

The Archives of a Professional: Maria Luisa Spineto, Civil Engineer and
'Thorough Designer'

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Collected by Ana María Fernández García, Helena Seražin, Caterina Franchini and Emilia Garda

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The Archives of a Professional: Maria Luisa Spineto, Civil Engineer and 'Thorough Designer'

Roberta Spallone

A female civil engineer between atelier and building site

In Italy in the 1950s, civil engineering was practiced almost entirely by men.

Certainly is a singular case the professional affirmation of a woman who lived and worked in a hilly town with fewer than 5000 inhabitants, Arquata Scrivia in the province of Alessandria, on the slopes of the Ligurian Apennines and along the road link between Alessandria and Genova.

Personal skills and reputation, familial and individual, surely contributed to the establishment of a mainly private, strong and loyal clientele, but also to the recognition of authority and competence that allowed her to lead the building-site, direct the workers, and interact with the contractors and the craftsmen that created technological elements, decorative details and complementary furnishings, on her drawings.

Maria Luisa Spineto was born in Arquata Scrivia in 1926 and prematurely died in 1989.

Following classic studies at the Liceo Classico in Novi Ligure ended in 1944, she graduated in 1950 from the University of Genova in Civil Building Engineering. In a course of forty-one students, only three were women. Among these three women, she would be the only one to practice the profession.

The training course included a biennial in Engineering, common to the various subsequent specializations and continued, in her case, with the three-year

Civil Engineering course, in the Building subsection.

During the three last years the disciplines related to the project - Building Science, Building Technology, Architectural Composition, Building Physics - and those aimed at professional practice - Real Estate Evaluation, Legal Subjects - composed the *corpus* of the Civil Engineer's knowledge in the Post-War period. This program according to the study regulations and Italian laws allowed practicing the profession of Civil Engineer and signing projects in the field of the structure calculation such as architectural project.

Two final dissertations were submitted by Spineto; they concern the report to the structural project of a school building in Arquata Scrivia, and the evaluation for the division of a farm.

A short curriculum, dated 18 November 1966, along with other archive sources, allows reconstructing the first steps of her professional activity.

During the first years after graduating she worked for the engineering firm of Adriano Bagnasco in Genova.

Among the works by Bagnasco, already President of the Order of Engineers and Professor of Building Technology at the University of Genova, it could remember that designed with the architect Luigi Carlo Daneri: the complex of high houses in Genova-Foce (1934-1958), realized answering the announcement of an architectural competition for the setting of the new Piazza della Foce.

One of her first independent works was the competition entry for the reconstruction of Margherita Theater in Via XX Settembre in Genova (1955). It is one of the few documented works that includes sketches and colour perspectives and demonstrates a particular quality of tracing and a fitting use of drawing for spatial conception. It was a building for theatrical performances of revue and opera. Among the competitors, engineer Spineto, who was only 29, was the only woman.

The failure of the competition, motivated by the Selection Board with the incompleteness of her proposal, that was in any case considered deserving of the cost contribution, probably contribute to induce her to resort to engagements with private or construction firms' commitments.

In the Archive there is an article published in the *Corriere mercantile* of Genova in May 1955, titled 'Engineers and architects wearing the skirt that work in studios and construction sites'¹. It contains some interviews with young professionals, including that with Maria Luisa Spineto. In the text emerges that the other interviewees have stopped working when they have had a child, or have devoted themselves to teaching, or were employees. The chronicler asks to Spineto whether, when she will marry, she will give up her professional career and if technical and scientific skills have some utility in domestic activities. No questions about a woman's position in an engineering firm or on her role in the building site; the interviewer merely points out that she is dealing mainly with residential buildings and not with road infrastructures. 'Drive securely everywhere', she sarcastically concludes.

¹ "Ingegneri e architetti in gonnella al lavoro negli studi e nei cantieri", *Corriere mercantile*, 29 May 1957.

