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ARCHITECTURE AS PRACTICE AND KNOWLEDGE: LUIGI COSENZA'S *ESPERIENZE DI ARCHITETTURA*

ARCHITEKTURA JAKO PRAKTYKA I WIEDZA: *ESPERIENZE DI ARCHITETTURA* LUIGIEGO COSENZY

Abstract

In his book *Esperienze di architettura* (1950), Cosenza defines experience as a critical and practical endeavour: the design emerges from the interplay between concrete needs, context, and technique, with particular reference to the reality of Southern Italy. His approach combines constructive rationality, civic engagement, and attention to the everyday dimension of living.
The comparison with Ernesto Nathan Rogers highlights a difference between an empirical approach (Cosenza) and a historical-critical one (Rogers), while the reference to John Dewey emphasises architecture as a total experience that integrates perception, use, and meaning. The distinction between the concept of *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* clarifies the dual nature of the project, lying between accumulated knowledge and sensory experience.
What emerges is a conception of architecture as a cognitive practice and an instrument of social and civic transformation, whose value is confirmed by the actual experience of its users.

Keywords: *Erfahrung, Erlebnis, Luigi Cosenza*

Streszczenie

W swojej książce *Esperienze di architettura* (1950) Cosenza definiuje doświadczenie jako przedsięwzięcie o charakterze krytycznym i praktycznym: projekt powstaje w wyniku wzajemnego oddziaływania konkretnych potrzeb, kontekstu i techniki, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem realiów południowych Włoch. Jego podejście łączy racjonalność konstrukcyjną, zaangażowanie obywatelskie oraz uwagę poświęconą codziennemu wymiarowi zamieszkiwania.
Porównanie z Ernestem Nathanem Rogersem uwidacznia różnicę między podejściem empirycznym (Cosenza) a historyczno-krytycznym (Rogers), natomiast odwołanie do Johna Deweya podkreśla ujęcie architektury jako doświadczenia całościowego, integrującego percepcję, użytkowanie i znaczenie. Rozróżnienie między pojęciami *Erfahrung* i *Erlebnis* pozwala z kolei uchwycić dwoistą naturę projektu, który sytuuje się pomiędzy nagromadzoną wiedzą a doświadczeniem zmysłowym.
Wyłania się stąd koncepcja architektury jako praktyki poznawczej i narzędzia społecznej oraz obywatelskiej transformacji, której wartość zostaje zweryfikowana w rzeczywistym doświadczeniu jej użytkowników.

Słowa kluczowe: *Erfahrung, Erlebnis, Luigi Cosenza*

1. THE PARADIGM OF EXPERIENCE IN POST-WAR ITALIAN ARCHITECTURE

The post-war period in Italy marked a time of profound theoretical and practical re-foundation of architectural culture. The need for the physical reconstruction of the country was inextricably linked to the requirement to move beyond both the monumental formalisms of the twenty years of Fascist rule and the abstract and purist tendencies of early Italian Rationalism. Against this backdrop of ideological and formal transition, the concept of 'experience' emerged as a genuine epistemological category, a common ground for architects, urban planners and theorists seeking to restore the project to a human, social and situated dimension.

Within this debate, Luigi Cosenza's book *Esperienze di architettura* (*Experiences in Architecture*)[1], published in 1950 by the Neapolitan publisher Macchiaroli, stands out as a document of extraordinarily prescient clarity. Cosenza, a Neapolitan civil engineer and architect (*honorary*) trained in a context steeped in technical pragmatism and a southern Italian sensibility, does not interpret the term 'experiences' as a self-referential collection of projects or a catalogue of formal solutions. On the contrary, Cosenza's concept of 'experience' takes the form of a cognitive and transformative practice, in which the act of building is constantly scrutinised in the light of historical reality, the material needs of the working classes, and the specific circumstances of the Campania region.

Across twentieth-century architectural thought, 'experience' assumed different meanings according to cultural tradition and theoretical position. Luigi Cosenza's *Esperienze di architettura* belongs to this debate and presents design practice as a cognitive process. Ernesto Nathan Rogers's *Esperienza dell'architettura* understands architecture through historical and cultural continuity, while John Dewey's pragmatism frames experience as an integrated interaction between individual and environment. The German distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* further clarifies the tension between accumulated knowledge and immediate lived experience.

