

Women Contribution through the Pages of “Domus” (1946-1968): Architecture and Urban Planning in the Italian Panorama

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Proceedings of the 2nd MoMoWo International Conference- Workshop

Research Centre of Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, France Stele
Institute of Art History, 3–5 October 2016, Ljubljana

**Proceedings of the 2nd MoMoWo International Conference-Workshop
Research Centre of Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, France Stele Institute
of Art History, 3–5 October 2016, Ljubljana**

Collected by Helena Seražin, Caterina Franchini and Emilia Garda

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I EDUCATION AND PUBLISHING

Architecture and Urban Planning in the Italian Panorama

Emilia Garda, Chiara Serra and Annalisa Stella

This paper investigates the female declination of architecture during the reconstruction years in Italy, using «Domus» magazine as a privileged tool and point of view. The study offers the results of a first systematic and critical survey on the presence of women professionals in «Domus», between January 1946 (n. 205) and December 1968 (n. 469). By observing the pages of 276 magazine issues - published on a monthly and bi-monthly basis by the Editoriale Domus (Milan) - this paper specifically focuses on articles dealing with architecture and urban planning. The research aims to reconstruct a historical frame and to map the contribution of women architects in the Italian architectural panorama. The objective is to critically analyse works and projects in order to show who the women are and how they had taken part in the Italian architectural debate during these two decades, highlighting their theoretical contributions as well as the technical aspects in terms of innovation and creativity.

To critically understand and frame professionals women's contribution in the field of constructions we intersected the specific investigation through the pages of «Domus» with a wider overlook on the Italian architecture of the second half of the XX century, in order to contextualise women's work within this very particular historical period. After a general introduction, the paper presents a comparative study among selected projects that were classified into specific categories of intervention. In fact, the

survey aims to put the attention on the architectural works through their features and characteristics, in order to show the female designers' specific approach to architectural research. The final outcome is a rich collection of projects and women architects that contributed to the Italian debate and animated the reconstruction period, giving their creative and personal solutions. The number of projects signed by female professionals published on the magazine issues is remarkable. By presenting some representative case studies, this paper finally aims to offer visibility to less known - and often forgotten - architectural projects as well as to their authors.

The Italian panorama: from the reconstruction to the sixties

From 1946 to the end of the decade, due to the critical situation left by the devastation of the Second World War, a huge mobilisation for city reconstruction - houses, public structures and areas - took part in the whole country. The urgency of reconstruction had also to face the need for new low cost housing to host middle and working class people and in order to provide "a house for everyone"¹. To this purpose in 1949 the INA-Casa programme was launched by the Italian government in order to implement public housing. The

¹ Adalberto Libera, Gio Ponti, Giuseppe Vaccaro, "Per tutti, anzi per ciascuno. Appello di tre architetti per la Carta della Casa", in Giorgio Ciucci and Francesco Dal Co (eds.), *Architettura italiana del Novecento*, (Milano: Electa, 1990)

programme was thought to solve the problem of unemployment through the development of the building sector as a tool to foster the Italian postwar economic recovery.² Architects started to be involved in the project of wide public residential estates, located in the urban peripheral areas. With these large new neighbourhoods a season of great experimentation began, which concerned the urban vision up to the detail scale. Proposals for self-sufficient modern communities were designed which combined the traditional building typologies and techniques with the use of experimental precast concrete elements, giving a specific Italian declination to this wide international phenomena. Even if in some articles of «Domus» several projects for INA-Casa neighbourhoods were presented and shown, through them the contribution of women does not seem to emerge.

Starting from the INA-Casa experimentations, in particular from the beginning of the fifties, it started to be evident that the architectural language was moving from the essential modern aesthetic towards a more organic conception of architecture. From the project for the *Tiburtino* public residential neighbourhood by Ludovico Quaroni and Mario Ridolfi (Rome, 1949-54) to the *Pirovano* Refuge by Franco Albini and Luigi

Colombini (Cervinia, 1949-51) a season known as 'Neorealism' characterised the architectural production. The critical revision of the Modern Movement was supported by several authors, such as Bruno Zevi in his *Verso un'architettura organica* (Towards an organic architecture, 1945). In this vivid debate the role of the most important architectural magazines was crucial in the dissemination of the new ideas. The contribution of «Domus» had been remarkable especially under the direction of Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1946-47), then replaced by Gio Ponti (1948-79). By showing a wide and open range of architectural projects «Domus» succeeded in bringing tangible examples of the cultural and theoretical panorama. By observing the pages of the issues, it can be noticed that in the articles the attention focuses mostly on the architectural works conceived as process/products as well as works of arts/building. One of the main themes emerging from the magazine articles and the published projects, is the crucial role of history and traditional architecture in the ex-novo projects. The most recurring topics of research, especially in private houses, were the relationship between the new building and the surrounding context - urban or landscape -, the way in which the building touched the ground and the reinterpretation of traditional typologies, architectural elements and materials. Among the women, this research is well epitomised by architects like Anna Bertarini Monti who worked together with her husband Gianemilio Monti and his brother Pietro, or Franca Helg with Franco Albini and Luisa Aiani Parisi with her husband Ico Parisi.

