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Contemporary Italian Architecture

The Principle of Responsibility

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Italian architecture of the last three decades is weakly characterized by the use of either a peculiar kind of shape, or material, or style. More frequently, it is characterized by a problematic approach to the “design process.” In short, Italian contemporary architecture is something like the result of all the difficulties, delays and setbacks that this design process encounters in Italy along its way. These circumstances, caused by a condition of permanent “crisis” of the Italian society, turn themselves from negative factors to positive, often becoming potential resources, even favorable opportunities. This is also a form of identity—the Italian architectural identity—however fragile and difficult.

What emerges from this unusual condition is—at best—an architecture that could be called “responsible,” namely an architecture that is able to respond to those different occasions and multiple difficulties generated by the “critical” Italian situation. Nowadays, Italian architects are often invited to perform an inventive act, not so much by formal solutions, but rather through the development of programs. Such “responsible architecture” rarely refers to the traditional typologies. Instead, it requires the creation of new types of buildings for new uses. “Responsible architecture” produces (when it can) several small, precise, clear and relevant buildings, intended to solve distinctive—even local—problems, demonstrating their adherence to the purpose. In most cases, they are not masterpieces, rather precious “pearls,” scattered throughout the Italian country, according to a seemingly random distribution. However, by no means this dissemination is fortuitous: often avoiding big cities, more preferably these new buildings are concentrated in little and medium-size towns.

This paper seeks to investigate Italian contemporary architecture through this new interpretative category, providing a new definition of its “identity,” a question that at the moment is largely debated in the Italian architectural circles and abroad.



In the past fifteen years Italian architecture has lost its role as a “driving force” within Italy’s culture and economy. It no longer retains a “synthetic power,” as it previously had, which allowed cities, society and the whole nation to transform itself. For various reasons, Italian architecture lost its ability to be an effective tool for implementing “grand designs,” whether urban or social—it simply was not in architecture’s hands to do so. Apparently the only “big” things that architecture could achieve were to do with real estate operations conducted by private corporations and endorsed by complacent politicians.

In a very different economic context to the 1960s and 70s (the best period for modern Italian architecture), recent architecture in Italy has tried, where possible, to create many small, precise, clear, relevant and often local designs, aspiring to solve well-defined problems. It is precisely in this way that architecture has proved its effectiveness and adherence to purpose. In most cases these buildings are far from masterpieces; rather, they are like little pearls, scattered throughout the country in a seemingly random distribution, avoiding the main centres and inhabiting the outskirts of cities.

From all of this, what emerges is not just a fragmentary geography but a condition of substantial fragmentation, the absence of a conscious direction. Instead architecture proceeds messily, producing single, isolated occasions, individual “cues,” which all together perfectly describe a certain lack of clarity, revealing a mood of improvisation existing in Italy at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Not infrequently, however, more than the mere performance of a task, or the proper performance of a function, architecture and Italian architects today are called on to be inventive: not so much in a formal sense, but rather by confronting new programmatic requirements that, with increasing frequency, require the creation of new building types beyond architecture’s traditional typologies.

Such inventions, sometimes modest yet no less interesting or commendable, are simply the result of efforts to produce a good outcome. More than this, however, they are aimed at winning in the difficult conditions in which the Italian system operates; a system that does not help but often openly hinders any attempt to innovate. From this point of view, to gain the right to exist, these buildings, more than being considered a product of the “system” within which they are placed, are almost required to engage “battles” with it, yet not necessarily against it.

It is notable that the protagonists of this arduous work of architectural “resistance” do not belong to a single generation but are fairly equally divided between different generations. This intergenerational character—that combines architects of various training and culture (as well as age)—is one of the few elements of continuity to be seen in the architectural landscape of the last thirty years; an important issue that marks the return of a commitment that, if not properly called political, at least has a civic sense. For this reason, the following buildings have been grouped together under the term “responsible architecture.” To justify this name it is enough to refer to the “principle of responsibility” that Hans Jonas made as the foundation of an “ethics for the technological civilization.” But also in an etymological sense, responsibility is clearly due to the

ability to respond, and then to stand on the ground of “compliance” rather than getting lost in delirious chatter or narcissistic self-reflection. In this sense, an architecture that is responsible goes out of itself and its own interests, to be a mirror to broader questions and common social concerns.

