

'I giovani delle colonne.' Tradition and continuity *ante litteram*.

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In the School of Architecture of the Milan Polytechnic in the mid-fifties, a group of students started to use in their academic *ex tempora* sessions a series of very personal stylistic references, which were linked to a certain historic and traditional grounding, giving rise to a protest that intended to report the limitations of the *razionalismo di maniera* that the university education of the time offered.

The *provocative* use of columns, arches and pinnacles in their formal studies earned the young Michele Achilli, Daniele Brigidini, Maurizio Calzavara, Guido Canella, Fredi Drugman, Laura Lazzari, Giusa Marcialis, Aldo Rossi, Giacomo Scarpini, Silvano Tintori y Virgilio Vercelloni the nickname of *giovani delle colonne*, according to Giancarlo De Carlo's definition in *Casabella-Contiuità* magazine². According to Aldo Castellano³, it is very likely that only some of them used these formal references in their academic projects. In this respect, Silvano Tintori⁴ states in a recent interview: *'It was not a group: we were only two (Virgilio Vercelloni and me); and the ex tempore «of the columns», an eight-hour project that we had to carry out in the classroom workshop once a week, emerged from an episodic situation'* (F1). However, that apparently isolated event had aroused the interest of the most critical students in the 4th year. The debate started by Tintori and Vercelloni in the 5th year Architectural Composition course of Professor Piero Portaluppi –Dean of the School of Architecture– regarding the *project-place* relationship, was reached that group of students, activating a vivid debate about the concept of *tradition*.

It was one of those *student minorities* that –in the words of De Carlo– *do not know how control their rage* about the need to face, also at the schools of architecture, the *risky innovations of architectural thought*⁵.

Silvano Tintori recalls: *Our disagreement with the teaching of the Architectural Composition course in the last year of our degree stemmed from the dissatisfaction coming from the disappointing Modernity of the reconstruction of the Italian post-war, with respect to the English (the new cities) and the French one (The Unité d'Habitation by Le Corbusier in Marseille and Nantes)*⁶.

During the years 1954 and 1955, the most active focus of the controversy developed, surpassing the limits of the university, and achieved the role of *small revolution* with the explicit goal of shaking the stagnated situation of the Milanese architecture. According to Tintori, in the capital city of Lombardy, *the interest in an architecture oriented to a civil society sensitive to the culture of the city prevailed, [...] in full confrontation not only against the rationalist formalism, but also the philosophy on which it was based: one which had yielded to progress and technology*⁷.

In a general atmosphere of revision, which nourished the question about the achievements and limitations of modern architecture facing the new social demands and concerns, the *giovani delle colonne* aimed at reactivating the controversy pointing at the heart of the matter. In this sense, the school of architecture provided a quite limited action field for the magnitude of the provocative discourse that they wanted to carry out. The design attitude they had adopted within the academic world had attracted Giancarlo De Carlo's attention (F2) –at that moment president of the Movimento di Studi per l'Architettura⁸, a movement that gathered together the rationalist core– who proposed a public debate about 'tradition in architecture' (F3) as the main argument of the *giovani delle colonne* as opposed to the *modus operandi* of the professionals who moved within the rationalist framework of the north of Italy, which was, perhaps, closer to the European trend¹⁰.

Finally, in June 1955, the approach adopted by the *giovani delle colonne* achieved recognition thanks to the reading of the report written by Guido Canella and Aldo Rossi in front of the members of the Movimento di Studi

per l'Architettura.

To present their protest to the MSA¹¹ meant increasing the visibility of the initiative of the group and entering the debate about Italian modern architecture and its teaching; above all if we take into consideration the stated interest of the members of the MSA towards *giving architecture a formative role in the changes that were taking place in the Italian society*¹².

In his dissertation, referring to the work of the present members of the MSA, Canella affirmed: *Being precisely the concept of tradition, its interpretation, and, if I may, its feeling, what separates us from your line of thought, we honestly think it is one of the original reasons of this debate*¹⁴.

Expanding his reflection to the widest scope of architecture, he continued: *it is necessary for all the realistic artists to be aware of the existence, at the heart of tradition, of models that have already proven themselves as able to interpret the contents of the society that applied them, thoroughly representing its feelings*¹⁵.

