ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURE

POST-WESTERN HISTORIES OF ARCHITECTURE

PILAR MARIA GUERRIERI
AND MARCO BIRAGHI

ROUTLEDGE

Post-Western Histories of Architecture

This book seeks to provide an alternative post-Western perspective to the history of contemporary architecture. It puts forward detailed critical analyses of various areas of the world, including Europe, Latin America, Africa, China, Australia, India and Japan, where particular movements of architecture have developed as active 'political acts'.

The authors focus on a broad spectrum of countries, architectures and architects that have developed a design approach closely linked to the building context. The concept of context is broad and includes various economic, social, cultural, political and natural aspects. In all cases, the architects selected in this book have chosen to view context as an opportunity. However, each architect has considered certain specific aspects of context: some have been very attentive to the social context, others to material aspects or typological issues, and still others to aspects related to political visions or economic factors. The analysis critically highlights interesting, creative and respectful design approaches towards local conditions, such as sustainability in Nordic Europe, climate-conscious design in Africa, and the 'bottom-up' sensitivity of India. The book's main aim is to retrace, through both theoretical arguments and case studies, the debate that focuses on politics and the environment. Thanks to its valuable examples, this book strives to make a conscious contribution to establishing a bulwark against the current 'flattening-out' processes that architecture is experiencing.

This book will be of relevance to researchers, teachers and students interested in the history of architecture, architecture and planning and post-colonial studies.

Pilar Maria Guerrieri is an architectural historian who has lived between Italy, the UK and India for almost ten years. She has a PhD in Architectural Composition and a second degree in Philosophy. Currently, she teaches History of Architecture at the Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy. She is the author of *Maps of Delhi* (Niyogi, 2017), *Negotiating Cultures: Delhi's Architecture and Planning from 1912 to 1962* (Oxford University Press, 2018) and *Egizio Nichelli Architetto (1937–1991)* (Franco Angeli, 2022).

Marco Biraghi is a professor at the Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy, where he teaches History of Contemporary Architecture. His published works include *Project of Crisis. Manfredo Tafuri and Contemporary Architecture* (The MIT Press, 2013), *Storia dell'architettura italiana 1985–2015* (with S. Micheli, Einaudi, 2013), *L'architetto come intellettuale* (Einaudi, 2019), *Questa è architettura. Il progetto come filosofia della prassi* (Einaudi, 2021) and *Storia dell'architettura contemporanea II 1945–2023* (Einaudi, 2023).

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Pilar Maria Guerrieri and
Marco Biraghi

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Foreword

In order to modernise the built environment in developing countries, images of the architecture and cities of the Western world are used by local professionals and decision-makers to create an aura and formulate strategies for architecture and urban development. The power of this aura is enhanced as much by the tangible evidence of modern development as by intangible values that are inculcated in the classroom. In professional education, the transference of these intangible values takes place through courses of History, Theory and Criticism (HTC).

HTC, therefore, becomes a potent tool in defining the quality of locally built environments. It can either reinforce the tangible evidence of Western development or thoughtfully mediate its consequences on the local habitat, depending on the objectives that the courses set for themselves. To be an effective instrument for societal welfare, the objectives of HTC should, ideally, evolve through a process of critical self-reflexivity in response to imperatives of local political, economic, social and environmental contexts: the ground realities of the built environment provide a litmus test for evaluating the effectiveness of HTC.

In India, for instance, its ineffectiveness is a matter of concern. Architecture and cities are being transformed to mimic the images of modernity from the Western world. In the process, valuable architectural and urban heritage is being scrapped and replaced to make buildings and cities 'world-class'; the imperatives of economics invariably trump social or cultural values in defining strategies for urban redevelopment, while the natural environment is routinely regarded as an impediment to achieve the objectives of development. These ideological biases foreground the weak culture of HTC that has been unable to engage with the complex predicament of modernising traditional societies, which are compounded by the wages of civic neglect due to a lack of both managerial and financial resources.

The Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, once articulated the predicament of modernising his country by quoting an old African proverb: "Until the lions have their own historians, histories of the hunt will glorify the hunter". What he meant was that until Nigeria developed locally rooted, self-reflexive strategies of modernisation, it would continue to follow the tropes of the

coloniser's 'civilising mission'. But this predicament has also been studied by philosophers. Paul Ricoeur, in his essay *Universal Civilizations and National Cultures,* posed the problem by asking: "How to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization […]".[1] Yet, it has seldom been critically examined by architects and urban planners, particularly in developing societies, where its problems are manifest most palpably in the built environment that they imagine and design. Their intellectual certainty in the efficacy of mimicking models of Western architecture and urbanism remains unruffled even when, Sisyphus-like, they engage with the complex and seemingly intractable problems of the contemporary built environment, a certainty that can be traced, in part, to their professional education in general, but to the courses of HTC, in particular, that glorify 'universal architectural modernism'. The political roots of such a faith in universalisation have not been critically questioned.

The significance of *Post-Western Histories of Architecture*, by Pilar Maria Guerrieri and Marco Biraghi, is that it critically questions Western models of Eurocentric architectural modernism, combatively stating that: "The aim of this book is to provoke a crisis in the Eurocentric view, and to look critically at the capitalist model and the processes of globalisation, examining the consequences in the field of architecture". Today all countries, to varying degrees, aim to modernise their habitats, whether by building new or rebuilding old buildings and sites: the question, in each country, whether developed or developing, is whether it can be achieved without compromising local cultural authenticity. This question is probably more consequential for post-colonial societies; for them, therefore, the propositions undergirding the objectives of this book are particularly provocative and timely.

Both the folk wisdom of the African proverb and the dilemma of modernisation highlighted by Ricoeur bring into focus the post-colonial quandary in architectural education, particularly in the teaching of HTC. In essence, it primarily promotes architectural modernism as it evolved in the West, which, pace Ricoeur, was the product of 'technics, tools, politics and economics', the four pillars of 'civilisation', that developed in Europe and North America and became identified as the International Style – broadly referred to as Eurocentric or Western modern architecture. It is rooted in the philosophical and cultural milieu of the West, which, when viewed critically through the lens of the historical experiences of post-colonial societies, segued from the architecture of the colonisers, and its dissemination through the many powerful forces of globalisation could therefore be read as perpetuating the tropes of the colonial 'civilising mission'.

The genealogy of architectural modernism is questioned by this book, but it is seldom questioned either in the classroom or by disciplinary discourses that take place in post-colonial societies; one of the roots of this failure can be traced to the enculturation that takes place in the teaching of HTC. This enculturation is unsurprising because the texts of HTC are the canonical texts of architectural modernism that glorify Eurocentric or

Western modernity, which students are taught second-hand. They absorb its tenets as gospel; and in praxis, this indirect learning enables post-colonial architects (and urban planners) to be considered 'progressive' and 'modern'. As William Curtis noted: "The dissemination of this degraded version of design occurred in a number of ways […] in which some sort of modern architecture seemed either relevant or unavoidable […] through the brainwashing of post-colonial elites (native born but foreign-educated) with Western images and ideas which were upheld as 'progressive' counter-agents to an earlier era of 'backwardness and stagnation'".[2]

Two points need elaboration regarding the dissemination of the ideals and ideology of architectural modernism to the former colonies, which, ideally, should have been flagged in the courses on HTC. First, the concepts are invariably misapplied because the conditions that generated architectural modernism and sustained its evolution in the West do not exist in post-colonial societies, whose rapid transformation is being mediated by different demographic, economic, social and cultural forces; second, and consequently, the potentials of their historically rooted cultural values and assets are exorcised to create 'modern' local habitats. The rampant and seemingly intractable problems of the built environment that characterise most cities in the Global South are a testament to this glaring mismatch. Of course, there are diverse and complex reasons for this failure, but what gets elided in both public and professional discourses is the strong causal relation between what is taught in the classroom and the strategies of modernisation in the field.

Equating modernisation with Westernisation is also tendentious for the sociology of the profession because architects and urban planners in post-colonial societies become handmaidens to a Westernised elite, oblivious to the needs of 'the other half'. Ironically, this propensity is contrary to the original promise of architectural modernism; not surprisingly, in a democratic polity, administrators and politicians have rushed to fill the void by formulating unsuitable habitat policies and dictating contingent development initiatives that professionals ignore, thus further eroding their agency.