In the Centre for health and housing Lega del Filo d’oro (1998-2004), in Lesmo (Monza), for support, education, rehabilitation and reintegration into families and society of deaf and blind people and the psycho-sensorily disabled, Stefano Guidarini and Pierluigi Salvadeo put on a gently sloping terrain six buildings for collective activities (management, rooms for physiotherapy, gym, swimming pool, cafeteria), placed at the two ends of the settlement, and three residential buildings, located centrally. It is an architecture of perception, which in addition to the usual visual and tactile stimulation (simple shapes, primary facades covered with exposed bricks, large expanses of primary colors), also uses sound and olfactory pathways to stimulate reactions in its users and to establish a relationship with them. In 2011, as evidence of the success of their attempt, Guidarini and Salvadeo obtained another task for the Lega del Filo d’oro—to design the new headquarters of Osimo.

A lesser communicative tension, but an equally strong determination to create a community, characterizes the Solidarity Centre FARO, Messina (1994-98) by Michele Cannatà and Fátima Fernandes. Its clean box volumes, lying longitudinally, with vertical and horizontal windows carved into its white plaster walls, clearly manifest the meeting of different cultures held in relation to each other: Mediterranean culture and modernist culture revisited through the lessons of Alvaro Siza. It is no coincidence that Cannatà and Fernandes precisely embody a synthetic encounter between these two geographical-cultural matrices, south Italy and Portugal. The same centre’s drug rehabilitation section, with its quiet and elegant look, happily fixed in the sensational position in which it stands (a very steep terrain in front of the Strait of Messina) provides a fascinating play between formal abstraction and the physicality of the place. It is precisely in this highly resolved contrast that the centre’s sense of community is founded: a sense that is rooted in a dangerous situation, daily crossed by its guests, and expressed in the struggles that they fight in order to find a way between Scylla and Charybdis, an *ubi consistam*.

An equally “difficult” situation exists at the Centro di quartiere and the Palazzo del volontariato (2004-11) in Cerignola, Puglia, by Angelo Torricelli. The point from which the architect approaches the project is—significantly—the country that surrounds the village, occupied by “innumerable platoons of olive trees,” as described by Cesare Brandi. The consideration that Torricelli gives to the town (and to the buildings he designs) is based on the existing ecosystem in which Puglia’s countryside is located, and even before that, on its architectural features: an ecosystem made of vegetation, light, air, “a campaign”—as Torricelli writes in the report of the project—“which for centuries has been defined in its structure according to the radial pattern of rural roads converging towards the *agrocittà*.” From this sight from “above” and from “outside,” the project goes beyond being “contextualized” in its banal and limited sense—nor is it merely “imitative”—rather it is deeply and fully classified within this ecosystem, trying to respond to and comply with it.



On the basis of this general “introduction”—which is the fundamental assumption of both projects—it is the Centro di quartiere and the Palazzo del volontariato that are placed in line with the olive groves bordering the area to the south-east of the intervention, rather than the residential buildings and the sporting grounds, which are oriented in a more “free” and random way.

Torricelli—here as elsewhere—is not seduced by the easy advances of architecture today to make a “fashionable,” “eco-friendly” architecture. This does not mean that his buildings ignore the issue of achieving a proper energy balance, or the more essential need to provide a thermal balance internally, made consistent with the climate and the place occupied. The buildings do not resort to high technology, rather all is done by architectural means: materials (bricks that cover large parts of the facades), shielding from the sun (the free walls and patio offering shadows and perspectives of rest), the modulation of openings and closures. These are simple devices based on ancient “lessons,” and yet—or simply because of it—always valid, always adequate. And it is precisely this “simplicity,” not at all obvious or trivial, which eventually makes the spaces of the Centro di quartiere and the Palazzo del volontariato of Cerignola.

Sometimes architecture’s ability to play its role responsibly can be measured on the basis of the intelligent way it is inserted in its context, not only its physical context but also its social and cultural context. Despite the significant presence of the former Casa del Fascio by Giuseppe Terragni, Lissone is and remains—beyond the crisis—the home of the North-Italy furniture manufacturing, and emblematic of the attitude to craft and industry in Brianza. This, combined with the relatively small size of the town, makes noteworthy the intervention of Marco Terenghi for the realization of the local Municipal Art Gallery (1996-2000), now the Museum of Contemporary Art. Right beside a nineteenth-century building characterized by its strict historicist style (originally used as furniture factory) Terenghi placed a new building that establishes a conversation with Lombard rationalism but also upon which are grafted more recent “quotations,” such as a large extruded glass element, remembering the “Portuguese School,” and a closed cylinder, reminiscent of Mario Botta’s architecture. The exhibition space on two levels, largely free except for the central stairwell, responds with care and accuracy to the needs of an Art Gallery. The best way to understand its provincial nature, is to see it as a cultural “rescue platform” floating in a residential and commercial ocean for the rest almost unattractive, and as a valuable outpost of the larger but incomplete archipelago of the museums of Milan, conveniently connected by the railway station.