To finish his speech, Canella answered the accusations made by that 'old' generation – deeply linked to the investigation of the first Italian Modern Movement – about their interpretation of the concept of tradition: *Having said that, we consider the accusation of literary complacencies, of yearning, of love for the past, whose atmosphere we would like to evoke by the use of columns, friezes and pinnacles, out of place, to say the least. [...] However, this does not deny the fact that columns and arches are all elements subject to the autonomous live of each artistic expression, in each historical moment*¹⁶.

Silvano Tintori clarifies that, in his controversial *ex tempore* –a jetty in Lake Como–, the broken columns represented the landscape of the lake hit by speculation, that is, the first symptoms of the aggression to the *Italian miracle* and a condemnation of the abandoned state of the historical heritage¹⁷.

This statement probably explains the need of provocation of the *giovani delle colonne*, of using references to historical elements well-recognized in collective memory. It was obviously a *memento*, an appeal to certain formal imagery catalogue which, according to the members of the group, had not exhausted all its expressive potential and that would allow freedom of action in a project a new place and unprecedented success within contemporary architectural investigation, as long as it was able to provide elements clearly connected to the past.

From that reading came the accusation, not much concealed, that Canella directed against the "old guard" of the MSA, which, from his point of view, had not been able to detach themselves from the functionalist precepts of the Modern Movement. In his opinion, the architects of the Modern Movement maintained some kind of rejection towards tradition, definitely linked to the concept of historicism. Consequently, tradition did not represent a live concept in its architectural role, becoming this way an argument frozen in time¹⁸. According to these young people, the *content of history*, together with the *social demands*, was at the bottom of the interpretative mistake of the Modern Movement: *If, in fact, it is not possible for us to dismiss beforehand certain «solutions» of the Modern Movement, it is not possible either to dismiss or to be against forms that [...] are imposed to our consideration and our study. Since they do not have their origin in a simple functional demand, but are instead justified by the deep content of history, by the social demands in their descriptive and celebratory aspects [...]*¹⁹.

For the *giovani delle colonne* this was the ideological premise that allowed them to link their *theoretical choice* and their *architectonic practice* (still in its early stages) to that reality of the grand architecture of the past, rescuing the meaning of tradition that in their opinion had been *forgotten*, although not *lost*, in the

* Photographs are attached in the spanish version

most vivid stage of rationalism.

Apart from the personal design variations (F4, F5, F6), the real value of that experience lay in the daring will to add an 'unprecedented' alternative, in cultural terms, to the consolidated principles of the heritage of the Modern Movement. Their experience intended to be a provocative call of attention, of easy assimilation on the part of society and at an urban level, above all in the historical Italian city. In this sense, the aspect of social legitimation of the intervention of architecture became, to them, essential.

In their speech the desire for a *progressive* architecture became evident; for a style that would not only focus on expression mediated by architectural forms, but one which would try to overcome the limitation of a *indagine cutanea*²⁰ by means of a general understanding of the role of the individual in their society. Therefore, their strategy focused on the need to maintain a realistic analytic position in regards to the conditions of the context in which the architect would have had to work²¹. It was, in fact, a question of not dismissing beforehand any solution just because it did not directly belong to the formal language embraced by the Modern Movement, but to subject the matter to analytic consideration, and to be able to give historical material a new light within an ideological vision that, on the other hand, was adopting some shades of the Gramscian current of thought. It must have been those elements of tradition the ones that in their first proposals would have created a new, *regalistic architecture. Traditionally new and realistic*²².

With these last words ended the reading of the *Relazione degli studenti architetti*, opening a public debate on the issue.

Art critic Gillo Dorfles centered his first intervention on the concept of *realism*, emphasizing the necessary complete acceptance of the demands of citizens *by art, not only aesthetic but also social and economic*²³. Despite the explicit agreement with the theoretical terms of the debate suggested by the giovani delle colonne, Dorfles considered the stylistic return of arches and columns as completely unnecessary in the buildings they were going to design. Thus, the elements for a disagreement became apparent, which were mainly the formal aspects, more than the theoretical, of the provocative character of the line of thought of the young students and the querelle was finally taken to the pages of specialized magazines.

