuity with the past, or the demand placed on the significance of history, on the capacity to integrate with design and favour the precipitation of its components into a solid and complex solution or, on the contrary, its proposition merely as the measure of a differentiation; an interrogation of the resources and limits of a rational conception of architecture. Beginning to examine the aforementioned questions has led to the formation of a few recurring *figures*. These include a dichotomic idea that proceeds through the

juxtaposition of progressives and reactionaries, a Manichean juxtaposition that does not permit distinctions and specifications; the idea of conflict as an essential category of making architecture, as in the famous *Difficoltà politiche dell'architettura italiana*, by Giulia Veronesi; the corresponding adoption of the *model of crisis* as a constant consequence of the confrontation between opposing sources, as a hypothesis, in the end aestheticising, of the incumbency of failure considered as a palingenetic plunge, the premise of a renaissance continually deferred to an indeterminate future and *somewhere else*; the identification of the value of architecture with that of the ideological choices made when designing and realizing it. This has led to the category of permanent conflict between opposing factions; of architecture as the expression of an abstract liberty, superior to any conditioning; the new as the result of a constant dialectic between the needs of settlement and representation born of the industrial revolution, needs that require a response from architecture, and *environmental pre-existences*, with the ambiguous compromises that are derived. The discomforting and cautionary vision expressed by Edoardo Persico; the dramatization of the condition of Italian architecture by Giuseppe Pagano; the palingenetic exasperation of organicism introduced in the wake of the Second World War by Bruno Zevi; the continuous and alarmed call for the responsibility of the architect made by Ernesto Nathan Rogers; the frowning and perennially unsatisfied gaze of Ludovico Quaroni; the inclination towards *apocalyptic* readings that marked the historical-critical itinerary pursued by Manfredo Tafuri all delineate a climate of endemic pessimism in which architecture as the «substance of things hoped for», according to the definition put forth by the author of *Punto e a capo dell'architettura*, revealed itself a promise that cannot be maintained. The very idea of environmental pre-existences that is similar, in many ways, to the theories of Saverio Muratori, in his delineation on an *intermediate line* between conservation and renewal – we can think of the Torre Velasca in Milan by BBPR or Muratori's Palazzo Sturzo in Rome – has generated an approach to design focused on incessant mediations that have robbed energy from the new, while simultaneously reducing, and timidly updating, the mysterious and prophetic meaning – from Alberto Savinio, Massimo Bontempelli – of the traces, evident or hidden, of the past. Of Rogers' *historical* pupils – Aldo Rossi, Guido Canella, Gae Aulenti, Vittorio Gregotti – in the end only the latter appears to have managed to subtract himself from



mimetic historicism, or worse yet, from an implicit continuist rhetoric present in the very idea of the *urban environment*.

With regards to environmental pre-existences, something must be said about a decidedly relevant antecedent. The problem of their *foundational* relationship with the new was already imposed and resolved during the 1920s and 30s, what is more in an analogous manner, by Gustavo Giovannoni and Marcello Piacentini. The urban projects of the latter, above all, were always conceived, even when dealing with demolitions or reconnections, through evaluations as accurate as they were efficient in their results, within the context in which they were to take place. The same accuracy is also present in many rationalist *theoretical projects*, including *Milano Verde* by Albini, Gardella, Minoletti, Palanti, Predaval and Romano, a source of much interest for the young Giulio Carlo Argan, and the Master Plan for a new district in Ivrea, by Figini and Pollini. Piacentini himself, what is more, in his famous *Architettura d'oggi*, requested, accompanied by one hundred and twenty illustrations, his own cultural policy which consisted of seeking a *central line* between overly pronounced innovative accelerations and an accentuated traditionalism. It must be noted that when selecting the examples proposed he demonstrated himself to be much more open to the new than those of the international panorama or the remainder of Italian production.

