

Irony and experimentation in Jaretti and Luzi's architecture (1960-1974)

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18th International Docomomo Conference & Students Workshop
Santiago de Chile, 2024

M O D E R N
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY
F U T U R E S

Editor
Horacio Torrent

**M O D E R N
F U T U R E S**

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Santiago de Chile, 2024

M O D E R N SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY F U T U R E S

Editor
Horacio Torrent

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CONTENTS

14	Introduction / Mario Ubilla, Horacio Torrent
16	Modern Futures: Sustainable Development and Cultural Diversity / Horacio Torrent
20	MODERN FUTURES
22	The Role of Technologies in the Modern Movement and in the Future of Docomomo International / Uta Pottgiesser
25	The Role of Modern Architecture in Shaping Tomorrow / Ana Tostões
28	Docomomo. Then, Now, and the Future / Maristella Casciato
30	Revaluing Docomomo / Huber Jan Hencket
33	SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
	A. ADAPTIVE REUSE: IMPROVING BY DESIGN
34	01. ORIGINAL DESIGN INTENT, LAYERS OF HISTORY AND THE NEED FOR ADAPTATION TO A CHANGING WORLD Chair: Scott Bruce Robertson
34	Original Design Intent, Layers of History and the Need for Adaptation to a Changing World / Scott Bruce Robertson
42	Decline of Department Stores and the Issue of "Third Places" in German Inner cities: Decline, Obsolescence and Reuse Potentials / Anica Dragutinovic, Uta Pottgiesser
48	Adaptive Reuse of Modern Heritage: Attitudes in Relation with the Materiality of Déjà Vu. Case Study of the Citroën Garage (1934) Becoming Kanal (2018) / Chiara Fucelli
55	The Ocean Terminal Complex, Dubai: The Search for Meaning in an Irrevocably Changed Context / Mike Scurr
62	Narrating the Layers of History: Exploring Temporal Changes and Practical Realities in School Building Renovations / Meric Altintas Kaptan, Aslıhan Unlu
70	The Weissenhof Estate from the Point of View of the State Research Society for Economics in Construction and Housing (Reichsforschungsgesellschaft für Wirtschaftlichkeit im Bau- und Wohnungswesen, RFG) / Edyta Naworska
77	02. NOTABLE RENOVATIONS IN ORDINARY CONTEXTS Chairs: Ana Carolina Pellegrini, Danilo Matoso Macedo
77	Notable Renovations in Ordinary Contexts / Danilo Matoso Macedo, Ana Carolina Pellegrini
84	A Church Changes Confession – a Transformation Project with Aesthetics between East and West in Munich (1980-1995) / Korinna Zinovia Weber
91	Pinacoteca Contemporânea / Carlos Alberto Maciel, Paula Zasnicoff
98	West Bund Shanghai. Think Tank for Art / Jacopo Benedetti, Carlos Eduardo Comas
106	Corporate Architecture in Brussels: From Obsolescence to Heritagisation. La Royale Belge as case-study / Jean-Marc Basyn
114	Preserving Through Transforming. Exploring the Conversion Processes of Emery Roth and Sons' Post-War Office Buildings in Manhattan into Residential Spaces / Caterina Barioglio, Elena Guidetti
121	03. TYPOLOGICAL EXERCISES AND THE SINGULARITY OF ITERATION Chair: Maximiano Atria
121	Typological Exercises and the Singularity of Iteration / Maximiano Atria
125	The Confines in the Architectural Type Definition: The Modernity of Airport Terminals in the Extreme Regions of Chile / Boris Cvitanic-Diaz, Claudio Galeno-Ibaceta
132	Flexibility in School Architecture: The 1970s Mat-Buildings of Recife, Brazil / Larissa Morgana Leão Silva de Sousa, Fernando Diniz Moreira
139	The Gasometer in Vienna / Markus Tomaselli
146	Concrete Abstraction / Jorge Gambini
153	Researching, Dismantling, Rebuilding: The Work of Emilio Duhart Revealed by Intervening on the Herman House / Loreto Lyon, Alejandro Beals

B. WELLBEING FOR ALL: SPACES FOR INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE LIVING

161	04. EDUCATING MODERN CHILDREN Chairs: Louise Noelle Gras Gas, Catherine Rose Ettinger
161	Educating Modern Children. Local Solutions and Standardised Construction / Louise Noelle Gras Gas, Catherine Rose Ettinger
167	Learning through Experience: Johanna Heinrich Pestalozzi's Pedagogy in Hannes Meyer's Educational Building Projects / Raquel Franklin Unkind
174	Infrastructures of Child Care: Establishing the Modern Language of Zagreb's Schools in the Agency of Ivan Zemljak / Mia Roth Čerina
181	Cheste Worker University: Designing a Modern Educational Center Tailored for Children / Fernando Usó Martín, Maite Palomares Figueres
189	Pedagogical Experimentation and Modern Architecture: Experimental High Schools in Santiago, Chile / Ursula Exss
196	A Classroom to Change the World: The School Architecture of the Ministry of Public Works of Uruguay (1954-1965) / Alfredo Peláez Iglesias
203	05. ADOPTION OF REUSE AND SUSTAINABLE CONSERVATION FOR EDUCATIONAL SPACES IN THE MODERN ARCHITECTURE Chairs: Zainab A. Murtadhawi, Ula Merie
203	Adaptive Reuse and Sustainable Conservation for Modern Educational Architecture / Zainab A. Murtadhawi, Ula Merie
210	Repurposing Modern Heritage Schools in Kuwait: A Framework for Adaptive Reuse / Rabah Raes Kazem, Naser Ashour
219	Ideas Behind the Form: Overlooked Qualities of the Experimental School in Bratislava / Nina Bartošová
226	Social Sustainability through Adaptive Reuse. Case study: Mt. Pleasant High School, USA / Armita Eghbali, Maya Weber
234	School Architecture and Adaptive Reuse: The Case of the Inmaculada Concepción School / Verónica Esparza Saavedra
241	Collaborative Redesign of Modern Schools: Rethinking Spaces of Coimbra Lyceum / Gonçalo Canto Moniz, João Mendes Ribeiro, Carolina Coelho, Pedro Brígida, Duarte Miranda, Valentina Gutiérrez
250	06. HEALTHCARE COMPLEXES; THE FUTURES OF MODERN URBAN ENCLAVES Chairs: Claudio Galeno-Ibaceta, Ana A. Amora
250	Healthcare Complexes: The Futures of Modern Urban Enclaves / Claudio Galeno-Ibaceta, Ana A. Amora
257	The Power of Adaptation: The Conversion of a Teaching Hospital into a Justice Complex / Ivo Renato Giroto
264	Paimio Sanatorium – The Masterpiece in Change / Jonas Malmberg
272	Obsolescence and Vulnerability of Modern Hospital Heritage. The Challenge of Rural Psychiatric Hospitals in Mexico / Iván San Martín Córdoba
279	Lelé's Architecture of Care: The Sarah Kubitschek Hospitals as a Strategy for Birth Centres and Healthcare Spaces / Carla Zollinger
286	The Instituto de Puericultura e Pediatria Martagão Gesteira (IPPMG). Between Glory and Risk / Helio Herbst
	C. SUSTAINABLE TECHNOLOGIES: RESEARCH INTO ACTION
293	07. CIRCULAR ECONOMY AND BUILT HERITAGE: OBSOLESCENCE, CIRCULARITY, INSTRUMENTS AND FUTURE Chairs: Renato D'Alencón, Dominga Teillery
293	Circular Economy and Built Heritage: Obsolescence, Circularity, Instruments and Future / Renato D'Alencón, Dominga Teillery
300	Stubborn Architecture: Preindustrial Principles of Slowing Building Material Use in the Use-Stage / Tobias Hentzer Dausgaard
307	Everyday Residential Heritage and Circularity: Potential and Limitations of Docomomo Full Documentation Fiches / Claudia Massioni, Wido Quist, Roberto Cavallo
315	Assessing the Environmental Impact: Office Building Reuse as a Sustainable Alternative to Demolition / Taylor Rose Quibell, Mario Santana Quintero
323	Curtains for Crown Hall: A Bioplastic Adaptation / Ryan Leigh Roark
330	Has Fossil Modernism Led us to a Dead End? / Wolfgang H. Salcher

