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URBAN TRADITION AND MODERNITY – THE NEW CITY BLOCK IN MILAN

TRADYCJA MIEJSKA I NOWOCZESNOŚĆ – NOWY KWARTAŁ MIEJSKI W MEDIOLANIE

Abstract

After the Second World War Milan was largely destroyed. The age of reconstruction had to face many different problems that implied important architectural and theoretical questions, the loss of a great number of monuments that represented the identity of the city and the destruction of many historical residential blocks. In this period, an important school of architects was developing in Milan: to be truly modern they claimed it was necessary to look at history and to study the construction principles of historical cities, not to imitate forms but to not lose their own identity. The research moving toward a modern architecture that was closely related to the tradition was also applied to the reconstruction of the residential blocks of the city center.

Keywords: urban tradition, modernity, urban block, architecture, Milan

Streszczenie

Po II wojnie światowej Mediolan był poważnie zniszczony. Okres odbudowy wymagał zmierzenia się z wieloma różnymi problemami pociągającymi za sobą ważne kwestie architektoniczne i teoretyczne, utratą ogromnej liczby zabytków, które reprezentowały tożsamość miasta oraz zniszczeniem wielu historycznych kwartałów mieszkalnych. W tym czasie w Mediolanie rozwijała się ważna szkoła architektów: twierdzili oni, że aby być prawdziwie nowoczesnym, konieczne jest spojrzenie na historię i studiowanie zasad budowy miast historycznych, nie po to, bynajmniej, by naśladować formy, ale by nie utracić własnej tożsamości. Badania dążące w kierunku nowoczesnej architektury, która była ściśle związana z tradycją, zostały również wykorzystane przy rekonstrukcji kwartałów mieszkalnych w centrum miasta.

Słowa kluczowe: tradycja urbanistyczna, nowoczesność, kwartał miejski, architektura, Mediolan

The works I am going to talk about today are well known, and were either designed by equally well-known architects in Milan immediately after the war. While quite different from one another, these buildings share one thing – the urban issue they address as meditations on the reconstruction of the block within an historical fabric established by clear and recognizable principles. Integration within the existing city and its tradition is one of their primary goals, although they clearly challenge its very rules at the same time, in the name of modernity – viewed as a correspondence between architectural forms and their own time – and of the new requirements of growth.

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You may not know that Milan suffered devastating bombing raids during the war that destroyed a quite relevant section of the city. As a major industrial and railway hub with over one million residents, ever since the early days of war Milan was a key target for the Allied forces' raids, increasingly so from 1943. Targeted against the entire city, its housing districts and civil population, the bombing raids entered a new and more intense phase after Mussolini's arrest, on July 25, 1943. The Allied forces aimed at the comprehensive destruction of the city in order to force Italy to ask for an armistice.

In the night between August 12 and 13, 1943, the old center and many of its most relevant monuments were either reduced to rubble or badly damaged by bombs and the all-enveloping fire that raged for days afterwards. With the streets made unpassable, the population could not be evacuated, the waterworks were unserviceable, and the network of tramways transportation, a source of pride for Milan, was put out of order. The bombing raids that went on for days, particularly at night, brought Milan to its knees. On April 25, 1945, Liberation Day for Italy, Mussolini was arrested in Dongo while fleeing the country. On April 30, the Anglo-American troops entered the city.

Thousands of civilians were killed by as many as sixty extremely heavy bombing raids that also damaged between 50% and 75% of the building stock according to postwar estimates. About 25% of that stock, or a third of the city's buildings, including a staggering number of monuments, was reduced to rubble. The city also lost about 75% of its trees. Some of the rubble from ruined buildings would be used to erect the Monte Stella, the hill in the QT8 district designed by Piero Bottoni. Besides the monuments, a remarkable portion of the housing stock was lost or damaged during the war.

Like many other European cities, Milan had to confront reconstruction as a primary concern after the war. Obviously, such challenge posed different issues as different were the approaches proposed to address it.

