DOI: 10.23817/2025.defarch.1-9

RAFFAELLA NERI
ORCID: 0000-0002-7786-5294
Polytechnic University of Milan, Italy

TRADITION AS AVANT-GARDE. ERNESTO N. ROGERS AND IGNAZIO GARDELLA

TRADYCJA JAKO AWANGARDA. ERNESTO N. ROGERS I IGNAZIO GARDELLA

Abstract

In Milan, the relationship between architecture and history was crucial for the post-war architectural debate, to the point that we could provocatively argue that in Italy, in the second half of the 20th century, it was history that became the bearer of a new avant-garde. The theme is discussed through the thinking of Ernesto Nathan Rogers and the works of Ignazio Gardella.

Keywords: Ignazio Gardella, Ernesto N. Rogers, tradition, continuity, character

Streszczenie

W Mediolanie relacja między architekturą a historią odegrała kluczową rolę w powojennym dyskursie architektonicznym – do tego stopnia, że można prowokacyjnie stwierdzić, iż we Włoszech drugiej połowy XX w. to właśnie historia stała się nośnikiem nowej awangardy. Temat ten został omówiony poprzez refleksję teoretyczną Ernesta Nathana Rogersa oraz analizę twórczości Ignazia Gardelli.

Słowa kluczowe: Ignazio Gardella, Ernesto N. Rogers, tradycja, ciągłość, charakter

It is not really possible to talk about the relationship between architecture and history in Milan without first considering Ernesto N. Rogers (1909–1969), a tireless supporter of a theme that became crucial for post-war Italian architecture. A re-reading of history tells us of the renewal of architecture in a moment of stasis, a reiteration of forms void of their expressive potential, in opposition to both the monumentalism of the Fascist period and an impoverished Rationalism, what Aldo Rossi would later define as *naïve functionalism*.

History was seen as an indispensable identifying element on which to pin a new modernity: this road would lead far, to the point of laying down new cognitive and, in a certain sense, scientific foundations for architecture, and to usher in – simplifying a little – a fertile period of urban studies along with analyses of the relationships between typology and morphology.

Consequently, in response to the solicitation of the Conference themes, we might argue, somewhat provocatively, that in Italy, in the second half of the 20th century, history brought in a new avant-garde. This was an era that went against the grain of what appears to be happening today, when identities tend to be erased in favour of the regimenting of architecture, ignoring any specificity of place, constantly duped by the mirage of technique, in the pursuit

of an ever-renewed originality which, in retrospect, ends up being repetitive, undistinguished, and lacking in values and expressive force.

It may have been the war and the ensuing reconstruction that prompted the reflection, overtly posing the first important question. How should it be rebuilt? How can we recover a collective identity reflected in the conformation of sites now destroyed by bombing? What forms should the places of future life take?

In Milan, a city whose monuments and housing were wounded in equal measure, this theme sparked heated debates among those architects, artists, philosophers, writers, painters and poets who enlivened the city's cultural life, in that period of rebirth and reconstruction, of idealism and positive faith in the future after the dark years of Fascism and war. With a mutual understanding: that only on past history would it be possible to found the future; a new modernity could not forget its own identity, which was not neutral or indifferent, but the bearer of authentic life, of the values and culture of society and the modern city.

As I said above, this theme was strongly posed in a theoretical sense by Ernesto N. Rogers in the pages of *Casabella*, the magazine he directed from 1954, and to whose name he added the term *Continuità* (Continuity). The core concept, developed thanks to a fruitful dialogue with the Relationist philosophy of Antonio Banfi and Enzo Paci, was that there is a clear difference between *history* and *tradition*: history is the succession of events, an objective and documentable fact, while tradition is that which resists change, the vital nucleus that remains, the profound meaning underlying human action, culture and civilisations, which remains relatively constant over time. Between *history* and *tradition* lies the difference that exists between *phenomena* and *idea*, between *particular fact* and *principle*, between the perceptible richness of the data of reality and the rational aspects of it: *tradition*, the element that endures beyond any particular forms, is what guarantees the *continuity* of history.

These two worlds, that of ideas and that of phenomenal reality, or of *experience*, as Rogers called it, coexist and nourish each other, they proceed in an incessant overtaking of each other thanks to the inevitable *rapport* that is established between them: *tradition* is the bearer of values which are grafted onto places, problems, needs, and techniques that are changeable, transitory, giving rise to different forms rooted in the present time. In this sense, *tradition* and *modernity* are complementary, necessary to each other, to life, as well as to architecture. There is no disparity between them, but, on the contrary, an inescapable need to base *modernity* on *tradition*.