337 **08. CONCRETE LONG-SPAN BUILDINGS' ADAPTIVE REUSE: SUSTAINABLE RETHINKING OF PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE AND INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE**
Chairs: Francesco Romeo, Giovanni Multari

- 337 Concrete Long Span Buildings' Adaptive Reuse: Sustainable Rethinking of Public Architecture and Industrial Heritage / Francesco Romeo, Giovanni Multari
- 345 What if? Open Questions and Design Scenarios on the Upcycling of Long-Span Structural Components from 20th Century Authorial Architecture / Alberto Bologna, Margherita Maurea
- 352 Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace – Transformation of the Preservation Approach / Aušra Černauskienė
- 359 Methodological Approaches Through the Use of Advanced Information Systems (BIM-GIS and CDE) for the Management and Valorisation of 20th-Century Industrial Heritage / Antonio Maria Nese
- 366 Re-inhabiting the Modern Factory: The Former Milk Plant by Luigi Cosenza / Francesco Iuliano, Lorenzo Renzullo
- 373 The Marchiondi Spagliardi Institute and the Marxer Institute: Good Practices for the Care of Reinforced Concrete and New Forms of Dialogue with Existing Spaces / Bianca Maria Rodriguez, Chiara Assante

380 **09. PREFABRICATION IN REINFORCED CONCRETE AND INTERNATIONAL TRANSFERS DURING THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY**

- Chairs: Pedro Ignacio Alonso, Hugo Palmarola
- 380 Towards a History of International Transfers in Large Concrete Panel Systems / Pedro Ignacio Alonso, Hugo Palmarola
- 386 The Birth of Stavoprojekt, a Socialist Attempt to Collectivise Design Practice and Standardise Buildings and Technology / Petr Vrlík
- 394 Transposing the Discourse of Industrialised Construction in Housing Between Lisbon and Luanda During the 1970s / Inês Lima Rodrigues
- 401 The Role of Prefabrication in Housing Construction in the 1970s in China: The Case of Diplomatic Residential Compounds in Beijing / Yimei Zhang
- 407 Exporting Soviet Monumental Art from Soviet Tashkent to Europe and Siberia: The Works of Alexander, Nikolai and Pyotr Jarsky between 1969 and 1999 / Philipp Meuser

D. BETTER CITIES: APPROACHES TO MODERN VALUES

415 **10. RESHUFFLING URBAN LAND: MODERN IDEAS FOR NEW URBAN MORPHOLOGIES**

- Chairs: Francisco Díaz, Marco Trisciunglio
- 415 Reshuffling Urban Land: Modern Ideas for New Urban Morphologies / Francisco Díaz, Marco Trisciunglio
- 422 The Drivers and Outcomes of the Urban Renewal in Oklahoma City: Looking Back, Looking Forward / Selena Bagnara Milan
- 428 Building the Model City of Socialism: Post-WWII Reconstruction of Nemiga Street in Minsk, Belarus / Dasha Kuletskaya
- 435 CIAM Young Generation's Ideas of the Street as a Tool to Question Conventional Hierarchies of Postwar Spatial Structuring / Elena Giaccone
- 442 Alternative Cities. The PEVE Programme, Mass Housing Proposals, and Urban Form Transitions in 1970s Argentina / Santiago Gomes
- 449 The Lot in Modern Architecture Urban Planning: The Case of Brasilia Pilot Plan's Central Sectors, 1957 / Helena Bender
- 456 **11. 'INFORMAL' MODERNISMS: URBAN DESIGN, PLANNING NARRATIVES, AND NEW CITIES**
Chairs: Kuukuwa O Manful, Emmanuel Kusi Ofori-Sarpong
- 456 'Informal' Modernisms: Urban Design, Planning Narratives, and New Cities / Kuukuwa O Manful, Emmanuel Ofori-Sarpong
- 462 Palmas (TO): Contradictions among the Ways of Living in a New City's Block / Mariana Verdolin dos Santos
- 469 The Work Encampment: A Utopia by Rodrigo Lefèvre / Ana Carolina Buim Azevedo Marques, Ana Paula Koury
- 476 Socialist Practice of Modern Planning in the 1950s' China: the Case Study of Minhang Satellite Town and the Associated Rural Planning Project / Pengcheng Zeng
- 483 Narratives-Within a Narration: Bridging Modernism and Cultural Identity in African Literature and Architecture / Ntletleng Orepa Mosidi
- 490 Between the *Mussequê* and the Neighbourhood Unit: Spotting "*Compagnons de route*" Architectures in Luanda (1961-1975) / Ana Vaz Milheiro, Leonor Matos Silva

496 **12. THE NATURAL HOUSE IN THE MODERN CITY: IDEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES, TECHNICAL DEVICES AND URBAN PROJECTS**

- Chairs: Joaquín Medina, Horacio Torrent
- 496 The Natural House in the Modern City: Ideological Principles, Technical Devices and Urban Projects / Horacio Torrent, Joaquín Medina
- 502 The Growing City. The Hybrid Character of Nature in Schwagenscheidt's *Raumstadt* Concept / Moran Lev
- 510 From Eden to Babylon. The role of Nature in Lima's Neighbourhood Units / Sharif S. Kahatt
- 517 Modern Housing Production on the Axis of Industry: The Expanding Boundaries of Istanbul / Yildiz Salman, Burak Ozturk
- 523 Villages, Houses and Gardens. Catholicism's Contribution to Social Housing in Uruguay / Mary Mendez
- 530 Devices for the Perception of Nature. Richard Neutra's Suburban Single-Family Houses / Matthias Brunner

E. CONTEMPORARY LIFE AND THE MODERN PUBLIC SPACES

536 **13. ADAPTING MODERN PUBLIC SPACE TO ACTUAL NEEDS**

- Chairs: Elke Schlack, Juliane Von Hagen
- 536 Adapting Modern Public Space to Actual Needs / Elke Schlack, Juliane Von Hagen
- 543 Take the Heat: Adapting Modern Public Space to Accommodate Older Adults' Needs / Ana Martins, Gisela Lameira, Ana Silva Fernandes, Rui Jorge Garcia Ramos
- 550 Public Space for Childhood, Art and Biodiversity in Bulevar Marx's Plaza Perú in Buenos Aires: Between Documenting and Demolishing or Restoring and Rebuilding / Martín Capeluto
- 557 Redefining the Role of Public Space as an Urban Connector in the Lord Cochrane Housing Complex in Viña del Mar / Anna Brahamini
- 564 Open Spaces in Modernist Housing Complexes: Urban Ambiance in Three Cases of Santiago de Chile / Ximena Arizaga
- 571 Adapting a Brussels Urban Regeneration Tool to the Specific Characteristics of a Large Social Housing Estate. The Case of the Sustainable Neighbourhood Contract (CQD) Peterbos / Morgane Bos, Giulia Marino, Alexandre Bossard, Chiara Cavalieri

