DOI: 10.23817/2026.defarch.2-3

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ARCHITECTURAL EXPERIENCE AS A CRITIQUE OF HOMOGENISATION

DOŚWIADCZENIE ARCHITEKTONICZNE JAKO KRYTYKA HOMOGENIZACJI

Abstract

This essay examines the relationship between architecture, experience and the identity of places through a comparison of Ernesto Nathan Rogers and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Rogers's notion of 'environmental pre-existences' understands context as an ensemble of forms, memories and social practices, guiding design towards transformation within continuity. The Torre Velasca exemplifies a modernity capable of reworking history without imitating it. Pasolini's reflections on the form of the city denounce the loss of cultural and territorial differences brought about by consumer society. Although neither perspective derives directly from the other, they converge in recognising the relational value of places and the connection between space and collective life. Their comparison restores an ethical responsibility to design: to transform without erasing, safeguarding memory, environmental resources and the ability of communities to participate in change and generate meanings of their own through the experience of dwelling.

Keywords: *architectural experience, continuity, environmental pre-existences, Ernesto Nathan Rogers, Pier Paolo Pasolini*

Streszczenie

Esej podejmuje problem relacji między architekturą, doświadczeniem a tożsamością miejsc, zestawiając poglądy Ernesta Nathana Rogersa i Pier Paola Pasoliniego. Pojęcie „uprzednich uwarunkowań środowiskowych" (ang. *environmental pre-existences*) w ujęciu Rogersa traktuje kontekst jako zespół form, pamięci i praktyk społecznych, ukierunkowujących projektowanie na przekształcanie w ramach ciągłości. Torre Velasca stanowi przykład nowoczesności zdolnej do twórczego przetworzenia historii bez jej naśladowania. Refleksje Pasoliniego nad formą miasta są z kolei wyrazem krytyki utraty różnic kulturowych i terytorialnych, wywołanej przez społeczeństwo konsumpcyjne. Choć żadna z tych perspektyw nie wywodzi się bezpośrednio z drugiej, łączy je uznanie relacyjnej wartości miejsc oraz związku między przestrzenią a życiem zbiorowym. Ich zestawienie przywraca projektowaniu wymiar odpowiedzialności etycznej: aby przekształcać bez wymazywania, chroniąc pamięć, zasoby środowiskowe oraz zdolność wspólnot do uczestniczenia w zmianie i samodzielnym kształtowaniu znaczeń poprzez doświadczenie zamieszkiwania.

Słowa kluczowe: *ciągłość, doświadczenie architektoniczne, Ernesto Nathan Rogers, Pier Paolo Pasolini, uprzednie uwarunkowania środowiskowe*

The concept of 'environmental pre-existences', developed by Ernesto Nathan Rogers after the Second World War, represents one of Italian architectural culture's most significant contributions to thinking about the relationship between design, history and the city[1], introducing the idea of building the city as an experience of architecture. These pre-existences encompass the full range of material and immaterial conditions that give an environment its identity: its architecture, urban structure and landscape forms, as well as uses, collective memory, traditions and cultural characteristics accumulated over time. Architecture does not emerge in a vacuum; it enters a historical, physical and social reality with which it must establish a relationship. Rogers's thinking developed within the cultural climate of European reconstruction. After the Second World War, modern architecture faced the need to re-examine some of its own assumptions. The Modern Movement had advocated moving beyond historical styles and developing a language appropriate to industrial society. In some of its manifestations, however, this aspiration had produced solutions based on supposedly universal principles, applicable regardless of the specific characteristics of places. The city was often interpreted through abstract categories: separate functions, rational circulation, freestanding buildings and standardised building types. This approach had the merit of addressing real problems, such as urban growth, housing shortages and sanitary requirements. At the same time, it risked reducing the city to a purely functional organism, neglecting its historical and symbolic depth. Rogers does not reject the modern experience. On the contrary, he regards modernity as an indispensable cultural achievement, and his aim is to free it from dogmatic rigidity, restoring its original critical capacity[2]. The concept of environmental pre-existence arises precisely from this need: to enable modern architecture to engage with history without relinquishing its contemporaneity. The issue is therefore not to choose between innovation and preservation, but to understand how innovation can take place within continuity. The word 'continuity', which Rogers also chose for the title of the journal he edited, Casabella-Continuità, certainly does not imply immobility or repetition[3]. It describes a dynamic process in which every new work modifies what already exists and, at the same time, derives meaning from it.

