REFLECTIONS

THE ITALIAN SCHOOL OF PROCESS MORPHOLOGY. ROOTS, METHODS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The following three texts intend to summarize the formation, development and future prospects of the Italian school of urban morphology. The problem is not simple, since the related debate never established a common ground. However, one can recognize a shared aim to use the analysis of the built environment for operational purposes. These studies are, therefore, “architecturally oriented”, showing a complementarity of methods, with other schools of thought, among them, the geographers of Conzenian traditions.

The following texts inevitably refer to the specific field of study of the authors, which is that of process morphology. Nevertheless, we believe that this presentation, albeit partial, contains matters of interest for our foreign colleagues, especially those who are investigating built form to plan its transformation. The three texts address, in order: the origin of process morphology studies, focusing on the Roman school, where some notions that guided subsequent studies were born; the formation of a new science of building based on an innovative method of reading and designing the existing reality, mostly thanks to Gianfranco Caniggia’s contribution; future prospects, which open up new fields of investigation, new specificities, (and also differentiations) within ongoing research.

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Particularly in the current conditions, I believe, it could be useful to go back to reflecting on the roots of morphological studies in Italy as they are, in fact, the evidence of a concrete approach to the architectural design based on logical and didactically transmissible bases. These studies were aimed, especially in the Roman School, at the formation of general and shared methods derived from the reading of built reality and were aimed at the positive study of how it could be transformed. Studying them is useful, precisely in a period like the present one in which, on the one hand, morphology studies are gradually assuming an increasingly abstract and independent drift from design and, on the other, professional practice is aimed, instead, at the marketing of architecture through interpretations based on the perception and spectacular communication of the results.

The studies from which the researches on the formative processes of the urban form in the Italian area have been developed are above all known, abroad, through the texts of Gianfranco Caniggia. It is also known that these derive from the teachings of Saverio Muratori, whose texts, however, are less known for having never been translated into English. Even less known is the fact that the origin of this school of thought dates back much earlier, at least to the interwar period and to the studies of innovators such as Gustavo Giovannoni, Giovan Battista Milani, Enrico Calandra and others. The common thread that binds these researches, developed largely through teaching in the Faculty of Architecture, is the “reading” of the built reality which not only has the project as its aim but, in many respects, is itself a project.

The method which, starting from the 1930s, will be coherently developed over time, explicitly starts from a critique of the Modern Movement, of the new conditions deriving from the emergence of new uncritically accepted modes of production, the internationalization of design tools, the widespread serialization of forms, the loss, above all, of the synthetic and unitary notions of organism and process. These notions are inextricably linked to each other as it is not possible to think of the form of architecture and of the city detached from the principle of becoming. They are the founding notions on which reading, criticism (i.e. interpretation and the resulting choices) and the very way of working of the architect are based.\(^1\)

The definition of organism, and that of organicity derived from it, have very little to do not only with the naturalistic matrices used throughout the history of architecture, but also with the Cartesian analogy between organism and machine.\(^2\) The new meaning of the term captured, in fact, that “forming” capacity recognized by Kant, which every organism possesses, in which the
individual elements are not simply assembled, according to a finality, to form the whole, but are themselves shaped by the whole. Basically, it is the difference between Le Corbusier’s conception of the house understood as a “machine for living”, where the building is an organism through the mere subordination of the parts to its function, and the house understood by Muratori as the result of a formative process in which the part adapts, proportions, updates through successive phases which become part, in the critically contemporary age, of the conscience of the builder.³

These notions run across all the research conducted in Italy and their use is not only cognitive, but substantially architectural. The interpretations of historical buildings by Gustavo Giovannoni (1873-1947), the great urban and territorial conceptions of Saverio Muratori (1910-1973) and the studies on the transformation of urban fabrics by Gianfranco Caniggia (1933-1987), are related by not being only descriptions or explanations of constructed reality: they are readings oriented by a general, unifying and operative thought that distinguishes them from the studies of other disciplines such as history or geography.