From this perspective, the significance of formulating appropriate and context-based HTC becomes evident in order to dismantle the hegemony of Eurocentric architectural modernism and assert the redemptive potential of the post-colonial profession. However, increasing awareness of problems of climate change and those of social and economic inequities makes this task a universal concern. *Post-Western Histories of Architecture* must be viewed in this light. It identifies "architectural movements built around a close relationship with politics, the need to build a strong identity and to create strong roots through principles linked to the traditions of the place" and evaluates "the unique experiences of certain architects and their works within a larger framework, reconstructing meaning in the light of political, economic and contextual aspects". This empirical approach offers salutary lessons not only to post-colonial scholars and professionals but to critical thinkers in other

parts of the world as well. Guerrieri and Biraghi have examined 111 case studies and categorised them into 8 genres of context-specific architecture, from Europe to India, Africa to Latin America, Japan to China and all the way to Australia, thus taking into account the plurality of experiences and viewpoints regarding modern architectural practice. These region-specific strategies take into account social and cultural forces, local geography, as well as the availability of resources that define the concept of *genius loci*, the spirit of the place. Such a strategy has enabled them to retrace the contemporary architectural debate around the concept of 'critical regionalism' and to extend it by engaging with the concept of modernity in a more nuanced manner, thereby foregrounding alternatives to the central narratives of Western modernism.

The rationale of the eight regional contexts they have identified is premised on the close link that the history of architecture has had with a wide range of political, social and cultural issues, which in turn has necessitated the need to examine a variety of regional contexts that produce architecture. This perspective upturns canonical historiography of architectural modernism that uses Eurocentric modernism as its context and looks at local architecture through that lens to identify variations that are remarkable. 'Critical Regional' architecture is thus viewed as an architectural 'variation' of Eurocentric modernism rather than as a series of independent entities. The book, therefore, provides a grist to the mill to reform HTC and mitigate the problems of the built environment. Instead of universal modernism, it promotes the virtues of the polyglot nature of architecture, which is responsive to the local contexts to resolve local problems of the habitat.

Guerrieri and Biraghi have used the master's tools to dismantle the master's house to compellingly – and provocatively – contest the canonical historiography of architectural modernism. They define the contours of context-generated regional architecture by purposefully focusing on the unique experiences of those architects whose works have demonstrated an ability to sensitively respond to the local context and resolve local habitat issues at key historical moments: Italy, after World War II in the midst of reconstruction; India, after independence from Great Britain in 1947; Japan, following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and surrendering to the Allied forces; China, after Mao Zedong and during its economic revival under Deng Xiaoping; Africa, during the period of decolonisation; Latin America, in the time of revolutions; countries of northern Europe, following growing awareness of climate change and the need for environmental sustainability; and, the response in Australia to its environment and to Aboriginal cultures. Such historiography examines a time of transition in each of its identified contexts, when "some architects have designed architectural works that are not just 'buildings' but also 'political statements'", thereby transforming "not only the physical environment but also the production methods of a system, in particular of the capitalist system". The message in

the authors' post-Western history of architecture is that the 'good' architect aspires to be what Walter Benjamin called a 'producer', in other words, he/she brings about and produces change rather than being a supplier, who produces 'things'.

This message valorises the more 'progressive' criteria of examining the role of 'context' and 'tradition' as generators of architectural modernism. Context and tradition in this book refer to "cultural and material layers that over time have consolidated their characteristics in a place". This is particularly important for post-colonial societies, where Eurocentric modernism advocates that in order to be modern, local professionals must valorise a 'universal and international' language of form whose vocabulary should have the universal sanction. One perspective opens the door to developing multiple – including Indigenous – modernities, while the other to closing it and adopting universal or Eurocentric modernity to engage with the contemporary issues of the habitat. One offers an intellectual incentive for local historians to write their histories, while the other continues to glorify the 'hunt' and the 'hunter'.

Multiple modernities and contemporariness is conceptually a potent and ideologically rewarding intellectual tool to understand the diversity of architectural production around the world. It could enable 'post-Western' HTC to construct a more authentic template to understand architectural production that is grounded in local contexts by examining how, on the one hand, local architectural production was dependent on Eurocentric architectural modernism, but on the other, how the many acts of resistance to those dependencies have enabled local architects to explore alternate, context-specific architectural strategies. *Post-Western Histories of Architecture* shows the way to structure this new way of understanding architectural modernism.