The sixties were characterised by a vivid discussion about the relationship between architecture, urban planning and governance, and their specific roles. Some

² On 24 february 1949 the Italian Parliament approved the law proposed by the Minister Amintore Fanfani under the name "Measures to increase workers' employment, facilitating the construction of houses for workers", also known as 'Legge Fanfani'. The INA-Casa programme was launched by the State in order to realise residential public complex on the whole country. It was adopted for two cycles of seven years each, from 1949 to 1956 and from 1957 to 1963. It was founded by the *Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni* (National Institute of Insurance). See Paola Di Biagi, *La grande ricostruzione: il piano Ina-Casa e l'Italia degli anni cinquanta*. (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2001)

of the most influential architects like Aldo Rossi, Carlo Aymonino and Guido Canella supported the position that architecture is an urban phenomena, able to shape the city. The outcome of the architects' commitment to find solutions and strategies for the future development of the cities are visible through some proposals for large plans, such as the competition for the new directional centre in Turin (1962), published in November 1963 in «Domus» n. 408. The first prize was gained by the proposal '*Biancaneve e i sette nani*'. In the winner team the architect Gigetta Tamaro was the only women working with other eight well known architects - Giuseppe Samonà, Nino Dardi, Emilio Mattioni, Valeriano Pastor, Alberto Samonà, Luciano Semerani, Andrea Vianello Vos. Also in the second awarded project, named '*Akropolis 9*', Gabriella Esposito was the only female architect collaborating with Mario Bianco, Roberto Maestro, Sergio Nicola, Ludovico Quaroni, Antonio Quistelli, Nello Renacco, Aldo Rizzotti, Augusto Romano. In these projects the two women architects gave their contribution within the design teams, yet not emerging as distinct personalities within them.

On the other hand, the emphasis on the importance of tradition and identity became stronger and stronger during these years. In fact, the majority of architectural projects, showed in the issues of «Domus» during the sixties, regards renovation, transformation and reuse of historical buildings such as the numerous works by Anna Castelli Ferrieri, Luisa Castiglioni e Rita Mori Bravi. Another recurring typology of intervention concerns ex-novo proposals for suburban villas and holiday houses, where the female contribution by architects like Emma Pasquinelli Peressutti and Anna Bertarini Monti was consistent. Finally there were numerous projects of interior

design, pavilions and temporary structures and some of the most prolific designers dealing with this research were Eugenia Alberti Reggio, Luisa Aiani Parisi and Franca Helg. Working alone or together with their husbands, the contribution of women architects was specifically evident in these projects. In fact, this meant the possibility for women professionals to express their ideas and to manage the whole architectural process, from the drawing up to the construction and the interior design.

The female contribution: observing the pages of Domus

From the first systematic survey on the presence of women professionals in «Domus» issues, between January 1946 and December 1968, a rich collection of projects and women professionals emerges. We analysed 276 issues collecting 197 projects and 39 women, mostly Italian, active in the field of both architecture and design. Although the works by women constitute a minority compared to the whole number of projects described, we noticed that these projects well represent the particular Italian architectural panorama and its role models exported abroad. In fact, to critically analyse and interpret these projects, we chose to divide them into four categories of intervention and research which were more constant and frequent. Intersecting this survey with the more general bibliography about the Italian context we also found that those categories could well epitomise the debate of the two decades analysed. Thus, by putting the focus of attention on the most representative projects in terms of architectural research, quality and value, and looking at their female authors, we could understand in which way women

professionals contributed in spreading ideas, creativity and innovation in the Italian architectural panorama.

