Neoliberty & co.  
The Architectural Review  
50s Italian historicism  
Manuel López Segura

7. ZEVI, Bruno: Alcune opere degli architetti torinesi alla fine del '50. Cas.-Cont., no. 216, February/March 1956, p. 306; Scarpa, in the context of his work, appears in a-priori formalism, and finally experimental empiricism.  
12. BIBLIOGRAPHY: BIBLIOGRAPHY: References to architectural journals and books include: Casabella-Continuità, no. 215 (April/May 1957) (Figures 1 and 2). His text, “Continuità o crisi?”, referred through its title to the editorial of the first issue of the resurrected Casabella (no. 199, Dec./Jan 1953/54). Rogers could that seminal manifesto “Continuità”, which was the central idea of his intellectual project for an architecture of the post-war era: continuity with the labour of his predecessors at the front of the magazine, the martyr P. Pagano. This meant continuity with the principles of modernity. However, beyond this orthodox adscription, his idea of an uninterrupted path had to connect contemporary architecture not only with the most recent heritage of the Modern Movement, but with its deeper roots (the work of the proto-modern) and even with the whole arch of the history of architecture.

The revision of the project of modern architecture after the Second World War found in Italy and in the limited Kingdom two of its most prolific fora. However, the paths proposed to overcome its exhaustion were in some aspects divergent; the Italian return to history as a legitimate source to operate was intensely rejected by some of the leading figures of the British scene, more concerned with a revision in the light of sociology, new forms of urban aggregation, or the production of technology. Proof of this were two particular episodes: the discussion of Verre Velasca (1957), brought by Ernesto Rogers to CIAM 11 (Ottawa/59), consumed by his British and Dutch counterparts; and the so-called Neoliberty debate, arising from the publication of the issue 215 (April/May 1957) of Casabella-Continuità, which presented some works by the young turinese Gabetti and d'Isola, in collaboration with Giorgio Rainerti. This publication received intense responses not only from Italy, but from Britain too, among others that of Reyner Banham, who internationalized the debate through the pages of The Architectural Review (AR) with his "Neoliberty. The Italian Retreat from Modern Architecture" (April 1959). We will centre our study on this event. Our aim is to explore the different approaches present in both national contexts, the extent of their divergences and the reasons of their ultimate clash.

The existing literature that evokes the Neoliberty polemic has focused its attention on the contribution of the Italians, within the broader discussion of the recovery of history and rootslessness that was taking place in their country at that time. In contrast, little efforts have been devoted to try and understand the reasons underlying the rejection of Rogers’s revisionism, which was considered by the progressivistic architectural circles, particularly by the group around AR, where Banham collaborated from 1952 as a redactor and from 1959 as assistant executive editor, while Rogers directed Casabella between 1953 and 1964. This imbalance makes it relevant to study why the Italian stance of revision of modern architecture in the light of its historicity was not little understood in Britain, as the pages of AR attest.

Italian bourgeois urbanity  
Ernesto Rogers’s first public prise de position on the architecture of the young Turinese was expressed through the editorial that accompanied the publication of their works in Casabella-Continuità nº 215 (May 1957) (Figures 1 and 2). His text, “Continuità o crisi?”, referred through its title to the editorial of the first issue of the resurrected Casabella (no. 199, Dec./Jan 1953/54). Rogers could that seminal manifesto “Continuità”, which was the central idea of his intellectual project for an architecture of the post-war era: continuity with the labour of his predecessors at the front of the magazine, the martyr P. Pagano. This meant continuity with the principles of modernity. However, beyond this orthodox adscription, his idea of an uninterrupted path had to connect contemporary architecture not only with the most recent heritage of the Modern Movement, but with its deeper roots (the work of the proto-modern) and even with the whole arch of the history of architecture.

That this broader historicism inclusive could threaten the robustness of modern architecture was not very much felt by Rogers. On the contrary, his was a determination to reform it to assure its survival. Yet that the revision he was promoting could become dangerous was fully realized by the time the young Turinese began to play an active role in the debate and Rogers acknowledged this in his “Continuità o crisi?”. Indeed they went beyond Rogers’s renovation to the point of denying the operative centrality of modern methodology. Hence the question the director of Casabella bluntly posed in the first lines of his text:"
can architecture develop the premises of the Modern Movement or is it changing in consequence? This, he foresaw was that the new, a penetrate and recovery of the phenomena of the XIXth and early XXth centuries. A possible scenario is of a foundation to a sensitivity otherwise developed by the mere experiencing of the city. Any architect, not erudite quotations, detached from any social foundation to a sensitivity otherwise developed by the mere experiencing of the city. Any architect, not erudite quotations, detached from any social context could claim a comparable refinement, but they are submerged in the miasma of the Victorian disordered city.

