

Architectural Design and History

**The Italian Debate  
1940s-1950s.  
An Anthology**

edited by  
**Federico Bucci**

**FrancoAngeli**

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# Architectural Design and History

The Bookseries *Architectural Design and History* intends to explore the relationships between architectural design and the contemporary city, with a particular focus on the contexts where urban transformations relate to the preservation and promotion of historical heritage. By intersecting various theories, techniques and practices, the contributions aim at unfolding the complex identity of the architectural culture, fostering connections and exchanges among different disciplines, and enhancing a strategical and evolutionary conception of architectural heritage.

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**«Il Mestiere  
dell'Architetto»:  
The Sense of  
History and  
the Creation of the  
Contemporary Life**

Ana Tostões



- Nous avons una tâche si grande et grandiose en Europe  
(Letter from A. Roth to E. N. Rogers, November 22nd, 1949)<sup>1</sup>.

Italian modern architecture has long suffered from famously poor dissemination of its full story within the celebrated history and theory of 20th century architecture<sup>2</sup>. It seems that the futurist avant-garde sketches of Sant'Elia, the Giuseppe Terragni masterpieces and the figure of Aldo Rossi have dominated the scene, thereby obscuring the glorious generation of the 1940s and 1950s who created some of the most fascinating works of the post-WWII era. Although Luigi Moretti constitutes perhaps the most dramatic case<sup>3</sup> of a kind of brutal silencing, it is something of a surprise to discover that Franco Albini, Ignazio Gardella and Ernesto Nathan Rogers were among the geniuses of their time and were undoubtedly key figures of 20th century architecture, surpassing the scope of merely Italian architectonic culture. This rare anthology, edited in English by Federico Bucci, encapsulates the epochal debate as well as a contemporary vision of this brilliant generation born between 1905 and 1909.

When Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1909-1969) and the Swiss architect Alfred Roth (1903-1998) realised in November 1949 that they had «such an important and grandiose task in Europe»<sup>4</sup> they were, of course, expressing a belief in the social and architectonic regeneration of Europe within the post war reconstruction process. In fact, they were discussing the future strategy for education as crucial for the mission of architects in the new world of the reconstruction. Rogers' international reputation made him one of the few invited to London for the first CIAM<sup>5</sup> Summer School<sup>6</sup>. As a matter of fact, Rogers came to make a decisive contribution with a huge impact on the critical revision of Modern Movement architecture worldwide and profound consequences for the profession of the architect [*il mestiere dell'architetto*].

Italy remained the centre of this debate until the end of the 1950s, when the cultural shift turned definitively to the Anglo-Saxon world. That is why several meetings and events, specifically within CIAM, took place in such Italian cities as Bergamo, Venice and Padova. The *Biennale di Venezia* stands today as a kind of timeless worldwide achievement, to which can be added the efforts conducted by Universities, namely in the Mantova Campus of Politecnico di Milano

with the patronage of the Unesco World Heritage (Chair in *Architectural Presevation and Planning in World Heritage Cities*).

The 1950s were not only a period of economic miracles<sup>7</sup> but, above all, demonstrated the Italian genius with a pleiad of masters. It constituted an unusual moment in the construction of modernity in which Italian architectural culture played a key role. In fact, the generation who survived the war was key for fostering a renovating shift in the architecture of the Modern Movement. The study trips of Aalto, Saarinen, Kahn and Wright, just to mention a few architects, reasserted the importance of Italian architectural culture worldwide.

*City and landscape at the heart of an international educational network*

In the post-WWII era, CIAM underwent a crisis, believing the organization was itself the Modern Movement. This was evident in the main post-war topics of discussion at CIAM, such as the new generation's opposition to a neutral and bureaucratic rationalism, the challenges of city reconstruction, the need to re-humanize a dry functionalism and, above all, the need to consider memory and tradition as essential concepts for the needs of monumentality<sup>8</sup>. Like the larger Modern Movement of which it was a part, CIAM had attempted to counter the bifurcation between profit-seeking and the aesthetic experience characteristic of modern culture, by rejecting earlier architectural approaches and appropriating elements of utilitarian capitalist building in the service of the masses<sup>9</sup>.

As Horacio Torrent states: «The diagnosis was clear. Industrialization and mass production had populated the world with ugliness and poor aesthetics. Mercantilism and individualism were imposed onto the community. The division of labor and specialization had promoted increasingly distant practices and disciplines, and among them including the higher arts: architecture, painting and sculpture. Moreover, modern architecture had promoted the expression of the practical and constructive functions and thus the aesthetic ideals had been primarily located in the field of the production of art works, neglecting the “common people”, stepping back and away from the expectations of the general public. What was left evident was the crisis that modern

architecture had reached, and the efforts to overcome it would thus be aligned with the recovery of the symbolic expression of architecture and urbanism, under the name of a synthesis of the arts»<sup>10</sup>.

