
The city as form and structure: the urban project in Italy from the 1920s to the 1980s

Anna Bruna Menghini

Facoltà di Architettura, Politecnico di Bari, Via Orabona 4, 70125 Bari, Italy.

E-mail: abmenghini@tiscalinet.it

Revised manuscript received 24 June 2002

Abstract. *Since the end of the First World War Italian architecture has had an original and decisive impact on theories and methods of urban planning. The complexity of this impact emerges if one compares the various positions of those who have expressed a clear idea of the city and made careful observations on urban planning through systematic theories or empirical methodologies. Some have assumed as a basis for their research the relation between building typology and urban morphology, while others have emphasized one specific aspect of the city. These various approaches have generated a diversity of project methods and tools. What links all these experiences is the desire to bring the urban question back to the realm of architecture: to bridge the divide between architecture and urbanism as disciplines.*

Key Words: architecture, planning, twentieth-century history, urbanism, Italy

This article seeks to identify and compare the main lines of thought that characterized Italian architecture from the 1920s to the 1980s. An analysis of this period provides a basis for reflections on the cultural context and orientation of contemporary urban planning.

In Italy two lines of research in the field of architecture can be discerned: on the one hand, the Roman School and the work of Saverio Muratori with his physical and process approach to urban morphology; on the other, Aldo Rossi's work and the *Novecento* Milanese culture expressed in a metaphysical approach to the city and a search for the 'ideal' architecture. One is concerned with the 'construction' of the city; the other with its 'composition'. For

Muratori the urban project is a collective process of construction and restoration of the physical structures that go to make up the urban organism, whereas for Rossi it is an act of composition based on the search for ideal and absolute forms. Both Muratori and Rossi sought a controlling order for the complexity of urban phenomena; but for the former such an order was an immanent reality, while for the latter it was the result of a conceptual operation.

In addition to these two lines of research, there have been many related ones which have followed, with varying degrees of independence, similar agendas. Much of the research shares the same interest in urban morphology, to which is assigned a multiplicity of meanings, mirroring different

spatial and aesthetic concepts. In some cases the city is seen as a 'form', that is a simple natural or functional configuration; in others, as a 'figure', that is a complex entity endowed with historico-cultural significance. Sometimes the city is interpreted as a 'structure', that is a system of relations: in this case, the morphological aspect tends to be posited as the result of a modelling process. Sometimes the perceptual dimension of urban phenomena is emphasized: the city is read as a series of images. Thus the elements entering into play in the process of construction-composition of the city are, in turn, form, figure, structure and image. The question of typology, too, may be related to these categories.

The aesthetics of the city: Gustavo Giovannoni

At a time when the functionalist city-machine was at the height of its popularity, Gustavo Giovannoni based his theories on the idea of the city as an organism: a hierarchical space made up of diverse, yet interconnected parts in continuous interaction with the environment and continuously changing. While the Modern Movement attempted to resolve the crisis of the nineteenth-century city by designing ideal models for its replacement, Giovannoni affirmed the importance of the real city. This was not from a standpoint rooted in nostalgia, but reflected his view that the city had an organic quality that had matured with time, and could not be replaced, therefore, by an abstract and controlling rationalism. The problem for him was to rediscover the organic structure beneath the apparent contradictoriness of the real city. The lost unity could be regained by steering urban projects back to the 'art of building the city' – to historical awareness, technical know-how and artistic sensibility. Giovannoni extended the concept of a work of art from the single monument to the city as a whole, in the sense of a collective creation. The lasting quality of buildings was to him valuable both aesthetically and as a historical document.

In his essay *Vecchie città ed edilizia nuova*,¹ Giovannoni faced the problem of how to reconcile the 'life' and 'history' of the city.² Despite their different characteristics, old urban nuclei and new urban sprawls were combined in the formation of a single organism. Thus Giovannoni outlined two different aesthetics for the city, which corresponded to two different living conditions: on the one hand, the modern city, a 'social, cinematic and aesthetic organism', abode of the 'life of movement' and the dynamics of vast road networks; on the other, the 'life of habitation', the static condition of the minutiae of urban fabrics made up of irregular spaces and groupings that recall the theories of Camillo Sitte.³ Giovannoni himself experimented with these in the garden suburbs of Monte Sacro and Garbatella in Rome (Figure 1). The problem of old centres was thus seen as complementary to that of new building fabrics and was considered at the scale of both local and territorial planning.

