

Contribution to the book *Education Shock. Learning, Politics and Architecture in the Global 1960s and 1970s* (HKW: Berlin, 2020)

## Campus or Territory

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“I am more interested in those architectural proposals that remind us of problems – above all about urban relations intended as the collective use of the city and its buildings – than in those that testify, even if to a level of perfection, of a purely autobiographic or stylistic trajectory.”<sup>1</sup>

The year 1973 marked a watershed in Italian architecture. It was then, precisely at one location – Milan - and event – the 15<sup>th</sup> edition of the Triennale exhibition – that two groups of architects and ideas confronted one another, eventually parting ways from a previously common line of enquiry into the relations between architecture and the city<sup>2</sup>. One group – the Rationalists - posited utmost faith in architecture as the underlying logic of cities (*The Architecture of the City*, as the title of the most famous book linked to the group originally put it a few years before)<sup>3</sup>. Confronting them, the Radicals gave up all hope, arguing that architecture was nothing but an operative arm in capitalism’s project to reduce everything – also the built environment – to the level of commodities. Where the Rationalists believed that architecture could keep under control, and put order into, a built environment that the demographic and social changes of the postwar period were making

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<sup>1</sup> Aymonino, ‘Rapporti urbani e modi d’uso dell’architettura’, in VV.AA., *Per un’idea di città: La ricerca del Gruppo Architettura di Venezia 1968-1974* (Venice: Cluva, 1984): 71. My translation from the Italian.

<sup>2</sup> Celebrating fifty years since the foundation of the Triennale in 1923, and following a controversial previous edition (the 14<sup>th</sup> Triennale of 1968, when the exhibition building was occupied by a group of protesters on the day of the opening), the 15<sup>th</sup> edition explored “ways of life based on a better use of available living space and on new structures, capable of enriching the life of man in our age” (Dario Marchesoni, *La Triennale di Milano e il Palazzo dell’Arte*. Milan: Electa, 1985). Aldo Rossi curated the International Architecture Exhibition, which looked at the relation architecture/city under an overall reconsideration of the role of rationalism in architectural theory and practice, resulting in the book *Architettura Razionale* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1973). The International Exhibition of Industrial Design was curated by Ettore Sottsass with Andrea Branzi, the latter being a founding member of Archizoom.

<sup>3</sup> Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1982). First published in Italian in 1966.

increasingly disordered, no such thing was possible for the Radicals, who turned their back to architecture and found refuge in other media and scales of design<sup>4</sup>.

The year 1973 was also a moment when many Italian architects were confronted with one major problem: the design of new environments for higher education and, with them, the reinvention of the Italian university<sup>5</sup>. An international urgency that resulted in the many reform programmes throughout (in particular) the Western world, rethinking higher education played an important role in the split among the Rationalists and the Radicals, which was in fact anticipated in 1970-71 at a competition for the expansion of the University of Florence that saw the participation of adherents to both groups. The cover pages dedicated to the competition by the two magazines respectively linked to the Rationalist and Radical streams offer a clear visual summary of the split, with the site plan of Vittorio Gregotti's project on the cover of *Controspazio* – a statement of faith in architectural form - confronting the choice of Domus to use a collage by Gruppo 9999 that superimposed modern computers on a forest background in which Brunelleschi's dome was reduced to a fetish of architectural past times.

Besides these two images, another contrasting couple allows to understand how the architectural split connected to different “ideas of the university”. Adhering to the requests of the brief of designing a new academic settlement for an outlying area in the Florentine territory, whilst embedding it within a wider master plan to reconfigure such territory, the project submitted by Carlo Aymonino and Costantino Dardi depicted the new university as an array of clearly defined architectural objects, orchestrating the spaces properly dedicated to higher education alongside schools, hotels, offices, exhibition spaces, health services, retail, and sport complexes. These were the components aimed to define a service armature catered to a vast regional territory, and elaborated on the idea of a *Città Territorio* that Aymonino and other Italian architects had been discussing since the early 1960s<sup>6</sup>.

This image of a university could not be farther away from the homogeneous and repetitive picture submitted by the architects collective Archizoom. Only a few months before being launched into international stardom at MoMA's exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* (where the nickname of Radicals was also officialised), Archizoom were part of a Florentine avant-garde movement that had been questioning the

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<sup>4</sup> In a recent recollection of those years, Andrea Branzi has described the Rationalists and Radical as two twins that were eventually separated. See Andrea Branzi, *Una generazione esagerata: Dai Radical italiani alla crisi della globalizzazione* (Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> For a general discussion of the Italian architectural response to higher education reform in the 1960s-70s see Francesco Zuddas, *The University as Settlement Principle: Territorialising Knowledge in Late 1960s Italy* (Routledge: Oxon and New York, 2020)