At CIAM 6, at Bridgwater in 1947, this was introduced by Giedion, who stated that, while the focus had previously been on industrialization and standardization, the new post-war social situation required a fresh approach: «Now we consciously promote another step. A step towards a rather intangible subject: aesthetic problem or, you may prefer to say, emotional expression»<sup>11</sup>. He again insisted on the matter in Bergamo in 1949, and two years later in Hoddesdon, when the theme turned to highlight the significance of «the heart of the city». One year later, in 1952, the CIAM Summer School started at the prestigious *Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia (IUAV)*, gathering a group of brilliant masters as its directors: the CIAM architects Albini, Gardella, Rogers and Samonà.

As a contemporary workshop, the Venice Summer School was an educational opportunity based on real contact with the city, a complex node of the dynamics of conservation and the modernization of urban structures and community life. Quoting Serena Maffioletti, the first Venice Summer School (1952) focused on the relationships between the island city, the mainland and the region; the second (1953), picking up on a suggestion from the *Biennale di Venezia*, addressed the redesign of the national pavilions in the Giardini; and the third (1954) clarified the reflections of the first, concentrating on the relationship between the city's historical centre and the mainland at the points where the road/rail infrastructures met the city<sup>12</sup>.

At a time when Americanization was beginning to push a repetitive, tedious and boring kind of international style, Samonà, who was the school's director, invited Gardella and Albini to teach at *IUAV*. This was proof of the reinforced relationship between architecture and the city, especially of the renewed interest in the historical city; an historical city envisaged as an architectural project, as opposed to mimesis, taking the approach of interpreting pre-existences, addressing the importance of cultural roots, and thus launching the theme of the city-territory.

Giuseppe Samonà, through the thoughts he published in the journal *Zodiac*, contextualized questions with the broad vision of someone able to connect past and future.

The Italian sensibility exploded on the international scene, effortlessly connecting architecture, design and the city, technical accuracy and memory, with sophistication and poetry. The works of the four masters brought together in this volume are proof of these ethic and aesthetics, executed with unceasing attention to context – a context understood as an inspiring pre-existence for work to be carried out in continuity.

*History and truth: the search for the total artwork*

The role of Italian architects in the framing of the «third path» of the Modern Movement against the mechanical combination of «slab and plaza»<sup>13</sup> was crucial for the future of architecture. The importance of recalling history and tradition, as well as innovation [*tradition* and *innovatio*] had a tremendous impact on design theory and praxis in these years when the Modern Movement was being called into question. In some ways, the work of Albini, Gardella, Moretti and Rogers anticipated the line of thought later taken by Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) when analysing the growing phenomenon of universality<sup>14</sup>. Considering it to be a kind of civilizational advance made at the expense of the subtle destruction, not only of traditional cultures, but also of the creative core of major cultures, he questioned whether modernisation had to entail «burning the boat» of a past culture that had been its *raison d'être*<sup>15</sup>. According to him, from the end of the 1950s, humanity was becoming a single planetary civilization, signifying gigantic progress for everyone but an overwhelming task of survival and adaptation for cultural heritage: «We all resent, in different degrees and in varying ways, the tension between, on the one hand, the need for access to this progress and, on the other hand, the need to preserve our inherited heritage, [in that] we suffer the pressure of the two different but equally compelling needs»<sup>16</sup>. For him, this threat was translated into, among other disturbing effects, the diffusion of a weak civilization, the decisional counterpart of an elementary culture<sup>17</sup>, as if mankind, massively accessing a mass consumer culture, were to be confined to the level of mass culture. Thus, the crucial problem facing developing peoples was formulated: to enter the path of modernisation is it necessary to discard the cultural past that underlay their identity? In an Italy full

of beauty, treasures, history and astonishing city centres, the problem takes the form of a dilemma in which the classical tradition struggles with the claims of creativity and the power of innovation to conjugate architectonic technique with industrial technology. The Italian masters were able to rediscover this deep cultural personality rooted in the past in order to feed local demands. Therefore, they were able to overcome the paradox: how to modernize and simultaneously return to the sources<sup>18</sup>. This stimulating discussion drew on the subject of the city and its relationship with the past and history, as a means and a key to unlock the impasse in which the Modern Movement had become trapped. This book is an example of this complex, rich and deep debate, revealing a singular awareness of the future of architecture and the mission of architects in the world to come.

This volume brings together, in the form of a critical anthology, the debate generated around four acknowledged masters, filling a notable gap in the historiography published in English. It cleverly proposes an analysis on three levels, revealing itself to be an invaluable document for students and scholars, historians and critics, or simple lovers of architecture. Firstly, because it allows an analysis of the debate promoted by the work of a group of four architects that constitutes a coherent whole, and because of this, it is symbolic of the voice of the critics of the time, from Giuseppe Samonà to Giulio Carlo Argan. Secondly, because it gathers contemporary critical introductions that analyse the critical standing and the built work of each author. Finally, this anthology presents writings of the protagonists themselves, in their own voices. They are not descriptive texts of their own buildings; they are mainly reflections about architecture and the act of creating, and go beyond a mere autobiographical record.

