

Ludovico's Order

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Abstract: The article primarily describes the author's relationship with Ludovico Quaroni at the time of 'the Workshop' (Il Laboratorio), set up in the Design Institute (Istituto di Progettazione) of the Faculty of Architecture in Rome in the early seventies, and especially his involvement with the 'Glossary' of specialist terms, which led to certain important teaching commitments carried out by Quaroni in the years that followed. During this period the question of Order took shape and was organised and inter-related with the themes of design research and contemporary aesthetics.

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I got to know Ludovico Quaroni better after I graduated, when he assigned me some research work in what was once termed 'The Workshop' (Il Laboratorio), a kind of pre-departmental facility which brought together all those who gravitated around the old Institute of Architectural Composition (Istituto di Composizione architettonica). The Workshop was housed in a fine building in Viale Mazzini and had a view of one of Mario de Renzi's better buildings, not far from the Post Office; here all sorts of research work was carried out, with the assistance of a well-stocked and continually updated library of works on design, history, architecture, city planning, technique, and especially on the history of the city, which was Ludovico's absorbing passion and one that he had never abandoned since the time of his first published

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book, *L'Architettura delle città* (The Architecture of Cities). I was put in charge of drafting certain items in a kind of Lexicon of Architecture, a 'Glossary' of specialist terms, a collection of definitions that would later be expanded and included in the legendary series of lessons that were originally collected together in the copious mimeographed class handouts entitled '*Design a Building: the traditional method*', and later appeared in other more celebrated, significant and exhaustive publications. I was assigned the terms Space, Geometry, Symbol, Proportion, Structure, Type, Model, and naturally, Order, with the aim of putting together a primary bibliography from which a compilation would be derived to be used in teaching. The terms and definitions often invoked topics and motifs that were very much in fashion at the time, taken from anthropology, structuralism, semiotics, technological aesthetics and historical criticism, all of them imbued with an excessive amount of ideology, and resounding with the names of Summerson and Giedon, of Levi-Strauss and Benjamin, Adorno, Cacciari, Tafuri, of Eco, Moles, Pierce, Jammer and Bense. And so it was in those early years of the sixties that I became aware of Quaroni's almost obsessive interest in the question of architectural order, in its larger sense, not as a simple stylistic derivation of a restricted issue within the larger Vitruvian tradition, but as the guiding principle of a wider logical and structural awareness in creating, conceiving, imagining and designing an architecture envisaged in its consistently specific urban and environmental context. This theme found a secure place, methodologically speaking, in the diverse territory that the Rome School of Architecture had been exploring for some decades under the aegis of Gustavo Giovannoni, Vincenzo Fasolo and Arnaldo Foschini, and above all Marcello Piacentini, who was definitely the most important figure during those years of modernist transition between the traditional and the avant-garde. Ludovico Quaroni was brought up in that school and that cultural background, and, along with Saverio Muratori, became its most analytical and knowledgeable interpreter, accepting its complexity and contradictions and deriving from it a method which still today is the subject of lively debate and discussion.

In those days we wrote in a style that today seems somewhat contorted: «*An essential component that to a large extent characterises*

the current approach to architectural design is a concept of the past, of the various eras traversed by architecture, from a simplified, historically biased point of view. The past has been in fact assigned a 'quality' of architectural and compositional order, which today would seem obsolete, not for any easily identified reasons in the real world, but because of a set of factors which, leaving aside the need for historical evolution, remain abstract as far as methods, architectural order and compositional criteria are concerned and which see the past as a simple repository for a repertory of images and forms. By essentially distorting in this way the approach to the objective realm of the facts, and thus disengaging, with blatantly meta-historical judgement, the structural connections that have, at various times and in various ways, helped to explain a whole series of social and economic factors within the 'architecture' – 'urban form' debate, the wealth of phenomenological complexity that is linked to a specific case is reduced to a series of misleading methodological abstractions that can be inserted easily into the subject matter of whoever today practises or teaches architecture. To regard what has been produced over past centuries as the formal repertory from which to draw samples and methods, to help formulate a theory of design that is in some way linked to the past, only aggravates the present crisis in architectural design with yet another methodologically confused process. In light of the most recent results of a historicism falsely associated with the tenets of the modern movement, and of an approach that merely seeks some revivalist form of composition from the past history of architecture, no one can be blind to the need for a wholesale revision of our historical-critical perspective as regards the question of contemporary architectural design».