In order to place these studies historically, it is essential to take into account how they started from a close criticism of the fact that not having taken account of the organicity itself of history leads to the formation of many contradictory forms of modernity, which can be found in the discord between the intuitive technical-analytical and artistic component. For this reason, the method had to be transmitted to the students through the exercise of “restitution” as a technique for extracting, from the multitude of forms transmitted by history, some general rules. It should be noted that there is an evident link between the premises of the Roman School between the two wars and the “redesign” exercises proposed by Muratori and Caniggia in their courses, through which the student had to retrace, with the means of the architect, the logical and typological formative processes of urban fabrics and buildings.⁴

Against the specialist drift of modern architecture, according to Giovannoni, the method of investigation of the built reality had to be “integral”, that is to say by examining the phenomena that contribute to the formation of the organism as a unit, under the various aspects “... constructive and aesthetic, of practical spatial and financial needs and expressions in external representation, of relationship with civilization and social conditions”.⁵

In other words Giovannoni identifies the center of the problem, in other words, in the splitting of the original organic nature of the project into different, dedicated aspects of modern thought on architecture, starting from the positivist line of thought, identified in the sequence that originates in Schopenhauer’s affirmations of Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung⁶ on the struggle between weight and rigidity in architecture. It develops with the constructivist theories of Viollet le Duc exposed in Entretiens sur l’Architecture, (Viollet le Duc, E. 1863) ending with the questions posed by new building experiments and from new materials to
which the new theorists, such as Le Corbusier in *Vers une Architecture nouvelle*,\(^7\) give an answer in terms of machine aesthetics and industrial production.

Alongside this line of thought, Giovannoni identifies other strands of theories that favour aesthetic rules (the allusion to the arbitrariness of modernist composition of the facade is evident and to its hidden derivation, through Hermann Muthesius, from the Anglophone picturesque tradition) or the use of psychology à la Wolfflin.

This interpretation of modern architecture as a laceration of an original, shared totality is a prelude to the Muratorian interpretation of modern history, as it was set out in the period that coincides with the first phase of critical elaboration of Caniggia’s thought, in his first post-war writings and in the lectures given at the Faculty of Architecture in Rome at the end of the 1950s.

The ideas of Giovannoni, Foschini, Milani, Fasolo are often accused by modern Italian historiography of “traditionalism”.

In fact, theirs is a completely up-to-date critique of contemporary internationalism, fertile in its consequences, inserted with full awareness into the climate of the current debate. It is not a question, in other words, of the contrast between conservatives and innovators, as Caniggia observes “on the one hand people unaware of the European cultural framework, and on the other hand informed and participating people. If anything, it can be ascertained that the apparent autonomy of the former with regard to the diatopic developments of architecture and the intentional result of their attention to a relative autochthonous experience, of their continuous referring to participation in the ‘place’ obliging a continuous critical choice which leads to the exclusion of ways and behaviors deemed incongruous to the place itself; rather preferring, from the external experience, to assume the values that are openly non-oppositional to the Roman building”\(^8\).

Moreover, it is enough to read what Giovannoni writes about the modern city understood as a “cinematic organism”, where the new role of routes and the potential future urban structure is recognized, to realize how he was fully aware of the conditions induced by modernity.\(^9\) He admits how the theoretical innovations of the Modern Movement, although disregarded by the results, constituted an attempt to overcome the eclectic drift of the late nineteenth century by attempting to reconstruct a form of new totality of the project.

The dichotomy between “architectural imagination” and construction operated by eclecticism and, to an exasperated extent, by the modernism of the beginning of the twentieth century, constitutes in fact the origin of that decadence of the principle of truth which had historically constituted the ethical centre of the architect’s practice. Giovannoni does not reduce the problem to a simple cause-effect relationship, introducing that notion of implicit, non-mechanical relationship that Caniggia will develop with great clarity in the exposition of
the forms of “direct and indirect” legibility of architecture especially in the second of the two volumes dedicated to the design of base building design.\textsuperscript{10}

A prominent figure within the School in the period between the two wars is that of Enrico Calandra, a Sicilian architect who, from 1930 to 1950, held in Rome the chair of \textit{Building characters} and who had Saverio Muratori as assistant from 1944.\textsuperscript{11}

Calandra’s teaching shared Giovannoni’s idea of an “integral” study of the built environment aimed at architectural design. It was a completely counter-current position with respect to the parallel teachings given in other faculties, based on classifications of a functionalist nature. Calandra spoke of an “operating idealism”\textsuperscript{12} meaning, precisely, the necessary passage from the pre-war materialistic conception (of an economic-industrial and scientific-technical nature) to abstraction and spirituality which leads the architect to aesthetic synthesis, freeing it from the excessive weight of contingencies.

Muratorian thought, right from the first syntheses of the 1940s, seems to largely take up and develop some of the themes posed by Calandra and to define in scientific terms those intuited by Giovannoni, not only substantially recognizing the same splits in modern history and including modernism among the eclecticisms (environmental aestheticisms) that have lost the order that regulates the unitary formation of architecture, but reconsidering, more generally, the fragmentation of language that precedes the First World War as the origin of the crisis of modern language.

