

# Reconstructing Architects: Continuity and Gaps in Post-Fascist Italy

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## ABSTRACT

The end of WWII in Italy witnessed a long-hoped-for and difficult political change, from Mussolini's dictatorship to a fragile democracy, whose issues inevitably intersected with those of architecture. Fascism acted for two decades as a contradictory factor of development, mixing Roman imperial rhetoric with the myth of youth, reactionary social politics with radical urban transformations, and rural tradition and industrialization. In Marshall Berman's terms, it pursued modernization (of technology, infrastructures, communication...) by getting rid of modernity (as liberation of individuals from the constraints of family, religion, gender...), with some awkward consequences. The huge gaps created by the wartime destruction in Italian cities came after other – sometimes deeper – wounds inflicted by the fascist regime on their historic urban fabrics, more than often transformed without any reference to the previous situations.

The demolitions of the Borgo's spine in Rome, or Piazza della Vittoria in Brescia, and many others already treated the very city centers as modernist *tabulae rasae*. Radical interventions, such as the reconstruction of Rotterdam or Le Havre, were therefore less conceivable in the Italian situation after the war, not only because of a more fragmented power and difficult financing, but also because of the need for a different representation of the social bodies involved in the reconstruction.

This need, in turn, affected the architectural languages. Unlike Nazi Germany, which operated a clear aesthetic choice condemning modernism as a 'degenerate art,' Italy pursued a more eclectic architectural policy, connecting to its ideology the approaches of the few designers – such as Libera, Moretti, Pagano, Terragni, Vaccaro – who were able

to get in tune with the most advanced expressions of the time. The anti-fascist Italy that emerged from the war asked for a different representation. Therefore, besides the many difficulties Italian architects had to tackle in reconstructing their cities, they also had to cope with a serious reconsideration of the tools of their own discipline in order to overcome methods and outcomes associated with Mussolini's rule. The tricky layering of both the need for continuity (with history, of the urban fabric, of the communities involved...) and discontinuity (from the political choices that precipitated Italy into a bloody conflict and from everything that brought them to mind) became central in the architectural reflection about reconstruction: an endeavor that went far beyond the sheer recovery of the war destructions. The exposure to these latter issues and to what they represented changed the attitude of Italian architects, and led them to anticipate a critical approach toward the Modern Movement, questioning local identities and the relationship with those contextual constraints that Ernesto Nathan Rogers will define as 'environmental pre-existences.'

This paper will explore some of the ambiguities the issue of continuity proposed to the architectural reflection in the aftermath of WWII. It was a time of huge transformations, which conditioned the following debate until the 1960s and beyond, in Italy and in a wider context. Its main theoretical questions will be unfolded through a comparison of some examples, mainly from the city of Turin, which, notwithstanding the fact that the confrontation between Rome and Milan had led the national debate, offers an interesting case study of its reception in the peninsula.

[1] Ernesto N. Rogers, "Programme: Domus, the House of Man," *Domus*, 205 (1946), p. 2.

[2] Rogers, p. 3.

In the editorial that opens *Domus* 205 – the first issue after a one year hiatus at the end of WWII – Ernesto Nathan Rogers almost apologizes for publishing a magazine instead of hurrying up “with some bricks, or beams, or sheets of glass” to recover the many wrecked buildings of Italian cities.<sup>[1]</sup> In that January 1946, the situation was still very hard, with the destruction of cities, infrastructures, factories, and especially housing for the people, which already suffered a serious shortage before the conflict. Rogers’ argument – “No problem is solved as long as it does not simultaneously comply with usefulness, morals and aesthetics”<sup>[2]</sup> – sounds pretty traditional. He quotes almost literally two concepts of Vitruvius’ triad, *utilitas* (commodity) and *venustas* (delight), but substitutes the only one tied to building, *firmitas* (firmness), with ethics. It is a rather surprising choice, given the urgent need for reconstruction, which provides an interesting clue about the issues at stake in that particular moment and how they have been then developed, also under the influence of his profoundly humanist attitude.