A.G. Krishna Menon
New Delhi
19 December 2022

Notes

1 Paul Ricoeur, *'Universal Civilizations and National Cultures'*, in *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 271–286.
2 William J.R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1983), 356.

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1 Architecture as a 'Political Act'

International political tensions, natural tragedies, such as epidemics and earthquakes, as well as mass migrations, have all caused many of the critical situations in our world today. And the history of architecture is inextricably intertwined with what happens in the world. A history of architecture that is aware of its responsibilities must necessarily be viewed in relation to the present context. Indeed, the development of a critical consciousness inevitably comes through an 'awareness' of what happens around us. It should come as no surprise, therefore, to see how a 'green ideology', which also involves architecture, has emerged in response to the effects of global climate change (ranging from pollution in cities to rising temperatures). However, while architecture (and the architect) reacts to the stimuli coming from current society, history (and the historian) has the task of providing a critical analysis of such 'reactions'. The historian's task is, therefore, to provide a far-from-simple historical evaluation of events that are often very recent events, as well as a 'denaturalisation' of such events, thereby aiming to reveal the ideological 'veneers' shrouding them. It is in this context – and with such an awareness – that we have decided to write *Post-Western Histories of Architecture*.

The parameters of time and space are essential and intrinsic to the historical discipline, whatever the 'object' of its attention. History, by its very nature, always deals with the past: whether a recent or a distant past, it is always the past. History cannot be made out of the future, and only with extreme difficulty can it be made out of the present, and only in the prospect of the present becoming the past.

When talking about the past, we inevitably read it in the light of our present experience. It is always an interpretation of the events belonging to the past seen from a present-day awareness, a present-day point of view. The history of architecture is inevitably the result of the particular point of view of the historian, and indeed, historians live in a sort of double time period: on the one hand, immersed in the 'objects' of the past that they study, and on the other, in the present-day world where they live. What has happened in history must serve to re-read what is happening today, with an added awareness. The intention of this book is, therefore, to analyse the architecture of

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the recent past, more or less from World War II onwards, in order to try to understand how the situation today has been shaped by history.

There are many ways to observe architecture, and it is essential to consider different points of view in order to navigate through its history, whether recent or distant. Bringing together the increasingly widespread processes of fragmentation of knowledge into a single unit is the task of the architectural historian, though it must be done without losing sight of the overall complexity. Fragmentation, in fact, tends to make phenomena lose meaning, and it is important to make every effort to bring meaning to the overall sense and not just to some of the phenomena. A further aim of this book, which is in no way a secondary aim, is to re-examine the unique experiences of certain architects and their works within a larger framework, reconstructing meaning in the light of political, economic and contextual aspects.

Just like history, geography is never neutral and always carries a point of view. Indeed, history and geography are two complementary disciplines, defining time and space. Cartography has always been one of the many forms of power and a way of exerting it. Maps are a testing ground for the ideology that has generated them; they are bearers of deformations, partial and subjective representations, even when they attempt (or perhaps refuse) to be complete and objective. And the type of cartography determines the type of possible deformation. Any representation in map form, because of the very nature of its interpretation, is a 'more truthful' or 'less truthful' view of reality; in other words, it interprets the situation to a lesser or greater extent. For example, the distortion given by the Mercator map of the world makes it clear how the Flemish cartographer of the 16th century applied his Western point of view to the map, putting Europe at the centre and giving greater resonance to the northern hemisphere of the world. In contrast, the German scholar Arno Peters, within the context of the process of decolonisation, drew up a map of the world in 1973 that has tried to correct the distortions of the Mercator map, aiming to provide a 'real' map of the globe that respects the actual sizes of countries. Nevertheless, Peter's map, despite its noble intentions, is not free from all distortions and confirms the subjective and critical nature of cartography. It is, therefore, important to be clear that geography is a cultural construction in the same way as history.