If *modernity* is the variable and external condition of the architect's work, then *tradition* becomes a choice; one which is obliged to be specified and clarified. Because it is not an objective datum and is therefore not neutral, but one that must be sought out, recognised, and selected. And, above all, it is necessary to specify the relationship that one wishes to establish with it, the way to put it into practice and make it up to date and thriving, so that its cultural significance, concretised in other forms, is renewed.

This is the question around which many architects toil, on the basis of the positions of Ernesto N. Rogers, which enriched the contributions of many of his peers, of Giuseppe Samonà for example, a master of the School of Venice, and of the students who continued his research, building schools of thought that remain recognisable today.

What does this element of *continuity* with history, this enduring nucleus, subject to incessant changes in appearance, correspond to in architecture? How can we make tradition relevant again in the modern city? I shall limit myself here to talking about certain specific issues.

I shall try to explain them by relying on the lucid thought of Ernesto Rogers (1909–1969) and to show how they can be recognised in the architecture of Ignazio Gardella (1905–1999), who left us many beautiful works, but, unlike Rogers, never showed any interest in making his thought on architecture explicit through his writings.

Ignazio Gardella (1905–1999), a Milanese by culture, a Genoese by family, a Venetian by school, one of the finest and most active central characters in this period, was an architect-engineer who is not easy to interpret, given that his works of architecture are all *formally* different from one another. This richness makes it difficult to pigeonhole them in the categories that historiography often presents us with, but, precisely for this reason, I think it is interesting to try to recognise in them some of the themes related to the issue we are dealing with here.

First off, let us be clear that Gardella's research was not one that began from the forms of architecture. Instead, following in the wake of Rogers, he reflected on the meaning, nature and identity of things, on the meaning of living, working, exhibiting, and so on: these were his starting points. This was research into the meaning of life, of its acts, whose values he wanted to see reflected in the forms of architecture: he conducted this research free from any formally pre-established constraints, but within a *rational method* – another of the themes which Rogers insisted on – or, arguably, within a classical idea of architecture. This freedom of thought, which was also freedom from pre-established forms, allowed Gardella great depth in the answers to the problems he tackled, together with a consequent formal richness in the works themselves.

This shift in the aims of design resulted in a change of perspective; the problem was no longer an optimisation of the *functional* response of a building – a technical question in essence, but a search for its deepest meaning, its value for our culture. And subsequently, of course, its transposition into forms that could make it recognisable. It was a matter, Rogers insisted, of reconciling *utility and beauty.* What was being pursued was an idea of correspondence, an assonance between the values and the forms that must bring a renewed interpretation, the value of the home, its sense of domesticity and intimacy, its openness to the outside world, the richness of a city's landmarks, the intensity of a museum space, the community sense of a canteen, the urban value of a collective building, the sheer magic of theatre: the idea of *functionalism* was replaced by that of a story, the representation of a value and a culture, an identity.

Something remained, yet much changed: was it possible to define tools that allowed us to know, with a certain degree of scientificity, the element of permanence, the deepest core of architecture, as handed down by history?

Neither Rogers nor Gardella explicitly mentioned typology. But the path that the generation of students later travelled tended towards the quest for a tool, proper to architecture, that corresponded to this element of continuity.

It is my belief that research on the typological characteristics of buildings means exactly this: the identification of a generating nucleus capable of transposing an idea into a spatial structure, an element that is still abstract, neither fixed nor immutable, but firmly anchored to culture, and constant and slow in its transformations, like culture itself. An analytical tool, primarily, which allows us to appreciate and recognise in existing works of architecture this original nucleus, that irreducible element linked to their profound meaning; but also, and above all, a design tool, which allows the opposite operation, a fresh spatial organisation that corresponds to the meaning of the buildings. A tool developed not to distinguish works

of architecture from one another, but, on the contrary, to affirm their common identity and continuity: so that it is possible to recognise them coupled with the places of life.

Back in 1959, Giulio Carlo Argan[1] had already highlighted this idea of *continuity* in Gardella's architecture, which translated into an adherence to some traditional typologies. The two examples of the Church of Cesate (1954–1958) and the Church of San Donato (1962) both tackled the theme of the nave, a traditional spatial structure certainly, but in spite of everything appropriate to the rite and the liturgy, which therefore had no reason to be changed or reinvented, he argued.

