History of Italian Architecture, 1944–1985

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The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

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"Gay Errancy": Hypermoderns (Postmoderns)

It is well known that in Italy, Portoghesi launched a style that has been called "postmodern" with his *Strada Novissima* and a dense series of publications, and thus joined an international circuit that includes analogous "opinion-makers" such as Charles Jencks and Robert Stern. Portoghesi was different, though, in that he had a long theoretical and practical interest in the manipulation of historical signs: as we have seen, his first neobaroque experiments began in the late fifties. His more recent "manifestos" are linear.[1] They contain an appeal for a "liberation from ideas" supposedly imposed upon architects and their beneficiaries by the "modern movement," for a joyous rediscovery of the entire repertory of the past, for expressive contaminations of the complexity of historical eras, and for a formal expressiveness linked to the recovery of the concepts of place and continuity. Portoghesi also engaged in a critique of the utopia of the "modern" and of its nihilistic character, which was spiritually grounded in the ideology of progress. "Liberation" is presented as overcoming avant-garde attempts to "reconstruct the universe," and also as canceling incongruous duties, in order to recover the happiness of "rich languages" that have been lost. Echoes of the philosophical writings of Heidegger, Gehlen, Deleuze, and Levinas—listening, simulacrum, *post-histoire*, angel of history—possibly mediated by Mario Perniola and Gianni Vattimo, punctuate Portoghesi's writings, as he travels the seas of contemporary thought, a voyage that, as we shall see, has its own particular significance.

A hedonistic urge and a taste for citation, as well as free association and *pastiche*, counterbalance each other in the proposals of Portoghesi, whose theoretical production has been accompanied by skillful professional and promotional activities. This man and the review *Eupalino* soon became the focal points of a composite school intent on using design and writing to breathe new life into a stringent critique of the "modern," thereby hailing the advent of a new era.

Portoghesi gathers almost all the motifs that have been floating about in the international architectural and philosophical debate of recent decades. His theoretical system accommodates a broad spectrum of issues: a critique of the linear concept of history, a reflection upon memory, the need for a new nonmetaphysical statute for truth, the emergence of new demands for identity and what can be imagined, the demand for peripheral identities, the cult of roots, and the explosion of ephemeral hedonisms. In fact, his cultural project is to make debate a priority once again, focused upon passwords such as the "end of prohibitionism," rediscovered architecture, historical roots, and listening to the site and to history. In this way, the factors characterizing Italian architecture at the present—the multiplication of ideas and the slow formation of parameters of comparison—are flattened in a synthetic attempt, launched with the explicit goal of cultural "management." And that is not all. The reduction of pluralism to a formula includes a study of the true nature of kitsch: there is an answer for everything, and the need for *solutions* predominates.

The superficiality of the "critique of the modern" resulting from such a synthesis is typical. The principal characteristic of the "modern" is constant self-criticism: destructive and gnawing doubts accompanied modernity in its journey, and the critique of the concepts of linear history and progress is intrinsic to both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The protagonists of this drama of course include Blanqui, Nietzsche, Freud, Kafka, Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Heidegger, as well as Loos, Le Corbusier (though certainly not the one of the *vulgata*), Klee, Malevich, and Mies van der Rohe. In order to present the new

theoretical proposal as "surpassing" something, a historiographic myth was reinforced: the new research was contrasted with a homogeneous and opaque monolith, an extremely worn historiographic construction: the *modern movement* theorized by Nikolaus Pevsner in 1936.[2] Thus there was an attempt to halt the process of historiographical revision, which has, for some time, thrown light upon the irreducible pluralism of experiments generated since the end of the nineteenth century on: the characteristic features of the labyrinthian map traced by these experiments were falsified implacably. The term *postmodern* as used by Lyotard has rather different coordinates, as he himself remarked during a seminar held in Paris in April 1985, when he opposed the homogeneity of his ideas to those of neoeclectic architecture.[3]

But up to what point is it correct to criticize the postmodern using its own theoretical premises as a starting point? These, in reality, drown in all the myths of the "modern": the cult of *tendenze*, the pathos of the new, and the "surpassing" or "overcoming" of the tragic. Examining Portoghesi's products confirms the "imperfect nihilism" that informs them. The "end of prohibitionism" is translated into montages of allusions and facile effects of "surprise," characterized by a symptomatic ease of composition. This is true of the mosque in Rome and of the following projects: the Unità Sanitaria Locale of Polla, Salerno of 1981, the town hall of Ascea of 1982, the civic center of Padua of 1983, the City of Science in Rome of 1983, the reuse of the Fortezza da Basso in Florence of 1983 (figure 165), the piazza in Latina of 1984 (figure 164), the complex in Rome of 1984, and the restructuring of residences in the historical center of Genoa of 1985.[4] Analogously, an architecture comfortable not only with sadistically deformed caricatures, but also with classical, medieval, and baroque emblems, emerges from the exercises of Riccardo Bichara, Giorgio Blanco, Gianfranco Cundari, and Franz Prati, and approaches comic nuance in the projects of Roberto Pirzio Biroli.[5] The obvious love of history is resolved, in practice, in the game of repeatedly "putting the mustache on the Mona Lisa," now a mass joke thanks to a visual culture more influenced by Disneyland than Duchamp.

It is not clear that this signifies a true turning point. On the contrary, the most superficial characteristics of the "modern" have been taken to extremes. We are left not with a "gay science," but with a "gay errancy" dominated by a perfect equating of form and meaning, by annulling history in reducing it to a field of visual incursions, and by a *choc* technique informed by television: in the end, a *fiction-architecture* comfortably establishes itself in the computer age. There is good reason to label such a mixture of components as *hypermodern*.

Furthermore, Portoghesi revealed how he uses his sources in a singular lapse located at the center of his "The Lights of Lost Paradise," a text introducing a recent anthology of works of "new Italian architects." Evoking the Nietzschean theme of the "eternal return" in order to support—with the help of fragments of Gehlen, Lacan, and Vattimo—the advent of a new sensibility, Portoghesi cites a passage in which the animals who are Zarathustra's friends define the eternal return as the "curved path of Eternity."[6] But the passage, as it is quoted by Portoghesi, cannot be found in the philological edition of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* by Colli and Montinari.[7] Portoghesi took the passage from a text by Löwith, and in so doing landed in a trap[8]: Zarathustra turns to his animal friends soon thereafter—but Löwith, and Portoghesi with him, ignore this—and reproaches them sharply for immediately turning their premonition of the abyss into an "organ grinder's song."[9]

And this is the point: the important themes carelessly assembled by the hypermodern synthesis (those that, in the world of Italian architecture, have been patiently and masterfully explored by Scarpa, by Gabetti and Isola, and by Rossi) have been turned into a "barrel-organ song."

All of this may explain the success of the formula among those on the margins of the profession, seeking a forum and confronting a public eager for eccentric novelties. There are exceptions, of course: a few projects by Francesco Cellini and Nicoletta Cosentino (figure 166) demonstrate a complexity surpassing the limitations cited above, as do a few buildings and projects by Oswald Zoeggler (figure 167). It is nonetheless clear that the hypermodern

phenomenon did not arise accidentally. Along with much that is fermenting on the Italian scene, it should be appreciated as a historical symptom. Its character of "imperfect nihilism" does not belong to it exclusively. For this reason we now shift our attention to the question of the relationship between nihilism and the project.