579 **14. COMMUNITY LIFE AND MANAGEMENT OF NEIGHBOURHOOD UNITS**

- Chairs: Flavia Brito Nascimento, Umberto Bonomo
- 579 Community Life and Management of Neighbourhood Units / Umberto Bonomo, Flavia Brito Nascimento
- 586 The Implementation of the Salvador Residential Complex: From Modern Conception to the Contemporary Appropriation of its Common Spaces / Joaquim Nunes Junior, Ana Carolina Bierrenbach, Aline Maria Barroso
- 593 Just Patios Make Cities? A Review of the Town Planning Associates Project in Maracaibo, Venezuela / Andrea Castro Marcucci, Daniel Belandria Gutiérrez
- 600 The Empart I Housing Complex in Iquique, Chile. Collective Housing in a Desert Landscape / Victor Valenzuela-Grollmus
- 606 Re-negotiating Modernity: Appropriation and Everyday Life at Centro Urbano Antonio Nariño in Bogotá, Colombia (Liliana Andrea Clavijo García
- 613 Social Housing and Urban Ideals: A Case Study of Quito, Ecuador / Verónica Vaca Proaño, Néstor Llorca Vega, Enrique Ferreras Cid

621 **15. RE-EXAMINING THE MODERNIST CIVIC BUILDINGS FROM THE "GLOBAL SOUTH"**

- Chairs: Ying Zhou, Cecilia L. Chu
- 621 Civicness and Tropicality: Re-examining the Modernist Civic Buildings from the "Global South" / Ying Zhou
- 627 Urban Textured Paintings: Exploring Chen Chi-Kwan's High-Rise Modern Architecture and Overall Ink Paintings from the "Global South" / Ning Tsai
- 635 Architecture for Children: Colonial Architects, Climate Design and Enduring Nursery Buildings (1957-1964) / Ana Vaz Milheiro / Beatriz Serrazina, Inês Lima Rodrigues
- 642 Between Tropicality and Modernism: Exploring Robert G. Boughey's Architectural Synthesis in the Global South / Fatema Tasmia
- 649 Flexible Architecture for New Education: Nordic Institute for Development Management (IDM) in Tanzania / Maryia Rusak

F. LANDSCAPES AND TERRITORIES OF THE MODERN: TODAY AND TOMORROW

655 **16. POST-INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPES: PROJECTING VALUES AND USES FOR NEW LIFE CYCLES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE**

- Chair: Osvaldo Moreno

- 655 Post-industrial Landscapes: Projecting Values and Uses for New Life Cycles in the Anthropocene / Osvaldo Moreno
- 661 Spring Bay Mill; The Transformation of a Peculiar Modern Industrial Heritage Site / Ross Brewin
- 668 Modern Pre-existing Structures and Urban Renewal: Cristina Xavier's Intervention at the Headquarters of O2 Filmes / Monica Junqueira de Camargo
- 675 Working on the Landscapes of Labour Between Ancient and Modern: Pin-point Projects for Industrial Archaeology in Tivoli / Edoardo Currà, Spartaco Paris, Carlo Vannini, Andrea Bonamore
- 683 Modernism on the Post-Industrial Riverfront: Heritage Site or Obsolete Relic? / Elizabeth M. Keslacy
- 690 The Social Construction of Post-industrial Heritage Values in Poblenu: New Urban Landscape Visions / Melina Guiraldos Diaz

697 17. RADICAL ROOF GARDENS: DREAM SPACES OF SOCIAL COHESION AND PRIVATE RETREAT
Chairs: Nathaniel Robert Walker, Joseph Watson

- 697 Radical Roof Gardens: Dream Spaces of Social Cohesion and Private Retreat / Joseph Michael Watson, Nathaniel Robert Walker
- 703 Caipiras' Roof Gardens in Rio de Janeiro / Silvana Nicolli
- 710 The Itamaraty Palace Roof Garden and a Possible Image of Brazil / Ana Paula Polizzo
- 716 One Thousand and One Nights: A Rooftop Airport Oasis in the Arabian Desert / Joss Kiely
- 722 A nocturnal roof garden for spectacles. The Luminous Ship by Carles Buigas / David Caralt

729 18. MODERN HERITAGE AND URBAN PRODUCTION
Chair: Magdalena Vicuña

- 729 Modern Heritage and Urban Production / Magdalena Vicuña
- 733 Addressing the Modernist Legacy Through the Historical Townscape: Re-evaluating Public Architecture of the 1970s-1980s in Ghent (Belgium) / Evert Vandeweghe
- 740 Modern Urban Landscape: Traces of Identity, Vectors of Sustainability. The Case of the Matthei Neighbourhood in Osorno / Hugo Weibel Fernández
- 747 Sun, Space, Greenery and Global Warming. The Potential of the Modern Housing Landscape in Climate Change Mitigation / Rodrigo Gertosio Swanston
- 753 Urban Values Heritage: Gilberto Gutto Sobral's Modern Architecture in Cuenca, Ecuador / Paola Preti, Fernanda Aguirre, Veronica Heras
- 759 Architecture of the Property State: Public Ownership of Land & the Production of the Built Environment in Post-Independence Singapore / Jacob Meyers

766 19. MODERNISM AND DIPLOMACY: PAYING IT FORWARD AT U.S. EMBASSIES (ROUND TABLE)
Chairs: Kathleen Gerner, Jorge Salcedo

- 766 Modernism and Diplomacy: Paying it Forward at U.S. Embassies / Jorge Salcedo
- 774 Case Study: The Major Rehabilitation and Expansion of the U.S. Embassy in Athens Greece, Originally Designed by Walter Gropius (1959-1961) / Kathleen Gerner
- 779 A Case Study in Modernism and Diplomacy: The Major Rehabilitation and Restoration of the Brutalist U.S. Embassy in Montevideo, Uruguay, Originally Designed by I.M. Pei (1959-1969) / Troy Thompson
- 785 Case Study: Historic Intent and the Renovation of Eduardo Catalano's U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires / Juan Villafañe
- 792 Maintaining Cultural History and Meeting 21st Century Expectations – Embassy in Montevideo as Example for Major Diplomatic Renovations / Frederick J. Poehler

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

798 A. RESEARCH AND DISSEMINATION AS OPEN FIELDS

- 799 20. ENGAGED RESEARCH: EXPLORING AND STRUGGLING FOR THE ARCHITECTURE OF WELFARE STATES**
Chairs: Peter Szalay, Henrieta Moravčíková
- 799 Engaged research: Exploring and Struggling for the Architecture of Welfare States / Peter Szalay, Henrieta Moravčíková
- 806 Continuity and Transformation of Post-War Modernist Architecture: The Case Study of the Former Communist Party Headquarters in Košice, Slovakia / Monika Kicová
- 812 Away from Nostalgia: A New Approach for the Forgotten Welfare State Industrial Facilities / Maximiano Atria

- 818 Wider than Welfare: Industry, Infrastructure and Eradication / Richard Brook
- 824 The Aylesbury Estate: Shifting Narratives on Urban Renewal / Lucia Concetta Vincelli, James Aston Lansbury
- 831 Architectural Conservation and Political Resilience: The 2023 Attack on the Palace of Congress in Brasília / Danilo Matoso Macedo, Ana Carolina Pellegrini

838 21. INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

Chair: Paulo Dam

- 838 Transdisciplinary Approaches in the Construction of the Modern: Peru as a Quest / Paulo Dam
- 844 Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's Innovative Schools: The Modern Revolution of Objects / Mara Sánchez Llorens, Fermina Garrido López
- 852 Libeskind House: The Construction of a Modern Ambience Through the Protagonism of Joaquim Tenreiro's Work / Luciana Tombi Brasil
- 859 Digital Documentation Workflows and Training for the Conservation and Planning of Niki de Saint Phalle's Tarot Garden / Mario Santana Quintero, Flavia Perugini
- 866 The Link Between Architecture and Psychology in Japan: Yoshinobu Ashihara's Landscape Theory / Zahra Ramezani, Kenji Watanabe

874 22. MODERN MOVEMENT AS A MEDIUM FOR EXPRESSION AND AS A DISSEMINATION TOOL IN AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA

Chairs: Susana Landrove Bossut, Sara Pérez Barreiro

- 874 Modern Movement as a Medium for Expression and as a Dissemination Tool in Audiovisual Media / Susana Landrove Bossut, Sara Pérez Barreiro
- 880 Stimulating Historical Identity through Alternative Media / Emma Veronese
- 887 Towards a New Metropolis: The Machinist Utopia in Urbanism and Cinema / Luciano de Topin Ribeiro
- 894 Experiences of Modern Space in the Central Valley of Chile / Glenn Deulofeu
- 901 Exploring Late-Modernist Domesticity in a Wooden Flexible House Versus a Concrete Brutalist House / Els De Vos
- 907 Parafictions of the Glitched Estate in Central Hill / Alessandro Columbuo

B. SCOPE OF MODERN: EXTENTS AND APPROACHES

914 23. BEYOND MODERNISM

Chair: Lidwine Spormans

- 914 Beyond Modernism / Lidwine Spormans
- 921 Portuguese Architecture in the 1980s: Into a Dreamlike Everyday Life / Joego Figueira
- 929 Irony and Experimentation in Jaretti and Luzzi's Architecture (1960-1974) / Maria Luisa Barelli, Davide Rolfo
- 936 Parque Guinle Post-Modern? / Nathalia Cantergiani, Mara Eskinazi, Mónica Luce Bohrer
- 944 French New Towns: Last Avatar of the Welfare State or New Avant-Garde Proposals? / Catherine Blain
- 951 Modernism and Countercultural Architecture: Not Exactly a Neat Cut-Off / Elena Poma, Franz Graf

958 24. MONUMENTAL MODERNISM: LEGACY OR WASTE?

Chairs: Claudia Costa Cabral, Fernando Diez

- 958 Monumental Modernism: Legacy or Waste / Claudia Costa Cabral, Fernando Diez
- 965 Housing Problem in Italy and Large-Scale Buildings in Second Half of the 20th Century. A Fragile Heritage / Francesca Albani
- 971 Mending Wall – Continuity in the Modernist City: Interpreting Smallbrook Ringway Centre, Birmingham / Michael Dring
- 978 New Old London: Modern Large-Scale Housing for the Traditional City / Jaime Silva, Ana Tostões
- 985 Ibirapuera Gymnasium: Renewal of Use, Private Concession and Preservation in São Paulo / Renato Anelli
- 992 Revisiting Merihaka's Parking Structures P1 and P2 / Karita Rytivaara

1000 25. BEYOND CIAM: TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS OF LATE MODERNISM

Chairs: Marta García Carbonero, Brett Tippey

- 1000 Beyond CIAM: Transnational Networks of Late Modernism / Marta García Carbonero, Brett Tippey
- 1007 Situated and Creative. Two Acts on Housing Design, Participation, and Methods in Latin American Late Modernism / Guido Campi

- 1013 Exploring Beyond Borders: The Significance of *Pequeños Congresos* in the Valuation of Spanish Architecture / Ana Esteban Maluenda
- 1020 From Valparaiso to Vancouver: Pan-American Networks and Poetic Visions of a Unified America / Oscar Andrade Castro
- 1026 Unveiling Post-Independence Discourse of Modern Indian Architecture: Insights from *Design Magazine* (1957) / Pappal Suneja
- 1032 Prishtina Shunning Critique: Yugoslavia's Encounter with the Radical Architecture Movement / Edmond Drenogllava
- C. THEORIES AND HISTORIES IN TIMES OF CONTROVERSY**
- 1039 **26. AUTHENTICITY IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE**
Chairs: France Vanlaethem, Ève Wertbeimer
- 1039 Authenticity in the Face of Climate Change / France Vanlaethem, Ève Wertbeimer
- 1046 Preserving Authenticity after Seismic Retrofit and Reuse in Japan / Toru Ajsaka
- 1051 Bridging Cultural Significance and Risk Assessment: Compared Analysis from Conservation Management Plans in Portugal and Cuba (1960-1966) / Teresa Cunha Ferreira, Davide Del Curto, Pedro Murilo de Freitas, Andrea Garzolino, Rui Fernandes Póvoas
- 1059 A Comprehensive Framework to Increase Modelling Credibility in Modern Buildings Energy Simulations. The Case Study of Chauderon Complex Façade by Jean Prouvé in Lausanne (1969-1974) / Giuseppe Galbiati, Franz Graf, Giulia Marino
- 1065 The Sustainable Shine Dome: Toward a Sustainability Plan for the National Heritage Listed Australian Academy of Science Building / Michael Jasper, Tracy Ireland
- 1071 **27. NONCANONICAL CURATORIAL NARRATIVES. RETHINKING THE ROLE OF THE ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION**
Chairs: Maria Cristina Cabral, Ana Esteban Maluenda
- 1071 Curatorial Narratives: Rethinking the Role of the Exhibition / Maria Cristina Cabral, Ana Esteban Maluenda
- 1077 Presenting Architecture, the Archive and Microhistories: The Opening Exhibition of the New Home of Hungarian Architecture / Ágnes Anna Sebestyén
- 1083 A New Period Eye: Learning to See Venezuela's Modernity with Docomomo Venezuela Exhibitions / Frank Alcock
- 1091 Beyond Modernism: Curatorial Clashes and Transformations in 1983 Portuguese Architectural Exhibitions / Ana Neiva
- 1098 War's Toll of Italian Heritage: Unveiling Italy's Postwar Reconstruction through Transnational Exhibitions / Jiayao Jiang
- 1105 Contested Modernities: Architecture and Propaganda in the *Exposição Nacional do Estado Novo* (Rio de Janeiro, 1938) / Catarina Flaksman
- 1111 **28. REMAPPING MODERNISMS: CONTEMPORARY DEBATES**
Chairs: Ruth Verde Zein, Patrícia Santos Pedrosa
- 1111 Remapping Modernisms: Contemporary Debates / Ruth Verde Zein, Patrícia Santos Pedrosa
- 1118 The Narrative Triad of Nikolai Pevsner: Recognising the Content Profile and Structure of the Book *Pioneers of Modern Design* / Tais Ossani
- 1125 Lina Bo Bardi: the Bad and the Ugly - Contemporary Formal Problems / Patricia Pereira Martins
- 1132 Being Modern, Building Modern. *L'Union Féministe Égyptienne's* headquarters in Cairo in 1932 / John Hanna, Maria Novas Ferradás
- 1138 The Value of the Material. An Economic Re-reading of the Modern Ideal in Chile / Paula Orta Camus, Cristian Muñoz Díaz
- 1146 Towards a Transient Understanding of Modern Built Heritage Documentation and Research / Adina Hempel
- D. CONSERVATION TRAINING: THE PAST AND THE FUTURE**
- 1154 **29. HOW CAN EXHIBITIONS HELP CREATING A SUSTAINABLE AND RESPONSIBLE ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE FUTURE?**
Chair: Bárbara Coutinho
- 1154 How can Exhibitions Help Creating a Sustainable and Responsible Attitude Towards the Future? / Bárbara Coutinho
- 1160 Towards a Reparative Architectural History / Eduardo Augusto Costa, Júnia Cambraia Mortimer
- 1167 Discovering a New Narrative: Interpretation Method Practices in the Exhibition *Modernism for the Future 360/365* / Vítě Migonytė-Petrušienė
- 1174 Archive Narratives. Curatorial proposals based on archive collection documents / Michelle Llona Ridoutt
- 1180 Elizabeth Mock's Curatorship at MoMA: a New Approach to Architecture and Architecture Exhibitions and its Echoes in Europe / João Miguel Couto Duarte, Maria João Moreira Soares
- 1187 Food Party: Reflections on Community Engagement through Food Projects in Architectural Exhibitions / Leyuan Li, Max Bravo
- 1194 **30. EDUCATION TO CONSERVE MODERN HERITAGE: METHODS AND TOOLS**
Chairs: Chandler McCoy, Andrea Canziani
- 1194 Education to Conserve Modern Heritage: Methods and Tools / Andrea Canziani, Chandler McCoy
- 1201 The CMAI's International Training on the Conservation of Modern Heritage / Margherita Pedroni
- 1209 Joint Master RMB, Re-use of Modernist Buildings / Michel Melenhorst
- 1217 The Conservation Planning as a Contribution to Education and Training for Twentieth-century Heritage Conservation / Santiago Beckdorf
- 1224 Remapping Modernism: MAPA Peru Arequipa 2023 / Carlos Torres Flores, Mariano Quiroga Robles, Rosabella Alvarez-Calderón Silva Santisteban
- 1232 What Do We Want from Architectural Education? / Artina Qehaja
- 1239 **31. RE-EDUCATION FOR REUSE OF MODERN SPACES. SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSION AS A PLATFORM FOR INCLUSIVE DIDACTIC AND RESEARCH**
Chairs: Carolina Quiroga, Gonçalo Canto Moniz
- 1239 Re-education for Reuse of Modern Spaces. Social and Environmental Dimension as a Platform for Inclusive Didactic and Research / Gonçalo Canto Moniz, Carolina Quiroga
- 1246 Education, Research, and Extension Practices on Sorocaba City (Brazil) Modern Architectural Heritage / Taiana Car Vidotto
- 1254 Implementing Democracy in Socialist Architecture. Adaptation of Former Soviet Schools for Contemporary Education Needs in Lithuania / Liutauras Nekrošius, Dolf Broekhuizen
- 1261 Pimp Danish Modernism: Drawing as a Pedagogical Tool for a Sustainable Future / Angela Gigliotti, Fabio Gigone
- 1268 Transforming a Conventional Rigid Classroom into a Stimulating Space / Adéla Šoborová
- 1276 (Re)signifying and (re)designing Modern School Playgrounds. Experiments on Collaborative Design in Portugal / Patrícia Lourenço, Alexandra Alegre, Teresa Heitor
- E. EVERYDAY LIFE AND MODERN INTERIOR**
- 1285 **32. ADAPTIVE MODERN HOUSING: SHIFTING NOTIONS OF COMFORT AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF DOMESTIC SPACE FOR CONTEMPORARY LIVING**
Chair: Zara Castelo Ferreira
- 1285 Adaptive Modern Housing: Shifting Notions of Comfort and the Transformation of Domestic Space for Contemporary Living / Zara Castelo Ferreira
- 1292 Modern Archaeologies: Sustainable Strategies for Social Housing Building in Athens, 1950-1970 / Chrysostomos Theodoropoulos
- 1300 Spatial Decolonisation of the Modern Middle-class Housing of Mozambique / Patricia Noormahomed
- 1308 Departure from the Chandigarh Style: Contemporary Adaptations to the Regulated Marla House / Priya Gupta
- 1315 Reflections on Minimum Space Living in Macau / Niccolò Arnaldo Galliano, Ana Tostões
- 1323 Exploring the Evolution of the Mass-Empty Space Relationship for Social Sustainability in Shushtar New Town: Insights from Kamran Diba's Design / Parisa Etemadi, Helder Casal Ribeiro
- 1330 **33. CAPTURING TIME INSIDE ARCHITECTURE**
Chairs: Ana Tostões, Marta Silveira Peixoto
- 1330 Capturing Time Inside Architecture / Ana Tostões, Marta Peixoto
- 1337 Recognizing Cultural Values in Changes to Modern Interiors / Juliano Loureiro de Carvalho
- 1344 Melchiorre Bega Corporate Interiors (1959-70): Transience and Care / Sara Di Resta
- 1351 Modern Over Modern. The SOM Interiors Restoration of Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House (1967-1975) / Davide Galleri