In both of these churches, Gardella was attentive to the location, to their relationship with the surroundings, or rather, with the *environment*, a recurring word in those years; he paid great attention to the *character* of the sacred place, as specified by the measurements, proportions, and lighting. He used modern construction techniques and ancient materials, but re-proposed a low-pitched roof, which is also, imaginably, an element of recognisability of the theme and spatial unity, while contributing height to the interior space, something fundamental for a church's sense of sacredness.

The Casa Barbieri, also known as "The Winemaker's House", in Càstana (nr. Pavia), one of the first buildings constructed after the war (1947) is a rural house, all on its own in the countryside, and of great simplicity. On the plastered volume, cut into two to make room for the entrance and the large opening of the living room, against all the dictates of the Modern Movement he laid a double-pitched roof on top, perhaps to recall a rural tradition that is still very much alive and widespread, to make the house more involved with the landscape; except that the two pitches are asymmetrical, and upside down inside, in the opposite direction to that of tradition.

The house was a theme particularly dear to Ignazio Gardella. In his projects for new expansions and the replacement of destroyed buildings, in this period the question of the relationship with the ways of constructing the city in history obviously surfaced, in addition to comparisons between ancient and modern houses, ancient and modern places, sometimes even directly, in the need to intervene alongside or in place of existing buildings in the historical fabric.

In general terms, Ernesto Rogers called this problem a question of the relationship with *environmental pre-existences*, arguing the need to grasp the existing values of the *environment* and to redefine these in fresh forms and approaches: the term *environment* here included not only rational data but sensible aspects, it was a broad term, which contained a certain vagueness and arbitrariness of interpretation, and indicated all the difficulty of the work.

Gardella designed houses that were different from the old ones, without ever being indifferent to history; he looked for continuity with life and with the city, without nostalgia or camouflage, without "rebuilding" them, but also without giving up on being modern.

His projects pursued these objectives both in bourgeois houses, such as the Villa Borletti, and in popular ones: he was guided by the aim of giving shape to an idea of domesticity, of rediscovering the value of the house in its relationship with places, in the quality of its interior spaces, in the light, in the chains of rooms, in the use of both new and old materials, in the size of the openings, which he favoured at full height from floor to ceiling, to be able

[1] G.C. Argan, *Ignazio Gardella*, re-published in *Progetto e destino*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1965, and G.C. Argan, *Presentation* [in:] M. Porta, *L'architettura di Ignazio Gardella*, Etas libri, Milano 1985.

to look outside, even when sitting down,[2] he said in a lengthy interview. He tried to give shape to a domestic intimacy that belonged to our way of living, to build a house that resembled us, that resembled "my humanity. In beauty", Rogers suggested.[3]

The elements he put in place were simple, volumes inside a historic park covered in clinker, something which makes the surfaces vibrate with a dark colour, as in the Condominium at the Gardens of Hercules (1951), in contrast with the long white, metallic railings as in the poor houses of the Milanese tradition, which bring rhythm to the volume while protecting balconies of different depths, with large glazed openings for bright lighting looking out over the historic garden. He incorporated the tree which was already there into the house, fearlessly introducing a variation which thus inseparably bound the house to the site.

The Borsalino Employees' House in Alessandria (1950–1952), on the fringes of the urban centre, is aligned with the road on one side, while facing the countryside on the other. The volume is divided into parts that define several tall blocks, ordered in a broken geometry; also in this case with a dark clinker cladding, a manufacturing error which Gardella chose for its colour to enliven the wall surface, in which French windows open, shielded by traditional shutters sliding on thin tracks. The two fronts are slightly different, underlining the dual relationship between the civil space of the road and the open view of the countryside. Here the roof is modern flat: it is one of the identifying elements of the house, and is candidly presented through the narrative of its construction elements, almost as if it were a traditional wooden construction, with the protrusion of the beams and the thin plane of the actual roof.

Ignazio Gardella was particularly fond of his project for the Vicenza Theatre (1968), which was never built. Its stereometric volume strongly affirms a clear idea of modernity, while being born in continuity with the still alive tradition of Italian theatre.

Gardella set out from the current meaning of theatre to identify what is indispensable and alive of this ritual, of its magic. The answer became the rationale behind the forms of his architecture: he designed the theatre starting from the nucleus that he recognised as the idea generating theatricality, the creation of two distinct places, one where the imagined world of fiction is represented and one where the audience sits, the place of the actor and the place of the spectator, opposed and frontal, separate yet united in the staging of a non-existent but still veracious world. A dim space, unitary as a square volume can be, and at the same time a double space, split in two by a clean cut that separates the parts which, as in the theatres of history, differ in height. An idea represented with an unparalleled degree of depth and precision, in a continuity of meaning with tradition, but far, far distant from its forms. Because here the shapes are separate, they are different and variable, like the materials and construction techniques. In this case, taken to the limit of abstraction: an abstraction which is a thought process, one which aims to identify the essential element, without which what is being planned becomes distorted, here reflected in the geometric absoluteness of the volume.