Particularly in the case of monuments, such as the La Scala opera house, the course of action was to bring them back to their original condition exactly as they had been before the war. In other cases, the reconstruction effort chose instead to reinterpret the buildings' spatial and typological features. A case in point is the reconstruction of the half-destroyed Ca' Granda, which relied on modern forms and technologies.

Whenever comprehensive destruction results from various kinds of events, from wars to earthquakes, the primary concerns are what should be preserved, how should buildings be transformed and, in general, how the identity of a city may be preserved so that its residents, in the aftermath of a tragic and destructive event, can still recognize themselves as belonging to it. The underlying concept is that the form of the city, and its architectures, ultimately define the identity of its residents.

This is mainly a cultural issue, and as such, a particularly insidious question that cannot be univocally addressed by either pursuing faithful reconstruction, and therefore recreate something as it was where it was, or, vice versa, by denying and radically overturn the previous ways and principles of construction.

The question is what is precisely the memory of a place, how can we keep it alive and relevant to its own time without betraying it. This is, basically, the more general issue that architects had to confront when they rebuilt their destroyed cities. The buildings' quality, their programs and degree of preservation, as well as the kind of memory the lost monuments had encapsulated, were the factors those architects considered when deciding their course of action.

While particularly dramatic in the case of the city's monuments, this issue is no less of a problem when the damaged or lost elements are residential districts and their houses, individual buildings or fragments of blocks that belong to a fabric with recognizable morphology, relationship with the street, interior environments. The reconstruction of pre-existing forms seems out of the question in these cases, although any intervention is required to address the context and the historical fabric.

The cultural climate in Milan was among the liveliest and most interesting: a cultural debate around the architecture and the city developed starring a group of architects of the Enlightenment tradition and Rationalist model, Ernesto Nathan Rogers, Ignazio Gardella, Franco Albini, Figini and Pollini, Piero Bottoni, and many others. These gave life to a school of thought that looked to Ernesto Rogers' magazine Casabella Continuità and to the Faculty of Architecture, which would result in intense exchanges and lasting relationships with the Institute of Architecture of Venice guided in those years by Giuseppe Samonà. The problems of reconstruction intertwined consciously with those of the aspiration for a modernity that did not reject its own history along with a search for scientific tools to operate on architecture and the city, laying the foundations for a disciplinary refoundation that remains the theoretical basis of the training of many Italian architects.

In Milan, an attempt was made to give the idea of modernity a new interpretation far from formal stylistic features, to redefine a role for architecture where it would be seen as civil commitment: a disciplinary commitment that meant knowledge and adherence to a culture, and an ability to understand, interpret and represent this in corresponding, generic, congruent forms, able to bring – and restore – identity to places and things. In this operation, history played a key part, since it is the foundation of every culture, necessary for an understanding of reality.

Counter to each proclamation of a part of the Modern Movement beyond the Alps, modernity was no longer defined in opposition to history: between history and the present time there is a relationship of continuity, a term coined by Ernesto Rogers, who associated it with the title of the magazine Casabella, that would become the emblem and guide of concerted research.

With this commitment toward modernity and this idea of continuity, the theme of the reconstruction was also applied to the city blocks – or fragments thereof – included in the ancient fabric, parts of the city still recognizable in their morphology, in urban relationships with the streets and communal spaces, in the articulation of the inner courtyards that characterized the housing of the old town. Here the comparison between new and ancient architecture was direct, putting the meaning of continuity to the test and deepening reflection on the principles behind building the city.

The best projects and experiments travel the uncertain road of integration with the extant and the context, with the environmental pre-existences, in a way however that does not preclude new relationships between the urban elements, between housing and streets, constructed and open spaces, private buildings and collective spaces, also within the existing fabric. They seek to understand the rules that underlie the construction of the buildings and places of the ancient city to define modern principles that will dialogue with and enrich it. They seek the path of renewal through knowledge of places and their history, through a modernization aware of tradition. They seek, in short, a relationship of continuity with the existing city without ceasing to question its rules, in the name of a modernity seen as a correspondence of the forms of the architecture to their own time and to the city's need for growth.