Saverio Muratori, however, within the framework of the innovative conception of the Roman School, introduced a key notion that would substantially change the point of view on studies of urban form. Indeed, in his cyclical idea of history, a fundamental role is played by the condition of crisis of architecture as an expression of a radical social change. In the widespread meaning before the Muratorian definition, the term “crisis” had the meaning of sudden and decisive modification that breaks established equilibriums, generally producing negative effects. In fact, the Greek term \textit{κρίνω}, in its original meaning of “to distinguish”, provides the meaning that comes closest to the Muratorian connotation. For Muratori, transformations in architecture always refer to a civil crisis and are understandable only within an “organic historicity” in which each phase of change must be read within the framework of a structure of correlated facts. In other words, there is a general ratio that allows us to outline the succession of the different cycles and historical phases. Claude Henry de Saint-Simon had already intuited the theme of the succession of organic epochs, in which the structure of knowledge is static, centred on an apparently immutable dominant idea, alternating with critical epochs, in which that same idea suddenly changes, creating the conditions of a social transformation.\textsuperscript{13} In the years in which Muratorian definition developed, the notion of crisis was, moreover, at the centre of reflections on the dramatic transformations
that were taking place in post-war Europe. In the climate of the Ricostruzione (Reconstruction), the same optimistic ideas of progress and modernity, with their apparently rational implications, began to be questioned. The translation, in 1946, of José Ortega y Gasset’s book on the subject had a great influence in Italy in spreading the recognition of possible organic epochs that follow phases of conflict. But, more generally, Muratorian research took place in the climate of the “crisis literature” that had pervaded European culture since at least the 1920s, when the argument appears, in the cultural environment of Germany economically and socially destroyed by the war, with Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte (The Decline of the West. A morphology of world history outlines), a monumental work by Oswald Spengler, of immediate success throughout Europe. It is a pessimistic text, which considers the crisis that Western civilization is going through as a decadence: “We cannot change the fact that we were born as men of an incipient winter and not in the solar heights of a mature civilization of the time of Phidias or Mozart” (Sprengler 1918 - 1922). In Spengler’s thought, alien to any idea of progress, civilizations are born, develop and decay as in a natural cycle. According to an interpretation not very different from the one proposed by Muratori, history has its own periodic structure, a general “organic logic” which must be understood starting from the immense reservoir of concrete data.

In 1935 Johan Huizinga published a fundamental text defining the notion of crisis. His *In de schaduwen van morgen* (*In the Shadows of Tomorrow*), translated into Italian by Einaudi in 1937 with the title *La crisi della civiltà* (The Crisis of Civilization), he tackles the theme of the massification of industrial society and the decline of spiritual values that will lead to the disaster of dictatorial populisms. Huizinga, however, still considers the idea of development fundamental and: “... we know this with certainty - he says -, a return to the ancient, in general, cannot be given”.

If Muratori has Spengler’s cyclical vision of history in common, he does not share his catastrophic conception, just as he does not share the ideological interpretation of mass-man, proposed by Huizinga, which leads us to interpret the crisis as decline. The crisis for Muratori is, instead, a regeneration.

Muratori identifies four cycles of the critical process, starting from the antecedent of the Renaissance, which run through European thought, from the Enlightenment to the contemporary need for an organic critique. The understanding of the crisis occurs only in the definition of the whole of society as a totality whose history unfolds cyclically through a law of permanence and a law of change. Every rapid transformation, in society, as in the territorial and urban organism, indicates the inadequacy of the previous cycle to the new conditions, which is “necessary” as a presupposition for the new conditions of equilibrium.

This notion of crisis, which was to become central to the research of the Muratorian school, was in reality misunderstood, I believe, by contemporaries
who have criticized this system of thought as “mechanical”: linked to an
idea of urban structure formation and transformation as a continuous, linear,
uninterrupted development. Muratori, on the other hand, states that crises
are anything but exceptional phenomena in the life of a society but “on the
contrary, they become its typical aspect”.18

The entire increase of an urban entity is the locus of a crisis. Hence the corollary
that the study of a city consists in the study of its formative process19 and only
its critical interpretation allows choices for the future.

In conclusion, the critical reading of the built world has a not only hermeneutical
value, but an ontological one. It concerns the principles and causes of operating,
the study of the design as a transformation of the existing and the conception of
the past as “storia operante” (operating history).