The *Relazione degli studenti architetti* was published in Casabella-Continuità, directed by Ernesto N. Rogers²⁴, few months after Giancarlo De Carlo's article *Problemi concreti per i giovani delle colonne*²⁵, in which the architect observed that *their first movement* (the protest of the columns) had a positive meaning. He considered this to be so because, above all, it rejected conventionality and the lack of talent that was spoiling the character of *Collegio*²⁶. However, in spite of this previous statement, De Carlo openly criticized their triviality and the abstract and futile tone that, according to him, their protest had reached: *Their columns do not have anything new; they are still old columns from eclecticism, the same symbols on which bureaucracies, dictators and bankers use to weep over the celebrations of Universal Man*²⁷.

De Carlo's point of view did not much differ from what Dorfles had said at the MSA meeting, since he also strongly rejected the retrospective look of those young students, who were looking for *solutions where they knew it was impossible to find any, feigning determination when in fact it was only a way to hide in conformism*²⁸.

According to De Carlo, the restoration of *old mummified languages*—just as he interpreted the operational proposal of the giovani delle colonne—could not solve specific problems on their own and, therefore, it was necessary to scrutinize closely the architectural development of the past in order to specify the significance of the architect's job²⁹.

To that end, De Carlo made clear the intrinsic limitations of that movement that had its origins in an *initial and generous distress* towards academic instruction as well as towards the architectural profession in itself, which was suffering, in his own words, the negative influence of a supposition from which no productive consequences could be drawn.³⁰

Despite the common interest between the member of the MSA and the *youngsters of the columns* in the *average citizen* and their need of a *home, schools, public buildings, streets, squares, residential areas, etc.*, the debate was, in the end, about the formal aspect directed towards the use of references taken from historical tradition. For De Carlo, it was essential to prevent tradition from falling (or declining) into the *field of a new eclecticism*, but to maintain it as a *stimulus for the entrance of the new Modern Movement into new territories still to be explored*³².

In this sense, it should be remembered that also other influential members of the MSA had publicly showed their interest in the subject of tradition, embracing it in a more or less particular way in their own design work. In 1955, at a meeting of the MSA, Franco Albini stated: *Human history is not the same as the history of nature, in which everything that can happen, happens; human history is full of continuous conscious actions that constantly modify their own course. The continuity of events does not exist in itself; it exists when men feel it exists... Tradition as a result of collective conscience, of high knowledge; respect towards tradition implies the acceptance of a collective control of public opinion and control of the people. Tradition as a discipline is a contention dam for fantasy licenses, for provisional fashion, for the damaging mistakes of mediocre people...*³³.

The initiative of the *youngsters of the columns* pointed out an issue existent and discussed between a generation of architects that, from the second half of the 40s, were following a revisionist line of investigation of modern architecture. Their experience is paradigmatic as to how different revisionist attitudes permeated university life, fascinating the most *rebellious*, that is, those who were not content with the contents taught in university courses at the time. It should be noted that at the beginning of the 50s (in the 1952-1953 academic year to be more precise), Ernesto N. Rogers was a professor at the Milan Polytechnic; first teaching the module *Caratteri stilistici e costruttivi dei monumenti*, compulsory subject in the third year, and ten years later, obtaining the chair of *Elementi di composizione* which he kept until 1969.

Consequently, it is not a coincidence that the discourse of the giovani delle colonne—based on the need to *re-connect with tradition, to recognize its humanistic essence and the figurative means [...] of its expressive language*³⁴—formulated a theoretical analogy with respect to the investigative line conducted by the group BBPR since the first years of the second post-war period. Guido Canella acknowledged, in a statement made in the 90s, Rogers's ability to *bring back to life the poetic experiences of the Modern Movement*³⁵. As Silvano Tintori—who was a teaching assistant in Rogers's module in the 50s—recently observed, Rogers used to give ground-breaking lessons with respect to the traditional teaching methodology followed at the College, not only proclaiming the role of the Modern Movement in the history of architecture, but also critically proposing the *continuità* of the new³⁶.

