

Milan 1945, the Reconstruction: Modernity, Tradition, Continuity

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ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of World War II, in 1945, Milan was largely destroyed. Monuments and houses, parks and transportation systems – in effect, the whole city and its center – were heavily damaged. The age of reconstruction was faced with a host of problems that posed important architectural and theoretical questions: the loss of a great number of monuments that represented the identity of the city, the destruction of many historical residential blocks and the large need for housing – a pre-war concern – that would increase in the following two decades due to industrial development. Tackling these problems led to a renewal of architecture and the city.

During this period, an important school of architects was forming in Milan – at the time, one of the most vital cities in Italy for its cultural and economic activities – together with a group of intellectuals, philosophers, poets and artists. The head of this group of architects working in both Milan and Venice (Albini, Gardella, Figini e Pollini, Bottoni) was Ernesto Rogers, the director of *Casabella Continuità*, the leading architectural magazine at the time.

To be truly modern, he claimed it was necessary to look at history and study the construction principles of historical cities: not to imitate forms but to preserve their own identity. The idea of continuity would bridge tradition and modernity. But what did continuity mean in architecture and which direction did this research take?

One of the most outstanding and discussed results of these ideas was the Velasca Tower, the first modern high-rise building in reinforced concrete

built in the historical city center: a new typology realized with modern materials, with shapes that seemed to refer to Milan's medieval history. The architectural team was BBPR (Banfi, Belgiojoso, Peressutti, Rogers) together with a well-known engineer, Arturo Danusso. It was too modern, and at the same time too old. For this reason, the English critic Reyner Banham accused the Italian architects of retreating from modern architecture. This debate marked a change in Italian architecture.

Few relevant monuments were rebuilt or restored as they were before the war – such as the Teatro alla Scala and some partially destroyed churches – and other public buildings were completed in different forms, like the Renaissance-era Ospedale Maggiore by Filarete. But the best built projects attempted to overcome both the philological reconstruction and the last experiences of the International Style, while facing the problems of the construction principles of the city and of the role of green spaces as collective urban places. The research moving toward a modern architecture that was closely related to the idea of tradition was especially applied to the reconstruction of the residential blocks of the city center – projects by Bottoni, Asnago e Vender, Moretti – and to the construction of the new settlements – QT8, Harar and Feltre among the most interesting ones.

In the meantime, scientific studies of the city, its structure and its architecture took root: the research on the relationships between typology and morphology originated from this interest to better understand historical cities so that the history of each may continue.

It is not easy to summarize the challenges Italy faced with reconstruction at the end of World War II in 1945. I will try to focus on some of the mutually intertwined and superimposed issues that I consider most important, which steered subsequent developments in architecture and defined what I believe to be the most important Italian contribution to architectural culture between the early 1950s and the late 60s: the attempt to tackle the study of the city on a scientific basis – the foundation and indispensable prerequisite to architecture.

Needless to say, what I am proposing is an interpretation, whose prime movers were architects from multiple generations who belonged to the Schools of Milan and Venice.

The images that glide past show the studies, projects and achievements of those years that belong to this research.

I will begin with Milan, my own city, among those most affected by the destruction of the war, due to its strategic role in the economy of the country, when the allied army sought to force the Fascist government into submission by annihilating the production power of the industrial cities of the north. Wave upon wave of air attacks struck the city indiscriminately, causing 2,000 civilian deaths. Milan suffered considerable damage, much more than one could imagine: around 25 percent of its assets were destroyed, and between 50 percent and 75 percent damaged. The city lost at least a third of its buildings and about 75 percent of its arboreal heritage: the rubble would be used to realize Monte Stella, the hill of the new QT8 district designed by Piero Bottoni.

Unlike Eastern European countries, Milan and the Italian cities were not completely razed to the ground, even though this had been the explicit goal of the first bombardments. The urban structure remained recognizable although the destruction spread throughout the city; many important historical and monumental buildings with which the city was identified were affected – the Teatro alla Scala, Ca' Granda, the ancient hospital of Filarete, the churches of Sant'Ambrogio, Santa Maria delle Grazie by Bramante, and many others. In addition, a substantial part of the residential fabric of the old town was jeopardized along with the urban transport network, while railway depots and rail yards, and some industrial areas were bombed.