In Rogers's thinking, the environment is more than the immediately visible physical context; it is the result of a process of layering, a collective construction produced by successive generations. The historic city embodies this process with particular clarity. Streets, squares, monuments, ordinary buildings and successive transformations coexist, forming an ensemble that was not designed at a single moment but took shape over time. What already exists thus has a relational nature: a building is significant not only for its intrinsic qualities, but also for the relationships it establishes with its surroundings. Proportions, materials, alignments, views, façade rhythms and patterns of use all contribute to the identity of a place, and the architect must be able to read these relationships before introducing new ones.

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[1] E.N. Rogers, *Le preesistenze ambientali e i temi pratici contemporanei* [*Environmental Pre-existences and Contemporary Practical Issues*], "Casabella-Continuità" 1955, no. 204, February–March. pp. 3–6. This text is one of the principal references for defining Rogers's notion.

[2] *Cf.* E.N. Rogers, *Esperienza dell'architettura* [*The Experience of Architecture*], Einaudi, Torino 1958; new edition edited by L. Molinari, Skira, Milan 1997, pp. 1–348. The volume presents modernity as a historical experience and a critical method, rather than as a definitive formal repertoire.

[3] Rogers edited the journal "Casabella" from 1953 to 1965, adopting the name "Casabella-Continuità". The title expressed the journal's cultural programme: to develop the legacy of the Modern Movement through an engagement with history, tradition and the specific conditions of contemporary society.

This reading does not necessarily lead to the imitation of historical forms. Reproducing arches, cornices or finishes from the past is not enough to establish an authentic relationship with the environment. Such an operation may even turn history into a stage set, separating forms from the conditions that generated them. For Rogers, the issue runs deeper: it is necessary to understand the structure of a place, recognise its values and translate them critically through the language of the present[4]. Knowledge of architectural experience thus becomes an integral stage of design, rather than an externally imposed constraint. Context does not provide a catalogue of forms to copy, but a series of questions that contemporary architecture must answer.

If every environment is the result of history, a new building is also destined to become part of history. Every intervention transforms an existing balance and, in turn, becomes a pre-existence for future transformations. Architecture therefore cannot be judged solely by its technical efficiency or formal originality; it must also be assessed in terms of the quality of the relationships it produces. A work can employ explicitly contemporary forms while remaining deeply rooted in its place. Conversely, it can adopt traditional elements yet remain alien to its environment if it fails to understand its actual structure. Milan's Torre Velasca, designed by the BBPR group, of which Rogers was a member, is considered an emblematic expression of this approach. Built between 1956 and 1958, the tower does not literally imitate an ancient monument, but interprets certain features of the historic city: the density of its urban form, the verticality of its towers, its masonry mass and the complexity of Milan's medieval configuration. Its projecting upper section may recall the structure of Lombard towers and castles, but this reference does not amount to the reproduction of a style. Historical memory is reworked through a thoroughly contemporary structure, construction process and functional programme. The image of the Torre Velasca, at once contemporary and archaic, thus seeks to establish a connection with urban memory through transformation rather than replication. This very pursuit demonstrates that engaging with pre-existences does not necessarily produce discreet or mimetic architecture. A new intervention may also introduce a strong and recognisable presence, provided that it emerges from an informed reading of the place. Continuity does not mean resemblance; it means belonging to a constantly evolving network of relationships.

Rogers's notion makes it possible to move beyond two opposing attitudes. The first is the *tabula rasa* approach, which regards what already exists as an obstacle to be removed in the name of progress. The second is absolute preservation, which tends to turn the historic city into an immobile object. In the first case, modernisation destroys the differences between places and produces urban spaces devoid of memory. In the second, protection risks preventing the city from responding to new needs and continuing to develop. Rogers proposes a third possibility: the critical transformation of reality, in which what already exists must be understood, assessed and interpreted, distinguishing what has value from what can be changed.