In many of Gardella's projects, the confrontation with history is direct: it was a matter of restoring buildings or creating something inside the city's monuments. Others did the same: BBPR did it masterfully, organising the museums of the Sforza Castle, valorising the castle itself over and above the quality of the objects it contains; Franco Albini did it, with the Genoese museums of Palazzo Bianco and Palazzo Rosso, and with the magnificent one of the San Lorenzo Cathedral Museum. And BBPR yet again with the Torre Velasca,

[2] A. Monestiroli, *L'architettura secondo Gardella*, Laterza, Roma 1997, p. 52.

[3] E.N. Rogers, *La casa dell'uomo*, "Domus" 1946, no. 205, p. 3.

a disruptive building in the centre of Milan that caused the English critic Reyner Banham[4] to wail about the Italian betrayal of modern architecture. Gardella did it too, several times over the years: when he designed the Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea or PAC, a museum of contemporary art at the Villa Reale in Milan (1951–1954), on the site of the villa's damaged stables, maintaining the grounds, changing the destination, and giving shape to one of the most beautiful and elegant exhibition spaces in Milan, measured, bright, divided into different spaces for each type of exhibition, facing the garden with a long window, which becomes a continuation of the exhibition outdoors.

He also did so in reconstructing the ancient Thermal Baths of Ischia (1950–1953), maintaining the ancient colonnaded front, a memory and manifesto of the place, kept clearly distinct and separate from the new addition.

He also did so with an extremely complex urban project which he carried out over several years (1969–1972) with great sensitivity and knowledge of the city, involving the selection, demolition and rebuilding of parts of it.[5] This was a detailed plan for the war-damaged area of San Donato and San Silvestro in Genoa, which ended with the construction, years later, of the Faculty of Architecture (1975–1989), a building which, grafted onto the site of the former Church of San Silvestro but enlarged, rises like a new cathedral on the top of the hill, a volume built with a series of modern buttresses which, partially reproducing the ancient morphology, is not afraid to show its size and modernity, and, with these, its importance as a public institution. Because even a restoration or reconstruction is, to all intents and purposes, an architectural project, argued Ernesto Rogers, and has the task of bringing new life to a building or a part of the city, dilapidated, destroyed or disused, grafting new values onto its history, fearless of changing its forms, in search of that delicate balance which Gardella managed to establish between the old and the new.

In 1982, along with Aldo Rossi, he conceived the reconstruction of the old Municipal Theatre of Genoa, Carlo Felice, again a return to his city of origin and to a building designed by Barabino in 1828, together with his great-grandfather. Here, once again, the tradition of the Italian theatre with its two parts of *cavea* and stage tower was reinterpreted and re-proposed in a modern key, in very different ways from the Theatre of Vicenza, thanks to its pre-existence, its urban role and the collaboration with Aldo Rossi, reinterpreting the *cavea* as a public square or courtyard, and giving the cityscape the extraordinary landmark of the stage tower.

There was yet another important issue in the search for *continuity* with history: this concerned the relationship with technique and construction, the most subject to mutations over time, which more directly referred to an idea of modernity and progress.

These years saw, on the one hand, experimentation with the structural possibilities of brand-new materials – suffice it to think of the reinforced concrete engineers, on the other, attention paid to construction techniques in relation to their expressive potential. In the architecture of the past, an intimate link between the materials, spatial organisation and necessity could be recognised: the interest in rural and spontaneous architecture,[6] in its relationship between local materials, climatic factors and forms was linked to this theme. Some projects

[4] R. Banham, *Neoliberty. The Italian Retreat from Modern Architecture*, "The Architectural Review" 1959, no. 125, pp. 230–235.

[5] See C. Cavallo, *Ignazio Gardella: persistenza dell'architettura*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2025.

[6] G. Pagano, G. Daniel, *Architettura rurale italiana*, Hoepli, Milano 1936, and B. Rudofsky, *Architecture without architects*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1964.

attempted to reproduce this reasoning, sometimes touching on aspects of the vernacular and folklore; among these experiments, the most beautiful and emblematic design was the famous Pirovano Hotel in Cervinia by Franco Albini.

Ignazio Gardella, an engineer by training, with a Degree in Architecture, enjoyed an advantage, with a clear idea of the role that structural problems play, without sentiments of inferiority or mythologising, knowing full well the possibilities and quality of the construction elements.