A historiography centred on ideology and politics could not avoid being a source of misunderstandings and errors, of over-evaluations of situations, schools, opportunities and works and, at the same time, the cause of symmetrical under-estimations of events and figures. If, during the period of Fascism, an attempt was made to bend architecture to the propagandistic interests of the regime, after the War this precedent impeded the elaboration, above all by left-wing parties, of an advanced discourse on the prospects of architecture as the expression of an entire society, if we exclude an interest, populist in nature and short-lived, for the dwelling designed for the so-called *subaltern classes*. Architectural neo-realism was seen as an entirely new orientation aimed at reclaiming, with respect to the celebrative events of fascist architecture, the potentials inherent to the traditions of popular construction, whose lexicon was reposed to contrast modern abstraction. In reality, in Rome neo-realism inherited the experiences of the 1920s and 30s, as revealed in a confrontation devoid of any prejudices between the Garbatella, Montesacro and the Tiburtino [all Roman neighbourhoods - TN] of Ridolfi and Quaroni. It was configured in more than one way as the true *invention* of a language that wished to incorporate rural atmospheres held to be capable of evoking a strong community spirit, though in reality profoundly *anti-urban*.

In continuing with this personal list of *narrative spaces* that must be subjected to revision, there are other issues to be dealt with. The *return of order* – Jean Cocteau's slogan – that was witness to the adherence in Italy of such artists as Ardengo Soffici, Carlo Carrà and Gino Severini, one convinced members of the avant-garde, must not be simply intended as a step away from backwards-looking positions, but as a *realignment* of research along a vaster and more widely accepted horizon of meaning. The avant-garde produced an epistemological fracture that caused the traumatic separation of language from its contents. Language has conquered an almost total autonomy,

independent of meaning, whose vehicle it was to have been. In this manner, artistic, architectural and literary aspirations entered into the realm of radical *hermetism*, which excluded almost the entirety of the general public from any access to an understanding of these works. This created the necessity of recomposing this dramatic gap, restoring language and contents to the same sphere. The intention was that of restoring to artistic research a capacity for communication that appeared to have been definitively placed in a condition of crisis. This need was also verified in the world of architecture. Reflecting on this problem, it appears evident that judging this realignment as a *moral betrayal* is intrinsically unjust. It is without a doubt correct, eventually, to speak of an erroneous decision, though in no way a guilty one.

Other than a return to order, there are other narrative spaces to be totally reconsidered. The fact that exemplary works of architecture were realized during the *Ventennio* [twenty-year period of Italian Fascism - TN] was, for example, recognized only if one agreed to presuppose their authors led a silent opposition to Fascism, which is often not the truth, as in the case of the Casa del Fascio in Como by Giuseppe Terragni and the Palazzo dei Congressi in Rome's EUR, by Adalberto Libera. If we examine a more recent period in history, the 1970s, the problems of large residential interventions from this era, inspired and supported by the left, whose symbol has become Mario Fiorentini's Corviale in Rome, were registered with a perceivable indulgence towards the functional and technical shortcomings presented by these districts.

The distortions rapidly recalled a few lines prior dealt not only with issues of a general nature. Entering into arguments more closely related to the specific problems of the cultures of design, we must recall a number of aspects of Italian architecture from the past century upon which to reflect. For decades creative episodes, such as those of Mario Ridolfi, together with theoretical elaborations, for example the proposals advanced in the pages of *Casabella* by Ernesto Nathan Rogers, or by Ludovico Quaroni, the *master of doubt*, in memorable books and during a half a century of teaching, were in some ways instrumentalised, even unconsciously, to obscure other architectural developments of a rare quality such as those undertaken by *irregular figures*, or those difficult to *frame* within precise ideological contexts, for example Giò Ponti, Luciano Baldessari, Luigi Moretti, Marcello D'Oliivo and Maurizio Sacripanti. Zevi's totalizing extremism lay at the origins of cultural battles in which a desire, as aggressive as it was summary, to overcome one's adversaries attenuated to a relative degree the possibility of sharing the motivations behind controversies that were often, inherently, necessary. The aversion to Post-Modernism, somatised in its irreducible juxtaposition to Paolo Portoghesi is not justifiable in the form it ended up assuming as, symmetrically, his propensity for *operative criticism* was fought using an equally rigid and definitive schematism by Manfredo Tafuri. Ignoring here the numerous *damnatio memoriae* – it is enough to recall the almost total cancellation of the theoretical and design work of Saverio Muratori in the wake of the harsh confrontation within the Faculties of Architecture in Rome between the author of the National Headquarters of the Christian Democrat Party in the EUR, and Bruno Zevi, only recently returned from Venice – we could compile an extensive list of erased events, of worthwhile examples of architecture condemned to