1358	Museum Building as a Living Archive and a "Time Machine": The case study of MUDE – Museu do Design, Lisbon / Bárbara Coutinho	1527	(Re)discussing Miscegenation in the Historiography of Modern Architecture / Alex Matos
1365	Modernity and <i>Cubanidad</i> : Clara Porset, Time, and Ideology / Jean-François Lejeune	1533	Transcontinental Modernity in Ahmedabad: Contributions by Geeta and Gira Sarabhai / Maria João Moreira Soares, João Miguel Couto Duarte
1372	34. TEXTILES IN THE MODERN INTERIOR: DISCOVERING THE HIDDEN LOCAL AND GLOBAL STORIES BETWEEN THE WEAVES Chairs: Eva Storgaard, Deniz Hasirci	1540	38. SHAPING THE NARRATIVE: THE IMPACT OF RESEARCH ON WOMEN IN ARCHITECTURE ON THE LEGACY OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE Chairs: Ana Gabriela Godinho Lima, Giovanna Augusto Merli, Klara Brůhová
1372	Textiles in the Modern Interior: Discovering the Hidden Local and Global Stories between the Weaves / Eva Storgaard, Deniz Hasirci	1540	Revisiting the Modern Architecture Canon: Parallels and Distinctions in Brazil and Czech Republic through Feminist Perspectives / Ana Gabriela Godinho Lima, Giovanna Augusto Merli, Klára Brůhová
1379	Weaving (as a Disciplinary Reference for) Stained-Glass Windows in Modernist Liturgical Interiors / Zsuzsanna Böröcz	1547	Remapping Modern Architecture: Three Modern Buildings by Female Architects in Maceió/AL / Manuella Marianna Carvalho Rodrigues de Andrade, Ítalo Monteiro de Oliveira Mariano Gomes
1386	"Origin: Modernized from Ancient Turkish Motifs:" A Case Study on Hereke Sümerbank Carpet Collection in 1965 / Didem Yavuz Velipaşaoğlu	1554	The Archival is Political / Fabiola Solari, Manola Ognide Gutiérrez
1392	Tapta-Simone Guillissen-Hoa: Collaborations and Crossing Borders Between Textile Arts and Modern Architecture / Apolline Vranken, Virginie Marnet	1560	Uruguayan Female Architects Research / Soledad Cebey, Laura Cesio, Daniela Fernández, Nadia Ostraujov, Tatiana Rimbaud, Elina Rodríguez
1399	Dambara Weaving – Minnette De Silva Threading a "Modern Regional Architecture in the Tropics" / Inês Leonor Nunes	1567	Women in Modern Architecture: Regionalism, Otherness, and Gender in the Brazilian Northeastern Region / Guilah Naslavsky, Maria Luíza Rocha Mariz Valença, Rafaela Silva Lins
1406	Educating Communities Through Industry: John Cotton Dana's, <i>The Heritage of 3000 Years of Art in Modern Rugs and Carpets Exhibition and Floor Coverings Exhibitions, 1929-1930</i> / Anita Puig	1574	39. ARCHITECTURE DISCOURSES AND CONSERVATION STRATEGIES Chair: Elvira Pérez
1411	35. THE MODERN INTERIOR: ESSENTIAL QUALITIES THAT REMAIN Chair: Zsuzsanna Böröcz	1574	Architectural Heritage Discourses and Conservation Strategies / Elvira Pérez
1411	The Modern Interior: Essential Qualities that Remain / Zsuzsanna Böröcz	1578	Towards a Construction of Heritage Assessment Criteria for Modern Architecture in Ecuador / Fernanda Monserrath Aguirre Bermeo, Verónica Heras, Santiago Vanegas
1418	Women's Advisory Committee-VAC and Johanna Kroep-de Jonge: the Legacy of Dutch Women's Agencies in Modern Interiors / Carolina Quiroga	1586	Modern Territories and Local Architectures: Peru's Tourism Hotels from 1930 to 1970 / Trilce Bravo Guzman
1426	Reclaiming the Outdoors: Challenges in Retrofit, Design for Ageing and Well-being in Modern Movement Access Galleries and Walkways / Gisela Lameira, Luciana Rocha, Rui Jorge Garcia Ramos	1593	Situating Indian Architectural Discourse: Transnational Networks of Late Modernism / Saurajeeta Bose Paul
1434	From Provincial to International: Modern Interiors of a Curitiba in Transition / Giovanna Polonio Renzetti, Ruth Verde Zein	1601	Change to Preserve. A Conservation Strategy for Tashkent Modernist Heritage / Sofia Celli, Davide Del Curto, Ekaterina Golovatyuk
1441	Rationalist Architecture in Seville: José Galnares and the Project for the Tomás Alehouse / Antonio Huertas Berro, Germán Reyes Mota, Pablo Millán Millán	1609	40. MODERNISM AND HERITAGE IN LATIN AMERICA AND AFRICA: CHALLENGES OF SHARED AND CONTESTED (ROUND TABLE) Chairs: Warebi Gabriel Brisibe, Nwola Oluwakemi Uduku, Ernesto Valero Thomas
1448	Timeless Quality in a Social Housing Estate for All: The Transformation of Domestic Space and Lifestyles in Olivais Norte (1960s-2020s) / Zara Ferreira, Ana Tostões	1609	Modernism and Heritage in Latin America and Africa: Challenges of Shared and Contested Heritage / Nwola Oluwakemi Uduku
	F. BREAKING UNITS: DIVERSITIES OF MODERNITY	1616	"No Holds Barred;" Behind Modernist Hotels in Nigeria and Brazil / Warebi Gabriel Brisibe
1456	36. OUT OF THE CENTER: MEMORY AND ROLES OF OTHER MODERN HERITAGES Chairs: María del Pilar Sánchez-Beltrán, María Macarena Cortés Durrigrande	1624	Modernism and Heritage in Latin America and Africa: The Case of Sustainability Policies at UNAM's School of Architecture in Ciudad Universitaria, Mexico City / Ernesto Valero Thomas
1456	Out of the Center: Memory and Roles of Other Modern Heritages / Macarena Cortés, María del Pilar Sánchez-Beltrán	1630	Whose Memories, Whose Heritage? Reflecting on the Spatial History of the Americas / Fernando Luiz Lara
1464	Multi-storey Buildings in Lima (1939 – 1970): A Peruvian Genealogy of a Modern Type / Javier Atoche Intili	1637	Modern Architecture and Ornament? / Ikem Stanley Okoye
1471	Memory, Legacy and Identity: Modern Heritage in Angola and Mozambique / Ana Magalhães	1643	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
1478	The Ethics of Preservation or Repurposing of Yugoslav WWII Monuments / Tatjana Aleksić	1644	ORGANIZATION
1484	"Un pueblo sin memoria, es un pueblo sin futuro:" Memories of Modernism and Violence at the National Stadium of Chile / Valentina Rozas-Krause	1644	SUPPORTERS
1491	The recourse to the authenticity in the modern architecture of Mobutu's Zaire / Manlio Michieletto	1646	INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WORKSHOP
1499	37. INTERSECTIONS OF ETHNICITY, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND MODERN ARCHITECTURE Chairs: Ivo Gíroto, Maarten Goossens	1647	DOCOMOMO INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERS & INSTITUTIONAL MEMBERS
1499	Intersections of Ethnicity, National Identity, and Modern Architecture: A View from Latin America / Ivo Gíroto, Maarten Goossens		
1506	Lúcio Costa on Alejandrinho: Race and the Building of the National Architecture / Jaime Solares Carmona		
1512	Modern White: The Intersection of Racial Identity and Pentelic Marble Architectures in Twentieth-Century Athens / Angelos Chiotis		
1520	A Network from the Middle of the World: Modern Architecture and Cultural Hybridization in Quito / Ingrid Quintana-Guerrero, Chiara Lucia Stornaiolo Jácome		