A characteristic common to the best projects is the non-acceptance of the closed city block.

The request for an increase in density, common to all interventions, led to an attempt to have two opposing kinds of logic coexist in the same project: the affirmation of the continuity of a curtain wall frontage via low buildings or bases that take their measure from the pre-existing constructions, possibly open toward the interior green spaces that now showed themselves to the city, and the highest buildings, inside lots or arranged at right angles to the street, that refuted the latter as an element of relationship, looking inwards toward a place that was more peaceful, quiet, and possibly green.

The designs I am now going to show you address this intermediate scale between individual building and the construction of new, major urban sectors. Such intermediate scale embraces both the relationship with the existing fabric, and its typological and morphological rules, and the meditation on the principles that underlie the construction of the modern city, particularly relevant at the time.

War defines a time divide after which everything is up for discussion – and a reassessment of principles, types and relationships between the elements is required even in the historical core. In the case of Milan, its best architects almost never opted for either a faithful reconstruction or a radical renewal. While they wanted their buildings to integrate within the existing fabric, they did not refrain from exploring new relationships between the elements in the city, house and street, buildings and open space, private buildings and collective spaces.

Building speculation was certainly a factor at the time. Even the developments we are discussing today had to contend with a request for increased volumes, although, in the best examples, their authors tried to integrate and interpret such requirement as a possibility, and never lost sight of the priority of quality as they simultaneously pursued a recognizable identity, challenged old models and addressed the new growth requirements.

The projects I am going to illustrate share a concern for such elements, although with some differences.

A number of architects worked in an exemplary way along this line, including Piero Bottoni, Figini and Pollini, Luigi Moretti and Asnago and Vender

Piero Bottoni had the most theoretical approach, and the clearest ideas about how to rebuild the city. Before the war, he had worked at the plans for Milan's satellite districts, namely the QT8 district, and later contributed to its actual construction. In these new developments, Bottoni experimented the most advanced concepts about the construction of the city, and strove to adapt them even to smaller plans thereby demonstrating their viability at the various scales.

In the unbuilt design entry submitted to the competition for a small district in San Siro in 1932 some of the issues we are going to discuss are already recognizable. One of these is the separation between housing and services. Rather than being aligned to the street, the houses are perpendicular to it so that the street ceases to be the focus of frontage. The street itself is rather established and defined by lower service and retail elements.

Piero Bottoni explored this arrangement in a number of occasions and places. Even in the design he developed in Bologna (via Roma, 1936–37; second project 1938), the street is established by lower continuous elements that are consistent with the scale of the historical city, while the apartment buildings become much taller. This project explores the issue of tall buildings in old cities in order to address the prevailing requirement for higher building densities without altering the scale of urban places and streets. In Bottoni's solutions, higher

buildings are withdrawn from the streets so that they are unconnected with, and perpendicular to, the lower service buildings.

We are now between 1936 and 1937.

A further example of such arrangement is the small block Bottoni built in Lecco (Inail building, 1939–44). While, once again, the street is defined by a low three-story building, the apartment buildings result from a different concept – they are perpendicular to the street and look out onto the garden.

This is a further element that would play a key role in the debate of the time. Green areas or gardens, either already existing or created for the occasion, emerge as possible and necessary elements for the construction of the city and, in particular, as a desirable frontage for housing.

Built between 1946 and 1951, the building in corso Buenos Aires in Milan (Ill. 1) is arguably the most renowned example and the clearest demonstration of Piero Bottoni's approach, although its construction failed to reflect its author's original concept in full, due to bureaucratic issues with the city council and conflicts with the builder.