Rogers was carrying out an exercise of interpretative retrospection through the editorial published in Casabella-Continuità, magazine in which he worked as director from January 1954 to January 1956. The first Rogersian editorial highlighted the objectives of the magazine in the field of the architectural production of the time, clearly defining the editorial line of the publication. Paying special attention to modern Italian investigation, Rogers aimed to a *universality of culture*

understood as *continuity in time; continuity in space*³⁷. A *continuity* that he considered to be the starting point for the investigation carried out by Giuseppe Pagano and Edoardo Persico's Casabella magazine and connected with the pursuit of a critical historical consciousness, seen as the necessary knowledge for a reflection that would lay down the guidelines for a methodology based on *tradizione*, understood as *dynamic continuity and not as a passive copy*³⁸.

Some months after being in charge of the magazine (in the editorial of the issue 202 in 1954), Rogers proclaimed the need to *extend the boundaries of culture, to go beyond the stylistic schemes of academic teaching and into the wider, and not sufficiently explored, field of spontaneous art*³⁹. In his opinion, only by being acquainted with the intrinsic representation of forms, it would have been possible to *blend into a unique tradition both spontaneous tradition and educated tradition*⁴⁰.

This need for exploration and rediscovery—especially of the experiences least celebrated by canonical historiography, already present in Pagano's research⁴¹—, defined the principles of a methodological reflection focused on the subject of *continuità*, a precept around which agreements and criticism had taken place within the freedom of speech inside Casabella itself. The new *academicism*, according to Rogers, dangerously persecuted by *the modern formalists*, was becoming, in fact, one of the main predicaments of his reflection regarding the necessary understanding of historical reality, seen as an essential step in order not to fall in the use of a pre-determined code book of solutions. Consequently, Rogers emphasized the need to understand architecture as *the synthesis of the expression of certain contents in certain given forms, tradition being the key point of this synthesis, linked together in the development of the history of a nation*⁴².

According to Roger's theory, not only forms, nor content alone, but their balanced compendium would go beyond the concept of *tradition* through the idea of *continuity*, without producing an intellectual and anachronistic *crystallization* of past styles emphasized in a demagogic way. Tradition was not, to him, a synonym of folklore or formal mummification; nor could it be properly understood from a *modernismo di maniera* perspective, which revisited pre-established forms, as either educated or spontaneous, old or contemporary. Research on the significance of tradition would have lost weight if the forms of a well-known cultural heritage would not have gone through a process of *revision in light of the local (national) demands*⁴³. In this case, according to Rogers, a formalist conclusion would be inevitably reached, which would have to be understood as *any use of non-assimilated forms*⁴⁴. As a final point to his article, Rogers stated: *one can deduce, therefore, that the artist has, in turn, a double responsibility, to their origins on the one hand, and to originality in their work on the other; it is essential for artists to be talented until they grasp the reality of the time in which they live: interpret it and then, proclaim and defend it*⁴⁵.

Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that Rogers quoted Giancarlo De Carlo in his article, in an editorial note that headed the text, in which he expressed his partial disagreement regarding this author's thesis, and maintained that also young people should be responsible for certain nostalgic attitudes⁴⁶.

The *reinterpretation* of tradition according to a new linguistic code still being defined, together with the subversive concern urged by the discourse of the *youngsters of the columns* would push Aldo Rossi to

investigate first the Milanese neoclassicism and, later on, the architecture of the city.

Rossi was barely 25, and still a student, when his paper *Il concetto di tradizione nell'architettura neoclassica milanese* (F7) was published in the well-known at the time Italian magazine *Società*⁴⁷. Rossi focused his essay⁴⁸ on a concept of tradition which, in his own words, *was not defined as a timid and disciplinary way of holding to the formal world which ancient civilizations had defined, but as the freedom of choice of what history was forging, as the acceptance of an order, from which another one, broader and newer could be reached by means of the rational criticism of what had been done so far*⁴⁹ (F8).