monumentality also aimed to express a country without colonialist or imperialist residues but, in any case, and in its own way, European. The Seville Pavilion was also a singular appropriation of postmodernism: a patchwork of ideas, high-tech architecture made with poor materials, apparently improvised steel structures, and a chaotic decorative use of the traditional blue-tiles.

The Seville Pavilion expressed the idea of a modern country, soon after Portugal joined the CEE/EU (1986). A very revealing photograph shows us the by then prime-minister Cavaco Silva rejoicing at the model display of the structure while the Spain prime-minister Filipe Gonzales looks at it very attentively.

6. CONCLUSION

Portuguese postmodernism was closer to the temporal ambivalence and fictional sensibility presented by Heinrich Klotz in *The History of Postmodern Architecture* than the taxonomic surveys portrayed by Charles Jencks. As Klotz wrote in its attempt to define postmodernism, "not only function but fiction as well", or what he called the "fictionalization of architecture." This precept permeates his reading of the movement, and it's a crucial key to understand the Portuguese experience.

All the cases described or mentioned in this paper aimed to cross architecture with other artistic expressions, in an almost delirious state. They had a sense of urgency, an almost violent desire to intervene in the public and/or in the intimate arena. Frequently they are, at the same time, playful and sinister, festive and somber.

The body of architecture was subjected to mutilations, dissonances, reconstitutions, fragmentations. As a consequence, the human body was put to a test and architecture became a trial, an ultimate experience. Architecture dressed up for the night: with pediments, porticoes, arches, round openings, columns, flags, friezes, rainbow colors, accidental geometries, constructivist dilacerations, free-style traditionalisms.

The anxiety but also the playfulness of that era is expressed in the photograph of António Variações with "scissor eyes", and in the drawing of the "concrete gums" of Graça Dias, preparing to bite. The 1980s in Portugal were the stage of countless mundane, populist and turbulent buildings and designs, almost authoritarian in their will to communicate. Democracy was finally at work. ■

5. Heinrich Klotz, *The history of Postmodern Architecture*, 5.

BIOGRAPHY

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IRONY AND EXPERIMENTATION IN JARETTI AND LUZI'S ARCHITECTURE (1960-1974)

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ABSTRACT

Sergio Jaretti (1928-2017) and Elio Luzi (1927-2006) were active in Turin, Italy, from the mid-1950s onwards. Their work, both praised and criticised over time, is today at the centre of a process of investigation and critical re-evaluation, which is leading to the recognition of its density of themes and meanings.

In one of their first buildings, the Obelisk palace (1954-59), the two architects express, in a provocative, ironic and surreal manner, a radically critical position concerning the orthodoxy of the modern movement. After having underlined their position, Jaretti and Luzi pursued their research between the 1960s and 1974 (when their professional paths parted), with an approach at times appearing uniquely analogous to certain northern European works. This paper, availing itself of archival and bibliographic research and of the direct analysis of the buildings, focuses on this phase of the architects' production, including outstanding works such as the via Curtatone house (1962-65), the Pitagora towers (1962-68) and the Mirafiori tower (1970-74). We aim to underline the experimental features of such works, which emerge both in discontinuity and continuity with some of the themes of the modern movement. Indeed, on the one hand, one can notice the adoption of a renewed *plan libre*, which leverages the enjoyability of living spaces, even in the relationship with the outside environment; and on the other hand, one can identify an expressive use of materials, which rejects any mythologization of technological innovation.

1. THE BEGINNINGS

"I am not a rationalist, but I am a functionalist": this statement by Luzi is emblematic of an attitude free of ideological or formalistic superstructures that accompanied the entire oeuvre of the architects from Turin Sergio Jaretti Sodano (1928-2017) and Elio Luzi (1927-2006). The careers of the two architects unfolded almost entirely in north-west Italy: after graduating with Carlo Mollino from the Faculty of Architecture at the Politecnico di Torino and some very early work carried out separately, in the mid-1950s Jaretti and Luzi formalised a partnership that would last until 1974, when their paths separated. Their work together was almost entirely dedicated to the theme of the residence and produced only a few, mostly unsystematic written reflections.

