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Leonardo Mosso: the poetry of structure

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01 Leonardo Mosso raising one of his structures; © Photos L. Mosso, T. Marzi, Archivio Istituto Alvar Aalto-Museo dell'Architettura Arti Applicate e Design, Pino Torinese.

Leonardo Mosso: the poetry of structure

Leonardo Mosso (1926-2020) was able to combine art and architecture. He was a collector and an interpreter of 20th century culture that he shared and passed on to succeeding generations of students and collaborators who attended the Alvar Aalto Institute. For many, he was an unsung Maestro, a generous polymath, who maintained an extraordinary curiosity and child-like enthusiasm throughout his long life.

It is not easy to define his complex identity: architect, artist, photographer, researcher, semiologist, professor (at the *Politecnico di Torino* and several European Universities, such as Berlin and Karlsruhe), a man of culture (co-founder of the National Museum of Cinema Association), an activist in the conservation of 20th century architectural heritage... and a poet of contemporary architecture.

He was born in Turin (Italy) in 1926, son of Nicola Mosso (1899-1986), a rationalist and futurist architect, and his career began in his father's studio. Together, they created one of the most evocative religious buildings of post-war Turin, the church of *Gesù Redentore* in Mirafiori (1953-1957), extraordinary for its modular geometry and complex vault structure, perforated by light.

In the early 1950s, on reading *Space, Time and Architecture*, he was struck by Sigfried Giedion's (1888-1968) description of the Sunila paper mill designed by Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) where "no human being is misused to become an adjunct to a machine." Fascinated by this humanistic approach[1] and the generative forms of Alvar Aalto's architecture, after a train journey across a Europe still wounded by war, he arrived in Finland where he joined Alvar Aalto's studio in 1955 and remained until 1958.

Through numerous articles in architectural magazines he wrote in the 1950s, Leonardo Mosso became a key-figure in the growing interest in the Finnish architect in Italy. Some of his articles became genuine references, such as "The light in Alvar Aalto's architecture."[2] This renewed interest led Leonardo Mosso to become the curator of the first monographic exhibition on Alvar Aalto at the *Palazzo Strozzi* in Florence in 1965-1966.[3] From 1964, he became Alvar Aalto's partner in his Italian projects that, unfortunately, were never realized, such as the Villa for Erica Olivetti in Moncalieri (1969-1972), the innovative satellite-city in Pavia (1966-1968), warehouses for the Ferrero company (1965-1970), and a congress center in Turin (1964-1965).

From the 1960s on, he devoted himself to the design of flexible, versatile structures with infinite potential for transformation. Together with his wife, Laura Castagno (1938-), a partner in his life, work, and research, he carried out some prescient and highly original studies on structuralism, on territorial planning through the relationship between man and the environment, and on the early use of computers for managing urban form. He developed a "theory of semiotic structural design" and "non-authoritarian programming," placing the concept of "structure" at the center of his research, with functional, aesthetic, and social applications.[4] In all his architectural and artistic works, he always followed a structural logic, in the sense of "structure as a system of transformation and of possibilities" according to the definition given by Jean Piaget (1896-1980). At the same time, Leonardo Mosso undertook experimental research aimed at "understanding the potential unions and relationships that could be obtained through connections." Those steps from experimentation to theorizing led to poetic work at different scales: algorithmic combinations and astonishing inventions in rhythm and color, such as the *Cappella della Messa dell'artista* (1962-1963) or the *Nuvola Rossa* set up in 1974 in the Museum of the Risorgimento in Turin, a large aerial structure of 400 m² consisting of red wooden elements and elastic neoprene joints, suspended from the vaults of the first Italian Chamber of Deputies.

But Leonardo Mosso was also a pioneer in the protection of 20th century Italian architecture, publicly denouncing unjustified demolitions (such as the Equestrian Club by Carlo Mollino (1905-1973), a masterpiece whose demolition, in 1960, was excoriated by Mosso in an article he illustrated with his own photographs).[5]

In 1979, with his wife Laura, he founded the *Istituto Alvar Aalto* [Alvar Aalto Institute], in the woods of the Pino Torinese hills, which also houses the headquarters of the Study Center of Programmed Architecture and Environmental Cybernetics (since 1969), and the Museum of Architecture, Applied Arts and Design (since 1984). The Institute preserves important archive materials, the result of a lifetime dedicated to the protection, conservation, study, and promotion of the architectural heritage, artworks, design, and applied arts of the 20th century.