oblivion, of non-decisive moments elected as epochal events, of rather modest experiences considered to be of international importance. In the meantime, the real significance of the architecture realized by such central figures as, for example, Giuseppe Samonà, Giancarlo De Carlo, the aforementioned Rogers and Quaroni, does not appear to construct a true reason for interest, given that they were considered important more for their role as intellectuals than for their design research, which almost always produced noteworthy results, for many decades. For a number of reasons academic culture alone is considered a solid and long-lasting point of reference, though simultaneously the architectural results achieved by this culture are not held worthy of critical investigation. Paradoxically, a sort of analogy affects those examples of architecture that could be considered *anti-academic*, in turn appreciated more for their experimental and anti-conventional nature than for their intrinsic architectural content. Within this framework their remain true historical-critical enigmas to be resolved. Of these the role of the *Comunità* movement that, under the guidance of Adriano Olivetti, promoted interventions of great importance, such as the agricultural village of La Martella, not far from Matera. What must be understood to the fullest is the very nature, simultaneously democratic and elitist, of Olivetti's vision, which ended up placing the solutions proposed, inspired by a *critical enlightenment* that directly accepted the problems to which it intended to offer a response, *above* and *beyond* the urban situations and social conditions within which they act. These solutions were airlifted in from above, as if those involved in these experiments were considered not as subjects in a dialogue, but as the *privileged objects* of an advanced *reformist engineering*. Another problem to be investigated consists of finding a reason for the lack of support from the left in the early 1960s, beyond apparent consensus, for innovative hypotheses for office districts, spaces of *urban social interaction* which remain largely incomplete and indeterminate to this day in their oscillation between an openness towards the territory and an enclosure within enclaves devoid of any connections. A further technical node that Italian architecture has dealt with only laterally is that of technique. Perhaps due to the influence during the twentieth century of Crocian idealism, the significance of the technical universe in modern society – a question that was central, in Germany, as recalled in the works of Romano Guardini and Martin Heidegger – was raised in an offhand and marginal manner. To expose this scarce interest we need only consider that it took at least twenty years for Renzo Piano, strongly supported by an original and humanist idea of technique far from the didascalical overexposure of high-tech, to be recognized by Italian critics as an important contribution to one of the most complex problems, not only architectural, of the twentieth century.

To better understand the relationship between the current problems faced by Italian architecture, observed within the historic perspective rapidly summarized above, and the condition of global architecture, we must now recall a number of profound and irreversible changes that have taken place during the last twenty years in the field of architecture. These changes have been provoked by the convergence of three phenomena whose importance it is not yet possible to fully evaluate, but which are surely of indubitable magnitude. The first is the advent of *globalization*, which has redefined, from their very foundations, the planet's political, economic and cultural

