2. GIANFRANCO CANIGGIA’S THOUGHT AND THE CONTRIBUTION TO THE ITALIAN SCHOOL OF URBAN MORPHOLOGY

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The reconstruction proposed by G. Strappa on the origin of typological-morphological studies in Italy in the School of Architecture of Rome clarifies the interest of S. Muratori, first, and his pupil G. Caniggia, later, in the multiple theme of reconstructing anthropized space. This reconstruction goes beyond the traditional positivist heritage that had produced noteworthy studies but failed to grasp the sense of the phenomena processuality. As is well known, Caniggia’s education in the school established by Giovannoni cannot simply be attributed to the close connection and line of reasoning with his master, although evident. The fertile teachings he received encompass a wide range of interests which nourish his judgment in various ways, even in the realm of modernity principles. This is noteworthy considering that Muratori had given up on the “willingness” towards modernity after Venetian experience and his remarkable research on the city of Venice, which was integrated into the work titled “Studi per un’operante storia urbana di Venezia”. A climate of critical thought, expertly summarized by Strappa, characerized the Roman School and represented a dialectic vision of modernity. This view was both complementary and opposing, as the individuals of that era perceived modernity with disillusionment and caution, refraining from being enticed by the allure of the new while still upholding traditional values.

The teaching of G. Giovannoni, G. B. Milani and V. Fasolo inside this didactic dialectic will be particularly noteworthy for Caniggia. He borrows the notion of “organism” from them, which S. Muratori later develops into a general theory of interpretation of reality. Caniggia also develops the concept of “legibility” of buildings that in an original way, expanding on the idea with a critical perspective. He aims to prevent subjective interpretation by considering the built environment and architecture in general in expressing the “essential” contents, as an expression of a civil culture. Instead, he recognizes the value of Muratori for understanding the type as a concept and articulating it through the construction of a comprehensive theoretical-methodological system, which is essential for the studying various anthropic manifestations at all scales (such as territorial, urban, aggregative, and building). This powerful legacy has attracted the attention of his main students, who are committed to understanding and disseminating it in its almost indefinite variations. Particularly, these students, who were trained by Muratori’s renowned assistants - P. Maretto, A. Giannini, G. Marinucci, G. Caniggia, G. Cataldi and the brothers R. and S. Bollati – have endeavored to apply the principles of his school to the systematic study practice.
of the built reality practiced today in the Italian academia. At the same time, Caniggia made an original and important contribution to the topics of basic and specialized building through his intense but relatively short research activity from 1960s to the 1980s. In subsequent sections, his theory will be explored in detail, along with his extensive teaching and design experience.

Caniggia is therefore an interpreter of the teachings of the Modena master, projecting them into a personal perspective that contemplates knowledge. In this dual relationship, which can be understood as two pathways, it is possible to recognize the true meaning of the fusion of horizons that unifies two parts: the study (including the conception and method), framed within the problematic trajectories of Muratorian theory, and the subject (interpreter-pupil) who reconstructs a potential sense of the broad speculative scope. This scope covers a horizon that originates from the same source and integrates with something else that can be acknowledged as a shared awareness of knowledge.

The process of understanding, it is, after all, an operation that can be framed in the essential features of the “hermeneutical circle” generated by the interaction between the interpreter and his “subject” since the critical action of understanding determines a fusion in “ever new” forms and vital”, arriving at a correlative link that takes into account the continuous dialectic: question and search for the answer.

According to H. G. Gadamer, this fusion can be described as a “circle that encompasses and includes everything visible from a certain point”. Therefore, it cannot be considered fully accomplished in its recognition of a potential identity without considering the hypothesis of otherness. For Caniggia, this is not a programmatic contradiction, as it stems from the same “principles” that could be tentatively defined as the “first” in articulating the theory (including aspects such as type, organism, ethics, and aesthetics). However, it represents a diversity in the enduring imprint left by Muratori, presented as an objective perspective on the points considered uncertain or in need of updating, if not somewhat redundant in the context of architecture. Caniggian research can be seen as the “deconstruction” of Muratori’s work, specifically questioning the foundations of Muratorian phenomenology, which is then reexamined with a focus on reconstructing its tangible impact as a distinct “realist ontology”.

As it is known, deconstruction is only applicable to what can be recognized as unified and continuous. The presence of an organic framework within Muratori’s thesis undoubtedly provides Caniggia with the opportunity to proceed cautiously in the process of dissecting its components. From this perspective, we can reinterpret Caniggia’s work as a deliberate exploration of the acquired themes, seeking multiple meanings with the aim of diversifying their significance, particularly in the realm of architecture. By closely examining the “lines” and line spacing in Muratorian statements, we can grasp the diverse content contained within them. It is important to assume that
truth is not always found in apparent evidence because, at times, there lies an “unmanifested” aspect, of which the visible represents only a “trace.”