It is obvious that many existing architectural histories, especially those of a general character, have usually focused on the history of Western architecture, where the notion of the 'West' becomes much more of a political concept than a physical idea. This book distances itself from such an approach and deals with a variety of cultural and geographical contexts, ranging from Europe to India, Africa to Latin America, Japan to China and all the way to Australia, taking into account the plurality of experiences and viewpoints about architecture. A criticism of the current conception of architecture and a distancing from the ideology that conforms to today's Western world lies at the basis of this study. Architecture is always a subjective issue, and it is not

easy to accept a critical re-reading of a time-honoured point of view, but this is the aim put forward by this book.

In the age of digitalisation, a cumulative taxonomic approach without any critical insight is pervasive. In an ever-more conformist world, Google provides us with the information we need at each and every moment. We are, in fact, chock-full of information, but rarely are we given a critical point of view. Anything that provides a 'critical analysis' provokes a crisis in the established order and requires a choice to be made. The capitalist mode of production sits in a dynamic (and at times precarious) balance between development and crisis. Development has been the driving force for the capitalist mode of production since the 19th century. To appreciate this, we just need to look at the assembly line, so well exemplified in *Modern Times* by Charlie Chaplin, which highlights the simplification of processes: a simple gesture is learnt – and repeated – without any need for an overall view of the whole system. The capitalist system clearly shies away from crisis, but development inevitably encounters 'obstacles' in its path, even if they are not to be considered as entirely negative. Crisis is an integral part of development because the system improves when difficulties have to be faced, in the same way, criticism is an essential part in improving what has been criticised. The aim of this book is to provoke a crisis in the Eurocentric view and to look critically at the capitalist model and the process of globalisation, examining the consequences in the field of architecture.

While on the one hand, the historian is the expression of a point of view, on the other hand, the historian has always had the aspiration to be the holder of a more universal knowledge (in a position of enlightenment). A 19th-century example of objectification and totalisation of history is the *Chronological Chart of Ancient, Modern and Biblical History* by Sebastian C. Adams published in 1871, which creates a very long figurative table encompassing the entire history of the world. Many such universal histories go back to the 19th century. Another attempt to tell the history of the world in an all-embracing manner – a veritable immense effort of synthesis – is *Synchronoptische Weltgeschichte* by Arno Peters, published in 1952. Our upcoming designer of the map referred to earlier lists all world events synchronously, in tables where different contexts and disciplines are listed in chronological order, in an attempt to overcome the logic of a Eurocentric approach to history. Driven by a universal resolve – a truly 'worldwide' resolve – the more recent *Phaidon Atlas of Contemporary World Architecture* (2004) brings together and illustrates a significant number of architectural works scattered around the world. Yet, while aspiring to be as 'complete' and multicultural as possible, the atlas actually presents a tendentious predilection for American and European buildings, which to a certain extent, also reflects a situation of objective historical relevance.

The histories of architecture written in the 20th century had clear Eurocentric orientations. The famous *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* by Banister Fletcher (first published in 1895 but updated and

reprinted numerous times during the 20th century) presents a clearly positivist approach. On the one hand, the book aims to draw a parallel between different architectural histories, while on the other hand, it divides a plural history into 'historical styles' (particularly Western) and 'non-historical styles' (Indian, Japanese, Chinese, etc.). Fletcher gives due importance to the architecture of a significant section of the non-Western world, including those styles that were ignored at the time, but he includes them as 'non-historical styles', a reductive and highly contradictory expression. At the beginning of the book, there is a tree of styles, a throwback to the great 19th-century philosophical constructions, with its roots – representing the geographical, religious, historical and cultural aspects that lie at the base of architectural works – and a trunk with its branches, corresponding to the various histories of architecture, based on a chronological and hierarchical pattern.

Contemporary historiography has produced countless architectural histories that give particular attention to Western contexts. Among the best known are *A History of Western Architecture* by David Watkin, *Architecture Nineteenth & Twentieth Century* by Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *An Outline of European Architecture* by Nikolaus Pevsner, *Storia dell'architettura moderna* by Bruno Zevi, *History of Modern Architecture* by Leonardo Benevolo, *Modern Architecture* by Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco dal Co, *A Critical History of Modern Architecture* by Kenneth Frampton, and *The Future of Architecture Since 1889: A Worldwide History* by Jean Louis Cohen. Among the exceptions that have looked at other parts of the world with a pluralist intention, it is important to mention *Modern Architecture Since 1900* by William Curtis and *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* by Spiro Kostof.