The building's site, one of the few undeveloped areas in a densely built sector, was a small 40-meter square with frontage on the main street and surrounded by other streets.

The building code allowed for the construction of aligned buildings within a 30 meters height limit. By separating the building in two sections – one that acts as a basement defining the perimeter of the block and the other a narrower element perpendicular to the street – Bottoni effectively achieved a height that was way beyond the statutory one. This arrangement introduced a major innovation as it created the first building in Milan to rely on two independent elements.

Basically, the project adheres to the street buildings' continuous line and to the logic of the block definition. However, it withdraws the apartment building and develops it in height; plus it changes its focus – its apartments look out on the inner courtyard rather than on corso Buenos Aires, a very busy and noisy avenue even back then.

Given how the site closely fit into pre-existing developed blocks, a garden was out of the question. On the other side, the basement shows a remarkable urban richness provided by several collective spaces, retail and urban services organized in a covered plaza and a gallery.

In Bottoni's drawings a kind of peculiar contrast emerges between the light and glazed basement and the heavy and massive building rising above it.

During construction the richly articulated collective spaces in the basement were somewhat downsized, although the building has preserved its demonstrative value.

For the later building in corso Sempione (1956–1958), Bottoni worked again on the same arrangement but resorted to a more radical solution. The 19-story apartment building has a remarkable height – about 60 meters. The small basement develops sideways rather than below the main building. In aligning with corso Sempione, an avenue that is altogether different from corso Buenos Aires, it effectively defines and completes the irregular corner block.

The type Bottoni develops here is that of a very tall apartment building. Corso Sempione is a wide, tree-lined monumental avenue that starts from the Sforza Castle and, in the original plans, was meant to connect Milan with Paris. The key feature of this house is certainly not its relation with the avenue but its view line towards the castle, the gardens and the mountains in the distance.

Bottoni explored the same principle as a viable way of building the city in his other plans for larger urban sectors. In a sketch for the Gallaratese district (1956), for which he theorized

the concept of "living street", the buildings that define the central street, or the core of the new development's collective life, reflect the same principle of the buildings we illustrated before.

The living street is something else from the rue corridor of the historical or nineteenth century city. If Bottoni still calls it street, it is not because of its structure but, I think, to convey the idea of liveliness and to demonstrate that any new development has to include an urban, living place at its core. Just like the street in the old city, he views it as an architecturally rich place with plenty of collective spaces, if not necessarily defined by aligned buildings.

He views the living street as established by discontinuous elements that define its section, and articulated by wide openings that lead to housing and green spaces in the block's depth. A lower basement looks out onto the street and accommodates public facilities and retail spaces, while the taller, perpendicular buildings front onto their inner open courtyards and pursue connections with the new development's green areas.

The principle Bottoni experimented with the small urban blocks became a model for larger scale new developments as a general principle for the construction of the city.

Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini pursued a similar line of research.

The period we are now considering is 1947–1948. At the time, Ernesto Nathan Rogers, the architect and intellectual who was then editing Casabella Continuità played a key role as theoretical guide for Milan architects. He wrote many essays about the need to refer to tradition while being modern at the same time, about environmental pre-existing conditions, about the relevant issue of how new buildings should relate to the existing context and its strong features not in terms of forms but in terms of identity, morphology and type. Following the war events, and with the now unavoidable transformation of the city, Rogers insisted that such context had to be adapted, replaced, altered so that it would reflect and interpret the cultural transformations of the time.

The building Figini and Pollini designed for via Broletto, in the center of Milan (Ill. 2), is yet another example of reconstruction on the site of a building destroyed during the war that still included a magnificent ancient garden.

Figini and Pollini decide to divide the development into two sections – a street-aligned building that completes and closes the line of existing buildings, mainly accommodating offices and general public facilities, and a second taller building, parallel to the street but withdrawn deep into the site. This latter building has a residential program so that its apartments benefit from a frontage onto the ancient garden with its original trees. Figini and Pollini, who viewed green areas as possible elements and places for the construction of the city and its architectures, explored this issue in a number of other designs.