The piece ends rather hastily and influenced by an ill-defined adherence to some ingenuous and sporadic readings of Saverio Muratori, with: *«Even if Aldo Rossi, in L'architettura della città, laid down the ground rules for an urban debate that would strongly influence critical studies and working methods in the sector for many years to come, and even if Ludovico Quaroni in La Torre di Babele, basing himself on fairly stringent criteria, came up with a whole series of 'ways of seeing' and 'feeling' the city and all its past and future architecture, the fact however remains that only rarely did these studies succeed in*

establishing themselves as meticulous analyses of the 'real contents' of the urban situation, able to go beyond, in other words, the formal outcomes of the phenomenon, which are for the most part given a strictly subjective interpretation».

Our assessment today would be much more thought out and we would be more aware and less inflexible when considering the wealth and complexity of a moment in history when, alongside obvious contradictions and over-facile ideological pressures, there was to be found an abundance of cultural viewpoints, which for the most part are to this day largely un-investigated.

Thus what Ludovico Quaroni contributed to the architectural debate was somewhat complex and in more than one case, went against the trend of the conventional and rather facile aspects of contemporary architectural research. We would like to dwell upon certain points of view here that base themselves on a more general and more expansive idea of architectural 'Order', which it would be decidedly simplistic to attribute purely to a more or less informal and artificial use of classical language, rather than drawing on aspects of a more structured and thoughtful idea of contemporary language, where the re-discovered rapport with history prevails over the modernist and functionalist deviations of the more recent past. The critical juncture in this evolution, in certain ways, and far ahead of its time, was the turning point that we can already define as post-modern, which the young Ludovico experienced at the end of the thirties, in sharp contrast with the rationalist tendencies that to such an extent affected young architects at the end of the previous decade.

Speaking of which, I can clearly remember how and to what extent Quaroni, who I spent some time with in the early seventies, was still sensitive to that simplified form of modernity which in its day appeared to attract those architects who were particularly associated with the Venetian school. And if, as regards Aldo Rossi, Quaroni found it difficult to disguise a certain unease, and sometimes a genuine, profound disapproval (but I think it was more a proper love-hate situation), and even towards Carlo Aymonino, who was at that time busy compiling the volume on CIAM and Frankfurter experience for the Publishing House Marsilio, and was involved in Frankfurt, I remember that Quaroni had much in common with him, but this soon changed into

a precise, elaborate form of criticism, where the overused general term 'rationalism' was picked apart and subjected to careful consideration, heavy with premonition.

I remember clearly that when Quaroni received back the original copies of the CIAM catalogues from Aymonino, and which I had also wanted to borrow so as to microfilm them as some sacred relic (his personal library was for me in those days a sort of *Sancta Sanctorum*), he spent some time warning me about becoming too enthusiastic, and pointing out to me the complexity of that long-past cultural moment, the differences between Modernism, Futurism, Functionalism and Rationalism, and giving me the example of Bruno Taut (whom I had, at that time, still to discover). He explained his critical ideas as someone who had lived through those heroic years with all the baggage of its contradictions and the hopes that sprang from it.

I discovered how the crucial second half of the thirties could be considered as a counterweight to the last years of the twenties, and just as they had, saw extreme ideas simmering, mechanistic utopias, methods based on the most subtle and rarefied lessons of Gropius and his imitators. On the other hand, by way of Mies, the old Schinkel-style enlightened rationalism was brought back to life, to which the younger generations were for ever after indebted. A good example of this is what many years back was rather simplistically defined as the 'rediscovery of the column', singling out Adalberto Libera and his *Palazzo dei Congressi* in Rome; his sudden conversion between the first and second stages of the public competition, and *pour cause*, the first stage design project of the Fariello, Muratori, Quaroni group which was undoubtedly its source of inspiration.