According to Rossi, the crisis in the architectural thought was developing on the basis of a *dry formalism*. As a matter of fact, he highlighted how they will try to draw the life of art itself from ideas and abstract schemes, even from past styles and forms, *prosaically repeated, according to a scholastic concept of tradition*. That life and that form of art which, to Rossi, *only the course of events could and can offer*, considering that, following Gramsci's theory, *ideas do not come one from the other, but are expressions always renewed by the historical development of what is real*⁵⁰.

Ernesto N. Rogers's work, and before him the BBPR and young Aldo Rossi afterwards, represents what Rosaldo Bonicalzi describes as *a new interest in methodology and the tools of scientific investigation*. This would correspond in architecture to the identification and implementation, on the one hand of some *operational and conceptual tools, which were in a tension that tended to individuate research methods scientifically coherent and, on the other, to establish more direct and strict relations with real experience*⁵¹. An experience that was not only purely contemporary, but also the experience –understood here as heritage– discussed by the Modern Movement, as a historical event as well as the single set of possible comparisons that needed to be removed from *any indiscriminate abuse*⁵². That is to say, the kind of *continuity* promoted by Rogers was directed to the conscious selection of traditional elements, which, when brought to the contemporary period and treated with an equally contemporary language, would achieve original results according to a theoretical reasoning impregnated with tradition, as well as with an international reflection of rationalism. Within this framework, the alternative of the *giovani delle colonne* represented a conscious action to redirect *the tradition of modern Italian culture*, connecting it to the theoretical charge of the Rogersian editorials appearing in *Casabella-Continuità* in the years 1954 and 1955⁵³.

According to the proposal of 'the youngsters of the columns', by means of the selection of historical types and the recovery of arches and columns extrapolated from their original context, a transposition of forms from a traditional language to a *modern implementation* would take place, working to keep the difficult balance between theoretical content and the formalization of the proposals. Rogers himself, who was accused of *having been the prime mover of this revival*⁵⁴, had cast doubt on the success of those young people, although he had not directly quoted them in his editorial *Continuità o crisi?* published in 1957. He stated that they (those youngsters) *speak about the study of a language of a more general scope which is reinforced by the deepest levels of tradition* and, however, they operate in the *field of taste*⁵⁵, Rogers observed, *looking at certain nostalgic attitudes with askance [...] in the use of architectural figures of the past*⁵⁶. Rogers accepted the validity of their linguistic research of the deepest levels of tradition,

stressing the urgency of studies of that kind, which were understandable and of a key to interpretation in accordance to the one he promoted. However, recovering contents and figurative motifs meant trusting taste and this could lead them to purely formal interventions⁵⁷, that is, according to Rogers, to fall in the same trap as the Modern Movement.

Rogers examined the situation, in which he was an active party: *Can architecture develop the premises of the Modern Movement or is it changing its course? This is the problem: continuity or crisis?*⁵⁸. His question marked a turning point that was revealed in his magazine through the publishing of the reconstruction of Le Havre de Auguste Perret, of the project *Bottega d'Erasmus* by Roberto Gabetti and Aimaro Isola (F9), followed by the article *L'impegno della tradizione* signed by Vittorio Gregotti, as well as a paper on Art Nouveau by Aldo Rossi⁵⁹.

In his view of *history as a process*, continuity and crisis represented, in fact, the two sides of the same coin, as they are considered to be the legacy, negative as well as positive, of previous periods. Thus, his opening to the different experiences of the project –also to those which at a different time he would have disapproved because of representing the established eclecticism– can be considered as an acknowledgment and response to that situation of *impasse* in which the development of modern investigation was stagnated⁶⁰.

From this point of view, the experience of *the youngsters of the columns* –which was not considered by Reyner Banham in his attack to the *the Italian retreat from the Modern Movement*, which this author categorically stated in *The Architectural Review* in 1959⁶¹ – reinforced, in an osmotic process, some of the topics promoted by Ernesto N. Rogers's theory of continuity. Hence, they contributed to delimit the premises for the progressive development of a possible original operative method.