Rogers's thinking remains particularly relevant. Economic globalisation and the spread of uniform construction techniques have encouraged the production of similar buildings in very different contexts. Skyscrapers, shopping centres, residential districts and infrastructure often

[4] See: E.N. Rogers, *Gli elementi del fenomeno architettonico* [*The Elements of the Architectural Phenomenon*], C. de Seta (ed.), Guaraldi Editori, Napoli 1981. Published posthumously, the work explores the relational nature of architecture and the relationship between the architectural phenomenon, environment, history and observer.

tend to repeat models regardless of local social and cultural conditions. In this situation, the notion of environmental pre-existence calls for renewed attention to specificity, understood not as a nostalgic search for an immutable identity, but as responsiveness to the concrete demands of each place. Landscape, territory, local techniques, architectural heritage and social practices can become active elements of contemporary design.

The concept can also be extended to the pressing climate issues we face. There is a growing awareness today that the environment, encompassing ecosystems, soil, water and vegetation, must be understood as it was in the past, making historical and urban studies increasingly essential. Building with respect for pre-existences also means recognising the value of resources already available. Continuity thus becomes not only a cultural principle, but also a strategy for the future.

Refocusing attention on these values, grounded in the experience of building, means transforming the relationship with context from a stylistic problem into a theoretical and ethical question, in which modernity need not necessarily assert itself through a break with the past.

In Italian thought after the Second World War, reflection on the identity of places takes on a significance that goes beyond simply protecting historic heritage. For Rogers, questioning the meaning of architecture means recognising that every project enters a reality already shaped by history, memory, uses and social relationships. Similarly, for Pier Paolo Pasolini, observing the transformation of cities, the countryside and urban outskirts means denouncing a vast anthropological transformation, marked by the disappearance of cultural differences under the pressure of industrial and consumer society.

Pasolini's thinking cannot be said to derive directly from Rogers's. Nevertheless, there is a significant convergence between them: both reject the idea that territory is a neutral space, available for transformations devoid of memory. Both conceive of place as a layered reality in which physical forms, everyday practices and collective identities are inseparable.

Pasolini's sensitivity to the identity of places emerges particularly clearly in the television documentary *Pasolini and… the Form of the City*, filmed by Paolo Brunatto in 1973 and broadcast by Rai in 1974[5]. Through the lens of a film camera, Pasolini observes the silhouette of Orte, in the province of Viterbo, and shows how the compact form of the medieval town is altered by the presence of several modern buildings erected on its edges. His argument does not concern the value of the new buildings considered in isolation. These buildings may appear insignificant, yet they become decisive because they interrupt the relationship between the historic town and the landscape. Pasolini thus grasps a principle close to Rogers's understanding of the need for an informed reading of a place in architectural design: the value of a form lies not only in the object, but also in the relationship between its parts. What is compromised is not a single monument, but the visual and cultural unity of the place.

In the same documentary, Pasolini considers Sabaudia, a town founded under Fascism. His judgement is deliberately complex: although it was established under the regime, Sabaudia does not appear Fascist to him in its deeper reality, because its architectural form has become integrated into the landscape and people's lives. According to Pasolini, the political power that built it did not succeed in radically changing Italy's popular cultural characteristics. Consumer civilisation, by contrast, proves capable of penetrating behaviour, language

[5] *Pasolini e… la forma della città* [*Pasolini and… the Form of the City*], dir. P. Brunatto, documentary, RAI, Italy 1974.

and desires[6]. Protecting the 'form of the city' therefore does not arise from a purely aesthetic concern. Behind the urban silhouette, Pasolini recognises a way of life. The historic city and the rural landscape are the visible outcome of a culture that has developed its relationships with the territory over time.

For Pasolini, Italy's physical transformation is the sign of an even deeper anthropological transformation. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, industrial development, urbanisation, infrastructure and the spread of television rapidly changed the country. Peasant, popular and subproletarian cultures lost their autonomy, while a single bourgeois, consumerist model spread nationwide.