Yet Britain had its Georgian architecture and it is no coincidence that when trying to construct a genuinely English ascendency for modern architecture, its promoters, such as M.J. Richards, editor of AR since the 1930s, chose this tradition (along with the Arts and Crafts movement) that the architect who was to become the modernist architects of the XIXth and early XXth century were tightly entwined in John Summerson's background that explained it. Surprisingly, Banham not only did not censure this, but seemed to some extent supportive.

A year later, his review of Moretti's Casa del Girasole went deeper into the explanation of such ecleccticism, which he attributed to the conditions under which architecture was produced, both technological - the availability of materials and the permanence of civic buildings from the mid-18th century onwards; Victorian and Edwardian commercial architecture are rather vociferous and emphatic in the individual work, generally excessive, and their historicism is less subtle than that of Turinese eclecticism. Only the urban: domestic as a whole, Voysey, or Ashbee could claim a comparable refinement, but they are submerged in the miasma of the Victorian disordered city.

For Banham, architecture was produced, both technological - the availability of materials and the permanence of civic buildings from the mid-18th century onwards; Victorian and Edwardian commercial architecture are rather vociferous and emphatic in the individual work, generally excessive, and their historicism is less subtle than that of Turinese eclecticism. Only the urban: domestic as a whole, Voysey, or Ashbee could claim a comparable refinement, but they are submerged in the miasma of the Victorian disordered city.

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The seeds of the promotion of Archigram, of the praise of Buckminster Fuller, or of the discourse on the artificial environment are to be found here. In his last article on Futurism he included the first English translation of Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto. In the introductory note he said: "as I was looking at them, more alive than ten years ago..." Sant'Elia laid down the programme of the architecture of the twenties (and the Fifties) and further below: "we see the Foundation Manifesto standing up, the farthest translation of Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto" before his thesis was published as a book. Before his thesis was published as a book. Before his thesis was published as a book.

And this is why the paradoxically cosmopolitan and cultivated, with a taste for the arts of the world of nature... we should draw ours from the mechanized environment we have created with this, there was the issue of the Art Nouveau origins of his aesthetic. Banham complained about the inaccuracy of the historical research carried on by the young Italians, who tended to stress that connection. Nonetheless, he had himself pointed at the influence of "International Art Nouveau," that is, precisely the architecture of that Belle Époque borse against which the Futurists rebelled and that was gaining favor in 1920s Italy. Moreover, Sant'Elia inequivalently recognized the relevance of civil engineering, of the architecture of infrastructures, and of local Art Nouveau in line with the Foundmont and Lombard traditions of good building. Given that he knew the style, until the 1920s the issue of the Art Nouveau becomes more difficult to understand, either he was driven by a prescriptive attitude, or there had been some evolution in his thinking.

The role of Reyner Banham I. Banham's modernity

In his seminal article on Neoliberty, Banham used for the first time in English some of the Manifesto of Futurist Architecture (1914). Among these, eight propositions which, read today, strikingly reflect many aspects of the thinking the British architect would develop throughout his career: "(5) that just as the arts drew the inspiration for their arts from the world of nature... so we should draw ours from the mechanized environment we have created that architecture must also be understood as the power to harmonize man and his environment that such an architecture as this breed ous permanence, no structural habits."

The role of Reyner Banham II. The study of the corpus of articles Banham published in AR in the thirties on Italian architecture is a two facts: first, the number of critical reviews of Italian buildings increased greatly. As a result of his dedication to the study of avant-garde, second, a severe change in his critical appraisal, which he unequivocally recognized the relevance of civil engineering, of the architecture of infrastructures, and of local Art Nouveau in line with the Foundmont and Lombard traditions of good building. Given that he knew the style, until the 1920s the issue of the Art Nouveau becomes more difficult to understand, either he was driven by a prescriptive attitude, or there had been some evolution in his thinking.

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The focus had necessarily been cosmopolitan, given that it articulated the mainly foreign phenomenon of avant-garde architecture. During the 1950s, the journal consistently turned toward an English-centered agenda. This was so first because modern architecture was still in need of national legitimacy; second, because its post-war success had to be consolidated; third maybe, because, given the roar of the fight before the war, the editors could not help themselves devoting many pages to the celebration.

The debate around Englishness and the Picturesque revivify the review promoted, together with the Festival of Britain, the emergence of the city and buildings of bourgeois culture after Art Nouveau, and in any case his analysis was always linked to a narrative of technique followed by a formalistic depiction. It could be argued that the architectural diagrams worked towards understanding the values and conditions of past times in their relation to contemporary culture and society so as to detect those aspects that were meaningful within an enlarged tradition of modern architecture. Indeed it was Croce’s intellectual project that “however remote into the past events thus recounted may seem to be, history in reality refers to present needs and present situations whereas older events vibrate.”