In his architecture he used different materials, re-proposing elements of the Lombard tradition and the River Po plain, on account of their expressive, luminist and formal qualities. Already in the Antituberculosis Dispensary of Alessandria, an early work of 1936, he readopted *gelosia*, a brick grid typical of Po Valley farmhouses, which filters light and air for drying hay, transposing it in this case into an extraneous theme thanks to its spatial, luminous and expressive qualities, combined with an extremely modern glass block wall of quite another texture.

Gardella knew how to masterfully dose the various structural elements to bring rhythm to the volumes, he knew how to use his materials: whether clinker, plaster, or bricks, he knew how to highlight elements of the construction to contrast the fullness of the walls. In recounting his 1934 project for the Piazza Duomo Tower [in Milan, t/n], years later, in full Rationalist orthodoxy, he expressed his opposition to the use of the frame, which makes carried and load-bearing elements, pillars and beams coplanar and indistinguishable, opting to make the narrative of the construction itself the story of the architecture, in this case a tower which achieved its height by the superimposition of different elements.

Arguably the clearest, Alberti-style awareness of the expressive potential of structural typologies is shown in the House in the Park, a troubled project from 1948–1949, where the qualities of the places in the house and their different relationship with the city are recounted by the wall volume of the bedroom area, more intimate and reserved in contrast with the trilithic system of loggias of different depths in the living rooms which open onto the park.

Gardella was not the only architect attentive to such issues. Rogers insisted on this often, and the work of the BBPR studio for the Velasca tower, in close relationship with the engineer Danusso, or that for the headquarters of the Chase Manhattan Bank in Piazza Meda testify to this. Others tackled them, Franco Albini among them, experimenting with different paths and different materials.

In these years, architects shared research and the largest projects for the city, for new residential districts, at the most important competitions. This was especially the case of large-scale projects, always carried out by several hands, in which Gardella also participated.

It was not his favourite theme, but even in these projects, in their urban layouts, we can recognise the attempt to experiment with streets that went beyond the schematism of pre-war residential neighbourhoods, similar to many built across Europe: from the project for Milano Verde (1938), which Gardella would look back at with indifference in old age, where the attempt to outdo the 19th-century city built from blocks pushed his research towards a quality to be found in the relationship with gardens and open green spaces, to the INA Casa neighbourhood of Cesate, (1952) of a completely different mould, which leaned towards recreating more intimate, rural places, as well as the houses created with Albini in the Mangiagalli neighbourhood (1950) and a participation in the extraordinary project for the Feltre

neighbourhood (1967–1973), in the form of a large traditional farmstead of the plain, but with the measurements of a typical Le Corbusier *redent*.

If Gardella did not carry through many large-scale urban projects, he certainly shared an approach which united the architects working in those years: every work of architecture, even the smallest, was the construction of a piece of the city, it could not ignore its urban role or modify the site where it was located, but had to seek continuity with the pre-existing. "The city's historical past is an essential component of the urban planning problem," wrote Argan;[7] and, again, Gardella's architecture "react[ed] to space", seeking a relationship with it that was never extraneous.

The theme of the environment returned again: Gardella went so far as to seek this relationship in a reinterpretation of the spaces of the ancient city, as in Genoa, in the elements of the architecture, in the shapes of the windows, in the light and in the surface variations, in the colours and in the texture of the façades. The House at the Zattere [in Venice, t/n] was, in this sense, an attempt to relate to, or rather to "insert itself" into one of the most particular and inimitable "environmental pre-existences" in the world, without nostalgia and without reusing the formal elements typical of Venetian palazzi.

I conclude by going back to the beginning.