This paper analyses Cosenza's theoretical and design work through three related lenses: Rogers's *Esperienza dell'architettura* (1958); Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics in *Art as Experience* (1934); and the distinction between *Erfahrung* (historically structured experience) and *Erlebnis* (immediate lived experience). This framework reveals a theoretical depth that takes Cosenza beyond a localist reading and connects his work to twentieth-century phenomenology and critical realism.

2. LUIGI COSENZA'S BOOK: SOUTHERN REALISM AND MACCHIAROLI'S COMMITMENT

To understand *Esperienze di architettura* as a milestone of Italian Rationalism and Cosenza's 'didactic testament', it must be situated within Gaetano Macchiaroli's progressive cultural project in post-war Naples. More than a printer, Macchiaroli was an anti-fascist intellectual who regarded culture as an instrument of social emancipation for Southern Italy. His publishing house provided the ideal vehicle for Cosenza's programme of material and cultural reconstruction grounded in scientific and social analysis. Publishing the book in 1950 therefore

[1] See: L. Cosenza, *Esperienze di architettura*, Macchiaroli Editore, Naples 1950, p. 12.

affirmed a modernity arising not from imported Milanese or Central European models, but from the contradictions and resources of the South[2].

As Luigi Cosenza writes regarding the relationship with Mediterranean civilisations and the character of southern living:

> The Mediterranean basin, a melting pot of ancient civilisations, a blend of Eastern influences with Northern temperaments, has for centuries exhibited this characteristic phenomenology in certain areas of culture. Spatial concepts are projected there in the form of instincts. The instinct for enclosed space, entirely interior, bounded on the outside by flat, geometric musicality. Here there are no cultural interferences from different environments. Spiritual tension extends and is immediately translated into space. And the forms retain the stability of their inspiration for centuries[3].

In Cosenza's book, the term 'experiences' does not simply refer to a collection of biographical episodes or design projects but takes the form of an epistemological category. Architecture emerges as the outcome of a continuous process of verification between intention, context and construction. Cosenza aligns himself with a rationalist tradition, but in his view, functionalist abstraction does not exhaust the meaning of the practice: every project is a concrete, situated experience that develops in response to specific conditions – social, climatic and technical.

The book combines theoretical reflections, projects and urban analyses through three themes: critical rationalism, understood as a synthesis of engineering logic and modern architectural requirements; the culture of dwelling, centred on domestic space and post-war social needs; and civic engagement, which treats architecture as an instrument of transformation in Southern Italy. The writings and technical reports range from the Naples Fish Market and Villa Oro to the 1946 reconstruction plan and the 'Cesare Battisti' district in Poggioreale, while also anticipating later work in public housing, industrial architecture and the Naples Polytechnic. Despite their different scales, these projects share attention to site, human measure and use. Architectural experience is thus cumulative practical knowledge, tested through design and construction and translated into typological and technical solutions: a form of *Erfahrung* founded on critical repetition[4].

The common thread linking such diverse works is a methodological approach that Cosenza explicitly defines as the 'search for the essential'. Architecture is not understood as the invention of pure forms, but rather as an analytical process that begins with the scientific study of need: 'Architecture is a scientific and artistic activity whose results cannot be separated from a precise understanding of the economic, social and technical conditions of the time in which one works. Any form that is not justified by this profound necessity risks descending into decorative arbitrariness[5].'

This stance clearly distinguishes Cosenza from the formal dogmatism of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM). Whilst European functionalist orthodoxy

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[2] On Gaetano Macchiaroli's publishing activities and the cultural climate of post-war Naples, see: A. Russo, *Intellettuali ed editoria a Napoli nel secondo dopoguerra*, "Archivio Storico per le Province Napoletane" 2001, no. 119, pp. 77–90.