Maria Luisa Spineto, who did not marry, drove the car and had an intense social life, as evidenced by the pictures of dinners and snow holidays with her circle of friends, left the Bagnasco firm in 1957.

In the following years, she collaborated with the same firm until the death of the holder in 1964, and at the same time she carried out her work as an independent professional, dealing with architectural project and works direction.

In 1956 she was a member of the Register of Experts of the Order of Engineers of Genova: in the categories of Civilian Buildings and Reinforced Concrete Structures, Topography and Real Estate Evaluation there were 3 women out of 268 members, in the category Ordinary Roads, women were reduced to 2.

In the Engineer's Register of Genova of 1964 that included about 1600 members, she was one of the 11 women, and the others mostly were teachers or employees.

Among the public assignments there was the participation in the Building Commission of the Municipality of Arquata Scrivia, on appointment of 12 May 1963.

In the curriculum dating 1966, she remembered, among the independent assignments, the project and the direction of the works of: eight apartment buildings ranging between 20000 and 30000 mc in Arquata Scrivia and Novi Ligure; some smaller condominiums and villas close to the city and in Marina di Bibbona; some buildings for a farm. Among the most demanding and prestigious assignments is the static testing of the Genova Sampierdarena skyscraper, identifiable in the so-called 'hospital's skyscraper', in Via Giovanni Battista Botteri 3, a 18-storey and 70-meter high building, built in 1957 by the construction company Vicari.

Her atelier was in a wing of the family home in Arquata Scrivia, where she also had an apartment.

In 1957, she joined the A.I.D.I.A., holder of the card no. 59.

Since 1979 she was a member of the Soroptimist of Alessandria, of which she also had the role of Secretary.

She was a versatile designer: in 1987, together with a friend, she drew and patented an industrial model of articulated eye-glasses.

Subsequent assignments, contracted by private clients and construction companies, mainly involved residential projects, condominiums, villas, and funerary architectures; although work for schools, cinemas, farms and industries was also done.

The scope of these projects extended from her hometown, to Novi Ligure, Genova, and Livorno.

From the early years of independent work, Spineto combined the architectural design to the calculation of structures; the latter task in some cases engaged her exclusively as a structural designer.

Carrying out the calculation of the reinforced concrete through the slide rule, she applied the principle of the use of the maximum of steel and used a particular strictness in the building site during the checking of the concrete's composition and the laying of the steel armor.

The end of the 1960s, in full economic boom, was the time of several realizations in which Spineto reconciled the architectural and structural project, to the design of technological elements (windows, roofs,...), finishes (coatings, railings,...), and furnishing details (lamps, handles,...).

The Engineer's Register of the Province of Alessandria in 1971 is a further testimony to how rare professional women were: among 267 members, only 4 are women. The other three, beyond Spineto, were younger than her and their father was an engineer.

In the early 1970s she abandoned the structural calculation, as documented a letter dated 11 September 1974 to Domenico Debenedetti, who had commissioned the family tomb: 'The calculations and the direction of the reinforced concrete works must be entrusted to another professional since I have for years ceased to be interested in this activity. On the other hand, I will be happy to follow and direct the architectural work if you like it'.

Over her last few decades, she worked on shop outfitting and interior furnishings. The clients' names recur, thus demonstrating their satisfaction and loyalty.

It is a sector of professional activity that she had been practicing since the beginning, as in the furniture of Casa Bellini in Arquata Scrivia, of which she was also author of the architectural project, dating back to 1958.

This was one of the first cases in which Spineto dealt with a 'thorough design', ranging from architectural composition, structural calculation, design of technological details, and furnishings.

Many years later, in November 1981, the interiors of Casa Bellini were published in the magazine *Modo*, in a monographic article by Nives Ciardi entitled 'Camere d'abitazione' ('Housing Rooms'). The author of the article puts readers the question of which is the key to poetically living. In the following, comparing the concept of dwelling in Heidegger's and Hölderlin's thoughts, she conducts an ideal visit inside the home, described as a 'memory house', and retraces the events remembered by the stratification of the family objects.