The first group of projects deals with a constant research in the dialogue between the building and the surrounding context. This kind of research is particularly evident in ex-novo projects for residential or public buildings outside the urban consolidated fabric. This contact with the landscape and the natural environment lets the architect free to create and experiment. The Italian architect Lina Bo Bardi faced and solved this issue in her own way through an experimental relationship between solids and voids, built and unbuilt spaces. There are two remarkable projects. The first is '*Casa de vidro*' in Sao Paulo, Brazil (1951) and the second is the project (not realised) for the Museum of Modern Brazilian Art in Sao Vicente, Brazil (1951). The buildings seem to be suspended in order not to break the surrounding landscape, that continues uninterrupted even under the buildings. Gio Ponti, who had a particular admiration for Lina Bo Bardi referring to her as an "extremely clever woman", dedicated a long and very inspired article to '*Casa de vidro*' in the pages of the magazine. He describes this architecture as a perfect example of "those principles towards which modern architecture moves in its more clever exponents". Through those principles of "essentiality", "expressivity", "fantasy of precision" and "personality" the house "has to be recognised as modern architecture. It honours Brazil that inspired it, and the Italian school from which it derives"³. In the 'Museum on the seashore'⁴ for the Modern Brazilian Art the conception of the continuous internal and external spaces, that directly look

towards the sea, influenced the entire organisation of the building. In both of the projects Bo Bardi showed her research in the use of experimental materials and structures for the support of the buildings: in the first mentioned case of '*Casa de vidro*', steel slim pillars were used to allow a free plan, while in the second case five reinforced concrete portals were designed to support the whole building. Another relevant case under the category of the research in the relationship between the building and the natural environment is the 'Villa in the pine grove'⁵ in Arenzano, Genoa. Designed in 1961, by Anna Castelli Ferrieri, the house is a well-structured building where the slabs, passing through the indoor volumes, reach the external environment as cantilevered plans. On these surfaces, terraces have been designed to create continuity between the indoor and the outdoor spaces, allowing the open view of the sea in front of the villa.

A second group of projects goes under the category of the renovation and reuse of historical buildings. Concerning this theme, there is an interesting comparison between two different architectural approaches, that reflects the debate of those times: the renovation of Regina Isabella Thermal Baths⁶ in Ischia, Naples (1952) and the renovation of a Villa⁷ in Somma Lombardo, Varese (1952).

In the first case, Elena Balsari Berrone and Ignazio Gardella were assigned to renew and make the thermal baths in Ischia more efficient. They chose to reconstruct the whole thermal complex, just preserving the original colonnade as evidence of the former building. In this way the colonnade, contrasting with the new

³ Gio Ponti, "La Casa de Vidro", *Domus* 279 (1953), 19

⁴ "Museo sulla sponda dell'oceano", *Domus* 286 (1953), 15

⁵ "Villa nella pineta di Arenzano", *Domus* 392 (1962), 15

⁶ Gio Ponti, "Primizia su Ischia", *Domus* 268 (1952), 2

⁷ "Applicare una facciata", *Domus* 274 (1952), 12

modernist façade, aims to highlight the intervention. In order to further underline this contrast, the colonnade has been kept separate from the façade and supported through a system of beams. In the case of the Villa, Luisa Aiani Parisi and his husband Ico Parisi - together forming the *Studio La Ruota* - were assigned to renew a single-family house, where the original conception of the building and the limited available budget did not allow substantial changes. They chose to add an external reinforced concrete structure, totally independent from the existing building - for technique and materials -, in order to change the aspect of the villa significantly and to create new outdoor spaces. Therefore, starting from different points of view, in both cases the architects' research in highlighting as much as possible the contrast between the new intervention and the old pre-existence clearly emerges. Another notable intervention is the one of Franca Helg and Franco Albini for the reuse of an old tower in the Lombard moorland⁸, in Somma Lombardo (1960) to host a single-family house. The project allowed the existing building to be maintained structurally intact and to create new spaces through the use of infill walls and partitions and through the opening of holes in the original walls to create a functional distribution of the interior spaces. The addition of new components, designed to respond to a modern conception of architecture, respects the character of the existing building and never tries to change its vocation. Similar to this intervention is the one by Luisa and Ico Parisi on a 'Rustic building facing the Como Lake'⁹ reused as a holiday house for a couple. Here the two architects succeeded in renovating the

indoor layout with a new entrance, bathroom, corridor, porch and terrace, by adding the new structures in a very clever and refined way. The renovation is conceived to preserve the external existing walls and to maintain the relationship between the renovated building and the historical context of the village.

