Continuity and Discontinuity in Casabella and Spazio. The 1950's architecture
magazines directed by Luigi Moretti and Ernesto Nathan Rogers

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Architectural Theory and Magazines

Can architectural magazines play a role in theoretical thought? What tools do they employ?

A comparison of two Italian magazines, Spazio and Casabella, published in Milan in the fifties reveals their importance. It also provides relevant insight into the tools architecture uses to communicate, the text-image relationship, and how architecture relates to other artistic disciplines and history itself.

The first architecture magazines of the twentieth century were closely tied to an idea of the contemporary and modernity that was well represented in manifestos and avant-garde art. After the war, however, the sense of what a magazine was changed direction. The peremptory affirmations and enthusiasm of 1920s writing gave way to criticism, doubt, and debate about the teachings of the Modern Movement. These were expressed in various European countries through the new tools of debate, editorials, and meeting places.

In the Italian architectural community, Luigi Moretti and Ernesto Nathan Rogers are acknowledged masters, embodying the capacity to reformulate and articulate a new kind of architectural education, or at least intuit the need for a multiplicity of means to do so.

Certainly, neither of them set out to re-establish a systematic theoretical discourse on architecture. They did not attempt to distil their thoughts into some grand-unifying theoretical opus. Instead, for them, the magazine was their medium of transmitting criticism and open-minded inquiry.

For an analogous historical period we could look to Manerism with its in-depth understanding of a language and capacity to critique itself from within, even ironically, while at the same time passionately seeking continuity and the advancement of the themes of modernity. The habit of drawing analogies with other historic periods can be found when leafing through the two magazines. Take for example the photographs of ancient architecture that populate Casabella-Continuità or the examples of the Baroque that fill the pages of Spazio.

We could therefore say that these two periodicals pioneer a new way of talking about architecture, one that is less direct and imposing and one that is more focused on developing critical thinking with the reader finally playing an active role. This is an important moment in Italian history. These are the Reconstruction years but also the years when the concept of a new kind of professional was being formed, as much in universities as other institutions. Post-war architecture magazines are no longer the avant-garde manifestos of the elite they were between the wars. Instead, they now play an educational role, providing the reader with access to a profession that could have controlled and developed the Italian landscape.

It is no coincidence that Rogers was also a teacher and that a large number of the people working in the magazine’s Centro Studi (Study Centre) were also teachers at the new, expanded university. Certainly, a strongly educational and theoretical discourse is a common thread in Moretti’s editorials. Cognisant of the obvious differences between the two publications, with one comprising only seven issues and the other about 100, we still maintain that a comparison of the two masters and their abilities to interpret the overarching qualities of historical and contemporary architecture makes a useful contribution to the architectural profession and design.

Luigi Moretti ran the magazine Spazio from 1950 to 1953, and Ernesto Nathan Rogers the magazine Casabella-Continuità in Milan from 1953 to 1964. The difference between the two publications is evident at first glance. While Spazio was published in only seven striking issues, Casabella-Continuità set the standard for years in the development of a new architecture culture.
in Italy and international debate. While Spazio was directed and laid out by a single individual, the architect and art collector with a strong personality Luigi Moretti, Casabella-Continuità was run by Ernesto Nathan Rogers, who acted as the catalyst for a diverse group of intellectuals of different ages and origins. While the director of Spazio launched his publication immediately upon his release from jail where he had been sent due to his involvement with Fascism, the director of Casabella-Continuità returned from anonymity and forced exile during the war in Switzerland due to Italy’s race laws. The very title Spazio embodies the theoretical thinking of a great architect-master builder. However, Casabella borrows its name indirectly from a 1928 magazine directed by Giuseppe Pagano that brought the Modern Movement to Italy. The addition of the word Continuità, adds primarily to the need to re-forge the connections severed by war, and also more generally picking up on ties to tradition.

The two publications emerge from two very different cultural contexts, personalities, and ways of making architecture.

Luigi Moretti was born in Rome in 1906. He had already had the opportunity to build a series of iconic buildings in Rome before the war, and the work his studio could build after the war in Italy was limited. As described by Annalisa Viati Navone in her work, starting with the fourth issue, Luigi Moretti began personally laying out the magazine and this change is clearly evident when leafing through the covers of each issue. The magazine was never issued as a monograph and the covers do not reflect the topics that are so clearly presented in the editorials. The one exception is the third issue where an abstract photograph accompanies an article on the Baroque. The other covers are by artists. Moretti personally designed the cover of the fifth issue; and, it is the only one where he lets his other design research shine through, namely a volumetric provocation that parallels Moretti’s explorations in the house La Saracena, described as Annales Vicari, a private house in the Tuscan countryside.