The large entryway through which one perceives the depth of the site and its inner spaces allows for an uninterrupted view from the street through the garden. The two buildings have different features – the one along the street is low and enclosed, while the taller apartment building is open and expansive, with deep loggias, and a character that echoes the sunny apartment buildings Figini and Pollini would later design for the magnificent Harar district.

The next two examples are particularly relevant.

The first building, also suffering from complications in its development process, was designed by Mario Asnago and Claudio Vender in via Lanzone (1950–1953) in a central, highly valuable sector of the city that had to be rebuilt following wartime destruction (Ill. 3). The site is close to the cloisters and the Basilica of St Ambrose and the Catholic University with its large gardens in the neighboring blocks included between via Lanzone and via Cappuccio.

Ill. 1. P. Bottoni, M. Pucci (then with G. Ulrich), corso Buenos Aires, Milano, 1946–1951 (Archivio Piero Bottoni, DAsTU, Politecnico di Milano)
Ill. 2. L. Figini, G. Pollini, via Broletto a Milano, 1947–1948 (da C. Blasi Figini e Pollini, Edizioni di Comunità, Milano 1963)
Ill. 3. M. Asnago, C. Vender, via Lanzone, Milano, 1950–1953 (photo Cino Zucchi)
Ill. 4. L. Moretti, corso Italia, Milano, 1949–1956 (Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Roma – Fondo Moretti)

Asnago and Vender developed a number of alternative solutions, also because the church, which owned the building lots selected for the development, repeatedly replaced them during the process.

Their original intention was to restore the street line with a low, C-shaped narrow building, closed by a taller building withdrawn from and parallel to the street. A second proposal inverts this arrangement – a court, rather than the street, now defines the building line, and opens onto the street by separating it from the garden in the back.

Additional proposals were submitted by Piero Bottoni, Vico Magistretti, as well as by Asnago and Vender themselves.

The development plan, that covered the entire large block on via Lanzone, included a section of palazzo Visconti and its badly damaged courtyard at the corner of via del Torchio and via Cappuccio, across from the large garden of the old church of St Bernardino alle Monache. The famous Casa Panigarola, decorated with frescoes by Bramante that had been luckily salvaged and transferred at the Brera painting gallery, was completely in ruins in the central section of the street.

For this small city sector, Asnago and Vender experimented the construction of a large urban block based on a different settlement principle and a larger volume. A sequence of low buildings – each with a taller building parallel to it – articulates a street line that is established by sections rather than continuous and closed.

The project included in the 1953 Master Plan still shows three separate portions, each including a low building and a tall building, this latter now perpendicular to the street, each commissioned to three different architects. The brothers Gustavo and Vito Latis designed the one at the western end; Asnago and Vender designed the central one; while Luigi Caccia Dominioni designed the one at the eastern end that included the remains of the Visconti palace (1589–1591, originally by Giuseppe Meda and Pellegrino Tibaldi).

The house developed by Asnago and Vender was commissioned by a company, the Fabbrica Italiana Tubi, that wanted to put its offices in the lower section onto the street, and use the apartments in the higher withdrawn building for its managing officers.

The buildings have changed hands but not their original programs over time. The white street-fronting three-story building, more severe and boasting a Loos-inspired civic quality, is more enclosed and faced with white Perlino marble, while the taller perpendicular building features large windows and clear pinkish clinker bricks. Its remarkably spacious apartments look out onto the garden below and the cloisters that typically grace this section of the city. The top floors offer an amazing view over the Basilica of St Ambrose, the Castle, the Cathedral and the mountains that ring the Po valley. The priceless view the apartments offer from above is indeed their most outstanding quality.

