

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

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18th International Docomomo Conference & Students Workshop
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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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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		
1478	The Ethics of Preservation or Repurposing of Yugoslav WWII Monuments / Tatjana Aleksić	1643	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
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	ORGANIZATION
1491	The recourse to the authenticity in the modern architecture of Mobutu's Zaire / Manlio Michieletto	1644	SUPPORTERS
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1499	Intersections of Ethnicity, National Identity, and Modern Architecture: A View from Latin America / Ivo Gíroto, Maarten Goossens	1647	DOCOMOMO INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERS & INSTITUTIONAL MEMBERS
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 Durbiano “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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