After the war, Moretti built the Corso Italia complex and some house-hotels in Milan, experimenting with the sequence of urban spaces and cutting the dense Milan street wall to provide unexpected views. The most well-known image is a photograph by Giorgio Gasali that gives us the sense of the violence of this large expressionistic space. Resting on the low street wall, the building sits crosswise to the street looking out towards the powerful residential building at the end of the block. A few years later, in 1957, BBPR studio built the Torre Velasca in the heart of the old fabric of Milan; a medieval architectural jewel that changed the skyline and identified a new scale for the modern city. A photograph of this building made the cover of Casabella issue number 232. It was an image that would come to evoke Rogers’ even more famous phrase ‘environmental pre-existence’ from an article in one of the first issues under his direction, almost a sort of thematic manifesto.

**Editorial Approach**

Even from these few introductory lines, it is easy to intuit the differences between these two figures and the need for further comparison in terms of their editorial approach. As has been well described by Federico Bucci in the first book out since the recent critical rediscovery of Moretti's work, Luigi Moretti does practically all the work on Spazio, including: cultural features on architecture, art criticism (both ancient and contemporary), selecting architecture, writing articles, selecting, framing, and cropping images, as well as designing and making up pages. He is mainly joined in writing by Agnoldomenico and other students of architecture. Luigi Moretti always worked in groups. The first of these dates back to 1933 when BBPR studio built a simple tubular metal structure at the Cimitero Monumentale in Milan. It was a structure that employed just a few carefully chosen elements that broke the figure-ground structure of the street. It was a highly visible structure, and it quickly made Moretti well-known to the architectural world.

Despite the obvious differences between the two publications, it is necessary to compare and explore how these two publications used images, since in both cases they played anything but a secondary role in the editorial strategy. They were an attempt to make the resulting formal, figurative, and educational consequences.

**Discontinuity in Spazio**

As already mentioned, Moretti personally participated in the graphic design of the entire layout, working on the images at his fingertips. The role these images played in the individual issues, especially the editorials, is always obvious. Since there are so few editorials, it is possible to examine and decode the entire series to detect the absent graphic design strategy, its various alignments, balances, tensions, densities, concentrations of reality, and suspensions of materiality. The articles that open each of the seven magazines are not canonical editorials in the sense of introducing the issue contents. Rather, they can be read as excerpts from a longer treatise on architectural design that would come to fruition in the last issue, Struttura e Sequenza di Spazio.

It is often said that the magazine ceased publication abruptly, practically in midstream. It is true that in subsequent years Luigi Moretti would publish key essays on Michelangelo and Borromini, including Forma come Struttura as ‘Estratti di Spazio’. Nonetheless, when reading these essays together, there is a sense of a unifying thread which is further reinforced by the powerful and evocative layout of text and image. The gravitas of the essay titles, the photographs of architecture and materials, fragments of paintings, diagrams, and designs all compose a coherent indivisible whole that actually made subsequent re-publication rather difficult. Moretti describes architecture as only a few authors can, making us forget the specific position in history that a certain object may have previously acquired. He makes striking use of cropping, framing, enlarging, and fragmenting while at the same time preserving a sense of unity. The process of abstracting shapes, explained so well by Moretti in his writing, is evident in the way he handles images, distancing them so much from the overall figure that they take on entirely different meanings. Each of these details is then carefully positioned on the page to generate relationships among the other elements.