Daniela Bosia and Tanja Marzi

Notes

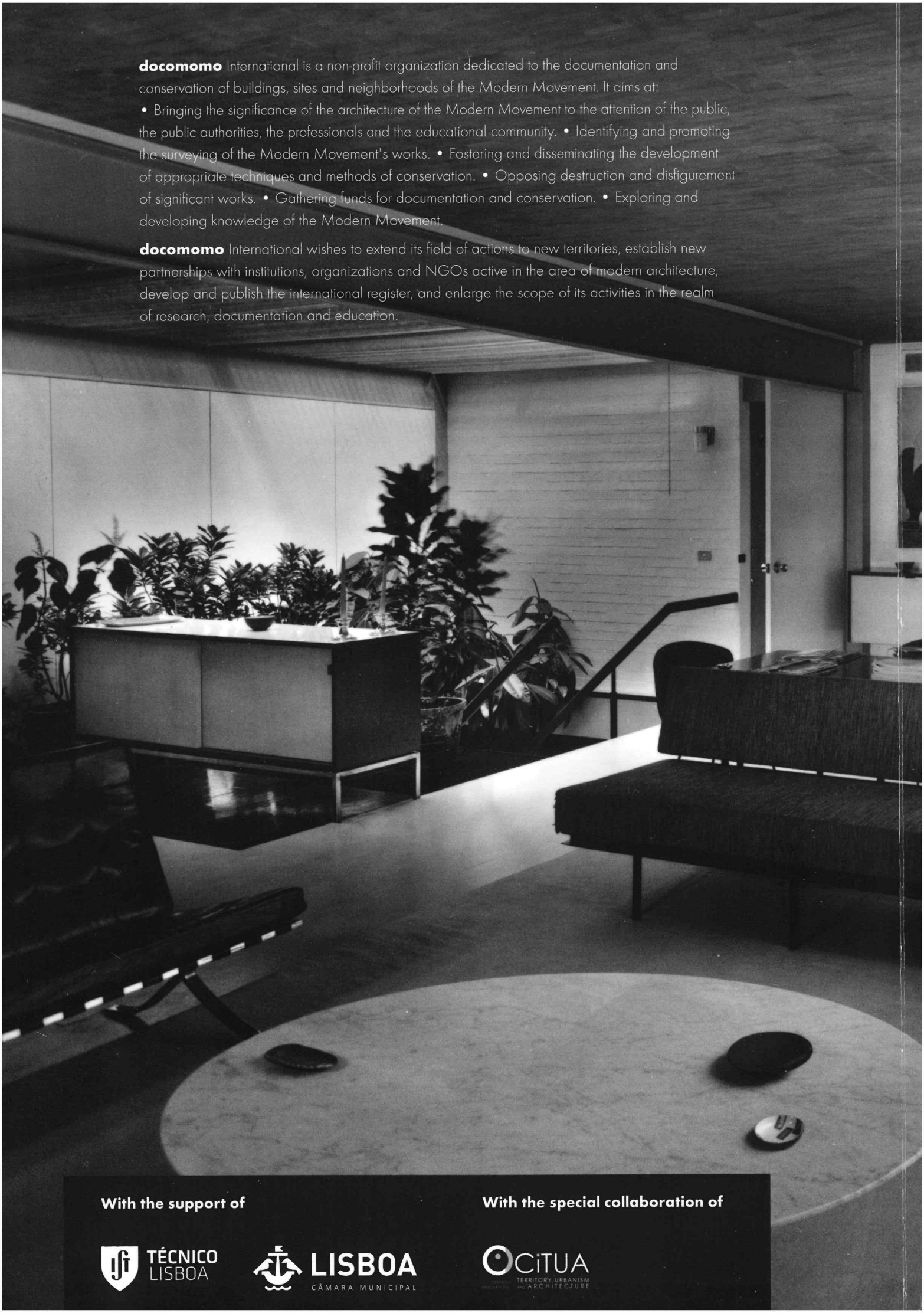
1 On the Sunila complex Leonardo Mosso, together with Tapio Periäinen and Italo Martinero, produced the film-documentary *Sunila, la fabbrica umana di Alvar Aalto*, 1955.

2 Leonardo Mosso, "La luce nell'architettura di Alvar Aalto", *Zodiac*, No. 7, 1960, 66-115.

3 Leonardo Mosso (ed.), *L'opera di Alvar Aalto*, Milano, Edizioni di Comunità, 1965. Catalogue of the exhibition at the Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, 14th November 1965 – 9th January 1966.

4 Laura Baccaglioni, Egidio Del Canto (ed.), *Leonardo Mosso: architettura e pensiero logico*, Mantova, Provincia di Mantova-Casa del Mantegna, 1981; Liborio Termine, *L'invenzione della meraviglia. Ragionamenti sulla poetica di Leonardo Mosso*, Torino, Edizioni di Lettera/Istituto Alvar Aalto, 1991.

5 Leonardo Mosso, "Un'opera perduta: l'"Ippica' di Mollino", *Comunità*, No. 80, 1960, 70-82.



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