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Original

Francesco Erbani, "Antonio Cederna. Una vita per la città, il paesaggio, la bellezza" / DE PIERI, F.. - In: PLANNING PERSPECTIVES. - ISSN 0266-5433. - 29:2(2014), pp. 259-261. [10.1080/02665433.2014.885793]

Availability:

This version is available at: 11583/2548939 since:

Publisher:

Taylor & Francis

Published

DOI:10.1080/02665433.2014.885793

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Antonio Cederna: Una vita per la città, il paesaggio, la bellezza

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In spite of their importance for a history of twentieth-century Italian planning, the writings of Antonio Cederna (1921 – 1996) are not particularly well known among non-Italian specialists. They have never been translated into English or other European languages. Cederna was not a practitioner but a journalist: an observer of the transformation of Italian cities – among which Rome occupied a special place – and the promoter of hundreds of preservation campaigns. His cultural battles had a remarkable impact on the way Italian elites understood urban change in the decades following World War II. This concise biography of Cederna by Francesco Erbani – himself a journalist with a strong interest in preservation issues – offers a recapitulation of the main threads of Cederna's work.

After a degree in classical archaeology obtained in Pavia in 1947, Cederna moved to Rome for postgraduate studies, but he soon abandoned archaeology for a career in journalism. From 1949 – 1966 he regularly wrote for the weekly journal *Il Mondo* and later for the daily newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* (1967 – 1982) as well as for *Repubblica* and *L'Espresso*. His articles were meticulously researched, powerful, and imaginative in their language. They were later collected in influential books such as *Vandali in casa* (Vandals at home, 1956) and *Mirabilia urbis* (1965). Cederna decried the brutal change that affected Italian cities during the years of the post-war economic boom. He attempted to defend the historic landscape against the dramatic alterations that in his view were caused by greedy speculation and administrative failure. Cederna's work is interesting for at least two reasons. First, it provides a clear illustration of how post-war planning debates in Italy were closely related to conservation issues. Cederna championed an integral conservation of the historic centres of Italian cities and the decentralized construction of 'modern' urban sectors in more peripheral locations. His press campaigns were inspired by his conviction that good conservation practices and good urban planning were but two sides of the same coin. In this respect, his urban theories were not original, but owed much to pre-war authors such as Gustavo Giovannoni (an influence that the book unfortunately fails to recognize and discuss properly). Cederna's work is also an excellent illustration of how some key intellectual tools of Italian planning were not developed by specialists alone but influenced by a debate that involved large parts of the public opinion. The way Cederna portrayed Italian cities had a long-lasting cultural influence. His voice was stronger than the voice of any other professional in defending the reasons of urbanistica, especially during the 1950s and the 1960s. His biography presents some typical traits of the biographies of post-war planners: he visited European cities like Amsterdam or Stockholm and a few North American ones, writing detailed reports on good practices and trends in modern planning. He took part in some key initiatives of the National Institute of Planning and in the 1960 Gubbio meeting that led to the formulation of a charter for the preservation of historic centres. Cederna's writings were marked by their author's almost obsessive reiteration of certain topics over an extremely long time span. Erbani wisely dedicates space and attention to some of these life-defining issues. These were, for example, the preservation of the Appian Way against voracious developers and illegal construction or the campaign for the demolition of Via dei Fori Imperiali, the ceremonial road built through the Roman Forum under Mussolini. Cederna often lost his battles, Erbani argues, but he also obtained important results and his reports were precious in raising public awareness on the direction taken by Italy's modernization. Erbani's book is extremely well written and offers a classic take on Cederna's biography. It can be considered the best available introduction to the written and oral tradition about Cederna, as it has been elaborated and transmitted by a close group of loyal friends and disciples. Not surprisingly, the book tends to over-emphasize the coherence in Cederna's choices and to present the man's life as continuously inspired by a few guiding principles, among which anti-Fascism plays a central role. Less space is given to the appreciation of nuances and discontinuities, and to the explanation of why Cederna's voice gained such a long-lasting influence among the observers of Italy's built landscape. Cederna's papers are collected today in an archive that opened in 2008. Erbani used some of the papers for his work, although most of the book is based on printed material, especially Cederna's published writings. Hopefully Cederna's papers and the work of a new generation of scholars will contribute to question the elegant symmetry of this narrative and to bring a little more ground noise into such a perfect story.