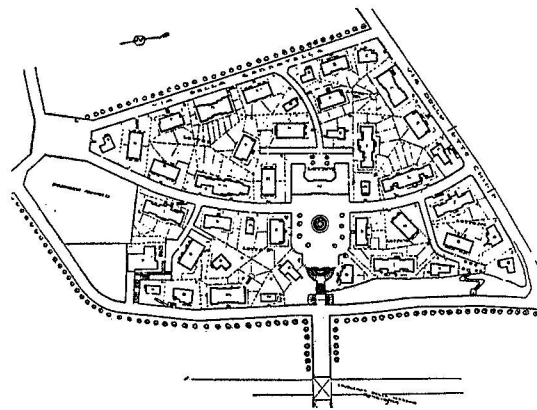


Figure 1. Plan for the Quartiere Garbatella in Rome designed by G. Giovannoni, 1920. Source: Giovannoni, *op. cit.* 137 (note 1).

Giovannoni's solution for the functional adaptation and spatial revaluation of the urban fabric of minor buildings was the method of 'building reduction' (*diradamento edilizio*), an act of cautious demolition and reintegration, which respected the texture of existing fabrics.⁴ Thus urban planning was seen as environmental restoration: a

restoration which preserved historical stratification. Measured drawings of monuments, both great and small, played an important role in Giovannoni's praxis 'in order to have a clear and precise understanding of their type and significance through an analysis of their anatomy, by inverting the course taken by the architect and artificers who designed the organism and modelled its various parts'.⁵ A further role was played by typological analysis of the urban fabric of minor buildings, 'to understand the characteristics of, and reasons for, urban evolution, in order to determine cycles and recycles, to establish principles and laws for the ways in which cities take shape and the various phases of their development'.⁶ These reflections anticipate Muratori's methodology.

An exemplary case of 'building reduction' is the Quartiere Rinascimento in Rome, which was, significantly, also chosen by Muratori at the beginning of the 1960s for his students' experimental projects. Restructuring the urban space is achieved essentially through the application of perceptual criteria. The control of vistas, through the use of perspective, guarantees a 'variety of movements and contrasts', while respecting the environmental conditions and artistic atmosphere (proportion, form, colour, etc.) determined by the permanent elements that characterize a given place, above and beyond style and historical period.⁷

An acceptance of the real city, as it has taken shape through time, is also fundamental to Muratori's theories. However Giovannoni, in keeping with Camillo Sitte's thought, selected the city's figures and images – its aesthetics – as both a value and a reference model, whereas Muratori attempted to understand its structure – the logic of its forms.

Forms and figures of the Italian rationalist city

In Italy the experience of the Modern Movement is grafted on to a clearly identifiable urban tradition. The idea of the city as

a form regulated by a pure abstract or functional logic never really took hold in Italian culture, which instead was concerned with the figurative dimension of urban phenomena. The young Rationalists, working within the dialectics of ancient-modern and tradition-innovation, did not totally dismiss the idea of the inherited city.⁸ The pursuit of abstract models and typological studies in a functionalist context was accompanied by attempts to uncover and represent the identity of urban spaces. Although unified projects for new cities, such as Sabaudia, did not envisage the building continuum as a process, they were, nevertheless, articulated around themes such as the *piazza* and the *strada* (Figure 2) – spaces evocative of the forms of a classical tradition, where the figurative dimension as abstract form prevails.