Entirely different is the condition of the Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Foundation, dedicated by its founder, Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, to the promotion of contemporary art. Inaugurated in 2002, the Foundation is located in a former industrial area in the Borgo San Paolo district, an area immediately behind the centre of Turin. Claudio Silvestrin, architect and designer, Angelo Fronzoni’s pupil and continuator of the research undertaken by him especially in the field of graphics, organizes a space that aspires to be positively neutral, at the service of the often-bulky presence of contemporary art

works. It does this by using a simple and rigorous box covered with white stone, almost entirely closed, except for a few cuts that “animate”—albeit with extreme caution—the exterior and interior surfaces. In a national and international scene mainly dominated by the more empty exhibition of architectural vanity, the sober and quiet parallelepiped of Silvestin produces an effect paradoxically provocative—making the latest “hype” awoken in a world that is broken by every formal noise, and probably the only one still recordable.

An extreme formal simplicity also characterizes the Pythagoras Museum (2003-07) of Crotona by OBR (Open Building Research—Paolo Brescia e Tommaso Principi). Compared to the Foundation in Turin, however, the Museum of this Calabrian town plays a much more strategic role and has a more urban character, despite the difficult position it occupies. Configured as an elongated body with a rectangular section and partially buried in the slopes of the Pignera Park, in the outskirts of the city, the building addresses the historical center with a fully glazed facade, framed in a deep concrete cornice, a sort of “big screen” designed to give maximum publicity to the new museum as an institution. If in fact the museum is dedicated to the work and thought of the greek mathematician and philosopher, the “function,” which its sharp and significant position gives full evidence of, provides a renewed image of Crotona that attempts to strengthen not only the contacts established between the city and its areas of new growth but also—to a higher level—the contacts between a noble past and a sparsely exciting present. Far from being an incongruous gesture, something out of place, the “geometrical theorem” of the building by OBR aspires to be the face of an Italy really modernized, transparent and clean—fortified by the clarity of its aims and the achievement of high results.

Forming a real public space open to the city of Milan, highly suitable for the organization of events that go beyond traditional theatre, is the Teatro Franco Parenti (2004-2008), produced after an architectural reconfiguration implemented by Michele De Lucchi, under the artistic direction of Andrée Ruth Shammah. Partially annexing an adjacent outdoor swimming pool facility now in disuse, De Lucchi has transformed the old rationalist building of 1933, which over the years had housed a cinema and then the historical Teatro Pier Lombardo, into a “citadel of the show” consisting of a main hall with 500 seats and a number of secondary halls of different size and appearance. The brick infill, left visible as well as the steel of the new structures (which are combined with the existing reinforced concrete) give rise to a chain of indoor rooms whose “happiness” is represented by the carefully controlled repetition of well known solutions. But it is with the treatment of the foyer, where you can find a restaurant and a coffee shop, but also the stairs and walkways that connect the various levels and distribute the various functions, conceived as a sort of “continuous stage” covered by a wooden floorboards, that the new Teatro Franco Parenti reveals the nature of its place made for meeting and socializing.

The nursery of GlaxoSmithKline, designed and built between 2004 and 2005 by Antonio Citterio Patricia Viel, is located on the industrial outskirts of Verona. The context of the multinational corporate campus, intended for the children of employees, was a difficult problem to solve in making an integrated and safe environment.



Setting the external perimeter of the building on a rectangular plan, and creating a broken profile courtyard open on one side (perhaps mindful of the Asilo Sant'Elia by Giuseppe Terragni), the architects have come up with a brilliant solution but at the same time a "singular simplicity," as rightly noted Pier Paolo Tamburelli. In fact, at a closer look, its remarkable simplicity is not so much a simple solution as simple reasoning, its clever ease that—not by chance—allows the architects unexpected freedom and gentleness. The architects have accepted the responsibility to make a simple but useful building, intentionally devoid of inappropriate ambition. The clearly defined project restrictions allowed the architects to tackle the job with composure, and not rigidity. They saw an opportunity to work on this typology with both eager interest and naturalness, reflecting pragmatically on a set of not very orthodox models and paying attention to the quality of the end product. Only in the light of these objectives, with the use of prefabricated elements and a material such as laminated wood, can the project take its more effective meaning: not finding comfortable "shortcuts" on the one hand, nor searching for eco-friendly practices, on the other, but—more simply—to create the maximum light and flexibility in rooms for children.