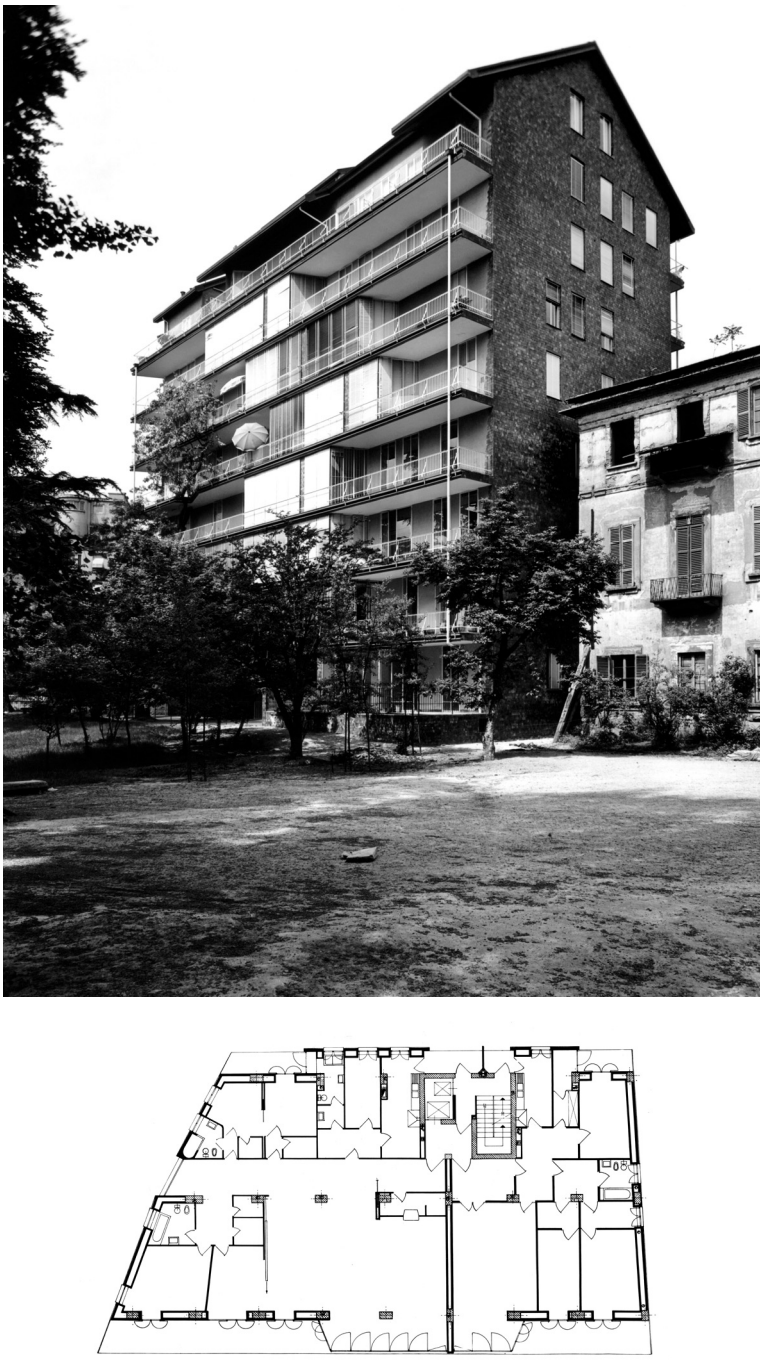
Is there continuity in this search, or is the outcome the sum of many different episodes?

It is my belief that the continuity which should interest us, the one that interested Gardella and Rogers, is that of life and its values, which architecture must poetically witness.