In the article *Acculturazione e acculturazione* [Acculturation and Acculturation], published in 1973 and later collected in *Scritti corsari* [Corsair Writings], Pasolini argues that the centralism of consumer society has achieved a result that historical Fascism had failed to attain: the effective cultural homogenisation of Italians[7]. Fascism had imposed symbols and slogans without completely eliminating local cultures; the new economic power, by contrast, operates through infrastructure, information, advertising and, above all, television.

Consumerism does more than sell goods: it produces human models, determines what people should desire and indicates which behaviours are socially acceptable. The freedom promised by the market thus becomes a form of obedience, in which each individual is apparently free to choose, provided that the choice remains within the same system of needs and aspirations. Cultural differences are not merely suppressed from outside; individuals themselves progressively abandon them, driven to feel ashamed of their dialects, their origins and their ways of life. Homogenisation penetrates inner life and modifies desires. For this reason, Pasolini considers it even more devastating and radical than traditional political forms of authoritarianism. Just as homogenised building erases the differences between cities, mass culture reduces the variety of human experiences to behaviours that serve consumption.

When Pasolini speaks of authenticity, he does not mean an abstract purity or an immutable identity. His attention is directed above all towards cultures that have retained a relative autonomy from the models of the industrial bourgeoisie, such as the peasant world, the subproletariat and the communities he encountered in countries outside Europe. Their material poverty does not preclude a richness of meaning, because life retains connections with the community, the body, the landscape and a shared memory. His interest in dialects responds to the same need: to defend a plurality of ways of naming and interpreting the world against the spread of a standardised language shaped by bureaucracy and the media[8].

This position has, however, attracted criticism. Pasolini's nostalgia for the peasant and subproletarian world may appear to idealise the past, risking an underestimation of the poverty, exclusion and inequalities present in traditional societies. Pasolini himself was aware of this objection, and in his 1974 open letter to Italo Calvino he clarified that his nostalgia

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[6] In his comparison of Orte and Sabaudia, Pasolini implicitly distinguishes the political authoritarianism of historical Fascism from the more pervasive power of consumer civilisation, which is capable of transforming individuals' behaviour and inner lives.

[7] *Cf.* P.P. Pasolini, *Acculturazione e acculturazione* [*Acculturation and Acculturation*], "Corriere della Sera", 9 December 1973, under the title *Sfida ai dirigenti della televisione* [*A Challenge to Television Executives*], subsequently collected [in:] *Scritti corsari* [*Corsair Writings*], Garzanti, Milan 1975, pp. 27–30.

[8] On the relationship between language, popular culture and social transformation, see: P.P. Pasolini, *Empirismo eretico* [*Heretical Empiricism*], Garzanti, Milano 1972.

did not concern a supposed golden age, but the existence of distinct cultures that, despite their poverty, possessed values and models of their own[9]. His critique should therefore not be interpreted as an invitation to restore the past. The issue is not to reject technical progress, but to distinguish progress from development. In Pasolini's thinking, development primarily means economic and productive expansion, whereas progress concerns the improvement of human conditions, justice, freedom and cultural growth[10]. Development without progress can multiply the goods available while simultaneously impoverishing relationships and the possibilities for giving life a meaning of one's own.

The relationship between protecting places and defending cultures also appears in the short film *The Walls of Sana'a*, made by Pasolini in 1971[11]. Struck by the Yemeni city and its architecture, Pasolini appeals to UNESCO to protect its heritage from indiscriminate modernisation. Sana'a is described not as a collection of isolated monuments, but as a unified urban form, born of techniques, materials and ways of dwelling accumulated over time. Its beauty derives from the continuity between the buildings, the landscape and the community's culture. Here too, Pasolini's position meets Rogers's: a city cannot be protected by preserving only its exceptional buildings.

In the 'Fireflies Article', published in Corriere della Sera on 1 February 1975 under the title *The Power Vacuum in Italy*, the disappearance of fireflies becomes a metaphor for an epochal transformation[12]. This environmental phenomenon, linked to pollution and industrialisation, takes on political and anthropological significance. With the fireflies, an entire world disappears: landscapes, rhythms of life, cultures and forms of experience that the new consumerist power is unable to recognise. The image shows how, for Pasolini, the environmental and cultural crises are inseparable. Nature is not a backdrop external to society; it participates in individuals' memory and sensibility. When an environment is destroyed, part of the experience through which human beings have developed their relationship with reality is also erased.