Entirely different starting conditions and outcomes are reached by the municipal nursery in Formicola, province of Caserta, designed in 1990 by Beniamino Servino. In this case the effort of the architect is not an attempt to overcome the obvious contextual difficulties, which are added to those due to the protraction of the work of completion of the building. However, the solution provided by Servino shows itself more committed to dialogue with the different "linguistic traditions" of architecture than with the world of childhood. The coating of the two brick buildings arranged in parallel to form two separate courtyards with classroom for group work in between, the reinforced concrete column that does as a mediator between the platform and the curved stone walkway, the large T metal like a portal of entry to the courts, together constitute materials that give proper definition to the spaces of a civil and social architecture; an architecture that transcends functions and acts as both a point of reference and of collective recognition.

The school campus of Agordo (Belluno), designed and built between 2006 and 2009 by Studio Albori (Emanuele Almagioni, Giacomo Borella and Francesca Riva), includes four high schools: a high school, an art school, a technical institute and a chemical institute. The plan forms an obtuse angle; with the complex composed of a single continuous building that contains classrooms, the auditorium, laboratories, offices and warehouses, having alternating sides covered with larch boards and fiber concrete sheets. Without succumbing to the easy temptation to propose a "typical" architecture within a landscape strongly characterized by the presence of the majestic peaks of the Dolomites, the architects come to a happy synthesis of mountain austerity, expressed by coupling the structure of prefabricated reinforced concrete with a secondary structure of wood, to reveal a modern efficiency. The building even incorporates, as an essential aspect, the creation of comfortable living spaces and bright, vivid colors. The "typical" is thus opposed—and offers in its place—the "characterized." We seem to hear, ringing in the measured shapes of the school of Agordo, the echo of Adolf Loos's Rules for people who build in the mountains.

Nestled in the foothills of the Alps of Alta Brianza, in Eupilio, near Como, the Thermal Center Aquilegia, on the Segrino Lake (2002-04), by Marco Castelletti evokes Japanese scenarios, more than those typical of Brianza. The basic box structure in dark wood that houses the various functions (lounge, bar, changing rooms, showers, sauna, infirmary), strongly stretched in the longitudinal direction and willing to L, together with the wide porches punctuated by linear pillars wooden square section facing towards the lake and bridges-piers that reach to touch the water, have the severe simplicity of the Katsura Imperial Villa or pavilion Ryoan-ji Zen temple—the only break to the uniformity of wood, being the side facing the road which alternates its metallic railing and concrete wall. This treatment makes it look like stone blocks elongated in composition and alternately protruding. The same “ashlar” treatment presents the closed corner tower with two storeys, the first of which is for the ticket office. Avoiding complication and the making of unnecessary artifices, Castelletti has been able to give to the building a simple elegance, which makes the perfect backdrop for the lush vegetation of Segrino proliferating around the lake, whose waters are among the cleanest in Italy.

The waters of the river Sile, at Cendon Silea, Treviso, are the indispensable partner of the arrangement of the river created by Made Associates (Adriano Marangon and Michela De Poli) between 1998 and 2006. In the alternation of materials programmatically left in their raw state (cor-ten steel, wood, stone), used as flooring, as seating, as retaining walls arranged at various levels, the architects show their intent to reconnect the different fragments of the village along the bank of the river, giving to it a missing unity. A minimal intervention, which does not require the construction of any volume, but which nevertheless achieves its goal: to show that “to get away with little,” to use the famous expression of Walter Benjamin, is not only a virtue due to the need but it has its own independent value, as well as its dignity and usefulness.