Claiming morality in a country that experienced foreign occupation and a harsh civil war, and was trying to build up democracy after a 20-year dictatorship meant calling for a ‘political’ role of architectural design, in which reconstructing Italy’s physical body would go along with reconstructing its society. Architects aspired – at least according to their theoretical leaders – to extract from the fragmented identity of a nation mauled by such hard times and events a shared, unifying expression: rebuilding urban space aimed therefore to shape an emerging, collective subject while portraying it. In order to do this, it was necessary to come to grips with fascism, the ideology that forced Italy into a catastrophic war after having ruled it for 20 years. This was not a simple task for a profession intrinsically compromised with power, whose main protagonists, Rogers included, worked under the fascist regime. Furthermore, fascism acted under the pressure of opposite currents and visions as a contradictory factor of development, mixing Roman imperial rhetoric with the myth of youth, reactionary social politics with radical urban transformations, and rural tradition with industrialization. In Marshall Berman’s terms, it pursued modernization (of production, infrastructures, communication...), while getting rid of modernity (as liberation of individuals from the constraints of family, religion, gender...) <sup>[3]</sup>. Many disciplinary and personal certainties shaped in this totalitarian environment had therefore to undergo a deep revision, in order to redesign the architects’ social role and to provide them with a different toolbox.

[3] Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).

What came out, in brief, was an opposite and still contradictory quest for modernity without modernization. The intent to get in tune ‘democratically’ with previously neglected social classes and groups came along with a ‘Neorealist’<sup>[4]</sup> refusal of technological progress, which partly explains the problematic attitude local architects developed toward the Modern Movement after the war. Modernist dehumanizing obsession for performance, they felt, was a decisive factor in driving the world to the catastrophe, and the architecture it produced an unwelcome reminder of the facts they wanted to get past. Unlike Nazi Germany – which, condemning modernism as a ‘degenerate art,’ unwittingly preserved its agency for further uses – Italy followed a less consistent architectural policy, ending up also by associating with the totalitarian regime the work of those designers – such as Libera, Moretti, Pagano, Terragni, Vaccaro, even Piacentini – who aimed to import to Italy the most advanced researches. Their translation of

[4] Italian neorealism is mostly associated with films about and within the difficult situation of the country after WWII. Other forms of expression of that time, architecture included, are often framed under this definition. An interesting analysis of the exchanges among the arts in that period is in Maristella Casciato, “L’invenzione della realtà: realismo e neorealismo nell’Italia degli anni cinquanta,” *La grande ricostruzione: Il piano Ina-Casa e l’Italia degli anni cinquanta*, ed. by Paola Di Biagi (Rome: Donzelli, 2010 [2001]).

modernism into a monumental, classical-Mediterranean, national language of stone, able to celebrate Mussolini's power, ceased of course to be a viable option, in aesthetic and rhetoric terms. Operations like the ones orchestrated by Marcello Piacentini in the 1930s became examples in reverse at different scales and from many points of view, starting with the relationship with history and local identities. These urban interventions – for example those of Piazza della Vittoria in Brescia or the Borgo's spine in Rome – repeatedly inflicted deep wounds on historic urban fabrics, usually transformed without any reference to the previous situations.<sup>[5]</sup> The gaps they opened up in many Italian cities came before and were often bigger than wartime destructions, making it difficult for radical interventions, such as the reconstruction of Rotterdam or Le Havre, to be conceived and realized. In other words, for post-war Italian architects the modernist tabula rasa became a less sustainable choice, at the bigger scale of the whole city as well as for selected urban spaces or buildings.

[5] Paolo Nicoloso, Marcello Piacentini: Architettura e potere: una biografia (Udine: Gasparri, 2018), reconstructs the opportunist personality of the "starchitect" of fascism and his ambiguous attitude toward history.

More than any architectural ideology, however, the common will to rapidly forget the war played a central role in driving our historical centers toward a prevailing *com'era dov'era* recovery. This Italian formula – coined for the rebuilding of St. Mark's Campanile in Venice 'as it was and where it was' – would recall faithful reconstructions, as in anastylosis, but, like its first example, the reality displayed rougher technical solutions and other modifications. Speeding up works and saving money at the expense of historical correctness and precision were in fact the main goals, implemented through the decision to bind financing "for both public and private buildings [...] to the restoration of the pre-war state: any improvement works or variations of any kind with increased costs would not have been compensated."<sup>[6]</sup> This 'conservative' approach made sense, on the one hand, for evident practical reasons: to tackle private speculation (avoiding to finance it with public money), facilitate procedures (which new projects would have inevitably slowed down), limit spending (reusing what was left standing and all recoverable materials), employ the abundant workforce available (rebuilding political consent along with public space and the national economy), and to deal with the shortage of materials, the fragmentation of the construction businesses and their technical capability. On the other hand, the great opportunity to get better performance, transforming a deeply damaged building stock, was often lost and with it the occasion for Italian architecture to experiment and advance.