It is within this line of reasoning that Caniggia’s work retrospectively reinterprets Muratorian’s, providing a personal framework for the development of his own idea-cogito. This framework serves as an avenue towards a renewed approach, connected to certain lines of study proposed by the master, while simultaneously directing complementary research efforts to establish a distinct stance in the ongoing debate of that era.

Furthermore, Caniggia exhibited perseverance and passion in his teaching endeavors, which, along with his projects, formed the experimental foundation for his intellectual growth and the formulation of a theory that engages with the prevailing trends fueling the discourse of those years.

In this concise allusion to both figures, we already observe the diverse objectives that Caniggia pursues, alongside what he deems significant in Muratori’s teachings. While he aligns himself with the paths that reflect the master’s interests, there is an evident departure that becomes more pronounced at a certain stage. Muratori’s interests progressively gravitate towards a philosophical and speculative trajectory, exploring grand systems of the world and their application to comprehending global phenomena. However, Caniggia chooses not to unconditionally endorse the validity of Muratorian ideas, deliberately focusing on aspects closely related to architectural themes—those that hold complete meaning within historical expectations and possibilities. These aspects captured the attention of the entire scientific community during his era.

For instance, Caniggia dedicates extensive study to urban fabrics and the “language” of the built environment, initiating thorough investigations into specific built contexts with a “scientific” outlook. His aim is to examine and grasp the tangible reality, providing evidence of the temporal and spatial aspects. This approach allows him to approach the quest for “truth,” seeking to uncover the intricate “rules” that grammatically and syntactically govern the structuring of anthropic systems. In other words, it involves a reversal of the man-nature relationship, manifested in various “forms” such as buildings, aggregates, urban areas, and territories. These forms are defined and generate structural phenomena that concretely manifest their specific identity within the laws that have determined and expressed their essence throughout history.

Based on the concept of architecture as a language, Caniggia builds upon the Muratorian perspective of interpreting the built space. This perspective relies on the undeniable assumption of a historical process, supported by the structural mechanics that perceive the individuality of phenomena as the result of distinct spatial-temporal conditions.

Within this research context, Caniggia recalls the notions of spontaneous consciousness and critical consciousness, which he explores through the
adoption of a principle recognizing the specificity of localized architectural language. This language carries within it a presupposition of continuity and diachrony, signifying its temporal evolution as an identity entity. By doing so, he explains that the main reason behind the progressive expansion of architectural work, driven by a critical approach, is the contamination of languages that occurred during the transition to late Enlightenment rationalism. Additionally, this expansion is influenced by the gradual introduction of specific building elements into the “language” of fundamental construction.

This deduction aligns with continuous investigations conducted in the field of knowledge and interpretation of the distinctive languages belonging to different cultures. Caniggia delves into the unique nature of spatially identified “langue,” demonstrating a deep cultural interest. This engagement leads to the construction of a structured thought on the foundations of a complex set of rules, deeply rooted and codified within every linguistic-architectural entity, necessary for the project as a means of collective communication. Caniggia discovers idioms to be used critically in the individual act of the project, understood as an “invention” in its etymological sense of discovery or revelation, emphasizing novelty rather than parasitic “creativity.” In this context, creativity is seen by linguists as the individual’s ability to utilize language independently, implementing their own words.

Thus, the past becomes an inherent component of the project, reflecting qualities of persistence, stability, constancy, extension, and succession of (linguistic) characters. It embodies an ongoing process that encompasses the concept of type in continuous transformation, continuously sought as a historical “judgment.”

Caniggia methodologically organizes the orderly recognition of linguistic diversity in Western Europe, dividing it into two primary cultural areas for interpretive purposes. The first area encompasses the Mediterranean regions, characterized by continuous masonry construction systems that possess an idiomatic conception, being simultaneously heavy, plastic, load-bearing, and enclosing. The second area is the Northern/Middle European geographical region, distinguished by discrete, light, load-bearing, and non-enclosing systems with a wide range of nuances and hybridizing accents. This division contributes to the construction of a theory on the project, proposed with a hermeneutical foundation closely intertwined with interpretation.

The perspective employed signifies a “judgment” that leads us to view reading as an operative process. This reading is based on a logical and historical-processual assumption, not delving into secondary aspects of reality, such as the epiphenomena arising from the search for “sensations” evoked in individuals by the shape (visible or apparent) of architectural objects or the suggestions derived from their analysis. Instead, it is grounded in the existentialist style of thought within phenomenology.
Caniggia's engagement with phenomenological systematics, although influenced by structuralism, diverges from the current of thought that seeks to explain phenomena in architecture using psychological foundations as an interpretative exercise. The paradigm of his work lies in investigating reality through an awareness of the world as a “common perception,” providing the basis for the existence of a given phenomenon and effecting meaningful change through collective participation. For instance, he considers every civic achievement as the outcome of a collective endeavor, with the individual author (and their work) merely serving as the means of progress.

Based on these postulates, Caniggia conducts numerous analyses of urban organisms (such as Como, Florence, Venzone, Benevento, Isernia, etc.), reconstructing their original framework and subsequent phases of diachronic transformation, ultimately leading to the exploration of the project theme. These readings significantly contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge in urban analysis.

