

# The Promises of San Rocco

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During the 12<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in September 2010, “Innocence”, the inaugural issue of *San Rocco* magazine, was launched. In a short time, the Italian magazine gained popularity and established itself as a reference for a generation of young architects eager to write about their discipline in a carefree manner. However, its success as an object of desire and the fetishization of its graphic style -particularly the black axonometric drawings on the front covers- overshadowed some of its most innovative propositions. In April 2019, at the Triennale Milano, “Muerte”, the 15th and final issue of *San Rocco*, was presented. This premature end meant the unfulfillment of some of the publication’s initial goals. Nevertheless, the magazine’s network of connections between authors, collaborators and admirers has kept its legacy alive within select circles of contemporary European architecture.

*San Rocco* was founded by a group of young architects, designers and photographers from Genoa, Rome, Milan and Venice. They shared a dissatisfaction with mainstream magazines and online aggregators, for their lack of critical engagement and alignment with market interests, while also rejecting academic publications for their vague objectives, their restrictive formats and their inability to communicate with the general public. Key contributors to *San Rocco* included Matteo Costanzo from 2A+P/A studio; Matteo Ghidoni, Giovanni Piovene, Ludovico Centis and Michele Marchetti - author of the famous front cover axonometries - from Salottobuono, Paolo Carpi, Pier Paolo Tamburelli and Andrea Zanderingo from baukuh and Kersten Geers, from OFFICE kgdvs. Photographers Stefano Graziani and Giovanna Silva also played significant roles, with Francesca Pellicciari overseeing the magazine’s graphic design.

*San Rocco* was a magazine that turned to the past, recognizing history as the great source of solutions for the present. Its greatest merit lied in making that premise attractive through its distinctive format. In contrast to the prevailing media trend of showcasing recent architectural projects through glossy photographs and renderings, *San Rocco* stood out for its editorial autonomy and its strong graphic identity. The magazine borrowed certain elements from academic journals, such as thematic issues and concise articles, but broke with convention by abandoning peer review. Each issue was framed through a satirical take on the Call for Papers, in which the editors shared their thoughts on a topic in exhaustive detail, often in an

informal, subjective, and humorous tone. The magazine’s editorials expressed the ambition to revitalize the stagnant architectural theory and critique and to reconnect them to contemporary practice. These renewing propositions, like their willingness to use history without being constrained by the corset of historiography, did not transcend, instead the fetishization of its graphic design elevated the magazine to celebrity status, thus in the end generating more collectors than readers.

Despite being born with an expiration date -as it was announced that it would end in five years- the magazine extended beyond its initial five-year plan. For a little less than a decade, *San Rocco* provided a platform for a generation of young architects who would later go on to participate in biennials, international competitions and occupy the most coveted academic positions. Through an analysis of the magazine’s contributions, as well as its congresses, exhibitions, and activities, it is possible to identify a constellation of architects, mainly European, born between 1965 and 1980, who form what could be theoretically be called the ‘San Rocco Generation’. In this group, in addition to those previously mentioned, architects and studios such as Atelier Kempe Thill, Johnston Marklee, Kuehn Malvezzi, Lütjens Padmanabhan, Monadnock, PlanComún, Productora, Sam Jacob, YellowOffice and 51N4E stand out. They are joined by theoretical references such as Irénée Scalbert, Fabrizio Gallanti, Christophe Van Gerreway, DOGMA partners: Martino Tattara and Pier Vittorio Aureli, and photographers such as Bas Princen. In the context shared by this generation, there are certain focal points and locations that act as nexus, such as the cities of Milan, Venice, Vienna and Brussels, or universities like the Berlage in Delft, the EPFL in Lausanne and the USI in Mendrisio. At the disciplinary level, this group is united by a double opposition: on the one hand, to the ‘diagramatism’ of the previous ‘SuperDutch’ generation and, on the other, to the neoliberal pragmatism that reigned American academia during the turn of the millennium. Ideologically, the coexistence of their professional activity with regressive economic cycles and the response to the excesses of the ‘stararchitects’ explain both the austerity of their proposals and some of their critical positions.