logics, triggering a hard-fought competition not only between nations, but above all between *metropolises*, each of which is actively involved, such as Shanghai, to mention only one, in capturing the world's top spot. The second is the *information revolution*, whose primary effect has not only been the passage, as Kurt Forster has written, from the Vitruvian tectonic paradigm – the triplicate paradigm – to construction based on the continuity of supporting and wrapping surfaces, but above all a new way of communicating, verified by the birth of social networks, one of the most evident consequences of the creation of the *Internet*. The Internet is the environment within which a new form of criticism was born and spread, expressed in the numerous *blogs* dedicated to architecture and in the various *press letters* that deal with current events. Even the websites that present the works of numerous architects or offices contribute to determining a new modality of reading and deciphering what now takes place in architecture. It is still too early to evaluate the role of online criticism, though it constitutes in any case a phenomena worthy of particular attention. The third change is the passage from the production of material to *immaterial* goods or, in other words, the affirmation of culture and art as the primary fields of the elaboration of collective mentalities and expectations. These three changes are inscribed within a progressively more accentuated acceleration of information flows, coupled with a *reduction to the present*, also more and more driven, in other words a flattening onto the narrowest actuality, in turn rendered more operative by a process, typical of globalization, that tends towards generalization and erupts in the broadest abstraction. The acceleration of information, the reduction to the present, and abstraction are all factors that impede those who wish to understand what is taking place and construct that *critical distance* spoken about with such conviction for years by Vittorio Gregotti. The time necessary for observing things from perspectives that consent an analysis and evolution of meaning has been reduced to the point of disappearing. For this we must learn to place ourselves where we wish to be found, utilizing a sort of *sixth sense* that permits us to effect instantaneous collimations or, in other words, which makes it possible to proceed through rapid connections between phenomena and elements, even distant and diverse. In light of what has been said, I can only hope that the near future will be witness to three correlated operations. The first is the promotion of a strategy for twentieth century Italian architecture, finally conceived outside of the binary scheme, inspired by an ideological vision of what has occurred, which dominated the second half of the past century. Historical writing must take heed of the end of a conception of Italian architecture as the result of a sort of endless *civil war* that has and continues to witness two factions locked in combat using any licit and illicit means. Modernity was not a monolithic technical and operative entity, nor was it forced to confront the antagonist of *another modernity*. It is presented progressively more often as the interaction between different points of view that possess their own intrinsic legitimacy and which can undoubtedly live together. The totalizing idea that the direction of research capable of expressing the most elevated contents and the most advanced programmes is *only one* can no longer be sustained. It must be substituted by a pluralistic vision that, if we do not wish to place different positions on the same level, must in any case be capable of recording eventual imbalances and the very right to exist of conflicting disciplinary interpretations. The second operation that must be carried out has to do

with the problem of *thematic simplification*, imposed by global logics of culture and information. For example, the articulation of Italian architecture between the national situation and regional identities is too complex to be understood at the level of planetary problems, now dominated by the relationship between sustainability and technology. A historiography of Italian architecture dominated by a prevalence of *memory*, rather than search for how innovative ideas can find space and be verified, a memory that cannot help but tend to inoculate against the toxins of nostalgia, self-satisfaction and the a posteriori alibi typical of disciplinary culture, is not capable of placing an architecture so percentagely *marginal* as Italian architecture in a condition to insert itself within the global framework with equal possibilities of iterations and exchanges. In effect, memory cannot be considered only as a *mental space* and a dimension of the spirit that render only those familiar more aware and more responsible, more sensitive to the complex fabric of reality. Memory truly counts if it is the space of a structural reading of how things have become what they are. A non-sentimental reading, nor a purely evocative one, though aimed at reconstructing the processes through which spaces and architecture have defined their identity.

The necessity for a thematic simplification is the premise of the third, and most difficult operation. In fact, there is an urgent need to work as quickly as possible to identify within Italian architecture no more than three priorities, which find confirmation in problems that are immediately evident and easy to comprehend. *Translating* historical heritage into the languages of the contemporary by subtracting it from its propensity to flow into the conventional and reassuring idea of the *past*; creating a programme of innovative urban and architectural interventions, renouncing the possible current variations of theories of environmental pre-existences; favouring the conflicting simultaneous presences of a plurality of tendencies without imagining that a sole direction of research must be dominant, delineating a programme that is perhaps worth taking the pains to realize. If it is true, as stated by Charles Baudelaire, that criticism – and culture in general – must be “partial, passionate and political”, it is also true that these characteristics need not necessarily belong to a single faction. While awaiting this new history, no longer conceived of within a *binary paradigm* intended as the bellicose confrontation for the conquest of a hegemony, but rather as the intentional description of *strategies of conflictual and operative coexistence*, it is necessary to hope for a creative season that rediscovers pleasure in the act of making, far from the closed and worrisome atmosphere that permeated the narrative spaces of Italian architecture during the twentieth century.

## An Italian Chronology

Vittorio Gregotti

After a brief mention of the international situation, this essay proceeds with an in-depth report on Italian architecture, from the declaration of Italian unity to the present day. Through specific definitions of various phenomena, and even more specific examinations of the important figures of architectural culture during this lengthy period, the essay creates a scenario of premises and counterpoints to the great information revolution of the past twenty years.