The interior furnishings in the Spineto's drawings - great color perspectives, traced with remarkable

accuracy - are still recognizable in the published photographs².

In the same field, she received other significant awards, such as the second prize awarded ex-aequo in 1989 by the Chamber of Commerce of Genova under the Competition 'Antico è bello' (Antiques are beautiful) for the restructuring and enhancement of the environment of the historic center, through the renovation and the furnishing of a clothing store in Genova.

Forty years of intense work are described by the copious iconographic and textual materials collected in her Archives and preserved by her family. An analytical report is currently under review, but it can be anticipated that it should include about two hundred projects.

Among archival documents: selection of some emblematic projects

The documents found in the private Archives of Maria Luisa Spineto, generally in good condition, consist of iconographic materials: drawings, mostly China-inked on tracing paper, blueprint copies, in a few cases coloured by pastel or watercolour, bills of armor, photographs ..., and textual materials: letters, notes, technical reports...

As in most professional Archives, the preserved drawings relate to the final and executive phase of the project³. The

² Nives Ciardi, "Camere d'abitazione", *Modo* 5, 44 (1981), 23-27.

³ On the characteristics of archival drawings of professionals in the twentieth century see:

Piero Albinetti, Laura De Carlo (Eds.), *Architettura disegno modello. Verso un archivio digitale dell'opera di maestri del XX secolo* (Roma: Gangemi, 2011).

Fulvio Irace, Graziella Leyla Ciagà, G. L. (Eds.), *Design & Cultural Heritage. Archivio Animato / Animated Archive* (Milano: Electa, 2013).

ideation drawings, the physic models, the photographs that the designer used checking alternative solutions and studying the building in the context in which it was to arise, were generally eliminated. In fact, in the Spineto's Archives there are very few works in which the technical strictness gives space to the expressive representation.

As we have seen, the residential architecture, consisting of the high condominiums of the Sixties, and the single-family villas, is one of the recurring typologies of Spineto's work.

The Condominio Libarna, in Viale IV Novembre 7 in Arquata Scrivia, is an H-shaped eight-storey building, plus a mansard. Set on a trapezoidal lot, the oblique side is solved with a stepped façade in correspondence to the interior spaces. The plot owner was the Marquis Rodolfo Saporiti. Spineto was concerned with architectural and structural design.

The first design drawings date back to 1967; the building was completed in 1972. The first technical drawing in the presentation dossier, as usual in the materials she produced, is a three-dimensional view, in this case a two-points perspective, traced in China ink.

The ground level, presumably originally intended for offices, is covered by ashlar-worked stone, to create a

Carlo Mezzetti (Ed.), *Il Disegno dell'architettura italiana nel XX secolo* (Roma: Edizioni Kappa, 2003).

Roberta Spallone, Francesca Paluan, "Contemporary design drawings as cultural heritage: interpretation and communication. Towards a digital archive of Rosani's industrial projects", in Carmine Gambardella (Ed), *Heritage and Technology. Mind Knowledge Experience* (Napoli: La scuola di Pitagora, 2015), 283-292.

Roberta Spallone, Francesca Paluan, "Digital Archives for Preserving and Communicating Architectural Drawings", in Mehdi Khosrow-Pour (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Fourth Edition* (Hershey: IGI Global, 2017), 5213-5225.

diversified design that distinguishes the pilasters and architraves. The other levels are covered with gres tiles, as in the fashion of those years, while the top one, in which the mansard windows open, is plastered.

The main façade, on the Piazza dei Caduti, is articulated by the deep recess of the central body which has a different façade layout than the two symmetrical wings.