[3] L. Cosenza, *Esperienze…*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

[4] R. Capozzi, *Il Politecnico di Napoli di Luigi Cosenza. Una "versione" cólta del Mediterraneo*, [in:] P. Carlotti, D. Nencini, P. Posocco (eds.), *Mediterranei. Traduzioni della modernità*, FrancoAngeli, Milan 2014, pp. 156–171.

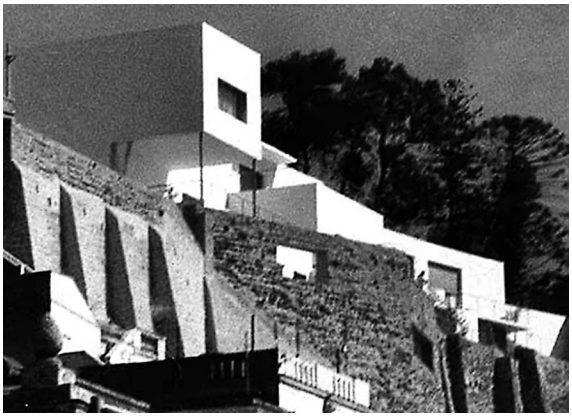
[5] L. Cosenza, *Esperienze…*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

tended to standardise housing modules based on an abstract 'typical man' (Le Corbusier's *Modulor*), Cosenza adapts the standard to the specific conditions of the Neapolitan working class. In the design for the social housing in Poggioreale, the analysis of the 'life experiences' of the displaced and the inhabitants of Neapolitan 'bassi' (low-rise tenements) guides the configuration of the space: the kitchen is not a sterile, isolated workshop, but becomes the relational heart of the home, responding to deep-rooted anthropological customs that urban sociology would only codify years later[6].

3. COSENZA AND ROGERS: A COMPARISON OF TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF EXPERIENCE

A comparison between Luigi Cosenza's *Esperienze di architettura* (1950) and Ernesto Nathan Rogers' *Esperienza dell'architettur*a (published by Einaudi in 1958) constitutes one of the most fascinating chapters in Italian architectural theory. Although the two texts have almost identical titles – one in the singular, the other in the plural – they reflect two distinct cultural trajectories which nevertheless converge in their rejection of dogmatic Rationalism and their openness to the historical dimension.

In 'Casabella-Continuità', Rogers developed the idea of 'environmental pre-existences', presenting design as a dialogue with historical and cultural context. For him, architectural experience is a critical act: the architect interprets tradition and places the new within a methodological continuity, without nostalgic historicism. *Esperienza dell'architettura* therefore understands architecture as an ongoing historical process. Experience includes not only knowledge acquired through practice but also the shared inheritance made available by history. The architect must reinterpret that inheritance in response to contemporary needs, avoiding both sterile formalism and a radical break with the past. Experience becomes cultural mediation rather than simple empiricism[7].



Ill. 1. L. Cosenza–B. Rudofsky, Villa Oro (1934–1937), Naples. Courtesy of the Luigi Cosenza's Archive, Naples

[6] See: G. Cosenza (ed.), *Luigi Cosenza: l'opera completa*, Electa, Napoli 1987, p. 112.

[7] See in this regard: E.N. Rogers, *Esperienza dell'architettura,* Einaudi, Turin 1958, in particular the chapter *Il contenuto della continuità*, pp. 235–244.

The contrast is clear: Cosenza privileges concrete making, whereas Rogers stresses historical-critical interpretation. Yet both reject architecture as a system of abstract rules and ground it in a dynamic relation with reality. Cosenza's plural 'Experiences' signals an empirical, phenomenological position closer to applied historical materialism: instead of seeking a universal synthesis, he proceeds through cases tested on site – in construction, collaboration with local trades, negotiation with public authorities, and the study of Naples's climate and light.

Let us take Villa Oro, built on the Posillipo cliff, as an analytical example. Viewed through a Rogersian lens, the villa is a masterful example of integration into the landscape and of dialogue with existing features (the tuff rock, the contour of the coastline). However, in the structural analysis presented by Cosenza in his book, the focus shifts to experience understood as 'technical and material experimentation': the use of reinforced concrete is not a display of abstract modernism but is calibrated to withstand the erosive action of sea salt and to integrate visually and structurally with the local tuff[8]. 'Experience' is not merely an aesthetic contemplation of the environment (as it sometimes risked becoming in the approach of Rogers' followers), but a technical and material penetration of reality.