After the war, Italy found itself at a very fragile and critical juncture. Devastated and divided, it showed even more clearly the great inequalities between the north and the south of the country. Neorealist literature and cinema would denounce this dramatic disparity (Christ Stopped at Eboli stands for all): a condition of great backwardness and a substantially agricultural economy in the south, as opposed to much greater wealth to the north, with an industrial development since the 1800s that had become so rapid that it had caused phenomena of mass immigration, urbanization, and congested expansion of the cities.

The post-war period in Milan therefore had to deal with many difficult issues: the urgent ones of reconstruction were added to those of its rapid growth, which now underwent a drastic acceleration, imposing urgent reflection on the principles of the city's expansion and the building of its new parts. Inevitably, in the urgency of the reconstruction, projects and realiza-

tions also followed conflicting roads. Different situations, each individual, were resolved on a case by case basis: from a faithful reconstruction of the original parts of monumental buildings that had collapsed – the Teatro alla Scala, the restoration of Santa Maria delle Grazie-, to the completion of buildings which reproduced the spatial characteristics in different forms – Ca' Granda by Filarete, now a State University, for example – to the consolidation of the voids that had been created by the bombing – the Vetra area becoming the Basilicas Park. Quality, destination, the memories haunting the lost monuments, buildings and places, in these cases guided decisions with regard to the roads to be undertaken for these individual interventions.

The cultural climate in Milan is among the liveliest and most interesting. A hotbed of ideas and experiments in all the fields of the arts and sciences and philosophy, a privileged place for the processing of architectural thought, experimentation with the themes so dear to European Rationalism, but also much questioning of the more jaded postulates of the International Style. In this climate, a cultural debate around the architecture and the city developed; a debate starring a sizeable group of architects of the Enlightenment tradition and Rationalist model, Ernesto Nathan Rogers, Ignazio Gardella, Franco Albini, Figini and Pollini, Piero Bottoni, and many others. These gave life to a school of thought that looked to Ernesto Rogers' magazine *Casabella Continuità* and to the Faculty of Architecture, which would result in intense exchanges and lasting relationships with the Institute of Architecture of Venice guided in those years by Giuseppe Samonà. The themes of the research that the two schools developed were similar and complementary, also because many of the protagonists of this period were working between the two cities. The problems of reconstruction intertwined consciously with those of the aspiration for a modernity that did not reject its own history along with a search for scientific tools to operate on architecture and the city, laying the foundations for a disciplinary refoundation that remains the theoretical basis of the training of many Italian architects.

When it comes to a city destroyed by a sudden and violent event, a war – but also an earthquake – the problem that appears most difficult if not the most urgent, is the reconstruction of an identity, a cultural identity reflected in the form of places that have been abruptly destroyed but are still alive in the memory of the inhabitants. A condition that shows the irreconcilable contrast between the lost forms it wishes to preserve or recover, and the original *raison d'être* of those forms, rooted in a past that is often very remote.

How can we reconstruct an identity without falsifying or betraying it? How can we retie the threads of history between tradition and modernity, the past, and the need to move on?

In Milan, an attempt was made to give the idea of modernity a new interpretation far from formal stylistic features, to redefine a role for architecture where it would be seen as civil commitment: a disciplinary commitment that meant knowledge and adherence to a culture, and an ability to understand, interpret and represent this in corresponding, generic, congruent forms, able to bring – and restore – identity to places and things. In this operation, history played a key part, since it is the foundation of every culture, necessary for an understanding of reality.

Counter to each proclamation of a part of the Modern Movement beyond the Alps, modernity was no longer defined in opposition to history: between history and the present time there is a relationship of continuity, a term coined by Ernesto Rogers, who associated it with the title of the magazine *Casabella*, that would become the emblem and guide of concerted research.