The theoretical and practical contributions of two of *San Rocco*’s founders, Kersten Geers and Pier Paolo Tamburelli, who have become prominent figures in the international architectural landscape, highlight the diverse operational visions of history that coexisted within the magazine, where both authored over a dozen articles. In parallel to his work at OFFICE with his partner David Van Severen, Kersten Geers has taught at universities such as EPFL Lausanne, USI Mendrisio and Harvard GSD. A selection of Geers’ writings can be found in the book *Without Content* (2021). Linked to his academic activity, he has produced in collaboration with Jelena Pančević, a series of books that focus on specific periods in the work of various architects.

These publications are characterized by the redrawings of the architectural works by the students, along with the re-reading of the production of these authors through critical essays and the contemporary lenses of Bas Princen and Stefano Graziani. This approach seeks to reinterpret these architects from the perspective of a current practitioner, demonstrating the practical applicability of selective appropriation in architecture.

These publications reveal a particular attraction to the 1960s and 1970s, a period in which some key figures began to openly question the propositions of Modernism, even as their work remained largely shaped by its codes and techniques. For instance, *The Difficult Whole. A Reference Book on Robert Venturi, John Rauch and Denise Scott Brown* (2016), co-edited with Andrea Zanderingo, illustrates how Venturi’s “deep interest in architecture as culture turns him into a (mild) antagonist of the Modern Movement”. However, it is pointed out that at its core, it is a family quarrel, as Venturi cannot help but remain a modern architect. *The Urban Fact. A Reference Book on Aldo Rossi* (2021) highlights specific periods in the work of the Milanese architect, of whom Geers, in issue 6 of *San Rocco*, argued that in the cemetery of Modena Rossi “cleansed his architecture of the last shred of the ideological Modernism in favor of reflecting life as it is: no diagrams, no utopia, no projection, just ‘the presence of things’”. Similarly, he has focused on the work of Team X members through publications such as *Aldo & Hannie van Eyck. Excess of Architecture* (2023) and *Giancarlo De Carlo. Experiments in Thickness* (2024).

Pier Paolo Tamburelli, co-founder of *San Rocco* and baukuh, has also held academic positions in Milan and Vienna. As a result of his teaching work, he has published the book *Grundkurs: What is Architecture About?* (2023), which distills his vision of the discipline through introductory courses for students. In his most significant publication, *On Bramante* (2022), Tamburelli offers a unique analysis of the life and work of the Renaissance architect, in which dates are scarce and no chronological order is followed. This study intertwines quotations from scholars contemporary to Bramante with modern writings, stating that they have been used “freely”. He candidly admits that within its pages “there are no discoveries, not even new attributions”. Rather than providing concrete evidence, Tamburelli employs historical analysis to articulate a series of personal positions that portray Bramante as an architect confronted with an era whose complexity could not be negotiated from within the discipline itself, a utilitarian who “used the ruins with the pragmatism of someone repairing a tractor with parts from an old Ferrari”.

In Geers’ publications appropriation emerges as a practical tool for shaping contemporary architectural projects. In contrast, Tamburelli analyzes the work of classicist architects such as the Italian Bramante, the Austrian Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach or the Americans McKim, Mead & White in order to connect different temporalities with the

present. This approach allows him to explore his vision of the contemporary architect, who, despite disciplinary changes is still bound to immutable principles that have endured for centuries. In their explorations of historical figures, Geers and Tamburelli ultimately engage with contemporary issues and their own professional practices. Geers expresses a nuanced attraction to the aesthetics of modern pragmatism, which is evident in the output of OFFICE, whereas Tamburelli finds in the biographies of classicist architects the same socio-political tribulations and obstacles of the everyday that an architect of the XXI century faces.

The output of these two figures illustrates the operational potential of history and theory for this generation of architects, reflecting both their ambition and their shortcomings. Whether consciously or not, the pages of *San Rocco* conveyed, through mostly male voices, a Eurocentric perspective on architecture and a selective gaze focused on the Western past. Neither its themes nor its proposals represented a real subversion of the *status quo*; rather, they tended to reinforce certain values aligned with a normative vision of the profession. Thus, in contrast to the mythification of the magazine by its followers, critical voices have also emerged to question whether its seemingly liberating proposals concealed a recovery of a certain orthodoxy.

Tamburelli and Geers represent two sides of *San Rocco*'s ambiguous relationship with architectural history, as well as the magazine's ambition to reconcile theory and practice in a contemporary context. This ambition was overshadowed by a frustrating legacy of celebrity and style, full with unfulfilled promises. But at least, promises.