In the middle of this façade one of the two atriums opens, the other faces the side street. The interest in such halls, which 'will be particularly attentive to the choice of materials and finishes', as the Technical Report states, is highlighted by the drafting of a central perspective that previews its spatiality and denotes the particular attention of the designer for choosing and matching materials and for designing the lamps.

The atrium is set on a strict symmetry and has a red granite floor, while the side walls are partly opaque and covered with pink marble slabs, partly semi-transparent and equipped with the access doors to the vertical distribution systems. The background wall is covered in the middle by large ceramic tiles from Albisola with motifs in relief; in the sides by wooden panels with vertical slats. On the side walls there are iron and glass appliqué, artisanally crafted on a design.

Also the Villa of Doctor Ballestrero, located in Via Martiri della Benedicta in Arquata Scrivia, and built between 1968 and 1971, sees Spineto's commitment as a architectural designer, director of works and designer of wrought-iron works, windows, fireplaces, stairs, and fixed furnishings.

The building, a large two-storey with mansard house, which each floor measures approximately 250 square meters, houses on the ground floor some

medical studios, including that of the owner.

The façades have a strictly symmetrical scheme, while the interiors freely respond to the different functions. Above a basement covered by stone from Luserna, the façades are plastered. Luserna stone also emphasizes the central bodies, protruded on the ground floor, and frames the windows. The roof is slate-covered and supported by Douglas's wooden corbels among which stand out the coffers, designed to fit. Wrought iron fences and parapets are also crafts on design.

In the interiors the same accuracy appears in the selection and matching of materials, and in the design of furniture. As detailed in the technical report, the large living room on the ground floor has a terracotta tiled floor with decorations, while the walls alternate the white plaster, the stone and brick fireplace, the English-style Douglas wooden doors, and the libraries in the same wood. Few materials, carefully chosen and combined, give the house the image of a sophisticated country residence.

The project of funerary chapels is another of Spineto's recurring assignments.

The Cemetery of Arquata Scrivia houses at least five, for which the engineer dealt with the architectural composition, up to the design of the customized lining.

Among these tombs, the Tomba Lasagna, committed by Angelo Lasagna and built in 1969, is distinguished by the rupture of the symmetrical scheme of façade present in the other (De Paoli, Spineto, Debenedetti-Ottonelli, etc.).

The design phase was rather long: among the dated drawings, the first one was signed in December 1967; the final drawings were drawn up in May 1969.

Over ten different solutions, developed through large-scale technical drawings, testify to the various configurations assumed during the design process that shows, in its evolution, the increase in the available plan surface, while the height remained constant.

Following is an ideal reconstruction of the sequence.

The 1967 drawings start from a rectangular plan of 2.80x2.50 m, and the main façade is on the long side.

Three hypotheses propose a volume with a symmetrical façade covered by a pitched roof. Two of these have a tripartite façade, with a wider central part; the first one presents a classical style solution, with thin Doric columns and arches, the other one is composed by a trilithon made up by pilasters and architrave, and has two statues flanking the entrance. In the third hypothesis, the tripartition of the façade through the pillars disappears: it is the glazed surface that is divided in the two fixed lateral parts and in the openable central part, while the architrave is lowered to contain the sculptural apparatus that looks like a pediment decoration.

Five other hypotheses have a flat roof and different schemes of façade maintaining the symmetry. The first one takes the idea of putting a large transparent surface between the two side walls and placing the sculptures above the architrave. The other four hypotheses resort again to the tripartition of the façade: the first one, through corinthian pilasters and a moulded architrave; the second one, placing the tombstones at the sides of the entrance; the third one, using the relationship between opacity and transparency where the two walls at the side of the glass entrance become the background of two statues; the last one, putting the statues on corbels and having a moulded architrave.

A further hypothesis breaks down the symmetry: on the right, an oblique wall lets space to a statue, on the left, the glass is connected to the side wall. Asymmetric steps emphasize the new compositional choice.

Another drawing dated 29 April 1968, documents the expansion in length of the plan: it measures 2.80x3.10 m and the façade is now on the short side.