A third collection of projects deals with the research in the reinvention of the 'rustic'. The 'House for fishermen'¹⁰ in Como (1955), by Anna Bertarini Monti with Gianemilio and Pietro Monti, well epitomises this theme. In this project the architects' research emerges at the different scales and in specific elements. The prevalence of a simple architectural composition aims to reinterpret the traditional typology of a fishermen shack with its wooden light structure. Furthermore the use of local and traditional materials epitomises the research in linking the new building with its natural context. The same research emerges in two projects published in 1959 in a «Domus» issue specifically dedicated to the theme of the house. They are the 'Country house for a weekend'¹¹ (1959) in Como designed by Luisa and Ico Parisi and a country house¹² in Morbegno, Sondrio (1959) by Anna, Gianemilio and Pietro Monti. In both these two projects the reinterpretation of the traditional typology is referred to a farmstead. In the first project, an external brick wall surrounds the house, while the internal concrete pillars support a pitched roof with a complex geometry. In the second one, the structure is made by load-bearing brick walls and some typical elements evoked in a modern way, such as the

⁸ "In una antica torre nella brughiera lombarda", *Domus* 365 (1960), 23

⁹ "Sul lago di Como un rustico trasformato", *Domus* 395 (1962), 19

¹⁰ "Una casa di pescatori, sul lago di Como", *Domus* 302 (1955), 31

¹¹ "Casa di campagna per il fine settimana", *Domus* 350 (1959), 17

¹² "A Morbegno", *Domus* 350 (1959), 23

pitched roof and the porch. In 1962 Franca Helg and Franco Albini designed a three flats house¹³ in Forlì where the reinvention of vernacular building is refined and referred to the use of traditional materials.

The fourth and last group of projects epitomises the research in innovative building typologies, technics and materials. Concerning the research and investigation in experimental building typologies, there is the representative case of the 'Cemeterial Towers'¹⁴ designed by Nanda Vigo and Cesare Tacchio in 1961 to solve the problem concerning the horizontal expansion of the cemetery in the city of Pavia. Four squared towers are disposed, marking the corners of a squared space and each tower has a central block of service and distribution with circular staircases and a lift. The external façade was thought to be made of serial glasswork or precast *brise soleils*. Another remarkable example in this category of intervention is the residential building¹⁵ in Milan (1954) designed by Anna Monti, together with her husband and his brother. Here the use of precast reinforced concrete in the façade system, allows a uniform external surface and great flexibility in the design of indoor spaces.

The research and systematic survey through the issues of «Domus» provides quantitative datas, which allow some final considerations and results. First of all comparing the whole number of female designers and architects mentioned and published in the magazine, the contribution of women professionals is larger in the field of design than in the

field of architecture.¹⁶

Secondly, while the architectural projects selected by «Domus» are signed mostly by Italian women, a considerable number of design products are signed by foreign professionals¹⁷, probably due to the Gio Ponti's particular passion and interest in the Scandinavian panorama.

From our research it also emerges that the most mentioned professionals are profiles of women who dealt with both architectural projects and interior and furniture design, such as Luisa Parisi, Anna Monti, Luisa Castiglioni and Franca Helg.¹⁸

Concerning the architectural panorama, we found that women designers gave their contribution mostly to housing projects - from ex-novo, to renovation and interior design - with just sporadic exceptions.¹⁹ Additionally, in a few cases these professionals women worked alone, while most of them worked together with a relative such as Luisa Parisi with her husband Ico Parisi or Anna Monti with her husband Gianemilio Monti and her brother-in-law Pietro.²⁰ To conclude the output of our research we cite the women who used to signed their projects alone and those who are the most frequently mentioned in the magazine. In the first group we find Gae Aulenti, Lina Bo Bardi, Anna Castelli Ferrieri, Luisa Castiglioni,

¹³ "Una casa a Forlì", *Domus* 383 (1961), 19

¹⁴ "L'idea del cimitero a torre/Cemeterial Towes", *Domus* 423 (1965), 8

¹⁵ "Elementi di una facciata", *Domus* 292 (1954), 20

¹⁶ In the 276 *Domus* issues we analysed, the whole number of female architects is 39 while the number of designers is 123.

¹⁷ On the whole 39 women architects 25 are Italian (64%), while on the 123 designers only 51 come from Italy (41%)

¹⁸ On the 39 women professionals mentioned in the issues of *Domus*, 22 are women active in both the fields of architecture and design

¹⁹ The total number of architectural and urban planning projects by women professionals in the 276 analysed issues is 90 and 50 of them are for residential buildings.

²⁰ On the 90 total architectural and urban planning projects by women professionals in the 276 analysed issues only 20 of them are signed by women alone.

Eugenia Alberti Reggio, while in the second group there are Luisa Aiani Parisi, Anna Bertarini Monti, Luisa Castiglioni, Franca Helg and Rita Mori Bravi.

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