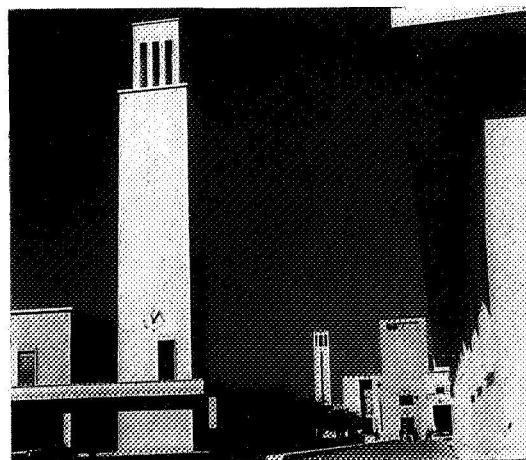


Figure 2. The city of Sabaudia, designed by G. Cancellotti, E. Montuori, L. Piccinato and A. Scalpelli, 1933-34. Source: Danesi, S. and Patetta, L. (eds) (1976) *Il razionalismo e l'architettura in Italia durante il Fascismo* (Electa, Milano) 164.

These figures were taken from history (metaphysics), technology (futurism) and tradition (*spontaneismo*). While the aesthetics of function and movement expressed by the futurist city-machine remained a slogan,⁹ albeit a successful one, the figurative world of metaphysics contributed directly to the elaboration of an idea of the absolute city in which abstract and classical were superimposed.¹⁰ The

convergence with Giovanni Muzio's *Novecentista* research, grafted on to the urban form of a neo-classical Milan, is evident here. According to Giuseppe Pagano, even simple traditional forms – initially created for a functional purpose, and only subsequently becoming figurative – can be a valid guide for modern architecture, as they are transformed back again into abstract forms (Le Corbusier's '*volumes sous la lumière*').¹¹

By the end of the 1930s certain recurrent forms of the functionalist city (such as grid systems and serial repetitions) began to assume an almost figurative role. The grid was used in order to evoke the rigour of Roman town plans, though it was transcribed according to the absolute and homogeneous principles of Cartesian space. The reference to the *domus* fabric, in the project for the 'horizontal city' by Pagano, Diotallevi and Marescotti, which was a model superimposed on Milan, allowed for an inversion of the usual relation in the rationalist city between solid and void, through the application of a dense pattern, while still following the logic of the rationalist city's conformation. This pattern was broken up at certain points in order to accommodate existing monuments (Figure 3).

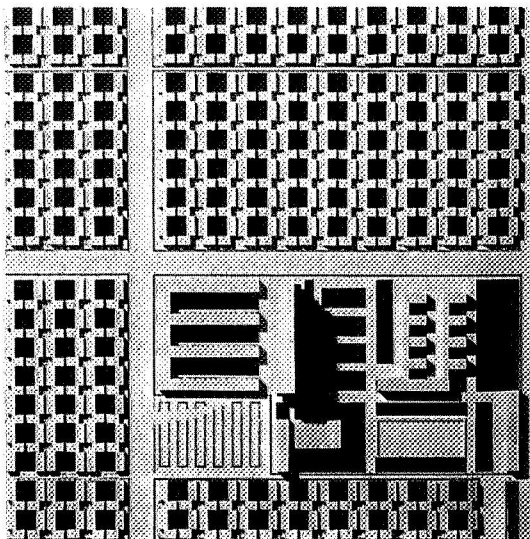


Figure 3. Project for the Horizontal City in Milan, designed by I. Diotallevi, F. Marescotti and G. Pagano, 1940. Source: Danesi and Patetta, *op. cit.* 120 (see Figure 2).

Giuseppe Terragni's project for the restructuring of the Quartiere Cortesella critically reinterprets the persistence of the plan by simulating a process of stratification: the layout of Roman Como determines the position of long, narrow buildings taken from the functionalist city, the serial repetition of which breaks into the contextual structure, thereby setting up a tension between the two (Figure 4).