Given the impossibility of reducing a history so accurately

«distilled» by the author to a brief synthesis, the choice has been made to present a significant section of the text, relative to the 1950s, which evidences the type of investigation and critical choices found in the essay: «During the first half of the 1950s, there continued a dense activity of constructing working class districts; Via Harar in Milan, the Falchera district in Turin, Cesate in Milan, in Bologna the Barca, in Genoa the Villa Bernabò. All with the ambition of identifying the terms of a new “current architecture” [English in the original text – TN] of quality. The second half of the ‘50s was witness to creation of many works demonstrating a significant maturity of Italian Rationalism, including those of Franco Albini, Gardella, Caccia Dominioni, Ridolfi and Ludovico Quaroni. Followed by the second generation: Viganò, Magistretti and Zanuso who designed industrial buildings for Olivetti, for whom Cosenza and Nizzoli, in ‘55, constructed the building in Pozzuoli. The generation of the great moderns also positively erupted in the world of museums: Florence, Genoa, Milan and Palermo. These same years were also the beginning of the season of successes in Italian industrial design, to which can be connected, after ‘55, even the Pirelli skyscraper by Pier Luigi Nervi (who had already achieved significant international fame) in collaboration with Giò Ponti, already a modernist. At the end of the ‘50s Gino Valle came to light, a figure who, during the successive years, would have a great importance. Moretti also returned with a series of somewhat unnecessarily elegant plastic interventions (and with his magazine). In the wake of Informalism (and the Le Corbusier of Ronchamp) even if linguistically distant from him and between one another, there were the plastic experiments of Savioli, Leonardo Ricci, D’Olivio, Enrico Castiglioni, culminating with the Church of the Autostrada by Michelucci». The author concludes with a look at the last twenty years: «During the twenty year period between 1990-2010 the same questions that guided the global crisis of architecture were also to be found in Italy, unresolved and worsened: including the progressively more marginal position of the Italian contribution to international architectural culture. Without prejudicing, as it is correct to say, a few rare exceptions. To this must be added the difficult conditions of the world of university education, the decadence of architectural magazines (though this is a global phenomenon), the difficulties (or perhaps the abandonment) of any plan to defend the reasonable development of the territory, and a cultural hostility between generations that is not justified even by the economic crisis. Finally, the mediatic triumph of the architect-artist (though this is shared with many countries around the world), as demonstrated also by the most recent Venice Biennales, and the progressive cultural colonization of Italy.

Though pessimism is refuted by a few signs that are emerging if we carefully observe the attitudes, the concerns and the qualities of the youngest generations».

## For an Agenda of the History of Italian Architecture

Marco Biraghi

There are moments when the necessity of defining the state-of-the-art appears impellent, when we must clarify current conditions and future objectives. The critical nature of the present moment may allow us to infer a consistent

number of clues; though perhaps, to this end, it may be sufficient to request, by now growingly widespread and pressing (advanced by Franco Purini in the pages of this issue), a logging of the recent history of Italian architecture, with the intent of increasing the awareness of architecture in our country and augmenting the critical skills possessed by its users.

It is evident that a current history of Italian architecture is above all the history of another generation: a generation that is not simply chronologically successive to its predecessors, but which breaks with them, not only in terms of cultural premises; a generation that has had to confront its own obligations in the field of architecture from often weak positions, characterized by a condition of precariousness, of uncertainty and marginalization; and, further still, a generation that has had to face up to a situation in Italy that is both economically and structurally very fragile. In the era of communications and 'mediatisation', young Italian professionals have trouble finding space in traditional magazines and publications, seeking their own dimension of representation in the more impalpable though diffusive reality of the Internet.

In an era with a primarily pragmatic vocation, finally, the younger generations of Italian architects possess, not infrequently, as part of their personal cultural baggage, a more or less consistent theoretical tool. Even while not responding in an immediate sense to the needs of the profession, this tool reveals the desire of at least a portion of Italy's new young protagonists to concentrate on the conditions of 'thinkability' of their future architecture, and constitutes an added value for those who wish to face up to the obligations of the architect in more problematic terms.