<sup>6</sup> See Carlo Aymonino et al., *La città territorio: Un esperimento didattico sul centro direzionale di Centocelle in Roma* (Bari: Leonardo da Vinci, 1964).

disciplinary bases of design and architecture since its inception, in 1966<sup>7</sup>, and that included among others the mentioned Gruppo 9999, Superstudio and UFO. The competition entry for the University of Florence served Archizoom as a testing ground for the ideas expressed in their most famous proposal, No-Stop City, which was published almost concomitantly to the submission date<sup>8</sup>. No-Stop City described the architecture/city nexus in a time of advanced capitalism, claiming that the city had become a pervasive condition against which architecture could no longer exert any controlling role. The drawings for the University of Florence illustrated this argument by erasing any index of architecture as an enclosing apparatus, and reducing spatial configuration to a never-ending surface populated by free-floating furniture and basic services. Tables, chairs, and bookshelves that were still bound within the walls of Aymonino and Dardi's idea of the university, were set free to roam on an "informational field" by Archizoom, providing an image that was simultaneously the critique and hoped-for modification of the existing situation of late capitalist society. For Archizoom, information under advanced capitalism could only be everywhere, because human inhabitation had gone beyond the city/countryside dichotomy, making the city itself into a pervasive territorial condition. Yet, at the same time, information was prevented from being everywhere exactly because its institutionalised spaces still confined it within four walls – the walls of a school, or of a university institute.

Concentration and dispersion are the obvious poles respectively embodied by the two proposals for Florence, but in both cases what was at stake was not just a matter of defining the best possible configuration for a specific problem – higher education. The latter was rather an excuse, or a trigger, for the architects to reflect on the very theoretical premises of architecture and the city as collective practices. More than two opposed visions of the university, and more than two opposed stylistic trajectories, the two drawings for Florence speak of contrasting, but ultimately similarly radical, arguments about how architecture could, or could not, aspire to represent society - the first being positive about it, the second much more sceptical. Education and learning, crucial spheres of human life that were internationally put under critical scrutiny at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, were instrumental for pushing the two arguments through, because they called into question the dichotomy between freedom and imposition that was at the core of the social protests of the period (which, in turn, found a main stage exactly inside the spaces of higher education, from Berkeley to La Sorbonne and La Sapienza).

However, it would be incorrect to ascribe the two positions and their authors to sharp-edged opposites - that is, to oppose the advocates and detractors of freedom. It would be

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<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive study of Archizoom see Roberto Gargiani, *Archizoom Associati, 1966-1974: Dall'onda pop alla superficie neutra* (Milano: Electa, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Archizoom, 'No-Stop City. Residential Parkings, Climatic Universal System', *Domus*, no. 496 (March 1971): 49–54.

wrong, that is, to interpret their drawings as representing the contrast of top-down imposition (Aymonino and Dardi) and free-will learning (Archizoom). If anything, both groups aligned on similar lines of reasoning and political ideologies aimed to define strategies of liberation from the discriminatory practices lying at the core of capitalist accumulation. At stake in the Florence competition, then, was a problem that went much beyond the specifics of the brief. Such wider ambition was actually embedded in the brief itself, which left ample scope to the participants to reflect on vast territorial change to be initiated by building a new university settlement outside Florence's old core. Put slightly differently, the real problem posed by the competition, and reflected in the entries, was how to conceive of the city as a pedagogical issue, or how to approach the built environment as the embodiment of a fundamental problem about learning. Understood in this way, the two proposals were two sides of the same coin, both arguing for a disruption of the status quo of learning as one among many aspects of life that capitalism intended to control in quantitative terms. Moreover, both were critiques to the dominant way of thinking about education as the result of a life spent inside the controlled and safe haven of a campus.

In fact, the Italian universities were talked about not as campuses, but as territories. Among the most uttered words in the Italian postwar architectural debate, "territory" was being used in the early 1970s as the antonym of "campus", which in turn was widely accused and refused among the Italian architects who took part in the rethinking of universities. For Aymonino and Dardi, the campus was a "symbol of introverted, elitist education, certainly anachronistic for the current society"<sup>9</sup>, while Giancarlo De Carlo saw it as a place of "privatisation, even when the institution is a public one, because its services can be accessed only by a limited group and nobody else"<sup>10</sup>. More extreme criticism came from Giuseppe and Alberto Samonà, participants in the competition for the design of the University of Cagliari (1971-72), who opposed the idea of building "a zoo for teachers and students located within an area of 400 hectares"<sup>11</sup>. Most laconic of all, perhaps, was Italo Insolera and Pierluigi Cervellati's declaration: "no to the concentration campus"<sup>12</sup>.