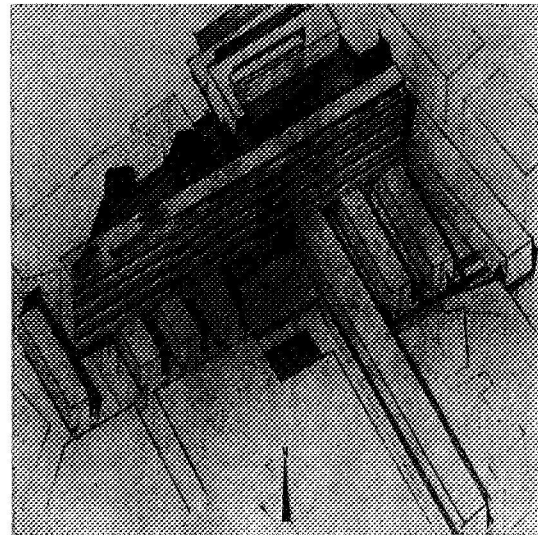


Figure 4. Project for the reconstruction of the Quartiere Cortesella in Como, designed by G. Terragni and C. Cattaneo, 1938-40. Source: Ciucci, G. (ed) (1996) *Giuseppe Terragni. Opera completa* (Electa, Milano) 519.

Both of these projects are based on a dialectic between a new concept of the city and the historical city, which is expressed through a proposal to reconstruct the ancient layout as a kind of palimpsest, through the use of figures from the traditional Mediterranean dwelling, and the exhibition of fragments of the historical city as isolated objects.

The city as identity: the neo-realist experience

From the mid-1940s, Italian architecture sought to forge the tools necessary for a post-war reconstruction. On the one hand,

Milanese culture expressed its continuity with the Modern Movement through the foundation, in 1947, of the *Movimento Studi per l'Architettura* as well as through the work carried out by Diotallevi and Marescotti on typology and production innovation.¹² On the other, Roman culture sought references to affirm its continuity with the Modern Movement, initiated by, amongst others, the *Associazione per l'Architettura Organica* founded by Bruno Zevi, and attempted a codification of traditional building techniques through the publication of the *Manuale dell'Architetto* edited by Mario Ridolfi.¹³ These were two antithetical yet complementary activities. Diotallevi and Marescotti's manual sought to assimilate the forms inherited from functionalism, turning them into recognizable figures, while Ridolfi's manual took figures from traditional building and deprived them of their historical and cultural connotations, thus turning them into objective technical forms.

Once the peremptory declarations of the manifesto plans had been abandoned, the projects elaborated for INA Casa¹⁴ after the Second World War sprang from a profound aspiration to reality, particularly in the Roman milieu. The architect assumed the self-appointed social role of satisfying the spiritual and material needs 'of the real man and not some abstract being' and of giving form to local identities.¹⁵ The task of setting up relations with the existing city was entrusted to the sociological disciplines and to the formula of 'neighbourhood units'. The suggestions furnished by INA Casa prompted the architects to refer to the scale and episodic character of small urban nuclei.

The image of the old village became a constant point of reference. The Quartiere Tiburtino in Rome, on which Ludovico Quaroni and Mario Ridolfi collaborated, is exemplary in this sense. The identity of place was entrusted mainly to the reinterpretation of a popular vocabulary. Figures taken from local traditions were used in the attempt at a literal recovery of their meaning.

Yet it soon became clear that a formal imitation of the layout of the spontaneous

city generated an artificial naturalness: it was merely a spurious search for typologies. In reality, the reference type was still that of the atypical and atemporal cell inherited from studies on *Existenzminimum*, while the aggregative logic was still that of the mechanically additive logic of functionalism, even though a variety of plans and a greater volumetric articulation were sought. The independence of buildings and open spaces, which characterized the functionalist city, was reconfirmed: the volumes containing the residential function and the zones of movement generated residual spaces which were difficult to control architecturally. The new neighbourhoods were presented, moreover, as self-sufficient units, and not as the result of a process: they were microcosms isolated from their surroundings.

There was an attempt to overcome these limitations in the Quartiere Tuscolano in Rome. The main building, designed by Muratori, is situated on the edge of the neighbourhood and the angular shape of its plan hints at its urban role. Moreover, Adalberto Libera's housing unit, deriving from rationalist studies on the horizontal city, was an attempt to experiment with the continuity of urban fabrics, even though the unit, which was proposed as a space in itself, had no direct relation to its surroundings (Figure 5).