The histories of architecture listed above have mainly featured architects of European and American origins. There are, however, rare cases of books that have tried to make significant moves away from the Western point of view. One attempt to move in this direction came with the book *Global History of Architecture* by Francis D.K. Ching, Mark Jarzombek and Vikramaditya Prakash, in which a chronological analysis was conducted starting from the ancient period of early civilisations through to contemporary times, taking a parallel, step-by-step approach to all countries in the world. Another book that concentrated on the international context, taking a more recent timeframe for its analysis, is *A Critical History of Contemporary Architecture 1960–2010* by Elie G. Haddad and David Rifkind. This latter book has the merit of critically embracing many contexts throughout the world, although the fact that it was put together by many different authors means that there is a lack of a common thread and overall sense in the focus of the book.

Obviously, there are partial or 'local' histories of architecture relating to various contexts in the world: specific histories of the architecture of India, China, Japan, Australia and African or Latin American countries. In addition, for each context, there are also histories referring to specific historical periods, architectural movements or monographs about individual architects.

While acknowledging the existence of a more specific and fragmented knowledge, *Post-Western Histories of Architecture* attempts to reconstruct a collective viewpoint, going beyond the processes of fragmentation while remaining fully aware of the risks involved. The frames of reference in this book are the histories of architecture that have tried to provide brief overviews of the overall picture.

Post-Western Histories of Architecture re-reads the history of architecture with a post-Western approach, focusing on national and international projects and architects who have taken the local context of their country as a tool to counteract the processes of directly importing foreign or imposed cultural models. The case studies in this book have been selected because of specific aspects (whether they relate to the architects themselves or to their works) that are intended as a reaction against an imported architecture that is inspired by Western models or models stemming from globalisation. 'Bottom-up' movements of particular interest have developed in Europe, India, China, Japan, Australia and Latin America, using their 'context' in a broad sense as a starting point for the design. The countries taken as case studies provide examples of architectural movements built around a close relationship with politics, built around the need to create a strong identity and a 'rootedness' through principles linked to the traditions of the place.

A crucial aspect is a relationship that exists between the imposition of Western styles, which has taken place in various parts of the world, initially as a result of colonialisation and then of globalisation, and the response that locally based architects have produced starting from 'bottom-up' practices and the founding principles of their own culture. Local reactions to the importation of foreign models and the consequent forms of cultural hybridisation are what this book aims to investigate. Indeed, the 'context' of each place has always been a powerful shield against a cultural levelling-out and uniformity. Therefore, all the buildings presented here have some connection with the question of identity, an identity that embraces the idea of context as the cornerstone of its recognisability.

This book aims to highlight the close link that the history of architecture has had with the widest range of political, social and cultural issues. It analyses a selection of contexts and architectural styles from key historical moments of time: Italy after World War II and in the midst of reconstruction, India after independence from Great Britain in 1947, Japan after the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and after surrender to the allied forces, China after Mao Zedong and during its economic revival under Deng Xiaoping, Africa during the period of decolonisation, Latin American countries during the period of revolutions, and countries of northern Europe after the emergence of an awareness of climate change and new policies of environmental sustainability. In these contexts of transition, some architects have designed architectural works that are not just 'buildings' but also 'political statements', often able to change not only the physical environment but also the production methods of a system, in particular of the capitalist system.

In this sense, Antonio Gramsci is a significant point of reference with his concept of 'philosophy of praxis', developed from his readings of works by Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile, and especially Karl Marx, and expressed in his *The Prison Notebooks*[1] where an inextricable combination of philosophy and politics is put forward, both in theory and in practice.

The idea of transforming thought into action, breaking away from the ideology of the ruling class – on the basis of what Gramsci referred to as a split that leads to acquiring an awareness of one's role in history – is one of the kingpins of Gramsci's thinking. Such a view led to the need to build an alternative mainstream approach that, by its very nature, is necessarily plural. Indeed, being able to change the *status quo* implies many people making an effort to come together and share ideas. The concept of overcoming the dominant ideology and the idea of creating an alternative mainstream approach can be recognised in most works of architecture and in most of the thinking of the architects presented in this book.