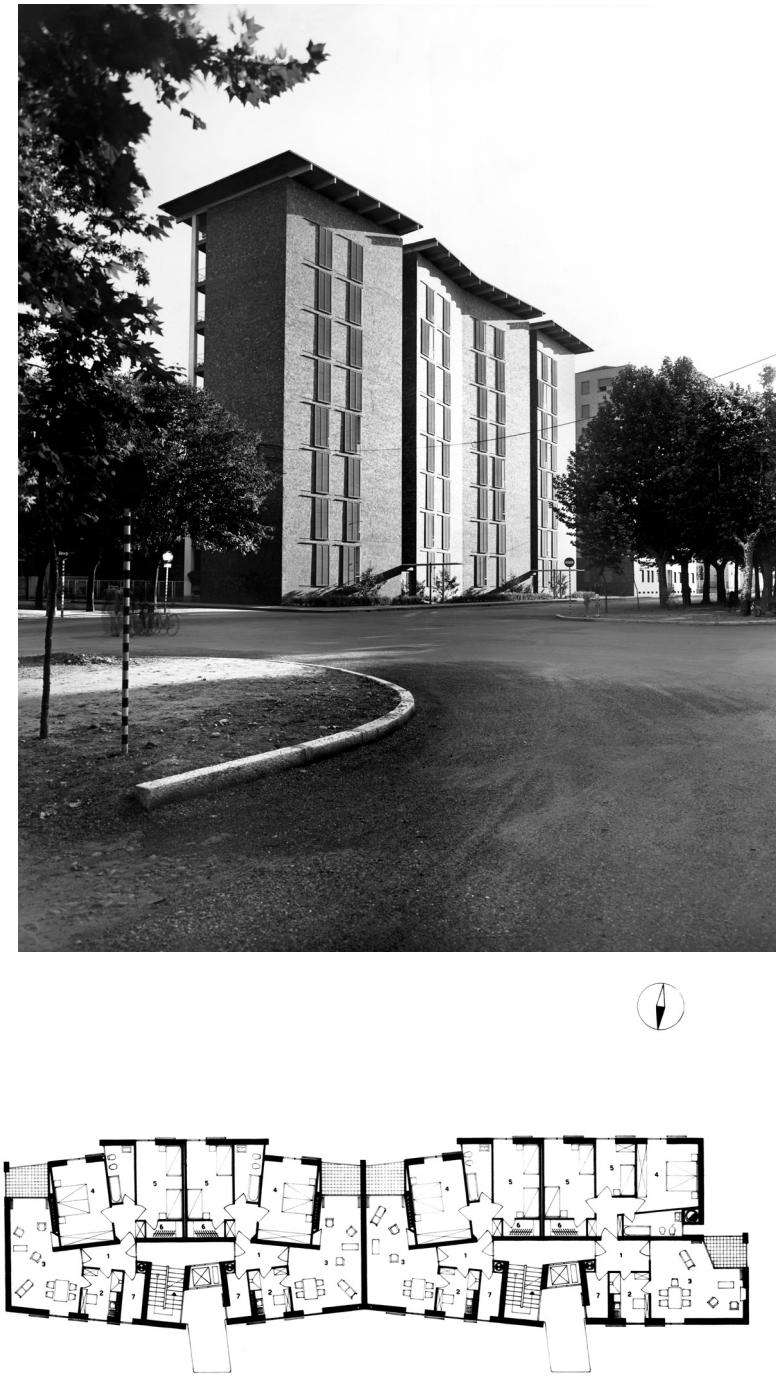
As in life, architecture must continually go in search of its own meaning, without settling for the cosiest, most obvious solution, the road most travelled; because, as in life, meaning is to be found, pursued, built, and manifests in ever-changing, occasionally even unanticipated, forms.

In Gardella's works this link was always grasped, as if the forms of the architecture were a direct emanation of the life they contain, subdivided into domesticity, time for work, rest, play, and study. This, perhaps, is the reason why, in all of his works of architecture, it is easy to recognise their forms as one's own, it is easy to share them, it is easy to belong to them, as if they had always been there.

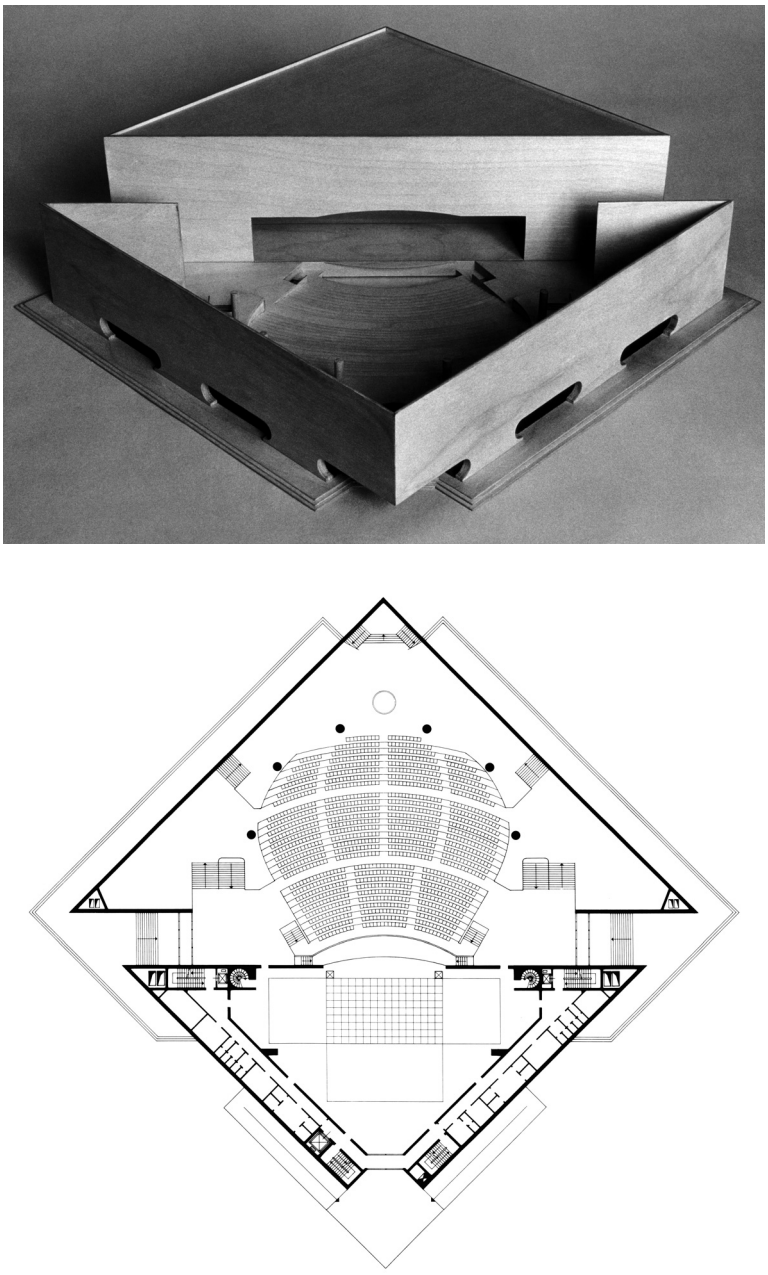
[7] G.C. Argan, *Presentation*, *op. cit*, p. 10.



