

The fragile agency of the draftsman's house

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THE FRAGILE AGENCY OF THE DRAFTSMAN'S HOUSE

Edoardo Piccoli

Abstract

Dismantling an architectural scholar and draftsman's apartment leads to an interrogation of the concept of agency of buildings and place. The setting is a rental flat in an Italian working-class neighbourhood, a place of life and work for an architecture historian, a specialist in survey drawings, who used it as his workspace for decades. Upon entering the apartment, the rooms and objects within it appeared as physical and spatial entities testifying to a deep connection with the former owner. The objects, the interiors, and the building itself seemed to possess an 'agency' that had resisted the departure of the human dweller and acted with disquieting power over those in charge of reordering his archive. Further investigation, however, also revealed that this same place witnessed the progressive vanishing of memory of the draftsman and scholar during the last years of his occupancy. The fragility of the bond between individual and place was exposed. The house as a physical space still proved to be essential in the mediation between archival legacy, memory, and history; however, it did not do so as a static time capsule, rather, as a place for reflections and activities extending well beyond the walls of the house itself.

Keywords: apartment, agency, architectural survey, domestic space, Antonelli, Guarini

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Biographical note

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Banner image: Detail from a view of the studio at the Barbara Hepworth gallery in St Ives, Cornwall. (Photo: Ed Clews / Alamy Stock Photo)

THE FRAGILE AGENCY OF THE DRAFTSMAN'S HOUSE

Edoardo Piccoli,
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Entering the house

The dismantling of an architectural scholar and draftsman's apartment brought the author of this paper to interrogate the concept of agency of buildings and place. In 2013, the author and two other curators crossed the threshold of a rental flat, for the first time not welcomed by its owner, who had become too ill to continue using it as his daily workplace (Fig. 7.1). The three curators¹ had been entrusted by the scholar's family with managing the donation of his professional archive, a testimony of forty years of largely solitary work, to the Turin chapter of the Italian National State Archives. A preliminary inventory was to be drafted to validate the donation by Minister's decree.

An engaged intellectual since youth, the flat's dweller had been born in a family of modest means; an electrician in training, after earning a high-school degree at night school, he obtained an Architecture degree at Turin's Politecnico.

Studying while working, benefiting from some support from grants and external aid, Franco Rosso (1939–2019) majored in History with a thesis dedicated to a modern architectural masterpiece: the dome of San Gaudenzio in Novara by Alessandro Antonelli (1798–1888). He then pursued an academic career, playing a major role in Turin as an architectural historian and a politically engaged, outspoken intellectual, from the 1970s through the '90s, frequently acting in public defence of architectural heritage (Pianciola, 2019).

While Rosso's studies in urban history were defined by the dialogue with French historiography, a rarity at the time among architectural scholars, his writings dedicated to construction and the building site (such as the 1977 book on *Alessandro Antonelli e la Mole di Torino*) were elaborated in an intense dialogue with other polytechnic historians and stood out for their remarkable reliability and precision (De Pieri & Piccoli, 2012). Rosso's approach to buildings combined the

¹ Cesare Pianciola, Isa Ricci, and the author, with help from Mirko Mantovan.



Figure 7.1: Franco Rosso's apartment: the entrance corridor. (Photo: Maurizio Gomez Serito, 2014)

study of archival sources with particular attention to the materials of construction. His primary and trademark research tool was the architectural survey, conceived as a personal, and often physically demanding enquiry into the anatomy and physiology of building (Cavaglia, 2021, p.89).

Hundreds of survey drawings in pencil and ink, a product of thousands of hours of fieldwork and draftsmanship, had thus accumulated (Fig. 7.2) in the small rental flat Rosso had used as a workplace for over forty years and which was located just above his family's apartment. Together with the drawings were photographs, archival transcriptions, manuscripts of published and unpublished essays, books, and other objects associated with Rosso's activity, such as his drawing and surveyor's instruments. The scholar's last major research project, whose development had been interrupted by the onset of a degenerative disease, was in itself worthy of special attention and conservation. It consisted of a detailed survey of the Dome of Guarino Guarini's Holy Shroud Chapel: a mass of



Figure 7.2: Franco Rosso's apartment: the main room; on the walls, works by Piero Rambaudi. (Photo: Maurizio Gomez Serito, 2014)