The role of James M. Richards. Internationalism and cultural commitment of the Editorial agenda

As stated on the editorial inaugurating the second half century of its existence, AR’s declared goal after the war was “to foster the development of an architectural production whose vitality was evidenced in the Triangle, in the Companhia D’Arte, in Comunità, in Roma and, even more, in Casabella.”

The question remains unanswered of why Richards let AR sustain such an aggressive campaign against those who in Italy were attempting to respond to many of the questions and issues that arose in the 1930s, that were meaningful within an enlarged tradition of modern architecture. Indeed it was Croce’s intellectual project that “however remote into the past events thus recounted may seem to be, history in reality refers to present needs and present situations whereas older events vibrate.”—210—

The status of history for Casabella and Architectural Review and the role of Nikolaus Pevsner

With the mobilization of J. M. Richards, Pevsner assumed the editorial responsibilities. This increased the number and extent of historical articles. Indeed the English journal published seven essays on Art Nouveau during these years. This is one of the reasons why in his argument of 1955 he acknowledges: “Could you not say that the return of Historicism is all our fault, and I mean myself in this case, personally, in two ways: (a) our Architectural Review and (b) you, historian?”—211—

In contrast, Giedion’s editorial policy placed the journal at the level of committed architectural debate.

The position remains that AR was not a mere periodical that collected essays by experts, but a major forum of ideas, a place where experienced architects and critics could propose solutions to the problems of modern city and architecture.

In conclusion, it might be illuminating to contrast two well-known passages from two of the figures in our story, Bregni, in the first editorial of Casabella Aprilis, claimed: “We believe in the second cycle ‘man-architecture-man’ and want to represent it dramatic deployment: the crises, the few, indispensable certainties of the numbers, double, not the very manner of its emergence of the city and buildings of bourgeois culture after Art Nouveau, and in any case his analysis was always limited to a narrative of technique followed by a formalistic depiction. It could be argued that the architectural diagrams worked towards understanding the values and conditions of past times in their relation to contemporary culture and society so as to detect those aspects that were meaningful within an enlarged tradition of modern architecture. Indeed it was Croce’s intellectual project that “however remote into the past events thus recounted may seem to be, history in reality refers to present needs and present situations whereas older events vibrate.”—210—

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In the essay on Vagnetti’s building Banham posed this clear question to what extent the Italian architecture proceeded from the supposed tenets of the Modern Movement? And it was an attempt to answer this question that underlay all his articles on Italian architecture for the following decade. We could claim here, as the Italians did, that Banham set himself up as guardian of a given orthodoxy. But it might be that it was for him “Architectural Expression” (CIAM 6), and to the “Core of Art Nouveau” [...] that were far less expository or explanatory, than for example in the Italian journals Casabella and Comunità, that Banham attributed both to Milanese (i.e. Casabella) and Roman (i.e. L’Architettura) journals.

There is a second aspect to point out when analyzing Pevsner’s historiographic relation to the Italian scene, which is that in his account of the dawn of modern architecture, “man-architecture-man” and want to represent its dramatic deployment: the crises, the few, indispensable certainties of the numbers, double, not the very manner of its emergence of the city and buildings of bourgeois culture after Art Nouveau, and in any case his analysis was always limited to a narrative of technique followed by a formalistic depiction. It could be argued that the architectural diagrams worked towards understanding the values and conditions of past times in their relation to contemporary culture and society so as to detect those aspects that were meaningful within an enlarged tradition of modern architecture. Indeed it was Croce’s intellectual project that “however remote into the past events thus recounted may seem to be, history in reality refers to present needs and present situations whereas older events vibrate.”—210—

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Banham, in the last chapter of *Theory and Design*, said: “It may well be that what we have hitherto understood as architecture and what we are beginning to understand of technology are incompatible disciplines. The architect who proposes to run with technology knows now that he will be in fast company, and that, in order to keep up, he may have to emulate the Futurists and discard his whole cultural load.”

For Banham modern architecture was not the cultural convention—always under revision, never fixed—that Rogers conceived, but the result of deterministic technological and scientific changes. When Banham embraced the messianism of Buckminster Fuller, or when he spoke of topology instead of form, and particularly when he praised Archigram for providing an image for the world to come, he denied the belonging of architecture to the realm of the cultural expressions: of technical culture (as distinct from the cult of technology), of urban culture, of collective memory; all this was lost amidst technological utopianism. Yet this was precisely what was at stake in the Neoliberty debate; these values were those that Gabetti, d’Isola, Rogers, Gregotti, or Rossi were determined to preserve.

That the consequences of this debate would be far-reaching is evident today, when British architecture has not fully recovered from having succumbed to these technology-driven and anti-formalist chants of gratuitous avant-gardism instead of having followed those who, from the other side of the Alps, called for the enduring elaboration of the mestiere.