In the last phase of his intense production, Muratori was above all interested
in developing the general part of his system of knowledge rather than in the
form of the city and architecture. A central notion was that of “civil ecumene”,
a notion linked to the time in which it was formulated, but which, with the
globalization crisis, should perhaps be reconsidered in a new light. According
to Guido Marinucci’s synthesis of it, ecumene is the vast civil area understood
in historical and geographical terms, which generates a common culture20. The
Chinese, Indian and Western Mediterranean ecumenes, which Muratori studies
in his texts, are spatio-temporal unities corresponding to as many categorical
aspects of consciousness.21

As will become clear from Matteo Ieva’s following text, Gianfranco Caniggia
systematized and innovated the complex Muratorian legacy by deepening the
problem of understanding not only the cultured language of monuments, but
also the “speech” of base building, founding a new discipline whose value it
will be all the greater the more the cultural climate in which his didactic and
design experiments were carried out is taken into account.

Caniggia warns of how it is necessary to extract the hidden meanings behind the
surface of things, to trace their profound significance. The world inhabited by man,
houses as well as monuments, becomes, along this path, not a simple construction,
but writing, and the task of the architect-structor is to be able to read not only
the message that writing transmits, but to decipher behind the appearance of what
the built reality appears to be, the shape of how it will, or should be.

In this, therefore, Caniggia seems to have inherited, and in turn transmitted, the
most profound and authentic teaching of the Roman School. In the ability to
grasp the individual aspect of architectural and urban phenomena, their being
unique and unrepeatable, and to recognizing, together, its belonging to the
great vital flow of the anthropized world, returning it to us as a constituent and
inseparable part of a shared heritage.
In conclusion, I believe that a pervasive rhetoric of contemporaneity and multidisciplinarity has today overshadowed some founding convictions not only of the morphological-proces school, but of Italian architectural culture in general. The main one among these, I believe, is that the present condition is the result of remote causes that generate it: that it is the outcome of a process.

For this reason, the history of the origin of morphological thought in Italy, based on the concrete experience of the existing built reality and its formative processes, could provide to the contemporary architect very topical matter for a general reflection, starting from the definition of his discipline and warning him against the rhetoric of multidisciplinarity. If architecture is syncretic by nature, its science is not the sum of other sciences. For this reason, the architect should derive from the exegesis of the text (which for us is the built world in its becoming, considered in its historical and social context) his own organic system of knowledge. It would be useful to go back to the origin of things, to the real and concrete problems of our profession, since theory for the architects is not a series of general, rational and rigidly consistent principles from which logically derive indications for operating. It is, above all, a stratification of experiences, generalizations of what one does.

For an architect, the method is still ultimately the attempt at systematization of the practice that laboriously tries to bring back, through the comprehension of the forms (morphology), the fragmented and particular aspect of each gesture to the generality and totality of knowledge, however changeable and contradictory.

NOTES

1. G. Strappa, Unità dell’organismo architettonico. Note sulla formazione e trasformazione dei caratteri degli edifici (Bari: Dedalo, 1995).


18. Ibid.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


ITALIJANSKA ŠKOLA PROCESNE MORFOLOGIJE.
KORENI, METODI I BUDUĆI PRAVCI RAZVOJA

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Tri teksta imaju za cilj da sumiraju formiranje, razvoj i buduće izgledove italijanske škole urbanih
morfologije. Problem nije jednostavan, s obzirom da debata o ovoj temi nikada nije uspostavila
zajedničku osnovu. Međutim, može se prepoznati zajednički cilj da se analiza izgrađenog
okruženja koristi u operativne svrhe. Ove studije su, dakle, „arhitektonski orijentisane“, koje sa
drugim školama mišljenja pokazuju komplementarnost metoda, među kojima su i geografi koji
prate Konzenovu liniju.

Tekstovi koji slede neminovno se odnose na specifično polje proučavanja autora, a to je procesna
morfologija. Ipak, smatramo da ovi prikazi, delimično sadrže razloge od interesa za međunarodnu
publiku, a specifično za one koji istražuju građenu sredinu i da bi planirali njenu transformaciju.

Tri teksta se bave, po redosledu: poreklu proučavanja proceduralne morfologije, fokusirajući
se na školu u Rimu, odakle potiču neki pojmovi koji su vodili naredne studije; formiranje nove
nauke o građenju zasnovane na inovativnom metodu čitanja i projektovanja postojeće stvarnosti,
najviše zahvaljujući doprinosu Đanfranka Kanide; buduće perspektive, koje otvaraju nova polja
istraživanja, nove specifičnosti, (i takođe diferencijacije) u okviru tekućih istraživanja.

KLJUČNE REČI: PROCESNA MORFOLOGIJA, ITALI