As is often the case, though, the passage from words to drawings was not a linear one, nor one without contradictions. In some examples, the drawings almost linearly mirrored the proclaims. It is the case of Cervellati and Insolera, whose refusal of the concentration

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<sup>9</sup> Carlo Aymonino, Costantino Dardi, et al., *Concorso internazionale per la sistemazione dell'Università di Firenze. Relazione. Ariella* (Florence, 1971): 7. Università Iuav di Venezia – Archivio Progetti, Fondo Costantino Dardi. My translation from the Italian.

<sup>10</sup> Giancarlo De Carlo, 'Il territorio senza università', *Parametro*, 21-22 (1973): 38.

<sup>11</sup> Giuseppe Samonà et al., *Concorso nazionale per il piano urbanistico di sistemazione della sede dell'Università di Cagliari. Relazione illustrativa* (Cagliari, 1972): 15-16. Università Iuav di Venezia – Archivio Progetti, Fondo Giuseppe e Alberto Samonà. My translation from the Italian.

<sup>12</sup> Pier Luigi Cervellati and Italo Insolera, 'Aquarius', *Urbanistica*, 62 (April 1974): 56. My translation from the Italian.

campus matched their proposal not to build what the competition was asking (a new academic pole in the outskirts of Florence), as well as their drawings depicting the university not as a compound for specialists, but as a place of debate open to anyone and embedded in the city: a university defined as just an assembly under a big roof. Notwithstanding the conundrum of understanding their drawings as projects (that is, proposed scenarios) or representations of the existing situation, the logical connection of drawings and words also applies to Archizoom, whose description of an infinite urbanised landscape was, in fact, evoked mostly *per immagini*.

When it comes to a proposal like that of Aymonino and Dardi, however, doubts populate the mind of the observer. How are those neatly defined and bounded shapes, mostly represented from the top-down, not a message about keeping learning within some form of enclosure? Yet, despite their apparent traditionalism, even such proposal would have made for a rupture – a shock - as radical as that drawn by the Radicals. At least, it represented a clear departure from the status quo of the Italian university, an institution that, still in the early 1970s, survived with its old-fashioned power structures – a disaggregated congeries of atoms set against one another within a pyramid with no clear apex, as Giancarlo De Carlo described it<sup>13</sup>. The crucial aspect of projects like Aymonino and Dardi's, is not found in a more rational concentration of a university, hence of learning, in space. Rather, their *raison d'être* implies a fundamental lament of a wider scope, a desperate cry about the dying status of the public city under the blows of private speculation. Sitting alongside similar proposals, often authored by other so-called Rationalists – Vittorio Gregotti above all<sup>14</sup> - the gigantism and formalism of Aymonino and Dardi's proposal for Florence sent out a message of hope about the possible survival of a public sphere as the core of urbanity. This was depicted through a purposely-exaggerated scaling up of the academic buildings and their neighbouring service structures – an alternative type of exaggeration from the unstoppable landscapes drawn by Archizoom.

The discussion about these two chosen examples extends more generally to many of the projects for universities produced by the Italian architects in the early 1970s. If there is anything peculiar to the way in which Italian architecture responded to the renovation of higher education, it is that it was one occasion when a specific problem of political and social magnitude triggered discussion on the agency of the architectural project. Put in other words, speaking about learning, higher education, and universities, was interpreted as a way to speak about the city, and about architecture's role in relation to the city. Rather than for the inventions they might, or might have not, proposed within the four

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<sup>13</sup> See Giancarlo De Carlo, *La piramide rovesciata* (Bari: De Donato, 1968); *Pianificazione e disegno delle università* (Roma: Edizioni universitarie italiane, 1968).

<sup>14</sup> See Italo Rota, ed., *The Project for Calabria University and Other Architectural Works by Vittorio Gregotti* (Milan: Electa International, 1979). See also Francesco Zuddas, 'The Idea of the Università', *AA Files*, 75 (2017): 119–31.

walls of a new lecture room, a new laboratory, or a new academic library, the projects produced by the Italian architects are relevant as warnings about the scope and scale of education. More specifically, they stand as reminders of the twofold pedagogical and political essence of any architectural intervention. If architecture has anything to offer to society, this is to shed light on problems, rather than providing definite solutions. This is what happened in Italy for a few years in the aftermath of 1968, until the enthusiasm about reshaping vast territories on the backbone of expanded educational opportunities started fading. While an intellectual split inside the discipline of architecture was being officialised at the Milan Triennale in 1973, the much-exorcised spectre of the campus as a narrow-minded understanding of learning started growing increasingly real. A tour through the many, often incomplete, university “citadels” and peripheral academic poles built in the subsequent four decades throughout Italy will suffice as proof<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> See Sabrina Puddu, ‘Campus of cittadella? Il progetto di un’eredità’, in *Territori della conoscenza: Un progetto per Cagliari e la sua università*, ed. Sabrina Puddu, Martino Tattara, and Francesco Zuddas (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2017), 134–51.