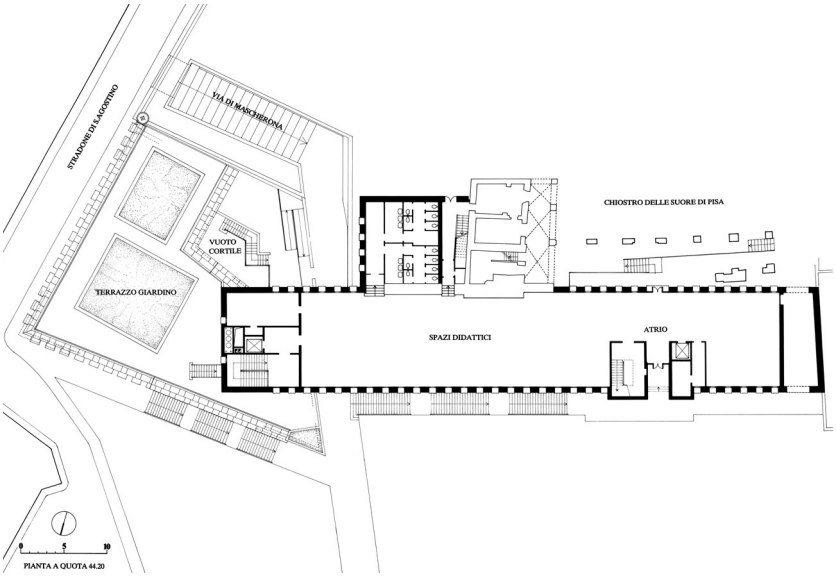
Ill. 1. Condominium at the Gardens of Hercules, Milan, 1951, source: private archive, Archivio Storico Gardella.



Ill. 2. Borsalino Employees' House, Alessandria, 1950–1952, source: private archive, Archivio Storico Gardella.



Ill. 3. Project for the Vicenza Theatre, 1968, source: private archive, Archivio Storico Gardella.



Ill. 4. Faculty of Architecture, Genova, 1975–1989, source: private archive, Archivio Storico Gardella.

References

[1] Argan G.C., *Presentation* [in:] M. Porta (ed.), *L'architettura di Ignazio Gardella*, Etas libri, Milano 1985.

[2] Argan G.C., *Progetto e destino*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1965.

[3] Banham R., *Neoliberty. The Italian Retreat from Modern Architecture*, "The Architectural Review" 1959, no. 125, pp. 230–235.

[4] Cavallo C., *Ignazio Gardella: persistenza dell'architettura*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2025.

[5] Monestiroli A., *L'architettura secondo Gardella*, Laterza, Roma 1997.

[6] Pagano G., Daniel G., *Architettura rurale italiana*, Hoepli, Milano 1936.

[7] Rogers E.N., *La casa dell'uomo*, "Domus" 1946, no. 205.

[8] Rudofsky B., *Architecture without architects*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1964.

Author's Note

Full Prof. Raffaella Neri, PhD, Architect

Full Professor in Architectural and Urban Composition at the Polytechnic University of Milan, part of the teaching board of the PhD course in Architectural Composition of the IUAV University of Venice, and of the national PhD course PASAP (Archeological, Historical, Architectural Heritage and Mediterranean Landscape) in Bari. Her research mainly focuses on the architectural theory, the problem of urban project in the modern city and the role of construction in architectural design. She participates in many architectural competitions. In 1996, she won the National Architectural Prize Luigi Cosenza.

raffaella.neri@polimi.it