In this context, it is also interesting to mention the thinking of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, in particular his 1934 essay *The Author as Producer* where he distinguishes between the two ways that people using their intellect can relate to their work and the world of production they are involved in. On the one hand, they can be 'suppliers' to the system, enabling the system to continue and to move forward, or on the other hand, they can be 'producers', in other words, those who are able to change the system from the inside, because they know how it works. The intellectual's task is to change the way of production from the inside, changing the way things are produced (even in regards to fairly marginal aspects), altering the rules of the game through small technical actions, not in any formal or artificial way.

On numerous occasions and in various contexts, architecture – with its tools – has been able to transform the political 'landscape', going far beyond simple aesthetics. Such transformations have never been carried out as individual acts, as single works of an architect, but as collective actions shared by the community. The 'good' architect should, therefore, always aspire to be a 'producer', in other words, to strive to bring and to produce change, not just to produce 'things'. And in the same way, the historian should always aim to re-read the established points of view through a process of re-assessment and criticism. For all of these reasons, this book is not devoted to analysing mainstream architecture, but instead, it aspires to highlight architecture that may be 'minor' or 'niche' architecture, that may even be 'problematic architecture' due to its political commitment, but that is always of great interest and inspiration because of its intellectual standpoint.

Note

1 Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni dal Carcere* (Turin: Einaudi, 1948–1951); translated as *The Prison Notebooks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

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2 A Dialogue with Tradition
The Case of Italy

'Pride in Modesty' As an Operating Model

Is there any way to react to the spread of culturally mainstream architectural models that tend to establish themselves on an increasingly conformist international landscape? Is it possible to counteract such a spread at a local level without giving in to a form of isolationism?

In order to try to respond to these questions, the situation in Italy can provide an interesting and worthwhile starting point. The fact that we are starting with Italy should not be considered in any way as a superficial Italy-centric approach (which would be not only wrong – or very wrong, in a certain sense – but it would also suggest a blindly Eurocentric attitude). Instead, Italy is the ideal starting point because of its distinctiveness and, in some ways, because of its 'unique' condition.

In particular, after the Second World War, Italy followed its own path towards modern architecture, displaying a distinct sensitivity towards aspects relating – in one way or another – to the culture of a place. Places often have strong connotations, as is the case of very many of Italy's cities (Rome, Florence, Venice, but also Parma, Ferrara or Matera, to give just a few examples) or large tracts of Italian countryside (the Aosta Valley, Tuscany or Sicily, for example), or even specific social-geographical contexts, such as popular culture or rural culture. Such a sensitivity, when it is effectively – or materially – able to become a 'dialogue' with tradition, is never a question of simply adhering to traditions, or at least not in the best cases when a decisive and indelible modern intent is kept alive. In other words, this is not something comparable to a 'traditionalist' approach, even less so to a 'localistic' approach, when such terms imply something locked in a certain separatism without any exchange of ideas with others. In the case of Italian architecture, the dialogue with tradition is not a muted exchange where there is no debate or interaction with others. Instead, what this dialogue aims to set up is a fertile exchange with what is part of the country's history and what belongs to wider horizons: in other words, the modern scenario that began to become established in Europe from the 1920s onwards, and that Italy has not in any way been impervious or insensitive to. Indeed, Italy has put its own slant on

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the message on the basis of those specific values that characterise and distinguish the country.

In order to appreciate how Italian architecture has been able to establish a sort of basic accord between local culture and international culture, we need to go back to the years between the two wars. In fact, in 1933, the art critic and art historian Lionello Venturi published an article entitled *Per la nuova architettura*[1] in the *Casabella* magazine. In his article, he tried to identify what he considered the "common basis in the approach of those involved in new architecture", in other words, "the desire for simplicity, the aversion for all exterior embellishment, or in a nutshell, […] the pride in modesty". This last phrase was taken up by Giuseppe Pagano who made it into the true 'common basis' for assessing modern architecture, both international and Italian architecture, using the phrase in various situations.[2]

But what does 'pride in modesty' actually imply? The expression is clearly an oxymoron, in that 'normally' pride stems from splendour, lavishness or exceptionality. Instead, what Pagano defines as "'current' architecture"[3] provides the true source of pride. It is this that "should be the usual end product", it should involve "modest objectives and modest results", displaying "with utter clarity, honesty, financial rectitude and, above all, good urban manners".