[6] Vittorio Bruno, "La ricostruzione del patrimonio contemporaneo," *Guerra monumenti ricostruzione: Architetture e centri storici italiani nel secondo conflitto mondiale*, ed. by Lorenzo de Stefani, with Carlotta Coccoli (Venice: Marsilio, 2011), p. 510.

This vast operation, run under the supervision of Genio Civile (State engineering administration), didn't trigger many disciplinary reactions, also because it was intended as merely technical, almost automatic: historical values, architectural quality or 'political correctness' were not the most urgent questions. The case of Turin offers in this regard some interesting examples. This industrial city, with major military targets, faced significant destruction and dealt with a large range of interventions in the post-war recovery. Though less central in respect of the national debate – traditionally based on the confrontation between Rome and Milan – Turin represents a case study able to highlight its reception and real fallout. Part of its own Piacentinian piece, Via Roma, underwent for instance serious damages, but it was reconstructed without much ado, demonstrating that a pragmatic attitude toward recovery would furthermore overcome potentially divisive operations. This also worked in the rare cases when some available

money made it possible new additions or substitutions. The Palazzo della Moda (Fashion Palace, 1938), though a recent and consistent example of Rationalist architecture designed by Ettore Sottsass Sr., underwent various extensions and transformations, starting with the vault built by Pier Luigi Nervi in 1948.

Just a couple of monumental situations sparked off a national debate around their future destiny: Monte Cassino Abbey, almost completely wiped out by the Allied Army, and especially the Nazi destruction in the center of Florence, namely the Santa Trinita bridge and the houses that gave access to Ponte Vecchio. As always in these cases, three main options were at stake: faithful reconstruction, total substitution, or contemporary solutions integrating the ruins. This latter, which entails the intention to preserve the memory of painful events and usually responds better to the architectural ethical need of being 'true,' has never had great possibilities in Italy, where the people's wish to forget always prevailed. Therefore, the abbey and the bridge were accurately rebuilt, while the houses on Por Santa Maria Street underwent a timid redesign. Both came along with many polemics, mainly gathered around the issue of 'authenticity.'<sup>[7]</sup> For the purpose of this paper, it is sufficient to remember that, in the long run, the 'fake' bridge and abbey disturbed the architectural sensibility less than the 'sincere' buildings designed from scratch, whose search for a 'Florentine' feeling still sounds phoney and weak. Those houses near Ponte Vecchio certainly do not stand out for their design quality, which is more affected than enhanced by the morphological and contextual concern. But it is precisely this intent to set the new intervention within the pre-existing environment, later theorized by Ernesto Rogers,<sup>[8]</sup> that marked Italian architecture, for better or worse, in the 15 years of the reconstruction and beyond.

[7] Amedeo Bellini, "La ricostruzione: frammenti di un dibattito tra teorie del restauro, questione dei centri antichi, economia," De Stefani, Coccoli, pp. 14-65.

[8] Ernesto N. Rogers, "Le preesistenze ambientali e i temi pratici contemporanei," Casabella-continuità, 204 (1954).

Rogers' Torre Velasca in Milan (1954-58) represents the symbol of this approach. It is a curious skyscraper that turns structural expression – the typical exposed concrete framework of those years – into a sort of medieval remembrance. Gino Valle, comparing it to his Torre Vriz in Trieste (1950-57), mocked the Velasca as an "elephant in disguise" because of its odd mix of historical mimicry and contemporary dimensions.<sup>[9]</sup> But Valle, who completed his education at Harvard, belonged to a generation of architects who had graduated after the war. He had no need to apologize for placing his research into international trends and was able to employ simpler design tactics. While Valle's brutalist slab is set back from the street, lowering its impact from closer views, BPR's high-rises (also the one built in Turin in 1959) look for a complicated contextual fitting.

[9] See Pierre-Alain Croset, Gino Valle: Progetti e architetture (Milano: Electa, 1989), p. 72; Gino Valle, "L'architettura come pratica progettuale," Casabella, 450 (1979); Sandro Marpillero, Gino Valle, Lotus navigator, 1 (2000), p. 67.