Rogers brings history back inside the idea of modernity: a tradition that endures is recognized, one that resists change, a bottomless core of culture and civilization kept alive over time. In architecture coexist a general, implacable element, and a particular element that is mutable. The former derives from the meaning of what is built – from the meaning of the house, the theater, the themes of the works of architecture – that which is stable throughout the epochs of history and represents the tradition that endures in the life and culture of humankind, a substance which takes different forms in time. The latter, the particular element, concerns the contingent reality and the changing conditions through which values are manifested. In this sense, tradition and modernity are complementary, indispensable to one another, so that architecture can be implemented and fulfil its tasks. Modernity is none other than a continuous and renewed interpretation of tradition, of what is still alive of history.

The manifesto of this thesis, shared by many Rationalist architects of Rogers' generation (Ignazio Gardella, Franco Albini) and by the younger students who worked at the Study Center of *Casabella* (Aldo Rossi, Guido Canella, Vittorio Gregotti, etc.), was the realization of Torre Velasca in those years. A work of the BBPR studio (Banfi, Belgiojoso, Peressutti, Rogers) and of the engineer Arturo Danusso, a professor at the Polytechnic, its publication prompted the well-known controversy with Reyner Banham who accused Italian architecture of betrayal and of having "retreated" from modern architecture.

The Velasca building was among the first residential towers built in Italy and in Europe. In addition to implementing the most advanced thought on the relationship between architecture and engineering, it addressed another crucial issue for architecture and the construction of the city: the tower is a disruptive new type and, from the point of view of urban relationships, a tall building located right at the center of the old town, in direct conflict with the spires of the Cathedral, and realized using state-of-the-art materials and techniques.

Deeming the indications of the municipality absolutely inadequate for the rebuilding of the destroyed lot by using closed high-density blocks with small gloomy internal courtyards, the BBPR proposed to concentrate the entire volume in a single high-rise building, self-standing, and quite separate from the surrounding blocks. This allowed them to give form to the voids between the buildings that were created, organizing a public square to replace the streets defined by the frontage.

The tower creates a very strong contrast with its surroundings. It introduces into the urban setting a new subject and a new relationship principle which, for the BBPR, became perfectly legitimate in the dialogue with the surrounding fabric with its low-medium height and the centrality of its position, with the need to introduce new features and landmarks into a city that needed to be reborn, to grow on itself.

With great lucidity, understanding and a few doubts, in an article in *L'Architettura* of 1959, Giuseppe Samonà, the other great teacher of Italian architecture in the post-war period, recognized the exceptionality of Torre Velasca precisely in its "new dimension" of building and in the new relationships that the tower established with the city, pondering on the elements of continuity with the context, which he also glimpsed in the tower.

This choice would provoke much discussion. The BBPR did not reject a priori the new type of tall, modern and disruptive building in European cities, by dint of an adjustment to the surrounding fabric. Indeed, the theme of the relationship with the context, the need to pay attention to environmental pre-existences – another term proposed by Rogers – and to establish between the historical city and new works of architecture a relationship of continuity which was not only mimetic but accepted and able to interpret the new conditions, was just one of the themes of the research of those years.

Continuity, Ernesto Rogers maintained, admits and indeed expects a transformation or change since continuity does not concern forms, but values, and the project must always adhere to reality: architecture is a realist art. "Not only does modernity not contradict tradition, it is the most evolved instance of tradition. In any case, we must have the courage to engrave the sign of our times and the more modern we can be, the better we will be connected with tradition and our works will harmonize with environmental pre-existences". "The concept of continuity implies that of a mutation in the order of a tradition." (Rogers, 1958).

With this commitment toward modernity and this idea of continuity, the central theme of the Milanese reconstruction was also addressed by others, namely, the city blocks – or fragments thereof – included in the ancient fabric, parts of the city still recognizable in their morphology, in urban relationships with the streets and communal spaces, in the articulation of the inner courtyards that characterized the housing of the old town.

Here the comparison between new and ancient architecture was direct, putting the meaning of continuity to the test and deepening reflection on the principles behind building the city.

The best projects and experiments travel the uncertain road of integration with the extant and the context, with the environmental pre-existences, in a way however that does not preclude new relationships between the urban elements, between housing and streets, constructed and open spaces, private buildings and collective spaces, also within the existing fabric. They seek to understand the rules that underlie the construction of the buildings and places of the ancient city to define modern principles that will dialogue with and enrich it. They seek the path of renewal through knowledge of places and their history, through a modernization aware of tradition. They seek, in short, a relationship of continuity with the existing city without ceasing to question its rules, in the name of a modernity seen as a correspondence of the forms of the architecture to their own time and to the city's need for growth.