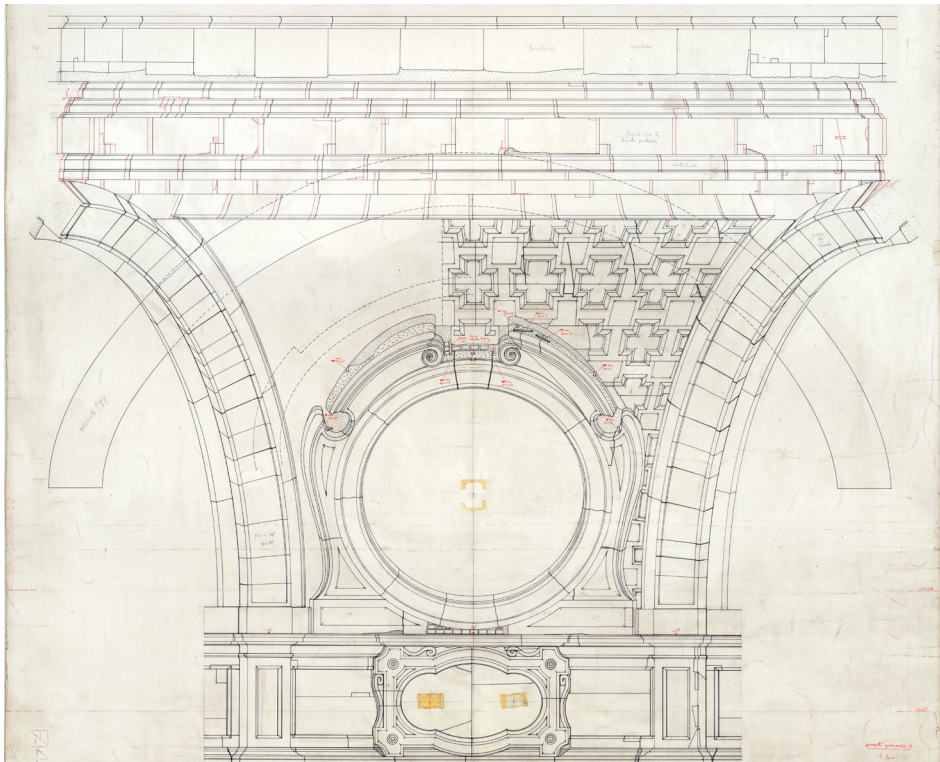


Figure 7.3: Franco Rosso, inner elevation of a spherical pendentive from the Shroud Chapel survey, c.1995. Pen and pencil on paper, original scale 1:20. (Photo: Archivio di Stato di Torino, fondo Franco Rosso)

sketches, notes, photographs, and drawings (Fig. 7.3), some of them perfectly achieved and of breathtaking clarity, others unfinished and no less captivating. Tragically, this documentation had become of crucial importance because of the 1997 fire that had seriously damaged the Chapel. Future scholars would need to interrogate the original construction largely through our draftsman's lens.

The task the three curators set to fulfil was, indeed, imbued with a sense of loss. Franco Rosso was at that time living in a nursing facility, in a state of ever-increasing disconnection from his surroundings. His caretaker, forced to terminate the contract on his upstairs apartment, had felt that the best way to honour his memory was to donate all of his working papers, no strings attached, to the State Archives. And



Figure 7.4: Franco Rosso's apartment: the former kitchen (Photo: Maurizio Gomez Serito, 2014)

so, as the scholar and draftsman's life and personality inexorably slipped away, his apartment was opened on borrowed time, to sort and reorganize the books and papers. The rental contract was expiring and only a few months were available before it was repossessed by the landlord.

Agency and place

As the three curators entered the house, several months after its owner's last visit, its rooms and the objects appeared almost instantly as 'non-human actors', physical entities with which the former inhabitant had once engaged deep connections. As in other literati and artists' houses, or 'habitats' (Motycka Weston, 2017, p. 86), a variety of different artefacts seemed to be endowed with an autonomous agency: the owner's drawings, books, and manuscripts, the watercolours of artist friends hanging on the walls (in his youth Rosso had been a passionate art critic), the furniture, as well as the building itself, with its position and connections to the neighbourhood. This agency had resisted the departure of the human dweller and could still act with haunting and disquieting power over



Figure 7.5: Franco Rosso's apartment: the small drawing room (Photo: Maurizio Gomez Serito, 2014)

those in charge of reordering the archive, by activating memories and suggesting unforeseen connections with the former inhabitant's life and work. At the opening of every drawer, at every step taken further into the privacy of the scholar's life, some of these connections seemed to be revived.