4. THE AFFINITY WITH JOHN DEWEY: ARCHITECTURE AND ART AS A 'TOTAL EXPERIENCE'

Cosenza's and Rogers' reflections find an important point of reference in the philosophy of John Dewey, particularly in his work Art as Experience (1934). Dewey distinguishes between ordinary experience and complete experience: the latter is characterised by a unified structure, in which the various stages of the process – perception, action, emotion – are integrated into a coherent whole.

For Dewey, art – and therefore architecture too – represents the privileged setting for this accomplished experience. The work is not a static object, but the result of an interaction between the individual and the environment, involving both the creator and the viewer. The significance of architecture therefore lies in its ability to generate meaningful experiences, capable of integrating the sensory dimension with reflection.

Applied to Cosenza's thinking, the Deweyan perspective sheds light on the processual nature of design: every work is the result of a series of interconnected experiences. In Rogers's case, however, Dewey enables us to understand how the historical dimension can be reinterpreted as an integral part of contemporary experience, rather than merely as an inherited fact.

The convergence between Cosenza and John Dewey is structural, although no direct connection is documented. In *Art as Experience* (, Dewey rejects the idealist separation of art from everyday activity: aesthetic experience is not an exceptional act of contemplation but the most integrated form of interaction between an organism and its environment. This position helps explain Cosenza's effort to connect architectural form, practical action and ordinary life[9].

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[8] See: L. Cosenza, *Relazione tecnica per la costruzione di Villa Oro*, [in:] L. Cosenza, *Esperienze...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 65–68.

[9] J. Dewey, *Art as Experienc*e, Minton, Balch & Co., New York 1934 (Italian edition: J. Dewey., *L'arte come esperienza*, trans. G. Matteucci, La Nuova Italia, Florence 1951, p. 45).

Cosenza similarly demystifies the architect-artist and recasts the designer as a civic actor who gives aesthetic form to basic needs. In his 1950 essay, architecture succeeds through the way people inhabit space, not through critical acclaim. The Naples Fish Market makes this position explicit: circulation, preservation and hygiene become the basis of a luminous spatial order whose great vaulted hall gives collective labour monumental dignity. Here the aesthetic experience coincides with the social experience of work, produced through structure and technical necessity.

It is no coincidence that Dewey defines experience as a transaction in which humans act upon the environment and, in turn, undergo its consequences ('doing and undergoing'). In *Esperienze di architettura*, this dualism translates into the continuous feedback that the construction of a building (the building site) and its social use (the reception) provide to the designer. Cosenza never considers a project to be complete with the handover of the drawings: architecture is only realised when it is 'lived' and modified by use, when it becomes part of the community's vital flow[10].

5. THE GERMAN SEMANTIC DISTINCTION: *ERFAHRUNG* VS *ERLEBNIS* IN COSENZA'S WORK

Cosenza's theoretical position can also be read through the German distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, a polarity developed by thinkers including Dilthey, Husserl and Benjamin. Although both terms mean 'experience', they identify different dimensions: accumulated, reflective knowledge and immediate lived consciousness[11].

The German language distinguishes between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, offering a fundamental interpretative key to understanding the different meanings of the term 'experience'. The former refers to knowledge acquired over time, the result of accumulation and reflection; the latter, by contrast, denotes immediate lived experience, often charged with emotional intensity.

Cosenza's title oscillates between these poles. Architecture belongs to *Erfahrung* as progressive learning, but it also includes *Erlebnis* through the historically mediated perception of the work – a dimension he shares with Rogers. Dewey likewise overcomes the opposition by treating knowledge and lived experience as inseparable.

In the architectural context, *Erfahrung* can be associated with the design and construction dimensions: it is the architect's experience, through which they develop skills and knowledge through practice. *Erlebnis*, by contrast, refers to the user's experience, to the way in which space is perceived and experienced.