The incarnation of such virtues is the architecture produced by Pagano himself (the buildings that provide the layout of Via Roma in Turin are – from this point of view – a perfect example) along with the 'Italian rural architecture' that Pagano had photographed and collected together (with the assistance of Gualtiero Daniel) in an exemplary exhibition held at Milan's Triennale gallery in 1936.[4] With its 'pride' in its modesty, its inherently poor, practical, unembellished and therefore basic style, Italian rural architecture is able to appear 'modern' in Pagano's eyes. And despite variations throughout the many regions of Italy, for Pagano, Italian rural architecture is ready to provide a model that is far from the empty rhetoric of Italy under Fascism.

This implies a coming together of two different approaches. On the one hand, there is a more 'abstract' modern style, intentionally freed from any local roots and directly grafted onto the most advanced set of currents in European architecture; on the other hand, there is a rooted and localised tradition, the fruit of long cycles of civilisation, of experience slowly laid down in forms that can be traced back to Italy's regional heritage. And it is this coming together of these two different approaches that inspire the best works of modern Italian architecture from the second half of the 1930s. Examples are the farmhouses of the Castello estate at Torrevecchia Pia, Pavia, 1937, by the young Mario Asnago and Claudio Vender, or the anti-tubercular dispensary at Alessandria, 1936–1938, by Ignazio Gardella, or even the Casa Malaparte on the Isle of Capri, 1938–1943, that is the result of a not clearly defined working relationship between the writer Curzio Malaparte, who commissioned the building, and Adalberto Libera.

The 'Italian Path' to Modern Architecture

All of this – starting from the early post-war years – was to lead to a very unorthodox re-reading of modern architecture by many Italian architects. And it is from this perspective that we must approach the Casa del Viticultore (wine-grower's house) at Castana near Pavia, 1944–1947, again by Gardella. A similar, though slightly different viewpoint also takes us to the INA-Casa Tiburtino public housing district in Rome, 1949–1954, by Ludovico Quaroni, Mario Ridolfi, Carlo Aymonino and Mario Fiorentino, or to the Unità di abitazione orizzontale (horizontal housing unit) in the Tuscolano part of Rome, 1950–1954, by Libera, mentioned previously. The former is an attempt to adapt solutions and 'acquisitions' from modern European architecture to contexts – such as the outskirts of Rome, where Pier Paolo Pasolini set his novels[5] – that only with great difficulty, or almost impossibly can be considered as places to make a clean sweep of things, to put in place 'ideal' projects. In reality, such neighbourhoods have always been seen as contexts full of their own 'character' but also 'blots' on the urban landscape. As a result, the urban layout that was given to such areas has no regular right angles; there would be no 'Cartesian geometry' for the .Tiburtino! Instead, the road layout reflects the size of the neighbourhood and its community, in the same way, that the pitched roofs and the perforated brick walls recall unassuming rural contexts. The use of diversified forms is functional in that it creates a mixing effect and – at least in part – a spontaneity. While improved living conditions are always the main goal, at the same time, there is an aim to provide a context in which the neighbourhood can recognise itself and identify itself. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Quaroni and others really insisted on having many areas for mingling (the stairs, the landings): shared spaces, living spaces.

In the case of the Tuscolano neighbourhood, instead, Libera preferred a different model, rebutting the idea of a high concentration of buildings of high-density living, as found in many public-housing neighbourhoods in those years. Instead, Libera went for low-rise residential units for around 1,000 inhabitants. His courtyard houses at different angles allow residents to enjoy the best outlooks, while the multi-storey block with outdoor landings has a reinforced concrete frame. Together, the complex provides a fragment of a possible residential area able to provide a sense of the individual as well as collective identity, its horizontality opening up the kind of social interactions to be found in a village. This is a true example of 'social' architecture, perhaps even 'socialising' architecture.

The wealth of approaches – but also the marked common intention – of Italian architecture in those years is indirectly but significantly endorsed by two monograph issues of the French magazine *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* published in 1952 and 1953.[6] From the work of Edoardo Gellner in the Dolomites to that of Luigi Cosenza in the Naples area, Italy as a whole was caught up in a wave of renewal that was not insensitive to the idea of localisation