A characteristic common to the best projects is the non-acceptance of

the closed city block. The request for an increase in density, common to all interventions, led to an attempt to have two opposing kinds of logic coexist in the same project: the affirmation of the continuity of a curtain wall frontage via low buildings or bases that take their measure from the pre-existing constructions, possibly open toward the interior green spaces that now showed themselves to the city, and the highest buildings, inside lots or arranged at right angles to the street, that refuted the latter as an element of relationship, looking inwards toward a place that was more peaceful, quiet, and possibly green.

Among the best examples of this research, focused in the span of a few years, are several projects by Piero Bottoni, including the house in Corso Buenos Aires (1946-1951); the house in Via Broletto by Figini and Pollini (1947-1948), the beautiful house in Via Lanzone by Asnago and Vender (1950-1953), and the complex in Corso Italia by Luigi Moretti (1949-1956), a Roman architect who had moved to Milan.

These choices partially reflected the position of the pre-war period toward projects for the construction of large new suburbs of urban expansion, the other grand, urgent theme that the Milanese architectural culture had to simultaneously tackle to provide accommodation to the thousands of immigrants from the south of Italy in search of work. This condition made it even more imperative to find a response to the theme of housing estates and a redefinition of the construction principles of the city as a whole.

The leading light of this research into neighborhoods was still the group of architects who represented the Rationalist soul of Italian architecture: teachers and students belonging to two or three generations, once again Piero Bottoni, Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini, the BBPR, Ignazio Gardella, and Franco Albini, to name but a few. They studied plans for the city, for Milan, for Ivrea for the Aosta Valley, and drew up the plans for the first housing estates of the '30s and '40s, ending, after the schism of the war, in the quite different and extraordinary experiences of the QT8, Harar and Feltre neighborhoods.

In common with the research of northern Europe, there would still be a negation of the 19th-century ways of constructing a city, founded on the relationship between the street and the city block, but the three estates also represented an attempt to overcome the simplification and uniformity of "satellite neighborhoods" that had characterized their own projects prior to the war. In fact, there is a distinct difference between the first projects for self-sufficient neighborhoods (the project for Milano Verde of Albini, Gardella, Minoletti, Pagano, Palanti, Predeval, Romano, 1938, the "Horizontal City" of Pagano, Diotallevi, and Marescotti, 1937-42, the four satellite towns developed by Albini, Bottoni, Camus, Cerutti, Fabbri, C. and M. Mazzocchi, Minoletti, Palanti, Pucci, and Putelli, 1939-40, among the most important), and the latest social housing schemes of the INA House season, the national plan for the construction of social housing that allowed experimentation on these issues in many parts of Italy, between the famous and exemplary project for Milano Verde, which adopted the orthodox rules of the Modern Movement, and the Feltre neighbourhood, the last in order of time, and the fruit of the same culture and the same group of architects. What was the radical change of the latter neighborhoods due to?

The projects were enriched with all the themes developed by the architectural culture, research which had different inflections but common objectives that shared renewed interest in the study of places, a different attention to history and construction tradition, a rediscovery also of rural architecture and less reflection on settlement principles and composition. These were the major chapters of concerted research that led to a greater clarity of purpose and a greater realism, to a deeper relationship with the reasoning behind a project, with the places and their history, to a greater theoretical depth that helped them overcome a certain abstract formalism.

After a pause of only a few years, the QT8, Harar and Feltre neighborhoods represented the criticism and the surpassing of the previous projects by the same authors. And despite the diversity of the compositional principles they contain, these three projects possess common elements that referred to a different idea of the city.