The idea of a project for urban fabrics did not find its full resolution in these experiences, since in a later phase of INA Casa's activity (1956-62) there was a move towards more compact urban layouts and reproducible patterns, while courtyard plans replaced more informal ground plans. Quaroni's Quartiere San Giusto in Prato, built in 1957, symbolizes this. In this period there were also experiments in the opposite direction: new urban projects were concentrated on a few large and simple signs that seem to negate the notion of an urban fabric. Luigi Carlo Daneri's Quartiere Forte Quezzi in Genoa takes Le Corbusier's Plan Obus as a reference: complex linear buildings, containing both residences and services,



Figure 5. Design for the Quartiere Tuscolano, Rome, 1950-54, by M. De Renzi, S. Muratori, L. Cambellotti, G. Perugini, D. Tassotti and L. Vagnetti (centre), and A. Libera (right).

Source: A.A.V.V. (1952) *L'INA-Casa al IV Congresso nazionale di Urbanistica (Venezia)*.

are laid out according to the topography of the site (Figure 6).

The city as environment: Ernesto Nathan Rogers

In the 1950s Italian architectural debate concentrated on the relation between existing environments and new architecture. Even though, in the work of Rogers, Franco Albini and Ignazio Gardella, there was a refusal to pose the problem in stylistic terms, adaptation to the environment was seen as a matter of form, and discussion often took place in an allusive language filtered through the legacy of the Modern Movement (Figure 7). Key figures and evocative images were isolated from their context and underwent a transfiguration. Existing environments and new projects were seen as the opposite poles of a dialectic, in which a tension was set up based on the interaction between memory and invention.

Diametrically opposed to Rogers's method of 'taking one case at a time', Muratori linked the problem of environment to that of type, as the only approach which could guarantee a spatial-temporal continuity for the city. His approach was put to the test in the early 1950s in the Ente Nazionale di

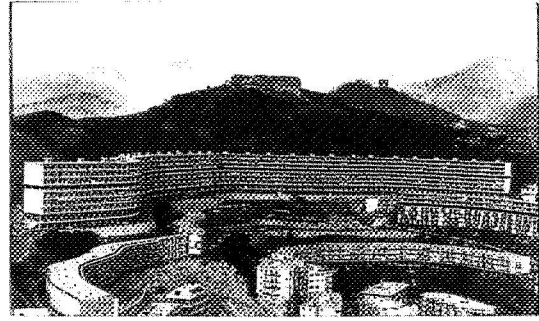


Figure 6. Quartiere Forte Quezzi, Genoa, 1958, designed by L.C. Daneri (with E. Fuselli, C. Andreani, R. Morozzo della Rocca, M. Pateri, G. Pulitzer and A. Sibilla).

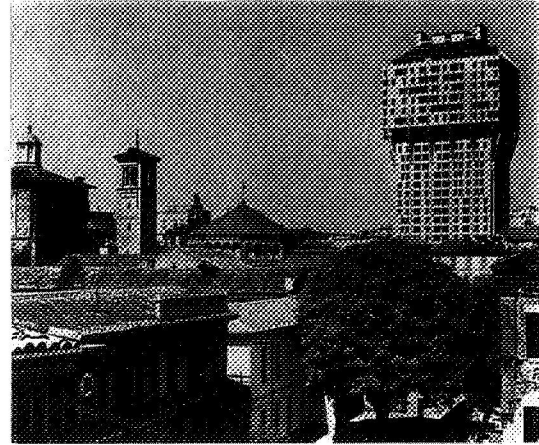


Figure 7. Design for Torre Velasca, Milan, 1954-58, by Studio BPR (L. Barbiano di Belgioioso, E. Peressutti and E.N. Rogers).
Source: Rogers, *op. cit.* 289 (note 16).

Previdenza ed Assicurazione Sociale office building in Bologna, and the headquarters of the Christian Democratic Party in Rome, which represented attempts to re-transcribe the environmental features typical of the two cities, while respecting the functional and structural rationale of the architectonic organism. Muratori referred to the structure of a context rather than to its 'atmosphere', the somewhat vague term often used by Rogers.¹⁶

The city as a structure in process: Saverio Muratori

The city was, for Muratori, a figure whose structure had to be understood, and this