The work that ensured their immediate recognition at a local level and some resonance (and controversy) at a national level¹ was the Obelisk palace (1954-59)² in Turin. The building featured a tight articulation of interior spaces, flats organised on several levels or with double-height ceilings, and no repetitive floor plan. Staircases, mezzanines and perspectives from interior balconies, through to the rooftop "belvedere", multiply the viewpoints and the possibilities of enjoying the space, reinterpreting some recurring elements of the villa typology. These distributive features, however, took a back seat in the general perception of things compared to the completely unorthodox appearance of the building. An envelope "continuous and flexible like human skin"³, made of artificial stone elements, characterises the building, evoking forms of Catalan modernism and aspects of Wright's research. It was a real virtuosic tour de force for both designers and construction companies. The architects openly stated their intention to move away from what was perceived as a stale and academic late-rationalism, with a touch of irony and a certain surrealism. They weren't alone: in 1957, the publication of the Bottega d'Erasmus and other works by Gabetti and Isola and Giorgio Raineri in *Casabella-Continuità*⁴ gave rise to controversy over the "Italian retreat" from the modern movement⁵ and introduced the term "neoliberty" (greeted with some annoyance by those involved) into the debate⁶.

Considered in the context of Jaretti and Luzi's professional and cultural journey as a whole, the initial venture of the Obelisk palace seemed to be a demonstrative element, both for the architects and for the construction company (Manolino) with its craftsmen. The architects continued their unconventional research with relatively simpler solutions in other buildings during the 1950s (the Manolino house in Chieri, 1955-56; the house in via Pietro Cossa, 1956-57; the house in piazza Statuto, 1958-59⁷).

2. HOUSES, "STIMULATING DOMESTIC LANDINGS"⁸

In the 1960s, during the intense building activity that accompanied the Italian economic boom, the two architects continued their research into residential themes. It can be difficult, considering formal aspects alone, to establish links between the works of the first period and those of the decade that

1. Paolo Portoghesi "Dal neorealismo al neoliberalismo." *Comunità*, no. 65 (December 1958): 79.

2. Maria Luisa Barello and Davide Rolfo. *Il palazzo dell'Obelisco di Jaretti e Luzi. Progetto e costruzione*. Roma: Gangemi, 2018.

3. Elio Luzi "L'architetto." In *Le Case Manolino*, edited by Luca Barello, Andrea Luzi, 31. Buttigliera d'Asti: Il Tipografo, 1996.

4. *Casabella-Continuità*, no. 215 (April 1957).

5. Reyner Banham "Neoliberty. The Italian retreat from modern architecture." *Architectural Review*, no. 747 (April 1959): 232-235.

6. Eugenio Gentili, Ernesto N. Rogers "Ortodossia dell'eterodossia." *Casabella-Continuità*, no. 216 (September-October 1957): 2-4; Gabetti R., Isola A., Rogers E.N. "Risposte ai giovani." *Casabella-Continuità*, no. 217 (November-December 1957): 2 and 69. For a comprehensive reconstruction of the events, see D'Amato C. "La «ritirata italiana» dal Movimento Moderno. Memoria, storia e questioni di stile nell'esperienza del neoliberalismo," and Cellini F. "La polemica sul neoliberalismo." *Contrappunto*, no. 4-5 (October-November 1977): 50-51 and 52 respectively.

7. Davide Rolfo "Il fascino discreto della borghesia. Costruire su un lotto difficile. Piazza Statuto, Torino." in *Storie di case. Abitare l'Italia del boom*, edited by Filippo De Pieri, Bruno Bonomo, Gaia Caramellino and Federico Zanfi, 397-415. Roma: Donzelli 2013.

8. Roberto Gabetti "Opera autentica, piccola, piccola." In *Le Case Manolino*, edited by Luca Barello, Andrea Luzi (Buttigliera d'Asti: Il Tipografo, 1996): 12.

9. "Il Piano Regolatore Generale di Torino 1959". *Atti e Rassegna Tecnica della Società degli Ingegneri e degli Architetti in Torino*, no. 3 and 4 (March and April 1960).

10. Marisa Cerruti "Edifici residenziali di Jaretti e Luzi." *L'architettura. Cronache e storia*, no. 154 (August 1968): 300-303.

followed: however, several lines of continuity can be traced in the pursuit of personalisation of living spaces and in the experimental tension focused on the technical and material dimension of design.

At the same time, however, we can see a decisive and highly original progression beyond that, in a direction that seems to find points of contact with certain experiences outside Italy. In addition to the houses in via Saluzzo (1960-62) and corso Orbassano (1961-62), and the "sister" villas that the two architects built for themselves (1963-65), among the works completed during this period, the house in via Curtatone (1962-65) and the Pitagora towers (1962-68) best highlight the most innovative features of this research, which also relies on an ironic and astute interpretation of building and town-planning regulations.

Exploiting the contradictions between the maximum volume allowed by building regulations and the smaller volumes actually permitted by the new Master Plan of Turin (1959)⁹, the two architects organised the project according to what they called a "desirability diagram", emptying the buildings at the base and concentrating the habitable surfaces increasingly on the upper floors, with flats that were progressively sunnier and quieter, as well as more commercially attractive.

Certain themes typical of the Modern, from which the young Jaretti and Luzi seemed to have ostentatiously distanced themselves from the Obelisk palace, reappear in a manner revisited to the point of being almost unrecognisable, in the search for expressiveness and the humanisation of architecture: the pilotis plan, the distinction between structure and non-bearing enclosure, windows *en longueur*, the *plan libre*, the intensive building developed vertically.

Having abandoned the traditional bourgeois atrium of the multi-storey house, the ground floor became a unique pilotis floor, with cylindrical reinforced concrete columns flanked by a multitude of other brick columns, introducing an element of spatial complexity and at the same time functional ambiguity, as their actual reason for existing (they house the ducts for the systems, downpipes, rubbish chutes) was not immediately comprehensible. In the house on via Curtatone¹⁰ this space is articulated, at different heights, around two circular water tanks. Their roundness is reflected in the walls around the staircase and the lift shaft. It is a joyful artificial landscape, rich in stimuli, which welcomes and accompanies the inhabitants, and was conceived in direct relation to the outdoors.

The "tree-like" structure of these buildings, expanding upwards, disintegrated façades, decomposed volumes and allowed for great freedom in the organisation of the plans of the different floors (there is no "standard plan"). In via Curtatone, the flats, which are all different, still seem to reflect the villa typology: inevitably side by side, but separate in their singularity; designed for unknown inhabitants, trying to guess their needs and desires; characterised by windows and large balconies, but generated by a centripetal plan which, seeking an intimate dimension of living, is organised on each floor around the distribution spaces and internal cloisters.

The same themes return with ever greater intensity in the Pitagora towers¹¹; the designers adopted an isolated block type, ensuring ventilation and multiple views. The design envisaged the successive realisation of three tower buildings, linked by a continuous porticoed basement. In the tower at the corner with piazza Pitagora, in particular, the irregularly shaped plot required the design of a multi-faceted volume, ruling out all standardised composition of the façades. The construction system, similar to that of the building in via Curtatone and many other constructions by Jaretti and Luzi in the same years, also took on the role of defining a common language, flexible and adaptable to the different situations of a large building site. The load-bearing structure in reinforced concrete and the brick cavity walls are exposed, as they are in many other buildings of the time. But this current technology is reinterpreted here in an entirely original way: the circular columns adopted on the pilotis floor, slender and therefore paired two by two, produce a sort of fragmentation and intensification of the sightlines, and are connected to the square-section pillars of the upper floors with a DADO system. For the cavity walls, Jaretti and Luzi “invented” a solution that was both economical and capable of alluding to a masonry tradition well rooted in Piedmont, with the adoption, for the outer wall, of solid facing shiner bricks, with the frog (intended in the normal position to house the mortar) shown with a decorative function. In order to keep the roller shutter boxes flush with the interior walls, the thin cavity walls (30 cm) were thickened in correspondence with the openings and projected towards the outside, articulating the design of the elevations by means of subtle and continuous variations. This solution was complex to implement and, having initially been made possible by an artisanal organisation of the building site, was abandoned in the third and last tower, built almost in the Seventies.