The same kind of sensibility belongs to the intervention by Francesco Taormina in the historical center of Pollina, a small medieval village on the Tyrrhenian foothills of the Madonie, in the province of Palermo. Started in the early nineties, and then continued over half of the first decade of 2000, the operation consists in the insertion of stairs, paved paths and a city gate that connects the historic centre with the expansion which has occurred in the Sicilian village since the 1960s. The so-called Strada Palazzi, which owes its name to the tower houses that are arranged like a curtain, is paved with blocks of stone and marked along its entire ascending path by a balustrade of steel and concrete framing the surrounding landscape. But it is with the new Porta Palazzi that Taormina goes beyond the limits of even commendable honesty in being faced with the problem of integrating the new in a historical context, indulging in a declaration of intent: the portal defined by the bare elements of vertical support and the equally essential concrete lintel, the “cannonball” of stone casually put on one side, the wall crossed by grooves which form an abstract drawing, and especially the bronze pine which is invested with the role of “hero local,” presence at the same time familiar and alienating, compose a picture of metaphysical and surreal shapes—almost a Carlo Carrà painting repeated in three dimensions—with a strong symbolic purpose.



Also in Sicily, but in a much more valuable context—the island of Ortigia, the ancient nucleus of the city of Siracusa—stands the Hall of access to the excavations of the Artemision (2005-12), the Ionic temple dedicated to the goddess Artemis. Its author, Vincenzo Latina, has included it in the curtain of the buildings of the Piazza Minerva, taking care to give to the front of the Pavilion an outward appearance extremely cautious and “silent,” with a single vertical cut slightly off centre. The two volumes covering the excavations (the first a closed cube that takes light from above, the second a solid with sloping entrance facade and the roof also sloping that allows one to go down to the archaeological level) are completely clad in clear limestone blocks that make them something like monoliths, enigmatic but not for this reason without expression. Dispel-ling a “myth” so widespread and durable as well fictitious, Latina is able to establish an effective dialogue with the fragments of the past present here, still loading throughout their fullness. He does so without shyness or waivers, articulating a language that, if not directly involved in terms of symbolic evocation, has however the ability to compare itself with the antique in terms of composure and seriousness. On the back of the pavil- ion the garden of Artemis (2003-2005) is located in an open space surrounded by walls dedicated by Latina to the goddess of fertility and protector of nymphs and woodland. Plants, stones, water and cor-ten steel plates are here arranged seeking to inspire a sense of wonder that gives observation to matter and the rhythms of the seasons.

Representation at the same time clear and rigorous of the double facies of death (public and private, social and individual), is the expansion of the Cemetery of Voghera (1995-2003), by Antonio Monestirolì. The vast enclosure open on one side that houses the dead can be walked from the inside by an ambulatory that allows access to individual niches. Here death has names, and often the kit of offerings and objects (flowers, photographs, candles) that customarily accompanies the commemoration as an individual fact. The same niches are visible (but not physically accessible, separated by a moat) from the central courtyard, where they are called to testify in an anonymous way to death as the common destiny of the human condition. The order in which the white square slabs of stone of Vicenza are placed, on each of which is engraved an identical sign of the cross—order replicated on a smaller scale in the plates ossuary—is a more comprehen- sive image of the order to which underlies the entire project of Monestirolì in Voghera: a grid layout which reflects a rational ordering principle, where each element takes its meaning in establishing a relationship with everyone else.

Perceptually and materially similar to the above but entirely different in its effects, is the Crematorium of Parma (2006-10), by Paolo Zermani: one of the rare buildings able to awaken a sense of happiness, a feeling of completion. It is not something that has to do with the proper performance of the functions, and even—strictly speaking—with the “beauty” in the absolute and idealistic sense in which the term is normally used. For those taking the Parma west-highway is not easy to see it, as it is hidden behind the noise barriers. But for those arriving by Valera Road, it stands in the middle of the countryside like an apparition. This is clearly not unrelated to the rising feeling of sad- ness that a place like this inevitably inspires. But that still does not explain everything. It

has also to do with the harsh, but basically comforting need that emanates from the brick building for cremation, enclosed within a protective wall, also made in brick. It is also about simplicity and dignity with which here mourning is understood, in front of which architecture—with its simple, linear elements—does not itself bend. If space, as well as giving hospitality to our actions, means something (and in extreme circumstances, it must mean something), in this case it brings a message of measure. The straight, “unnecessary” columns in the hall of farewell, are silent spectators of a drama performed every day in front of them; but without these columns, whoever would stand between these four walls would feel a little alone.

All these cases demonstrate the ability of architecture to go beyond its simple functions, but also they show buildings able to renounce to express their individuality as a vanity fair. The responsibility of architecture is to be able to adapt itself to the social concerns, but also it consists in translating social concerns into a form, becoming the emblem of them. This is the double task of an architecture that aspires to be called responsible.