The discussion of the neo-liberty launched by the *Architectural Review* and the «pop» publicity created by Reyner Banham for the New Brutalism, is a cornerstone in this anthology, made in counterpoint by authors of unique intellectual status, confirming the key importance of Italian creation. One is able to understand the glorious and plural modernity provided by the complex and diversified work of the four selected authors for this anthology, in a pleiad of magnificent architects. That is the relevance of this work, produced to reach a vast new audience, unaware of the potential of this fundamental debate for

the future of the contemporary architecture. Rafael Moneo referred to Gardella precisely in recognition of his capacity for understanding, through history, the mechanisms and systems explored in contemporary architecture, in the architecture of the past, as opposed to Louis Kahn, who interpreted the established criteria and principles of the Renaissance in the structure of modern architecture<sup>19</sup>.

The erudition of these authors is brilliant, revealing itself when Moretti immerses himself in the «two-dimensional» space of Caravaggio's canvas, in Worringer's relation theories, crossing concepts of the pure visually and formalism. Naturally, in this genesis, one cannot forget the critical standing of Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) who, within his aesthetics (1903), interpreted the vision and formalist theories of Germanic expression in the light of Mediterranean culture, tempering it with an appreciation of aesthetic pleasure and the role of society as an artistic engine, connecting the content of artistic form with social fact and history. This justifies the pleiad of Italian historians and especially the capacity of revelation of an independent and unprepossessing view that finds a key in the four authors gathered in this anthology. Croce's aesthetics opened a path of synthesis that was continued by Lionell Venturi and Edoardo Persico, and reworked, among others, by Ernesto Nathan Rogers, followed by his disciples Rossi<sup>20</sup> and Gregotti, and later on by Manfredo Tafuri. Ernesto Nathan Rogers' contribution is indispensable, with emphasis on his editorials in *Casabella* magazine, that represent one of the highest and interesting moments in the growth process of the Modern Movement<sup>21</sup>. They were published all over the world, particularly in Portugal, where the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto published *Arquitetura Moderna desde a geração dos Mestres*, in 1960, in the collection edited by Viana<sup>22</sup>.

The work of these authors anticipated the answer to the paradigmatic question posed by Rogers in one of the 1957 *Casabella* editorials, about the «crisis or continuity?»<sup>23</sup> of modern architecture. After the first modernist generation during the 1920s and 1930s defined modernism within a functionalism understood more as a programmatic alibi than a methodological basis of production, and whose attraction for modernity did not erase their deep eclecticism, it was undoubtedly during the 1950s that the most decisive ruptures took place with the

heroism of these great convictions. The construction from Italy, and also Portugal and Spain, of a defined line of thought based on the value of the pre-existing, revealed the pluralism and possibility of living healthily with tradition as part of a critical realism that underlined the maturity of architecture.

It revealed the possibility of persevering with the critical continuity of the modern process, understood as an attitude of realistic seriousness capable of answering the social challenges posed by modernity. Because, if the Modern Movement was unable to build a brave new world<sup>24</sup>, the truth is that architecture could not give up on the social movements that justified it, the programmes that gave it meaning, or on memory, the engine of reconciliation with history, with the identity of the place, with the value of the context, and finally with life.