Among the many historical examples Italian cities offered to Rogers and Co., the Middle Ages made some 'progressive' sense. Citizenship, basic freedom and cooperation first thrived in the age of communes, and quoting that period allowed for a very different symbolic reference and image compared to the 'imperial' classicism that supported fascist ideology. Insisted axial symmetries and serial repetitions gave way to fragmentation and marginal differentiation, hierarchical orders and stone cladding to the decorative use of constructive solutions that, by the way, kept a meaningful connection with the Modern Movement's early sources of inspiration. Rogers, after all, was still a member of the CIAM and his attempt to recover past styles, sublimating them in a dryer version with current materials and techniques, reveals a con-

tradictory desire to be both against and within the modernist camp. He did and wanted to share the collective inclination to forget the last dramatic 30 years (the two World Wars and what came in-between were perceived as a connected chain of events) but without completely believing in the possibility of restarting architecture from past times.

A radical step in that direction takes us again to Turin and to the work of younger architects, who had no personal biographies to overwrite. Roberto Gabetti and Aimaro Isola experimented in a plot cleared by bombing under the Mole Antonelliana with a refined revival of Art Nouveau atmospheres and detailing, inaugurating the 'Neo-Liberty' season. Their *Bottega d'Erasmus* (1953-56), published by Rogers in *Casabella-continuità*,<sup>[10]</sup> became a sensation precisely because of its ease in overlooking modernist orthodoxy. Paradoxically, they declared an intention completely disconnected from history with "no particular attitudes towards the past or the future" in order to "live in the present as isolated occasion."<sup>[11]</sup> Therefore, they didn't feel that the Neo-Liberty definition could grasp their approach, even though it frames precisely that form of novelty through nostalgia that their architecture often delivers and which became a sort of trademark of post-war Italy.

The problematic relationship with modernist ways to interpret and transform reality that was precipitating new-old solutions in Italian city centers affected the debate around the urban extensions. The architects' interest, however, shifted from probing cultivated historical references to a more sociological level. Those who still trusted in up-to-date technologies and promoted prefabrication and standardization – mostly Milanese, like Piero Bottoni, author of the QT8 neighborhood in Milan – soon faced a defeat. The idea to cope with housing shortage leaning on construction research, in order to reduce costs and get advanced architectural outcomes, gave way to an almost opposite quest for identity and differentiation.<sup>[12]</sup> Architects questioned their disciplinary habits to get in tune with the supposed immaterial needs and desires of the people, mostly refugees from Istria and Dalmatia and former rural workers and their families, who came to the town to make a living in the new economic conditions. The vernacular languages that characterize the Italian peripheries of this period – meant to remember the spaces the new inhabitants were coming from and reduce their bewilderment – thrived again thanks to political-economic decisions. The so-called 'Fanfani Plan' or INA-Casa, which promoted the public intervention in social housing from 1949 to 1963, was literally a bundle of Provisions to Increase Worker Employment, Facilitating the Construction of Workers' Homes.<sup>[13]</sup> In other words, it was a Keynesian measure to improve the economy through public spending, which produced houses as a side effect. The budget for these interventions was accordingly more generous than the cheaper construction costs made possible by industrialization. Traditional, highly labor-intensive techniques, accessible also to a non-specialized workforce (designers included, in a way) were welcome and allowed for a consistent meeting of architectural nostalgia with a backward production environment.

The most famous of these housing projects is probably the Tiburtino (Rome, 1950-54), but an example from Turin, the Falchera (1951-54), presents some similar themes and solution – even though with a less 'baroque' approach<sup>[14]</sup> – and can resume the architectural outcome of the vast INA-Casa plan (355,000 housing units built in 14 years in the

[10] Casabella-continuità, 212 (1957).

[11] Roberto Gabetti, Aimaro Isola, "L'impegno della tradizione," correspondence with Vittorio Gregotti, *Casabella-continuità*, 215 (1957), quoted in Carlo Melograni, *Architetture nell'Italia della ricostruzione* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2015), p. 158.

[12] See Paolo Nicoloso, "Genealogie del piano Fanfani. 1939-50," *Di Biagi*, pp. 33-62.