In the first place, there was criticism of the idea of self-sufficiency which, by accepting the existence of a unique city center, did not call into question the fundamental cause that had led to the formation of the suburbs, becoming a principle of exclusion and paradoxically sanctioning the separateness of the neighborhoods. The location of the three estates sought a relationship with the road network infrastructure and with urban furniture to endorse their belonging to the city, a city that was more sprawling, territorial, no longer monocentric. For this reason, they proposed the realization inside the estates of collective places and buildings of an urban scale and value. In addition, the houses needed to establish a relationship with the civic, public places, and there had to be centers that represented the identity of the estates, as in every historical city. Defined according to differing principles in the three examples, these places reinterpreted public squares, which were always green spaces, like those overlooked by the houses, an indispensable conquest of modern architecture, which now sought to elucidate its identity and measures.

With regard to the question of the construction principles of the city and its growth models, shortly before the end of the war a group of Rationalist architects devised a plan for Milan, the so-called "AR Plan," a point of reference for subsequent reflection. In the schematic design of the plan, there was provision for a second center for the city, capable, according to its authors, of dismantling the monocentrism, a new pole of activities that would be called "Centro Direzionale" – a business district. This plan paved the way for subsequent studies on the polycentric city as a model to maintain: a city of a territorial scale, supported in its extension by a system of road and rail infrastructures, constituted by multiple interconnected centers. It helped to cope with structural imbalances between a city rich in quality, services and collective places, and increasingly extensive, uniformly residential suburbs; and those between the built city, which inexorably advanced, and a countryside considered a land of conquest – and speculation – driven further and further away.

The proposed model opposed the city's recent growth patterns. On closer inspection, if the roots in the history of the Lombard territory, and partially those of Italy, were recognized when, from the age of the communes up to the Renaissance, the true wealth of this region had been represented by a perfect balance between city and countryside,

by widespread distribution of cities and towns, market centers for the produce of the fertile countryside around them and urban artisan production. A model, with a changed scale and the means for overcoming distances, to be pursued (and as yet unfulfilled).

The theme of the city was addressed, at least theoretically, by looking at it not only from the center but also from the suburbs: this was a city to try out large-scale interventions, of great extension, where the urban quality was tied to the construction of new centers, new housing estates, theatrical systems, education systems, business centers, new collective places on a territorial scale that could build outposts to counteract the tendency toward the formation of suburbs. A city which, it was theorized, must be designed by parts. Many were the competitions held in those years in various places on these issues and in particular on the business centers, that began from these assumptions. Unfortunately, as often happens in Italy, this great mountain of studies would only remain on paper and in the ideas.

The themes of the city and urban planning were at the center of Giuseppe Samonà's thinking, the Venetian side of this road of refoundation and undisputed master at reorganizing the University Institute, where, from the '50s and '60s, Saverio Muratori, Franco Albini, Ignazio Gardella, and later Carlo Aymonino, Gianugo Polesello, Luciano Semerani, and Aldo Rossi – exiled by the Faculty of Milan had taught.

Samonà was the paladin of the Urban Planning and Architecture unit (G. Samonà *L'unità architettura-urbanistica. Scritti e progetti: 1929-1973*, edited by Pasquale Lovero, Milan, Franco Angeli, 1978). He supported the idea of a city that was large, territorial, and made up, as Venice masterfully taught, of empty spaces, which must take on a form. A city, as Italo Calvino has Marco Polo say in *Invisible Cities*, of "instants separated by intervals," voids necessary to the solids so that these can be distinguished and identified. A city of parts, theorized Aldo Rossi at the end of the '60s: a city as a manufactured article made up of works of architecture, where the form of the architecture is also the form of the places, or where the places take their form from the works of architecture, conscious of its history, its continuity, and its new problems.

Tying back together the threads of research, Italian architectural culture continued its analytical and theoretical studies along different roads, approaching the central issue. The theme of continuity was studied in depth: is it possible to define with a certain degree of scientific merit this element of permanence, the profoundest heart of architecture handed down by history?

It was above all Rogers' students who picked up this gauntlet, together with the cultural heritage, and undertook to delve deeper into these themes, each following different roads but with characteristics of cohesion such as to build a School. The problems and tools were all brought into play, tried out in projects applied to different cities, with set objectives of generality and transmissibility, an awareness of the need for a theory that oriented knowledge and what needed to be done, guiding the project.