### Italian Cities, Global, Plural or Local?

Stefania Suma

Complex, whirling, competitive, conflictual, technological, transitory and hedonistic, our contemporary era develops under the sign of multimedia communication, which consents, thanks to the existence of progressively more sophisticated information systems, the global diffusion of economic, financial, political and trans-national cultural models. Within this system, distinguished by what Paul Virilio refers to as the "end of geography", cities are now connected to one another by a multiplicity of material and virtual networks, aimed at favouring immediate and sudden communication. This instantaneousness brings two consequences to bear. On the one hand the undeniable advantage, as indicated by the very etymology of the term «communication», the «sharing with others» of goods and, on the other, the development of the problem of a

standardising flatness of propagated models.

All the same, Italian cities, unlike others, place themselves in a position of marginality, which does not correspond with a failure to insert themselves within the logics of global systems, but rather the desire, more or less accentuated, to maintain a critical distance, aimed at preserving their specificity. The key to accessing planetary circuits for these cities lies in the development of skills and specialisations capable of offering, at the global level, a precise and exclusive specificity, around which it is possible for authentic interest to spread. In order to guarantee their belonging to the global network and preserve their identity, cities must construct a new globality, a *plural globality*, capable of contrasting the «end of geography», rediscovering the vocation of sites and restoring dignity and beauty to the act of dwelling.

### The (unanswered) Letter of the 35

Gianfranco Neri

On 7 September 2005, an article that appeared in the cultural pages of the *Corriere della Sera*, signed by Pierluigi Panza and entitled *Architetti in rivolta: invasi da progetti stranieri* (Architects in Revolt: invaded by foreign projects) animated the apparently composed world of Italian architecture. It was a journalistic comment offered in response to an appeal launched by 35 architects «defending» Italian architecture, and composed of approximately 30 lines penned by Paolo Portoghesi and intended for various national authorities. This appeal exposed a serious and real problem: in addition to observing the country's lack of initiatives and proposals of «mediated programming», focused on the realization of large projects, the article also pointed out that those few projects currently underway «are almost always to be attributed to the work of foreign architects». Exactly five years after this Letter we can, without a doubt, anticipate that of the various problems it mentioned, aimed well beyond the demarcation of an academic and professional environment, there remain no traces, while the situation denounced has continued to progressively deteriorate and fragment. As we know, no response was ever made to the *Lettera dei 35*, nor was it given the attention it deserved, nor, above all, was it able to achieve the most important and hoped for result: the beginning of a serious and organic examination of the state of Italian architecture. Yet, for many it confirmed the sad conviction of living in a country that does not believe in architecture and, when this happens, there is little to be done for the rest. What is more, that in our country architects can be as talented as they wish, though if there is no investment in their skills, there is little possibility of moving forward. And our country does not invest, while others do.

## RESEARCH

### Amnesia in the Present - Italia 1990-2010

Maria Vittoria Capitanucci

This investigation, entitled *Amnesia in the Present*, presented in occasion of the 12<sup>th</sup> International Architecture

Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, inside the Italian Pavilion AILATI [AILATI is a reversal of the word ITALIA, or ai lati – along the edges – TN], was an initial attempt at an analysis and reconnaissance through twenty years of Italian architecture or, better yet, through facts and events from the Italian architectural panorama. Imagined as

one of the three steps of investigation inside the larger container of *AILATI. Reflections from the future*, this section was presented, in the design of the exhibition, as a central and round totem, defilade and almost shy with respect to the other two sections, though dotted with images-icons in colours alternating from green to blue to red, at whose summit four screens reproduced a loop of thirty thematic monologues by the protagonists, architects and theoreticians of the last twenty years of Italian architecture. The 17 facets of this totem became thematic areas used to bring together issues, facts and emergences – publications, exhibitions, works of architecture, as well as laws, deaths and awards – chronologically distributed on 4 levels, in a ziggurat system, stepped and articulated from the bottom up.