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[10] On the convergence between American pragmatism and post-war Italian architectural culture, see: B. Zevi, *Storia dell'architettura moderna*, Einaudi, Turin 1950, *passim*.

[11] On the distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, see: W. Dilthey, *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* (tr. eng. W. Dilthey, *Experience and Poetry*) B.G. Teubner, Leipzig 1906 and W. Benjamin, *Der Erzähler* (eng. ed. W. Benjamin, *The Storyteller*, 1968), "Orient und Okzident. Blätter für Theologie, Ethik und Soziologie" 1936, no. 3, October, pp. 16–33. *Erfahrung* represents experience understood as historical accumulation, transmissible knowledge, collective memory and the dialectical structuring of knowledge. It is the experience of the wise person, of the craftsman who passes on a trade, of the city that has built up its form over the centuries.
Erlebnis is the experience lived in the immediacy of consciousness: the sensory shock, the instantaneous and individual emotion, the phenomenological perception here and now.

The distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* allows us to grasp the intrinsic duality of architectural experience, suspended between accumulation and immediacy, between design and perception. It is in this tension that the vitality of modern architecture lies, called upon to engage with a constantly changing world without losing its connection to its own tradition.

In this sense, the art of building can be viewed in two ways in relation to the two terms at stake.

Architecture as 'Erfahrung' (Historical-Structural Knowledge)

Cosenza's knowledge of the South's long history does not lead him to imitate neo-Romanesque or neoclassical forms. *Erfahrung* means grasping the durable principles of Mediterranean building. The spontaneous houses of Procida and the Amalfi Coast embody knowledge accumulated over centuries in response to climate, orientation and limited resources. Modern standards should recover this rationality and translate it into industrial production rather than reproduce historical styles[12].

Architecture as 'Erlebnis' (Perception and Lived Space)

At the same time, Cosenza's sensitivity to the spatial and phenomenological dimension is entirely in keeping with the concept of *Erlebnis*. The influence of the Austrian architect Bernard Rudofsky – with whom Cosenza collaborated closely in the 1930s – accentuates this focus on the body's experience of space, on tactile contact with materials, and on the modulation of light and shadow. In the aforementioned Villa Oro, the space is not organised according to an abstract geometric grid, but follows an emotional journey: the staircases carved into the rock, the terraces that offer sudden glimpses of the gulf's panorama, and the alternation of white-plastered surfaces and walls of rough tuff are design elements intended to generate an intense sensory *Erlebnis* that shifts with the time of day and the seasons[13].

The distinction can be tested in the works discussed in *Esperienze di architettura*. *Erfahrung* – Mediterranean rationality, modularity and analysis of social needs – helps explain the housing types of Poggioreale; *Erlebnis* – bodily perception, changing light and tactile materiality – illuminates Villa Oro's terraced spatial sequence. Cosenza's method never separates the two: individual perception is historicised and socialised through technique and urban design, so spatial emotion remains anchored to an ethical, constructive framework.

6. ANALYTICAL EXAMPLES: FROM THE FISH MARKET TO THE RECONSTRUCTION PLANS FOR NAPLES

This framework can be tested through two cases from the 1950 book. Both present architecture as a 'total experience' and resonate with Steen Eiler Rasmussen's account of architecture as something understood through human scale and lived interaction[14].

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[12] L. Cosenza, *Architettura spontanea mediterranea*, [in:] L. Cosenza, *Esperienze...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 89–94.

[13] See: B. Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects. A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*, Museum of Modern Art, New York 1964; on the relationship between Rudofsky and Cosenza see also: A.I. Lima, *Luigi Cosenza: la lucida linea della modernità*, Testo & Immagine, Turin 1998.

[14] E. Rasmussen*, Experiencing Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1959.