Around the 1960s, these studies were aimed at the search for a tool that corresponded to the element of continuity and permanence: a

scientific tool, analytical and disciplinary, that enabled them to know the extant works of architecture, to identify their original nucleus, the irreducible and permanent element linked to their deepest meaning. A tool to investigate the spatial character of the buildings and establish the relationship between meaning and spatial organization. The type was a bridge launched between the idea and its implementation, between a thought and its architectural transfiguration. An analytical tool but also, and especially, a design tool that allowed the opposite operation, the organization of a spatial structure that corresponded to the significance of the buildings. A tool developed not to distinguish the works of architecture individually from one another, but to define their common identity, in order to ensure generality so as to recognize themselves and the places of life, to recognize “a house that might resemble my humanity” (Ernesto Nathan Rogers). For many, this was a tool that allowed them to bring form, or rather a formal structure, to a value, an idea, allowed them to convert the essence of a thing into the substance of the form.

The research into the typological character of the buildings and their relationship with the urban morphology indicated the aspiration to define scientific tools to study the city.

The road was opened by Saverio Muratori during his spell of teaching in Venice – in conflict with the Roman school he came from – with a survey of the city’s buildings and the publication of *Studi per una operante storia urbana di Venezia* (“Studies for an operating urban history of Venice”), in 1960. It was resumed energetically by Carlo Aymonino and Aldo Rossi through surveys and analyses of many cities – Padua, Milan, Pavia, and many others – in addition to theoretical writings with their double signature, *Analisi dei rapporti fra tipologia edilizia e morfologia urbana* (1964), *The Architecture of the City* (1966), by Aldo Rossi and *Origine e sviluppo della città moderna* (1971) by Carlo Aymonino.

The long chapter of studies on the relationship between construction typology and urban morphology, the affirmation of the indestructible bond between architecture and the city – variable though it is in its forms – between the form of architecture and the form of places, the necessity to build each work of architecture upon a study of urban facts, to put the city and its construction as indispensable horizons of sense of each work of architecture was the theme of greatest affinity, consolidated and resistant, of the research of the Milan and Venice schools. The indestructible bond between architecture and place, the reflection on urban facts and their endurance, and the possibility of designing a transformation through architecture were the most fruitful contribution in this period which would be broken up in line with different meanings, shifting the focus onto the aspects of permanence, the structure of space, functional invariants and the recurrence of functions, and the link between a conceptual nucleus and geometry.

How to help these studies to reconstruct and build architecture and cities? What were the value and impact of all this research?

In this evaluation Italy is, as always, divided. There are, I believe, various interpretations. One that is more mechanistic and prescriptive, ascribed to the school of Muratori and his students, from Gianfranco Caniggia to Paolo Maretto onwards – by then back in Rome – that

tended to want to confirm the rules and principles recognized in urban analysis in the project, until tempted by the roads of Neorealism and the vernacular. There were, of course, some who opposed the use and questioned the cognitive value, but above all every possible application as a project tool. Then there was a school, that of Milan-Venice, with which I can identify, which considered typological and morphological analysis a cognitive scientific tool, an indispensable witness of continuity and a starting point of the project, which allowed generalities but also the possibility of surpassing, transgressing and renewing forms. A Rogers-style position of continuity, which opposed that of Muratori, arguing that even the conservation project is, to all intents and purposes, an architectural design, a creative act, simultaneously new and modern, since it is made for a new and different reality.

This story has no conclusion. The arguments are still open and hotly debated, and the positions, as you might imagine, are many and discordant between different schools.

Unfortunately, in Italy, what has always been missing is the possibility to verify these positions through the realization of the many projects carried out over the years. Many competitions focused on these themes. The most interesting responses were directed toward affirming the indivisibility of architecture and cities, a way of thinking about architecture as a formidable tool to construct places, rather than autonomous objects to be set down indifferently in places. Which considered the definition of places the *raison d'être* and purpose of the architectural project, the project a commitment to knowledge and a civil liability, the composition a tool for the transformation of space and its figuration.

The interest in the urban project, due to the need to define the settlement principles for the new centers and residential areas, whether of expansion or replacement, is a theme that is still present and pressing today in Italy, where the problems of reconstruction now concern the great abandoned areas inside cities – industrial estates, rail yards, barracks – and in some regions, the devastations of earthquakes.