The search for symmetry seems to have been abandoned and the project approaches what will be the ultimate solution through the splitting of the façade plans.

The part of the façade on the left of the glazed to full-height entrance is opaque, that on the right is transparent and is separated by a pilaster that creates a kind of niche for the statue. The architrave with listels is a modern version of a moulded architrave.

All the hypotheses above described were drafted up to the executive level to testify, probably, an active role of the client in the final choice. A letter sent to Angelo Lasagna by the firm that carved the statue underlines this role: it stated that the face of the Virgin Mary is not Nineteenth-century, but modern, as requested by the clients.

The final project is a clear evolution of the previous one, as the drawings dated 29th May 1969 evidence.

It has a particular movement of planes and a succession of full and empty, which constitute the box-volume of the artefact. The vertical walls stay on a two-step podium and completely close the two sides, but terminate on the façade in two different planes. The left wall protrudes in respect to the right and an orthogonal wall inserts in it forming the background of the statue of the Virgin. The right wall ends before and has a small flap in which a thin glass, delimited on the opposite side by a pilaster aligned to the left wall, is inserted.

In the center there is the entrance of the tomb, made by a hardened crystal glass wall.

At the back, above an altar, a large window opens up to the ceiling, contributing to the inside natural lightening. The flat roof features a refined three-listels motive that inserts into the walls with an offset of planes. The top part of the roof also has listels. The pavement, the opaque walls, and the vertical surface of the roof are covered by slabs of a grey stone called 'Serizzo' placed with vertical joints that give a plain colour to the outside. The statue of the Virgin, placed on a pedestal of the same material, stands out in the dark background thanks to the whiteness of Carrara marble in which it is carved. The internal walls are also coated in square slabs of Carrara marble with alternate joints. The contrast between the white interior and the dark gray outside emerges. The ceiling, which goes beyond the façade, is covered by a mosaic of blue tiles, as if to evoke the night sky. Such ceiling coating is used in other works, such as the Spineto's tomb in the same Cemetery.

Among the shops, the Boutique Maria Luisa managed by Mrs. Maria Luisa Scalabrino Cottone, in Via Girardengo in Novi Ligure, was designed in 1973. The shop was much admired so that the owner bragged that it was made by a French architect!

The set-up was removed in the past years, but the accurate drawings remain.

Spineto, for the barrel vaulted interiors, drew boiseries, doors and wrought-iron frames to which pulls together furnishings, mirrors and lamps.

Likewise, the drawings for the showcase and mainly those for the entrance door are subject to numerous studies and variants. Indeed the entrance door in the intentions is behind the façade

plan and has oblique sides that accentuate the prospective effect.

Wrought iron columns with stylized architectural orders, boiseries, English-framed glass doors, characterize the different solutions.

Conclusion

What value can assume the discovery of the Spineto's Archives and what can we learn from a case study like this? What generalizations can we aspire to?

I started this research encouraged by Caterina Franchini who, in one of our first meetings, told me that were very few female civil engineers operating in the second half of the twentieth century in Italy of which they had been known and studied the activities and the works.

Probably there are several other female civil engineers, not many, given the data of the professional Registers of those years, which may be interesting to investigate the stories. These stories can help us to understand their role in the studies, in the firms, in the building site; their way of working, autonomous or in group, their relationships with other professionals, and to highlight their real contribution to the territorial and urban transformation.

As a scholar of the history of design drawings, in my opinion the documents found represent a case embodied by a woman, in which the drawings and the archival materials testify to the role of 'thorough designer' assumed by Spineto.

Indeed, in a period when the specialization of knowledge tends not only to differentiate between the roles of the architect and the engineer, but also to influence the relationships between professionals devoted to architectural composition, structural calculation,

project of technical equipment, she dealt with distribution and functional design, structural calculation, and the large scale design of finishing and decorative elements to be artisanally crafted.

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