[13] This is the title of the law approved by the Italian Parliament (n. 43, 28 February 1949). Firstly aimed to last for seven years, it was extended for another seven until 1953.

[14] One of the authors of the Tiburtino, shortly after its completion, wrote a self-critical article about the whole operation, mocking it as "The Baroque Village" (which in Italian sounds very similar to Pinocchio's 'Land of Toys'). Ludovico Quaroni, "Il paese dei barocchi," *Casabella-continuità*, 215 (1957), p. 24.

[15] Mollino's definition is reported by Francesco Tentori, "L'architettura urbana in Italia," *Rassegna di architettura e urbanistica*, 58/59/60 (1984), p. 31.

[16] Of course, the Italian architectural debate was far more complex than a brief text can account for. For instance, Klein studies were published in Italy in 1957: Alexander Klein, *Lo studio delle piante e la progettazione degli spazi negli alloggi minimi. Scritti e progetti dal 1906 al 1957*, ed. by M. Baffa Rivolta and A. Rossari (Milan: Mazzotta, 1957).

[17] The ad promoting "Nevisia polyvalent supercream," meaningfully titled "Rebirth," praises for instance an "absolutely perfect product," made possible by the improvement in quality and quantity of the available goods after the war, *Domus*, 205, p. 62.

[18] For a positive recognition of the whole INA-Casa operation, less critical than the Italian investigations, see Stephanie Zeier-Pilat, *Reconstructing Italy: The Ina-Casa Neighborhoods of the Postwar Era* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

whole country). Apart from the typological variations, which add complexity in the Roman neighborhood, Falchera shares with it the intention to overcome the bewildering uniformity of modernist geometries. The search for an insisted differentiation between both the in-between spaces and the objects that define them aimed to get individual recognizable situations that people could feel were their own. The 'seismic' vibration of the Tiburtino resulted in another 'catastrophic' site plan in Turin, where housing is scattered, in the words of Carlo Mollino, like "a derailed train"<sup>[15]</sup> and forms various irregular courtyards. Also here, materials, building solutions and details – terracotta pitched roofs, exposed brickwork, wood shutters – evoke those of the rural tradition and have been used by the different architects who designed its single buildings.

These public interventions usually took place on cheap, open land, far outside the city limits, and were provided with some necessary facilities. When the city expansion incorporated them, as soon happened for the Tiburtino, the initial physical isolation and functional autonomy often turned into a form of social exclusion, highlighted by morphological weirdness. Those post-war public interventions failed, in other words, to become a viable model for current practices, following the destiny of the modernist examples they criticized. Of course, this outcome has manifold reasons, further motivated by the complicated Italian situation in terms of culture, economy, and decision-making. However, just to limit our gaze to the disciplinary plane, behind the deep formal difference, it emerges as a striking typological and quantitative continuity between modernist models and their post-war declinations, which consist in manipulations of previous achievements more than completely new experiments. Relatively low density (lower than the one exploited by free market operations), relationship with greenery, aggregation of dwellings and their arrangement and distribution do not show substantial differences after WWII, with some compelling analogy between Italian plans and those worked out by Alexander Klein in his functionalist and performative research on the *Existenzminimum*.<sup>[16]</sup>

The ethical position advocated by Ernesto Rogers translated, as happens often in architecture, into an aesthetic endeavor. Browsing that first post-war issue of *Domus*, this is a result clearly anticipated by the "body language" of the journal. Articles and projects are in fact intermingled with almost as many pages of advertisement, which made its publication possible. This unwitting manifestation of the reality principle – coming from an emerging economy and culture – is marginally dedicated to those so necessary "bricks, beams and sheets of glass:" more than half of the ads were about voluptuary goods, wine, liqueurs, smoking items, clothes, perfumes, and, especially, cosmetics. Differently from the editor-in-chief's Platonic approach, they speak of a powerful dimension of desire and show more confidence in the technological promise of a better future.<sup>[17]</sup> Shifting architectural self-awareness from the material-constructive component to a moral-political one provided room, in those difficult times, for aesthetic expression, but ended up turning it backward. Besides some positive consequences (INA-Casa neighborhoods met usually better acceptance than more 'rational' social housing interventions beyond the Alps<sup>[18]</sup>), this approach oriented Italian architecture toward language researches that, virtually detached from the realities of its production, weakened its abilities to interpret and transform them.