In an essay in the first issue, Elettismo e Unità di Linguaggio [Eccentricism and Unity of Language], Moretti introduces us to his working method. It is a search for a language that is on the one hand shared, current, and modern and on the other, richly personalised, with the most heterogeneous materials, tensions, and the power of a dense materiality through the perceptual reading of forms and fragments. In the second issue where he presents the text, Genesi di Forme dalla Figura Umana [Genesis of Forms Derived from the Human Figure], he addresses the theme of the figure and its development in the creative process through a re-reading of classical Greek sculpture. While these two texts could be considered more general, starting with the third issue there is a strengthened descriptive capacity that unites the text and image in the article, Forme Astratte nella Scultura Barocca [Abstract Forms in Baroque Sculpture]. Moretti begins implementing the modern concept of abstraction, uniting text and image for a re-reading of historic architecture, specifically the Baroque. Through his analysis we learn to recognize the relationships between the different centres and unifying structures of Baroque art. The powerful selective power of mountains and works of art by Michelangelo and Borromini take up almost the entire page, so closely cropped and fragmented as to be practically unrecognisable. Leafing through these pages, you are suddenly reminded of one of Moretti’s most beautiful works, the Casa Grasole in Rome. Here, the...
rusticated base contrasts with the smooth areas, hinting at the author’s passion for Arte Informale.

The fourth issue includes the essay Trasfigurazioni di Strutture Munemie [Transfigurations of Wall Structures], here text and image are engaged in a powerful play of contrasts between black and white. “Transfigurations are like operations on a tectonic and utilitarian structure,” between rule and variation. The strongly symbolic use of colour, transfiguration, freedom of constructive honesty, combined with the fructuring of the perimeter wall cause the wall to lose its meaning as a constructive element; instead, it becomes an abstract element based on purely formal relationships, so much so that it is oddly compared to a Mondrian painting on the very same page.

The fifth issue of the magazine includes an even more complex article, Discontinuità dello Spazio in Caravaggio [Discontinuity of Space in Caravaggio], in which Moretti compares the time and space connections of the Renaissance, its homogeneity, and the subsequent developments in Michelangelo and Caravaggio’s work, passionately describing space as an articulation of light and dark. The images that juxtapose the text offer a controlled and balanced play of containing black and white photographs. The white columns fade into a black immaterial space of almost shapeless details taken from Caravaggio paintings together with a smaller closely cropped insert of Moretti’s architecture - the house-hotel on Via Corridoni in Milan. The photos are laid out against a white background which becomes a figure in the composition.

In Moretti’s clear and poetic words, “The passage from this centering of interest in the whole form to the acute centering of interest in a section of the form, accepted as a condensation of the representational reality of the form itself [...] Reality, expanded and diluted across the entire surface of the painting due to academic and mannerist repetitions, tends to concentrate in pockets of sufficient vitality.

... Real kernels of inertia. [...] Terrible act of existence. [...] This vision derives from the hallucinatory density of reality in certain areas and from the absolute emptiness in others. I would say this stereoscopic quality is laboratory proof of the fracturing of space. [...] Concentrating reality, these limited and summary areas become more powerful. In Caravaggio it is in the figures that are cut off, that the evocative power is condensed, more powerfully than in frontal figures. A cut-off shoulder stands for a whole human figure. Caravaggio uses these cut-off figures, understanding their powerful inference [...] just as the architects of the late Baroque anticipate the sum and density of projections of a volume on its side, perforating space in the direction of the view and not blocking it with frontal obstacles. We moderns with our bladelike edifices have understood this due to our mature heredity and precise needs.”

At the same time it is impossible not to connect these words with the Milan projects Moretti was working on at that time such as the Rotondo volume of the Corso Italia and the previously mentioned house-hotel on Via Corridoni. The theoretical positioning of his writings always express a sense of a built application. In thinking about the built form, it is also important to bear in mind the significance that the terms space and time acquire in Moretti’s writings; Michelangelo is also a key figure. Moretti sees him as the magnificent conceiver of works that allude to being constructed in the form and scale of design and its material-built quality is laboratory proof of the fracturing of space. This is the last Spazio magazine essay, the closing of the exploration into the analytical description of perceptual qualities that formed Moretti’s sense of architecture. Concepts about figurative words, form, structure, and space would always have corresponding applications in his architectural work in terms of density, expansion, and tension in the transformation of the immateriality of space into materiality.

Structure and form are words that Moretti would continue to refer to frequently because his idea of material architecture, structure, and immateriality (i.e. space) were so interrelated and compulsory. In recent years Moretti has devoted much theorising (often quite abstract) about the connections to figurative art. However, Moretti’s writings draw no comparisons between art and architecture without providing concrete examples and precise descriptions of the actions and works in a continual transition from art to architecture and vice versa. The seven essays that make up the magazine’s editorial body of work have such theoretical power, with each one addressing a different formal issue related to architectural design, that taken together they represent a veritable treatise on art and architecture of equal standing. In his choice of images tells us a lot about his personality. It points to his commitment, his awareness, and at the same time his practicality in setting up a discourse based on “questions” by presenting topics through images. There is the worn out dirgible that demonstrates the fragility of technological progress as well as the ancient vase used to introduce the topic of ornament and its two lines where Rogers writes, “What are those two lines? They would become complex braids, volutes, bulb leaves, dragons, and monsters [...] so as to transform the accidental into the substantial.”