The depth and richness of the block clearly appear from the street – the entryway with the fountain guides the eye into the enclosed gardens. While the street alignment is still recognizable, the block opens itself to the city. A different relation between house and street opens traditionally closed courtyards and, vice versa, the street defined by a continuous alignment benefits from its openness to the green heart of the blocks.

The last architect I would like to discuss here is Luigi Moretti.

The year is 1946. After a stint in the San Vittore penitentiary, Moretti moved to Milan to pursue the professional opportunities reconstruction would offer in the city.

He designed a plan for 22 hotel-houses distributed across downtown Milan to address the then crucial issue of provisional accommodation for refugees and homeless people. Moretti seized this opportunity to experiment on a range of construction processes for small developments. The houses were small but provided an abundance of common facilities, living rooms and canteen among other things. In other words, they were collective housing facilities some of which, or the few that were actually built, would be later transformed into student dormitories and hotels.

In these designs, the urban relationships proposed by Moretti reflect the same rationale – the house does not define the block along its perimeter and instead creates interior environments that are separate from the city. The urban public space, or the street, is rather defined by the low building designed to accommodate collective facilities for the houses. The fundamental feature of the apartment buildings arranged orthogonally to the lower buildings is the relationship with open spaces such as gardens or courtyards.

Eventually, only three of these hotel-houses would be built – one in via Bassini, one close to Porta Venezia, while the third, and most beautiful, one is located in via Corridoni, close to the Conservatory and the Church of Santa Maria della Passione in the city center, where it currently provides accommodation for the Polytechnic School students. Aligned with via Conservatorio, and orthogonal to the street that provides access to it, the building directly engages with the large church's dome. Based on a radically innovative design, the development includes two buildings for housing – a taller one for men, and a lower one, aligned to the former, for women – as well as a low building for service facilities in between that connects the other two.

Moretti, who in the meantime had established the real estate company Cofimprese, built the house in corso Italia (1949–1956), or one of the most extraordinary buildings of modern Milan, as the achievement of his own urban research (Ill. 4).

With this house, once again designed to rebuild a large block within the close-knit historical fabric, Moretti pursued a relationship with the context without imitating neither the forms nor the construction principles of the ancient city.

The building neither re-establishes the street alignment destroyed during the war, nor rebuilds the street and the separation between urban space and private core of the blocks, that instead denies altogether.

Given its remarkable size, Moretti studied several solutions for the allocation of volumes. In the final version, he split the complex into several buildings, basically two elements of different heights, perpendicular to the street, plus a taller, transversal one, deeply withdrawn. The southern element, which adjoins an existing building, reflects the latter's size and is 20 meters high; the northern building, parallel to the southern one, is 30 meters high. Such arrangement defines a street inside the block, which is orthogonal to corso Italia, as a public, urban axis, dramatically completed by the 50-meter tall apartment building bisected by a thin cut that leads to a garden in the back.

A low two-story building establishes the boundary of the block towards the narrow via Rugabella and runs all around corso Italia, thereby creating a bridge between the two buildings perpendicular to the street as a sort of gateway to the inner road.

This articulated multi-building system establishes an alternative urban place that, while public, provides a different, pedestrian and interior, quality. The remarkable overhang on corso

Italia further underlines the denial of the traditional street alignment. When the scaffolding was removed and the building was revealed to the city, this dramatic overhang earned it the nickname of "flying palace".

The apartments in the back are glazed and feature a double height as well as double frontage, to the east and to the west, on the city, towards the Velasca tower and the Ca' Granda on one side, and the domes of St Alexander and St Ambrose, and the Monte Rosa, on the other side. Here too, the spectacular view from this tall building's top floors, removed from traffic and noise, is its key feature and relevant quality: a new idea of housing for the city of Milan. The building's main elevation also shows a peculiar solution, with the very large terraces rotated on their axis in order to offer a point of view that embraces the surrounding city.

By opening the block and building new urban places and tall buildings, withdrawn and separated from the street, this approach finally achieved a new quality and identity for the street itself.

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