The owner had left a personal mark also on the organization of the interior space. The apartment, a working-class flat originally laid out as a well-partitioned environment (not so distant from the Croix-Rousse apartments surveyed by Pierre Mayol in de Certeau, Giard & Mayol, 1994, p. 96), had been turned into a fluid, flexible workplace. While the interior partitions had not been modified, some doors had been removed and the rooms had lost their original functions. The kitchen had become a storage room (Fig. 7.4); the living room, a large drawing room; the bedroom, a smaller drawing room and a library (Fig. 7.5). Furniture had been reduced to a minimum and was composed of small cupboards, open shelves for storage, and tables of different sizes for drawing and working, with sparse chairs and stools punctuating the floor. The configuration of every corner into a



Figure 7.6: Franco Rosso, second from left, visiting Piero Fogliati's atelier in 1984. (Photo: Ernani Orcorte; Archivio di Stato di Torino, fondo Franco Rosso)

workspace was, in fact, so pervasive, that the curators ended up discarding normal classifications of the household and began considering the flat as a unified domestic landscape, possessing a peculiar topography: the trestle table and drawing tables as plateaux, the tiled floor as a continuous plain; the shelves and cupboards as mountain ranges, valleys, and caves.

While this analogy helped to gain perspective on the many scattered objects and their position, there was little time to consider its deepest implications. The curators' task was antithetical to the conservation 'as found' of the apartment and its content. As in an archaeological dig on a dense urban site slated for future construction, it was therefore decided that the state of the rooms and their content was to be summarily recorded. Surveying the surveyor's house, a simple plan was drafted. Rooms and furniture items were numbered, so that the original placement of objects and documents could be situated. Photography was used, calling in a photographer, he too among the scholar's friends. And yet, as the photographer drifted through the flat, the curators knew that the outcome would be less a formal documentation, than a tribute to the peculiar, unique interaction between the apartment's contents, the ghostly absence of its owner, and the natural light filtering in the rooms on a bright summer day.

Weeks into the curatorial work, the houses of other artists and literati had come to mind: houses where objects were also abundant and meaningful without possessing any predictable order or visible hierarchy. Francis Bacon's atelier, which was dismantled in London and reassembled, as a shrine, in Dublin (Cappock, 2005); the Turin house and memorial of Carol Rama (Ghiotti & Mundici, 2014); the workshop, also in Turin, of Piero Fogliati, a constructor of precise, elegant kinetic machines. The association with Fogliati's metal workshop was suggested by a *mise en abyme*, a photograph pinned to a cupboard recording Rosso's visit to the artist, accompanied by the art critic and friend Mirella Bandini (Fig. 7.6). A framed drawing by Fogliati, in Rosso's corridor, reinforced the connection. Not a workers' flat anymore, nor a conventional bourgeois apartment, had the house been used as an atelier? The analogy, as a working hypothesis, could suggest new interpretations of this notoriously meticulous scholar and draftsman's *modus operandi*.

The fragility of the link between person and place

As the first days of work passed, a more complex reality was revealed. The position of most documents did not correspond to earlier memories that the

