



Italy Now? Country Positions in Architecture

Alberto Alessi (Ed.)

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What does it mean to practice architecture today?

Does Italian architecture exist? What characterizes it? What values and objectives do you refer to when designing your architecture and why?

These are the questions recently put to twenty cutting-edge architectural firms working in Italy today. The answers come together in *Italy Now? Country Positions in Architecture*, which presents the architects' written responses in parallel with their design work.

Edited by Alberto Alessi, the book also contains critical essays by Pier Vittorio Aureli and Gabriele Mastrigli. Noted Italian photographers Gabriele Basilico, Francesco Jodice, Armin Linke, and Alberto Muciaccia have contributed their visions of Italy—the land and people as well as the architecture—to deepen the context of this book.

Based on an exhibit held at Cornell University as well as on two related conferences, one in Ithaca and the other in New York City, *Italy Now?* offers an intriguing look at contemporary Italian architecture—its physical expression and the thinking behind it.

Presents the work and philosophy of 20 leading Italian architectural practices

Insights into what makes Italian architecture distinctive from its leading practitioners

With critical essays, and images from noted Italian photographers

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Giuseppe Bardini, Milano, 1958

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Cino ZUCCHI

1 How do you define architecture? What does it mean to practice architecture today?

All attempts to define architecture try and condense the sense in a synthetic phrase, a slogan, and the results are often slightly ridiculous. However, in the form of a Zen aphorism, and paraphrasing Wittgenstein, we could define the meaning of the word "architecture" as the void left by all the other words in the dictionary. The limits of this known world, of its conceptual territory, increase today with new explorations, blurring and widening its borders each day.

We regret more than one thing about ancient art: the ability to be read on several levels. The Virgin of the Rocks or Saint Andrew of Mantua are, at the same time, objects of popular devotion and abstract machines that make many grades of interpretative sophistication possible. A work of architecture lives a double existence of intellectual product and phenomenal event: a stable object, founded on technical knowledge and at the same time able to generate thousands of perceptive "casualties."

This is what architecture should be thought out in depth, as a structure, disassembled into a thousand perceptions that need to be reassembled into another subject, into a different structure that is no longer ours. We would like architecture to be like a beautiful song: sentimental mathematics.

2 Does Italian architecture exist? How can it best be spoken about? What characterizes it?

Does a "national character" exist in architecture? I truly don't believe so. I am convinced that what we interpret as "spirit of place" or "local character" is often simply the reiteration of an "imported" invention. I think of Bramante coming from Urbino to Milan, of Fra Giordano who was called upon to consult for the London Bridge, of the colonial Jesuit exportation in Latin America, of the wooden Palladianism in the southern United States, of Luis Buñuel who emigrated and invented a "Brazilian" architecture, of the Chicago of the "German" Mies van der Rohe.

If it is true that the prime Aldo Rossi cannot be read but on the background of the great farm houses of the Po valley and the prime Frank Gehry on the fragmentation of the suburbs of Los Angeles, what should Aldo Rossi do when he goes to Japan? "Italian style" or his interpretation of the place?

The new Italian generation lives, in any case, in a totally eclectic culture; the Internet is a type of common fatherland that permits, as in contemporary restaurants, any sort of "fusion." Italian architects live, instead, in a sort of "common

Cino ZUCCHI

1 Come definire l'architettura? Cosa vuol dire fare architettura oggi?

Tutti i tentativi di definizione dell'architettura cercano di condensare il senso in una frase sintetica, uno slogan, risultando leggermente ridicoli. Ma, in forma di aforisma Zen—e parafrasando Wittgenstein—potremmo definire il significato della parola architettura come il vuoto lasciato da tutte le altre parole del dizionario. I limiti di questo mondo conosciuto, il quale territorio concettuale, si ampliano oggi in nuove esplorazioni, sfociano e allargano i loro confini ogni giorno.

Dell'arte di un tempo rimpiangiamo più di tutte una cosa: la capacità di essere lette su più livelli. La Vergine delle Rocce o il Sant'Andrea di Mantova sono al contempo oggetti di devozione popolare e macchine astratte, che rendono possibili molti gradi di sofisticazione interpretativa. Un'opera di architettura vive la doppia esistenza di prodotto intellettuale e di evento fenomenico: un oggetto stabile, fondato su di una conoscenza tecnica, e il contempo capace di generare mille "casualties" percettive.

L'architettura dovrebbe essere pensata in profondità, come struttura, essa deve decomporre in mille percezioni che devono ricomporsi in un altro soggetto, in una struttura diversa, non più nostra. Vorremmo che l'architettura fosse come una bella canzone: una matematica sentimentale.

2 Esiste un'architettura italiana? In che senso se ne può parlare? Cosa la caratterizza?

Esiste un "carattere nazionale" nell'architettura? Non lo credo proprio. Sono convinto che ciò che noi interpretiamo come "spirito del luogo" o "carattere locale" è spesso semplicemente l'iterazione di un'invenzione importata. Penso a Bramante che da Urbino viene a Milano, a Fra Giordano che è chiamato a consulto per il London Bridge, all'esportazione coloniale dell'architettura gotica in America Latina, al Palladianesimo inglesi negli Stati Uniti del sud, a Luis Buñuel che emigrando inventa un'architettura "brasiliana", alla Chicago del "tedesco" Mies van der Rohe.

Se è vero che il primo Aldo Rossi non può che essere letto sullo sfondo delle grandi case padane e il primo Frank Gehry su quello della frammentazione dei suburbi di Los Angeles, cosa deve fare Aldo Rossi quando va in Giappone? L'"italian style" o la sua interpretazione del luogo?

La nuova generazione italiana vive in ogni caso in una cultura totalmente eclettica; Internet è una sorta di patria comune.

Residential buildings, Jungfrau former industrial area in Giussano, Varese, 2000

Photo: Massimo Sestini, www.cucchi.com, www.5+1aa.com, www.cucchi.com, Varese, 2000



Alberto Alessi is an architect and curator based in Zurich. He teaches architecture theory at the HTA in Luzern and recently curated the international colloquium Spaziarte on the relation between contemporary architecture and art. He is the author of the monograph *Heinz Tesar* (2002) and coauthor (with Jo Coenen) of *Shared Architecture* (2006).

Mohsen Mostafavi is dean of the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning and the Arthur L. and Isabel B. Weisenberger Professor in Architecture at Cornell University. From 1995 to 2004 he was chairman of the Architectural Association School of Architecture, and before that director of the Master of Architecture I Program at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University. His recent publications include *Approximations: The Architecture of Peter Märkli*; *Surface Architecture* (coauthor David Leatherbarrow), which won the 2004 Bruno Zevi CICA Book Award; and *Structure as Space*.