The lesson of Bonatz and the Scandinavians, accordingly, as a neo-Schinkelian scenario, resuscitated the classical lexicon and rediscovered the *urgrund* of a structural tectonics where the logical aspect is at an obvious advantage over the merely formal aspect. These are the years when, after the heady intoxication of Futurism and Rationalism, almost all the more attentive and sensitive youngsters went back to a classic form of primitivism in its widest sense. In fact, it is no coincidence that the main protagonist of the Italian architectural scene at the time, Giuseppe Terragni, was active in this field; after his

unhappy experience in Rome and especially after the resounding defeat inflicted on him by his heir apparent, Libera (aided inadvertently by input from the Quaroni group), he created the extraordinary design project for the Danteum, where the allusion to the original forms of classical and brutalist primitivism was one of the pivotal points on his symbolic and representational artistic progression.

Schinkel, Gilly, Malaparte, Sironi, Bontempelli and Ciliberti are all re-interpreted on this Dante-like mission, where the 'column' undergoes an evolution in an intricate game of symbolic cross-referencing which progresses from Mozart to Asplund, in an attempt to recover the forgotten meaning of a debate on method, where the order becomes the substance and the aspiration of an architecture that has totally re-invented itself in its primordial, classical representations, from Luxor to Speer.

This brings to mind Terragni's reference, in his presentation of the preliminary sketches of his project, to those same prototypes of Egyptian architecture that (not by chance) we find on the cover of this issue. They are a fundamental key-point in Quaroni's book on the history of the city, and they played a large part in his own architectural development and the refined evolving of his ideas on capitals and horizontal trabeation, on which Attilio Petruccioli elegantly ponders in these pages. All Quaroni's long artistic journey, from the Church to the Foro Mussolini, the Pavilions of the Reclamation and Aluminium at the Circus Maximus, the competition entry for the Congress Hall of E42, the Piazza Imperiale and the Palaces of Art, the design project for Villa Tuccimei, certain fragments of 'Il Gualdo', all the way to designs for the Monte Antenne Mosque and the new façade of the Rome Opera House, is replete with a constant reference to classical forms, that is clearly in line with, yet opposed to, what Saverio Muratori was didactically propounding for the span of history that went from Schinkel all the way to Asplund. We should draw particular attention to the meticulousness and determination with which Quaroni addressed the concept of 'what is and what is not a capital' and horizontal trabeation in his solution to the series of columns of the museums facing the square, and above all, his remarkable exploit of the two pairs of slender, spectacular end-columns in the central hall of the Museum of Ancient Art, built in precious gold-

veined black, rare Portoro marble, whose tapered capitals still astound us with their strength, their power and their sheer inventiveness.

I will conclude with a tiny, curious and definitely marginal – but for me, illuminating – episode, in which the order problem found Quaroni once more in the field, the perceptive star player in a debate which had occupied him for a lifetime. We were in Venice, for the preview of I don't remember which Architecture Biennale – one of the earliest, obviously – and in the lonely half-shadows of one of the large semi-deserted halls, where some works of Giorgio Grassi were on show, I spied the unmistakable form of Ludovico who appeared to be busy reading one of the captions; as I approached, he wandered off, looking sly and furtive, with a pencil still in his hand - he was literally sneaking away 'with his hand in the cookie jar'. Under the drawing of the Students' Residence of the University of Chieti, next to Grassi's name (who Ludovico cordially detested), which had been roughly crossed out, I read the correction that the elderly graffiti artist had added: *Weinbrenner*. Evidently the idea that someone, after all those years, was still stuck in the rut of seeing a re-found classical currency in that Schinkel-derived conception of 'order', so Nordic and *Mittel-european*, that had fascinated him so much so long ago, had captivated him and irritated him, and was still capable of arousing him, almost making him jealous, and joyfully rejuvenating him.