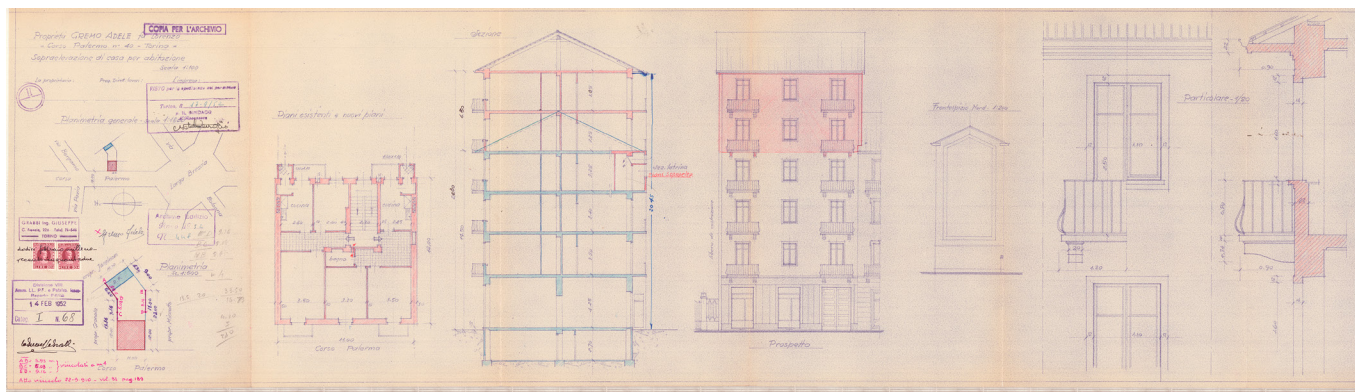


Figure 7.8: Approved design for the addition of two stories to the building in Corso Palermo, Turin, 1952. (Archivio Storico del Comune di Torino)

As these elements were revealed, the interpretation of the apartment also changed. While it could no longer be considered as channelling the memory of its dweller in his more active days, the flat remained relevant in the process of making sense of his archive, supporting the curators in the transition between remembrance, documentation, and heritage. However, it did not do so as a static time capsule, rather, it came to be seen as a battlefield, where the signs of a progressive, and inexorable, loss of control had been deposited side by side with the legacy of the owner's work. A place where amnesia had fought a battle over memory.

As the possible reasons for the unsettling placement of many objects were understood, a more detached approach to the inventory was sought, less reliant on intuition or personal recollections. Dragged down, perhaps, by their scholarly habits, the curators – an architectural historian, an archivist, a philosophy teacher – increasingly looked at the apartment as the site of an enquiry, and at the position of objects as clues, or symptoms, to evoke Carlo Ginzburg's *Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes* (1980).

It then also became possible to make sense of the fragments of lost order that had been preserved in some more remote regions of the apartment's topography: Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire*, stored in a closet under a window; a collection of original drawings by Crescentino Caselli, the brilliant architect-engineer and pupil of Alessandro Antonelli, lying untouched on the bottom shelf of a cupboard; the folders of the archival research on Turin under Napoleon, stacked in a remote corner (yet all together, forming a unity) on the kitchen floor; the fragile, light-sensitive tracing paper rolls of the 1970s Mole Antonelliana survey, carefully sealed and safeguarded by black anti-UV protective film. One of the most precious documents in the apartment was pinned inside a cupboard door: the checklist of the meticulously planned Shroud Chapel survey, providing an essential point of access to the whole research

project. By recombining the information provided by these caches (Boltanski, 2015) with the more scattered landscape of other objects and visual clues, different trajectories of investigation, 'thought in terms of complementarity' (Tigrino & Torre, 2020, p.682) were opened, extending an invisible network of connections with the author and his working papers beyond the apartment itself.

The inventory slowly morphed into a historical enquiry into the scholar's work, immersed in the political and cultural life of late 20th-century Turin. The drawings by Rambaudi, Fogliati, and Gandini on the walls, paired with the early published texts by Rosso as an art critic, and with the invitations to art gallery exhibits recycled into work notes, hinted at a structural connection between the intellectual and draftsman and the vibrant Turin art community of the '70s and '80s. They also suggested that this scholar had nurtured an interest in artistic production and drawing which went well beyond its use as a surveyor's and historian's tool. Rosso's surveys began thus to appear in a new light, as documentary evidence of the debate on art, technical drawing, craftsmanship, and industrial production, which had developed in post-war Turin. Once the attention was extended from the apartment to the urban setting, insisting 'on a notion of living that also involves what is outside' of the house (De Pieri, 2013, p.xxi), other layers of meaning began to emerge. Research in the city archives revealed that the building itself, a turn-of-the-century rental house that had slowly grown in height from two to six floors, strictly with no elevator, fit perfectly among the speculative building types that Rosso had studied as a historian, during his research on Alessandro Antonelli's activity as a landlord and developer (Piccoli, 2019; Rosso & Brino, 1972) (Fig. 7.8). The position of the house in the working-class neighbourhood where our scholar had been born (Fig. 7.9) suggested that a relationship of 'open causality' was at play (Gribaudi, 2006, p.121) between Rosso's



Figure 7.9: Turin, Corso Palermo. Rosso's flat is on the right. (Photo: the author, 2016)

biography, his profession, and Turin's social history. In a choice consistent with his unconventional academic itinerary, Rosso had kept his residence in a part of the city where personal identities had been defined, throughout the 20th century, mainly by one's work and political engagement.