Rogers is a careful architect; he is precise and scholarly about the form and scale of design and its material-built possibilities. Above all however, he is a thinker who offers up the stuff of history to the poets of future architects. It is no accident that the Acropolis in Athens is a beloved symbol that makes an appearances in both Casabella and Esperienza dell’Architettura. In his words, “objects become antiquities when they have ceased being old, yet this is a quality that very few possess. By becoming antiquities they become current resources with practical daily use as objects of cultural consumption.”

The earlier fragmented explorations find a more precise application in Casabella-Continuità. We have already mentioned the decision to publish the first 24 editions of Casabella with blank covers. The first illustrated cover is dedicated to the beloved Mies van der Rohe.

The title page was charged with building anticipation about the contents, so that the summary page could bear an image, often abstracted, reduced, and with a strong graphic quality, depicting an unrecognisable fragment from a beloved reference such as Sullivan, Perret, or some traditional Norwegian detail. Casabella was where the Modern Masters were introduced to the high culture of Italian architecture. However, its pages were also devoted to the heartful documentation of extinct traditions and cultures. Rogers did not
just express his Modernism by exploring the early modernists, but also by describing designs from a particular point of view, one that jumps from the general to the detail.

The images that document Italian production of those years show glimpses of buildings inserted within a context, alternated with zoomed-in images of façade details where the entire building is no longer legible. Two extremes, the overall view and the built detail. The specific and the universal at the same time. Among Werner Bischof’s many fascinating photographs, Rogers chose the ones that celebrated both the detail and the general two poles in tension, in this way resisting falling prey to the absence of perspective and the absence of a coherent whole. It is the abstraction of these architecture fragments that allows them to inspire new architecture. Yet a photograph is not a drawing, and Rogers uses photographic details to express a materiality that drawings so often lack.

For Rogers, the particular meaning of the modern artefact can be found in its specific time and place. Each moment is inserted in the drama of existence and cannot be considered an abstract entity with materiality the tool for representing a historic moment. So when he says, “In the case of the modern, we can talk about the process of stylisation,” he is pointing to the moment when character finds formal expression in a specific culture through its materiality and the personality interpreting it. It is precisely the specificity of the built artefact that releases the form from the absurd banality of repetition and, it is the obligation of each new artist to discover new relationships between form, materials, and meaning.

Finally, despite their clear differences, Rogers’ educational approach and methodology reminds us of Moretti.

Legacy for the future

We have compared how these two Milan magazines use images and theoretical criticism and highlighted some striking similarities. These include the strong communication skills of both magazine directors, especially when they manage to communicate a strongly proactive (one could even say theory-based) message without falling prey to the constraints of academia or formulaic essay writing.

In this they are helped by a shared passion for the explicit freedom of the photographic image. In Moretti’s case, the figure is closely tied to the text, while for Rogers, the image is almost always an autonomous conceptual symbol. Both frequently crop images and place them into a larger compositional whole (whether figuratively or literally), both employing a clearly facile design sense. Certainly, the two masters also share a strong working knowledge of history; the Romanesque and Baroque for Moretti and the ancient and traditional for Rogers. Both authors use photographs in their articles, often as fragments or close ups abstracted from time and place to highlight the relevance of the forms and timelessness of their compositions so ripe for new interpretation.

Their is not a modernity in crisis, but rather a thoughtful reflection that allows for placement within a broader historic context, resisting reduction to a specific style or fashion.

Albeit quite different, both Rogers and Moretti seem to be aware of the roles they are playing in Italian Reconstruction and of the educational value of the magazines that would populate the shelves of Italian architectural studios for years to come. This idea of the studio - the workshop - is something both of them experienced in their professional lives and used for strikingly different ends. With Luigi Moretti, his iconic architecture, while rarely published in the magazine, nonetheless remains in the back of our minds. In contrast, Rogers, ever the educator, seems to have entrusted the pencil to his friends and pupils.