The two monographs on basic building, co-authored with Maffei, elucidate the fundamental concepts essential for interpreting the structure of aggregates. These concepts consider their spatial and temporal location, analyze their interrelationships, and establish hierarchical connections within the urban system.

The thesis that Caniggia presents aims to clarify the complex system of laws governing the formation and progressive transformation of aggregates. It is based on the idea that the consciousness of the result, preceding its realization, encompasses the notion of interconnected union among building organisms along a predetermined path. This a priori synthesis reflects collective action translated into the organic unity of the concept-judgment/thought-representation system, which interprets and describes the totality of components and characteristics involved in the process, ultimately defining the constructed outcome. In this case as well, Caniggia employs an interpretative method of reality supported by the application of a valid concept on an intuitive-perceptive and practical level. This approach manifests in a logical and comprehensive evaluation derived from the experience of civil culture.

In a similar vein to the distinction made between the building (object) and its concept (type), Caniggia proposes a scale-based understanding of the aggregate as a collection of buildings (objects) connected along a route. He also introduces the concept of urban fabric, which elucidates the governing law of the association among these elements within a specific historical process. This concept recognizes their variable formal and structural outcomes.

By researching the constitutive differences of fabrics that result in diachronically differentiated outcomes, Caniggia constructs an intricate array of typical cases, variants, and budding manifestations. These findings gradually enhance the wealth of acquired knowledge. The parallel reconstruction of processes,
distinguished by their spatial and temporal characteristics, reveals the genesis of courtyard houses, pseudo-rows, terraced houses, row houses, palaces, churches, convents, and more. This reinforces the thesis that the stratified palimpsest of the city and its fabrics, despite not always being organic and continuous, can, when interpreted with appropriate tools, unveil the composite accumulation of stratified processes manifested in diverse ways.

Caniggia ardently develops a method for studying urban phenomena, drawing from extensive research conducted in various cities that serve as significant representations of how the aforementioned concepts are realized. The reconstruction of identified urban fabrics and hierarchies gradually leads to the recognition of a specific syntax intrinsically connected to the semantics of the systems comprising urban space. The syntax can be observed in the mutual relationships established between structurally distinct elements within different temporal phases of a single city, representing an “identified” building type with its specific mode of aggregation. The semantics, on the other hand, encompass the meaning (including symbolic meaning, such as churches, palaces, libraries, museums, theaters from the nineteenth century onward) inherent to each element and their collective significance. Culturally distinct syntax and semantics contribute to the recognition of a specific “urban” identity characterized by its own rules, dynamic typicalities, exceptions, and an authentic message that defines its raison d’être and serves as a means of community and communication.

In concluding this brief overview of Caniggia’s speculative and research trajectories within the school of urban morphology in Italy, we acknowledge his commitment as an active architect. Reflecting on his design experiences, as discussed in the introduction to the volume “Modern non Modern,” it becomes apparent why his projects can be considered “modern” within the framework that emphasizes his cautious participation in the Movement itself. The Movement is defined not as a style but as a collection of widespread needs, symptoms, and aspirations aimed at achieving a renewed unity of the architectural organism.

Considering current trends, Caniggia’s rigorous pursuit of architectural rules continues to hold relevance for fostering reflection. In a landscape where the prevailing notion seems to be chaos, embraced by many architects and paradoxically transformed into intentional expression, an excessive form of freedom emerges where creativity plays a significant role, sometimes leading to indiscriminate use of means and techniques. Caniggia’s idea of creativity aligns with Gregotti’s expression defining it as the “consciousness of modification.” The term itself implies the imperative presupposition of consciousness, which extends beyond self-reflection and represents the interconnection of all things with each other—an understanding rooted in science and knowledge founded on solid and demonstrable foundations. It involves a profound awareness of
the essence and representation of things “ontically” in their presentation to
the world. In other words, the role of the architect who seeks “creative doing”
today must be accompanied by a full awareness of current events and a
necessary foundation for launching into the future as a critique of the present.

To highlight some significant projects, we can mention the fabric projects
referencing cases in Pescara, Venice, Florence, Rome, and Genoa. These
projects exhibit a direct relationship with concepts such as formation,
transformation, congruence, and yield. The project involving a special type,
explored through experiences in Bagno di Romagna and Bologna, delves into
the emergence of architectural relationships, the principle of unity/distinction,
and the necessity of sharing. Noteworthy projects also include “urban planning”
projects and restoration projects, evident in consultancy work for certain cities
and interventions on important buildings.

Finally, the tragically “interrupted” project on the expansion of the headquarters
of the “Valle Giulia” Faculty of Architecture represents a distinct case and
serves as Caniggia’s final reflection, albeit a bittersweet one. It resembles
Michelangelo’s “unfinished” works, embodying a complex legacy that heralds
the opening of a new horizon in design research.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