The vanishing agency and the apartment's lives

In the initial approach to the house and archive, the assumption of an 'agency' embodying the apartment and its content was revealed as a powerful tool; it invited a careful observation and respectful interaction with place, space, and artifacts; it suggested networks of sense and invisible connections between possessions, past events, and human agents.

As the daily work of 'making heritage' (Heinich, 2009) proceeded, however, the curators' activities proved to be an obstacle to the deeper understanding of such immaterial bonds. By dismantling the apartment and rearranging its content, 'agency' was revealed as an ambiguous concept, evading the curators' grasp. Was the agency in the house, in the documents and drawings, or the curators' gaze? How did the agency of the inanimate objects react to the changes in their position? Once the documents and objects were rearranged in numbered boxes, ready to be shipped to the archives, where did the agency go? What parts of it had survived in the photographs taken in the early days, or in the cursory list that travelled with the boxed items toward the state archives?

The act of archiving as a 'way of knowing' (Yaneva, 2020, p. 185) is not meant to lead to a closure or a final verdict, and therefore, these questions should



Figure 7.10: Drawings of the Franco Rosso Archive stored at the Archivio di Stato di Torino. (Photo: the author, 2018)

remain open. In the years following the three curators' investigation of the apartment, the networks of sense involving the collection's items would be extensively rediscussed by the curators of the final inventory, performed in the controlled environment of the State archives (Fig. 7.10);² then they would be, and still are, questioned further by each new scholar accessing the fund, feeling and touching the original documents or gazing at their digital avatars.

Only the apartment would be closed to further direct enquiry. Its role, a crucial one in many aspects, deserves a few final remarks. The Italian *Vocabolario della Crusca* provides a concise definition of the early modern apartment as an 'aggregate of several rooms, which forms a free dwelling, and separated from the rest of the house' (V.C., 1691, vol.2, p. 119). This definition reflects quite closely what was learned from the observation of Rosso's workspace: during the scholar's lifetime, the fourth-floor flat had functioned as a space in which the individual dweller, as an early modern *virtuoso* engaged in mostly solitary practices of useful knowledge, enjoyed full jurisdiction and freedom of action. While luxury had been conspicuously absent from the scholar's life and work, the apartment itself had been kept by him as a carefully curated possession: a haven where the creative activities of his profession – drawing, reading, writing, and meeting select friends

2 Maria Paola Niccoli, Roberto Caterino, and Giusi Andreina Perniola curated the inventory at the State Archives, with the aid of Valentina Galante. Franco Rosso's library is housed as a single collection at the Biblioteca centrale di Architettura 'Roberto Gabetti', Politecnico di Torino (Caterino, Perniola and Piccoli, 2019).

– could be performed in full. Its low cost, its rental status, as well as its humble, nondescript character were qualities resonating with the dweller's intellectual passions as well as with his hold on reality. The same can be said for the position of the flat in Rosso's native neighborhood, right above his family living quarters. As in Montaigne's tower, or in Cornelis Meyer's one-room Roman apartment (Connors, 2015), a connection between the house and the ethical and political positions of its dweller had sealed the unwritten agreement between person and place.

All of this had taken place on the fourth floor of a simple brick-and-mortar box, with concrete floors and wooden windows. A testimony to the flexibility and down-to-earth, indisputable efficiency of so many twentieth-century rental flats, the apartment had functioned perfectly for decades, with minimal maintenance. It had beautifully performed its duties even in the more difficult last years of the owner's activity, adapting to his changing needs. Even after its dweller was forced to abandon it, it had sheltered the documents and drawings that were to be his public legacy. Forced into becoming a temporary archive by its invasive new daytime dwellers, the collection curators, it had provided them a safe and comfortable workplace. It had become a 'site of epistemological reshuffle' (Yaneva, 2020, pp. 180-94), where the former owner's creative and scholarly practices had been scrutinized and discussed, *in situ*. Once repossessed by its landlord and rented again, it entered other lives and other histories.

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