This systematic and critical reflection was not only informative, but also required a series of investigations and studies, a periodisation born of the desire to understand the motivations for the strange ‘black hole’ so temporally close to our era that it has not yet been properly logged. As Luca Molinari wrote in his essay *Appunti per una storia italiana 1990-2010* (Notes for an Italian History 1990-2010): “We are dealing with a historical period in which at least four distinct generations of authors seek to produce new maps capable of explaining, at least in part, the reasons for the disaster and the crisis and, together identify the occasions and the tools for returning to being a centre of potential interest.” The reading of this twenty year period, other than through memory and essays, was also assisted by architectural magazines – undoubtedly the historical ones – as well as using the more recent new generation’, no longer specialized and in a certain sense pop – as absolute tools of communication, information and criticism, allowing for the definition of a series of categories of interpretation.

## Criticism Online

*Lina Malfona*

The *Internet*, a component of our media society and presently the most powerful tool for the diffusion of information, has controversial aspects: while such factors as ubiquity and the optimisation of time may constitute positive features, the scenario of information is becoming more and more vulnerable: true news, in fact, alternates with false information, the risk of impoverishment for the cultural contents of tradition is evident and the scientific rigour of information is slowly disappearing. What is more, the extraneousness of authors from prestigious institutions, and the generalised omission of their *curricula*, cast significant doubts on the situation of online criticism in Italy.

As we know, the controversies of the Internet also involve specialised publications. In fact, if in the past architectural magazines were simultaneously instruments of technical-cultural know-how and platforms for the communication and interpretation of the world of design, to the point that some were able to guide the activities of entire generations, today the crisis being faced by these tools follows the mutated conditions derived from the growth and the development of online information. These aspects

contribute to the formation of a *temporary thought*, founded less on a theoretical reasoning as much as on a *phenomenological* one, whose fragility can also be felt in the prevalence of images over content, often simplifying and above all excessively descriptive, that fills architectural *blogs*, *e-zines* and *newsletters*.

All the same, a positive aspect within this scenario is found in the capacity of some organizations to utilize the tool of information in an experimental way. This has produced results of great quality, including prototypes of didactic laboratories, experiences of participative design, *hypothetical* cities created using interactive platforms such as *Second Life* and *Blue Mars*, characterized by elevated graphics. However, these initiatives, some extraordinarily futuristic, emerge from a multitude of projects and proposals, the quality of whose information is still undeniably low, given the current renunciation in Italy of an “approach to online architectural criticism”.

## 2000-2010. A Decade of Italian Architecture: Writing, Exhibitions, Conferences and Meetings

*Dina Nencini*

Italian architecture, examined through the essays and writings that, over the past decade, have offered a critical reading, the exhibitions and shows that have presented it and, finally, the conferences and meetings during which it was discussed, is presented as a system that is anything but neglected, even if heterogeneous and, to a certain degree, disorganic. Through the distinction between specific modalities, it is however possible to identify an equal number of environments of architectural criticism. In the first modality, or the *«way of the atlas»*, we find those texts and exhibitions predominated by the characteristic of the collection or the list, not concentrating the investigation of the qualities of Italian architecture in dominant figures but opting, on the contrary, for a horizontal reading, derived from sums and common denominators, rather than from singular expressions. A second approach, which could be defined as one *«of trends»*, is identified in those texts, exhibitions and conferences that aspire to fostering a prevalence, or highlighting a group, a dominant approach, or one that is held to be so. If we subtract the «destructive character» and a permanent desire for the alternative from this way of trends, it is possible to identify, within this substantially ideological category, the *way of the Schools*. The third approach, which we can define as one *«of narrations»*, presupposes a strong critical intentionality capable of configuring new scenarios for architecture. The critics who pursue this approach, what is more, unlike those of the *«way of the atlas»*, do not move in a horizontal manner, but work through dominants, through figures that catalyze themes and theories. In delineating the identity of Italian architecture throughout the past decade, we must also mention the architectural parties and festivals, the workshops and laboratories, the medals and awards that have succeeded one another, contributing to a critical self-reflection, and to the communication and diffusion of Italian architecture.