In the late 50s, the reservations of the Italian architects reflected, to a large extent, the concern suggested by Rogers in his paper *Continuità o crisi?* – as can also be seen in the minutes of the MSA meetings as a consequence of the debate started by Banham's article, as spokesperson of the English magazine. On the threshold of the existence of the concern caused by concrete results as well as by subjective puzzlement, a certain degree of frustration was felt by numerous Italian architects towards that situation, described by De Carlo as the *regressive aspect* of the national scene⁶². From the outside, the Italian situation was perceived as a reality characterized, according to De Carlo, by unsolved problems; a reality in which constant discussion over figurative aspects converged and where the work of the major architects was often limited to minor responsibilities⁶³.

Banham's article contributed to make more obvious the division between the existing different positions connected under the common denominator of the MSA, until the confrontation between De Carlo and Rogers's perspective and the editorial department of *Casabella-Continuità*⁶⁴ was revealed. At the time, some of the authors of the *protest of the columns* –Aldo Rossi, Silvano Tintori (at centro studi) and Guido Canella⁶⁵ – besides Vittorio Gregotti, Julia Banfi, Gae Aulenti, Luciano Semerani and Francesco Tentori were part of the editorial department.

It was precisely the opening of the magazine to the architectural designs identified as belonging to the neoliberty style –a definition coined by Eugenio Gentili Tedeschi with a controversial tone with respect to the contents of the issue 215 of *Casabella-Continuità*⁶⁶ – what got Rogers the disapproval of the rest of the members of the Milanese professional circles. His critical attitude –which had taken him to compile an eclectic review of projects in the Italian magazine– expressed a pluralistic view, but perhaps not so linear, of contemporary experiences and reinforced, paradoxically, a debate that could no longer end within

the limits of a private conversation. Rogers defended the need for an update of the architectural debate; to stop limiting the interest of the magazine in works of art, but presenting to the contemporary consciousness instances from the past that could offer solutions to current problems. From his point of view, to the freedom of choice as to the approach of the magazine, a prophetic hint was added, understandable in the broadest scope of sensitive culture reflection and, to Rogers, inseparable from the Modern Movement⁶⁷.

The management of the magazine was branded as being too *personal* and marked by the diversity of its interests, reality that became apparent from the divergence of points of view that could no longer stay under the same motto *continuità* – reason why De Carlo resigned in 1957⁶⁸. The magazine became again the center of a controversy with clear negative connotations about the critical line, more than operational, to which Rogers had provided guidelines adapting it, perhaps, to suit a spontaneous development of interests and attitudes latent since the beginning of the 50s in the protest of the *giovani delle colonne*.

If, on the one hand, it is true that it was a youth experience, on the other, the sharpness of their discourse cannot be ignored, which can be seen as 'action-reaction' movement in addition to a revision process that had already interested the Modern Movement also in the international field, and was clearly recognizable in the CIAM of the 50s⁶⁹. It would be enough to refer to the CIAM which took place in Otterlo in September 1959 –few months after the MSA debate about the Baham's controversial article– in which De Carlo's project of residences in Matera (1954) (F10), as well as the Torre Velasca in Milan (1950-1958) presented by Rogers (F11, F12), were strongly criticized –especially by Alison Smithson– because of embracing *old forms* in their constructions without making an effort to find some that were actually *authentic*.

Even though the debate promoted by the *giovani delle colonne* –in which they rejected the *solidified* modern linguistic canons of the university education of the time, which had started to reveal their limitations in terms of a social answer– has not been exempt of a certain 'formal regression' and not all of its aspects have reached a good conclusion; some of its contents have contributed to fuel the development of Italian architecture, and have left traces, more or less evident, in the mature work of the young architects of the period. Their student performance formed the breeding ground for the basis of Italian theory of architecture of the second half of the 20th century (F13, F14). Therefore, their proposal can be understood (rather than in terms of *regression*, according to Banham's judgment), as one of the starting points of a cultural process –architectural, urban and sociologic– that goes from the re-consideration of *the different spirits of the modern project*⁷⁰ (implemented by many of them through the columns of Casabella⁷¹), to the studies by Rossi and Canella on the city as an open field for reflection⁷², both theoretical and related to project planning.



GIOVANI DELLE COLONNE
TRADITION
CONTINUITY
GUIDO CANELLA
ALDO ROSSI