Ill. 2. L. Cosenza, Fish Market (1929–1934), Naples. Courtesy of the Luigi Cosenza's Archive, Naples

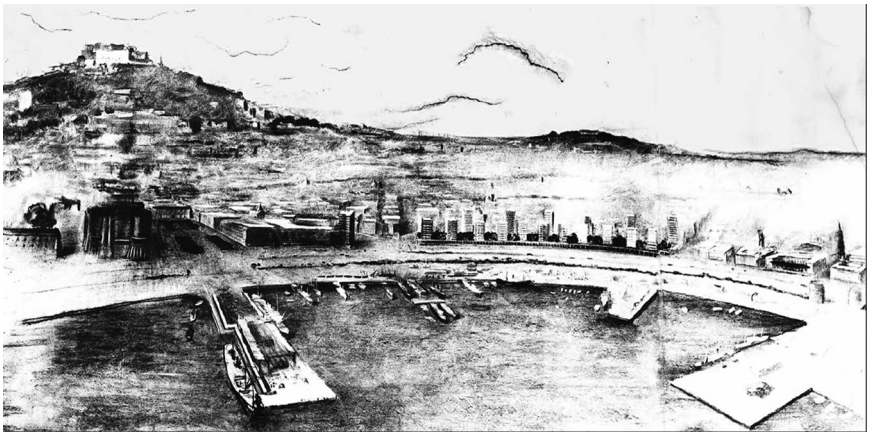
The Naples Fish Market (1929–1934)

In this early work, Cosenza tackles a typically industrial and logistical theme. Critics have often interpreted it as a formal adherence to Le Corbusier's purism or Soviet constructivism. However, a re-reading of the technical report included in *Esperienze di architettura* reveals a far more complex theoretical stance. Cosenza describes the market as a living organism. The architect's experience was shaped by direct observation of the work of fishermen and traders at the old Porta Capuana market[15]. Cosenza does not impose an abstract form, but 'extracts' the geometric shape of the large parabolic reinforced concrete vault from the very dynamics of moving bodies and from the requirements for ventilation and natural lighting. Light, captured by the large thermoluminescent windows, ceases to be an abstract element and becomes a building material that shapes the experience of daily work.

The Naples Master Plan and the INA-Casa projects (1945–1950)

In the post-war period, Cosenza's horizons broadened to the urban scale. His 1950 essay was profoundly influenced by the devastation inflicted on the city of Naples by the bombings. Here, his work took on an exquisitely political dimension. Cosenza, one of the founders of the 'Nuova Repubblica' group, fought against property speculation, which was pushing for the city's uncontrolled reconstruction. In his urban planning writings, planning is not a geometric design on paper, but a socio-economic investigation into the living conditions of the population.

[15] L. Cosenza, *Il Mercato Ittico di Napoli*, [in:] L. Cosenza, *Esperienze...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 45–52.



Ill. 3. L. Cosenza, The Naples Reconstruction Plan (1946), Aerial view. Courtesy of the Luigi Cosenza's Archive, Naples



Ill. 4. L. Cosenza, "Cesare Battisti" District (1945–1946) in Poggioreale, Naples. Courtesy of the Luigi Cosenza's Archive, Naples

Projects for social housing estates (such as the development on Via Nuova Poggioreale) became a testing ground where the notion of 'experience' took the form of public space. Cosenza rejected the intensive, enclosed-courtyard block – typical of nineteenth-century Neapolitan speculation[16], which was responsible for the unsanitary conditions of the 'bassi' – and proposed

[16] G. Menna, *Luigi Cosenza e la cultura del progetto moderno a Napoli. Parte I, 1929–1945. Una "eccezione eccezionale"*, [in:] R. Capozzi et al. (eds.), *La Scuola di Architettura a Napoli. I maestri e le opere. Dalla fondazione al dopoguerra (1927–1945)*, CLEAN, Napoli 2022, pp. 68–71. In the same book also see: F. Deo, G. Di Costanzo, *Il Mercato Ittico. Luigi Cosenza*, [in:] R. Capozzi et al. (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 128–139.

an arrangement of linear blocks oriented along the heliothermal axis[17]. The space between the blocks is not a residual void but is designed as an extension of the home: communal gardens, nurseries, public washhouses. Cosenza sought to offer the urban proletariat a new experience of citizenship, founded on the right to light, green spaces and social interaction.

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[17] See: C. Pagani, *Architettura italiana oggi*, Hoepli, Milano 1955, pp. 142–143.