Every solution chosen was adopted on the basis of functional reasons and incontrovertible, almost “natural” chains of logic, applying a “method [of design] of ‘fighting collaboration’ [...] which led us by painful but inexorable degrees to discard all solutions that, having only formal arguments on their side, failed to prevail over the enemy collaborator, and to accept, sometimes with repugnance, choices based on ‘objective’ arguments”¹². A similar reasoning would later lead Luzi to highlight the need to dispose of every preconceived idea on both the “construction elements” and the “spaces” they delimit, abandoning the terms generally used to define them. In order to convey the idea, he stated: “not ‘windows’ but holes to catch the light, so never a ‘window’ (a done and standard idea) but something different in each specific case”; and “cancel labels such ‘balcony’, ‘living room’ [...] and reinvent ‘space for being outdoors in the dwelling not at ground level’, ‘a place to see friends, or carry out activities in the home during free time, etc.’”¹³. Tracing human functions and activities has no “purifying” connotation here, on a formal level, but rather that of responding appropriately to the implicit demands of the inhabitants. In these ways, however, the two architects developed a figurative language that was to become their distinctive stylistic signature.

11. Jaretti Sodano S., Elio Luzi “Le torri Pitagora a Torino.” *L’architettura. Cronache e storia*, no. 131 (September 1966): 286-291; Jaretti Sodano S., Luzi E. “Turmhäuser in Turin.” *Baummeister*, no. 5 (May 1967): 576-578.

12. Sergio Jaretti Sodano, Elio Luzi “Le torri Pitagora a Torino.” *cit.*: 287.

13. C. Torta, C.S. Zorzan Jaretti & E. Luzi *testimoni ed artefici dell’architettura piemontese del dopoguerra*, degree thesis, Politecnico di Torino, Faculty of Architecture, a.y. 1981-82, supervisor C. Ronchetta, co-supervisor M. Parenti.



Figure 1. Jaretti and Luzi, the via Curtatone house, Turin, Italy (1962-65) (on the left, photo by Lucio Beltrami; on the right, photo by S. Cavallo, in Jaretti Archive, Politecnico di Torino).

Figure 2. Jaretti and Luzi, the Pitagora towers, Turin, Italy (1962-68). A drawing of the two first towers (Jaretti Archive, Politecnico di Torino).

Fig. 3. Jaretti and Luzi, The Mirafiori tower, Turin, Italy (1970-74). A detail of the façade.

14. Sergio Jaretti “Technicolor per la città senza qualità.” *Modo*, no. 39 (May 1981): 38-41.

15. Gustavo Ambrosini and Giovanni Durbanio “Architetture di Jaretti e Luzi, 1955-74, 1975-95.” *Edilizia popolare*, no. 242 (November-December 1995): 34-64.

3. “TECHNICOLOUR FOR THE CITY WITHOUT QUALITY”¹⁴

In a later phase, between the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s, Jaretti and Luzi’s confrontation with the demands of student protest and their reflection “on the limits of a professional activity that is increasingly perceived [...] as a place of mediation of decision-making processes implemented outside and above the field of expertise”¹⁵, led the two architects to explore new approaches, as in the residence in via Ormea (1967-70), the residential and commercial building in via Breglio (1969-71), the residential complex in strada del Drosso (1970-74) or the Mirafiori tower (1970-74), the last of which was to be completed jointly. Despite a growing mistrust in the

architect's possibility to influence the city's growth processes, Jaretti and Luzi did not renounce the use of alternative and, to some extent defensive, strategies in the face of the rigidity of urban planning constraints and the decline in the level of skill possessed by the workforce.

The ironic attitude towards any ideological or bureaucratic superstructure seemed to transcend into, at times, bitter sarcasm: experimentation with the use of colour and "catalogue" materials took the place of elaboration "based on design". In the architecture built during these years, the distinction between the supporting elements and volumes supported becomes more and more evident, bringing to the fore a structural grid with a rigid orthogonality.

In the Mirafiori tower, in particular, the cylindrical pillars now almost adhere to the outer walls, highlighted by the chromatic contrast between the black-painted concrete and the concrete block façade walls originally conceived to shimmer in natural light. Unrestrained use of colour also characterises the balcony parapets, the shutters and, as a further pop element, the cylindrical coloured fibreglass cabinets highlighted on the balconies. The dense composition, set on a predefined floor plan, culminates in a paradoxical rooftop pool covered by a parabolic vault.

That of Jaretti and Luzi is a mocking approach that does not represent a formal rejection of the themes of Modernism (as upheld by most post-Modernist interpretation), but a last ditch attempt to humanise a context, both in terms of design and regulation, in which the degrees of freedom of the individual – designer and inhabitant – are increasingly reduced.

4. LOOKING AROUND

Jaretti and Luzi were never interested in a structured theoretical elaboration, which they always regarded with suspicion. Part of their own expressive research seems, instead, to be based on the careful and critical analysis of the day-to-day reality of the profession and of regulatory constraints, on the observation of changes in building production and construction sites.

They did not work within the academy, but for a brief, late exception in the case of Luzi, and their works were only partially published. This unabashed "splendid isolation" which, in retrospect, they proudly claimed¹⁶, did nothing to facilitate the consideration of their works by critics.

The two Turinese architects have always moved with great freedom between the dogmas and anti-dogmas of modern architecture; their re-elaboration of some typical elements of Modernism poetics does not derive from a preconceived distancing, but from a profound critical and liberal spirit, and from an attitude that always places man's "pursuit of happiness" at the centre.

Some aspects of their work present similarities with the coeval research of architects such as Aldo van Eyck and, above all, Herman Hertzberger. There are no documented exchanges between Jaretti and Luzi and the Dutch group, whose architectures began to be published in Italy, apart from a few exceptions¹⁷, in the second half of the 1960s, and no evidence that

16. Sergio Jaretti "Figli di un dio minore nell'architettura del Novecento a Torino." In *Quaderno del Pensatoio*, no. 22 (February 1988).

17. Jan van Goethem "Casa dei ragazzi ad Amsterdam." *L'architettura*.

18. Nicolaas John Habraken *Supports. An Alternative to Mass Housing*. London: The Architectural Press, 1972; first edition in Dutch: *De dragers en de mensen. Het einde van de massawoningbouw*. Amsterdam: Scheltema & Holkema, 1961). *Cronache e storia*, no. 72 (October 1961): 386-402.

19. Sergio Jaretti, Elisabetta Calderini and Gianluca Cosmacini. *Quaderni del Pensatoio*, no. 1 (March 1983). *Partecipazione, qualità, persona*.

the two Turin architects knew Habraken's seminal book¹⁸, published in Italian only in 1974. However, it seems interesting to highlight a certain "evolutionary convergence" going beyond the Modern Movement, which was more methodical and "scientific" in the Dutch case, and more intuitive in the Italian. Besides the similarity of certain constructive and formal solutions (DADO-column system, exposed brickwork or concrete blocks), an expressive use of materials that rejects all mythologization of technological innovation and the idea of technical progress as a value in itself, as well as certain predilections in the organisation of space, it is the humanistic approach and faith in the possibilities of architecture to interpret changes in society and improve human life that seems to unite the work of Jaretti and Luzi and the Dutch architects.

Some research documents, following the separation of the two architects, still show the interest (at least of Jaretti) in an open design approach, with reference to the experiences – as well of Habraken – of Alexander, Erskine and Kroll¹⁹.

The research conducted so far does not permit us, at least for the moment, to draw certain conclusions, but it opens up the complex question of placing Jaretti and Luzi's work in not only an Italian but a European scenario. At the same time, the research contributes to highlighting the complexity of the evolution of Modern themes, through non-obvious paths. ■

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