- 1 From gta Archiv / ETH Zürich.
- 2 If we analyze the most noted narratives of modern architecture in English publications, the Italian contribution is silenced, almost non-existent.
- 3 Moretti made an extraordinary work on the scope of the *Case del Balilla* during the 1930s, see M. Mulazzani et al., *Case del Balilla. Architettura e fascismo*, Electa, Milan 2008.
- 4 «Nous avons una tâche si grande et grandiose en Europe», Letter from A. Roth to E. N. Rogers, November 22nd, 1949 (retrieved August 5, 2018, from <https://archiv.gta.arch.ethz.ch/>).
- 5 The *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM), founded in 1928 and dissolved in 1959, was an organization responsible for events and congresses organized across Europe by prominent architects of the time, with the objective of spreading the principles of the Modern Movement.
- 6 S. Maffioletti, «Ernesto Nathan Rogers and the CIAM: Teaching for Democracy», *For an Architect's Training, Docomomo Journal*, 49, Barcelona 2013, pp. 28-33.
- 7 C. Olmo, «Themes and Realities of the Reconstruction», *The Reconstruction in Europe after World War II, Rassegna*, 54, CIPIA, Bologna 1993, pp. 6-19.
- 8 S. Giedion, *The Need for a New Monumentality*, in *New Architecture and City Planning*, edited by P. Zucker, Philosophical Library, New York 1944.
- 9 E. Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA & London 2000, p. 273.
- 10 H. Torrent, «On Modern Architecture and Synthesis of the Arts: Dilemmas, Approaches, Vicissitudes, Art and Architecture», *Docomomo Journal*, 42, Barcelona 2010, pp. 6-13.
- 11 S. Giedion, *A Decade of New Architecture*, George Witterborn, New York 1951, p. 34 (referred by H. Torrent, *op. cit.*).
- 12 S. Maffioletti, *op. cit.*
- 13 S. von Moos, *The Monumentality of the Matchbox: On «Slabs» and Politics in the Cold War*, in *Re-Humanizing Architecture. New Forms of Community, 1950-1970*, Vol. 1, edited by A. Moravánszky, J. Hopfengärtner, Birkhäuser, Basel 2017, pp. 255-282.
- 14 P. Ricoeur, *Histoire et Vérité*, Le Seuil, Paris 1955.
- 15 *Ibidem*.
- 16 *Ibidem* (free translation).
- 17 «It is everywhere, across the world, the same bad movie, the same shilling machines, the same horrors of plastic or aluminum, the same twisting of language by propaganda, etc.» P. Ricoeur, *op. cit.*
- 18 According to Paul Ricoeur, the fact that a universal civilization had been continued for such a long time within Europe led to the illusion that European culture was, in fact and in law, a universal culture. The advance taken over other civilizations seemed to provide experimental verification of this postulate, the meeting of other cultural traditions was itself the result of this breakthrough, and more generally the fruit of Western science.
- 19 R. Moneo, *Ricordando Ignazio Gardella, in Ignazio Gardella architetto (1905-1999): Costruire la modernità*, edited by M. Casamonti, Electa, Milan 2006, pp. 17-19.
- 20 A. Rossi, *Para una arquitectura de tendencia. Escritos: 1956-1972*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 1977.
- 21 E. N. Rogers, *Esperienza dell'architettura*, Einaudi, Turin 1958; Skira, Milan 1997.
- 22 A. Tostões, *A Idade Maior: cultura e tecnologia na arquitectura moderna portuguesa*, FAUP publicações, Porto 2015.
- 23 E. N. Rogers, *op. cit.*
- 24 Reference to the Nikolaus Pevsner's «brave New World», see D. Watkin, *Morality and Architecture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977.



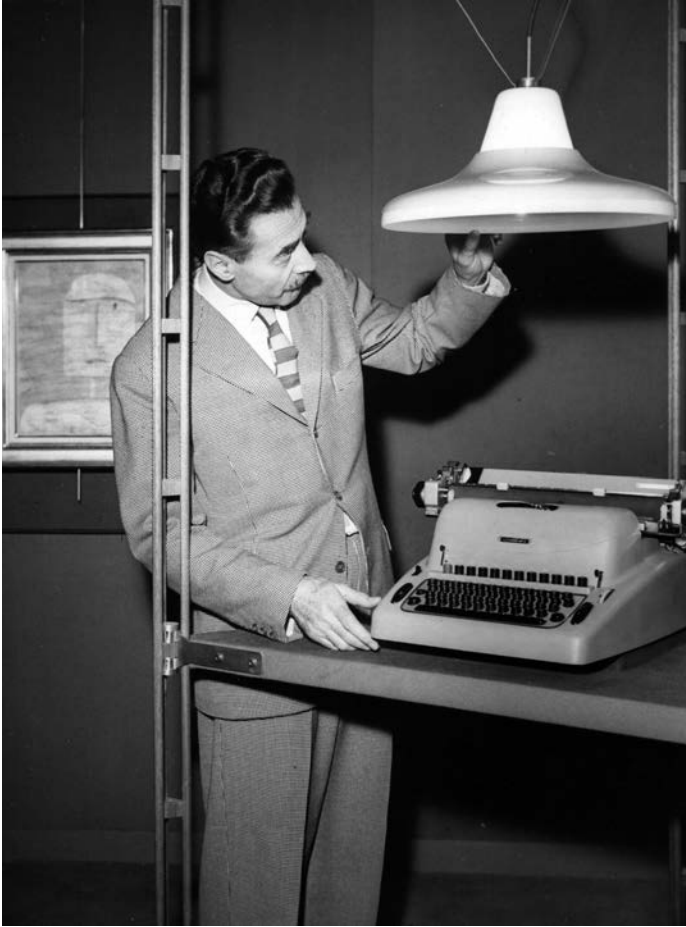
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**FRANCO ALBINI**

**Franco Albini.  
The «Art of  
Offering» Objects  
in Space**

Federico Bucci



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(Robbiate, October 17th, 1905 -  
Milan, November 1st, 1977).