Fireflies represent what is fragile, marginal and unproductive, and what, for that very reason, escapes the dominant economic logic. Their intermittent light can be read as a symbol of ways of life that have resisted homogenisation: tiny presences, unable to compete with the artificial illumination of power, yet embodying a different way of inhabiting the world.

The convergence between Rogers and Pasolini makes it possible to understand that defending the identity of places does not consist simply in preserving images of the past. A living place is not a museum. It must be able to change, accommodate new needs and produce new forms. The decisive question concerns how this transformation takes place.

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[9] P.P. Pasolini, *Limitatezza della storia e immensità del mondo contadino* [*The Limited Scope of History and the Immensity of the Peasant World*], published in *Paese Sera* on 8 July 1974 under the title *Lettera aperta a Italo Calvino: Pasolini: quello che rimpiango* [*Open Letter to Italo Calvino: Pasolini: What I Miss*], [in:] *Scritti corsari*, *op. cit*., pp. 60–65.

[10] P.P. Pasolini, *Sviluppo e progresso* [*Development and Progress*], [in:] *Scritti corsari*, *op. cit.,* pp. 175–178. Pasolini distinguishes economic growth, desired primarily by producers, from social and cultural progress, desired by the popular classes.

[11] *Le mura di Sana'a* [*The Walls of Sana'a*], dir. P.P. Pasolini, short film, Franco Rossellini, Italy 1971. The film's appeal calls for the protection of the Yemeni city against a modernisation unable to recognise its architectural and cultural unity.

[12] P.P. Pasolini, *Il vuoto del potere in Italia* [*The Power Vacuum in Italy*], "Corriere della Sera" 1975, 1 febbraio [1st february]; republished under the title: *L'articolo delle lucciole* [*The Fireflies Article*] [in:] *Scritti corsari*, *op. cit*., pp. 128–134.

Rogers offers the tools for conceiving a modernity capable of entering into a relationship with pre-existences, while Pasolini denounces a modernisation that destroys differences and replaces actual cultures with a single model. The former insists on the responsibility of design; the latter shows that economic relationships and systems of power operate behind spatial forms. From this dual perspective emerges a broader idea of dwelling. To dwell does not simply mean to occupy a functional space; it means to recognise oneself within a network of relationships, to value places, share memories and build bonds. A life rich in meaning cannot be entirely programmed by advertising, the market or communication platforms; it requires the possibility of independently producing values, desires and forms of belonging. The search for identity must not, however, become insularity. Territorial identities are not pure essences, fixed or impervious to change; they are constructions born of encounters, conflicts and intermingling. Defending an identity therefore means safeguarding communities' ability to participate in their own transformation, rather than being subjected to models imposed by consumer culture.

Rogers and Pasolini leave us two complementary perspectives. Rogers's concept of 'continuity' teaches that every intervention must engage with the concrete history of its place. Pasolini's critique of homogenisation shows that the destruction of context is never merely architectural: it affects languages, bodies, desires and social relationships. The identity of places is therefore not a purely aesthetic asset. It is the material condition through which a community retains the ability to remember, recognise itself and produce meanings. When the transformation of territory is governed exclusively by profitability, space loses its differences and life tends to assume standardised forms. This is not a matter of romantically opposing the past to the present, or of denying the benefits of technology. It is a matter of asking what kind of development is compatible with an authentically human life. Designing within the continuity of experience means transforming without erasing; living in resistance to homogenisation means withdrawing at least some desires from the industrial production of consent. Defending a city, a landscape, a dialect or a communal practice means preserving the plurality of ways of inhabiting the world. Rogers and Pasolini[13] remind us that freedom consists not only in having more goods or opportunities for consumption, but also in being able to give our own experience meanings that have not been entirely determined elsewhere.

[13] For the final phase of Pasolini's reflections on the pedagogy of consumption and the transformation of younger generations, see: P.P. Pasolini, *Lettere luterane* [*Lutheran Letters*], Einaudi, Torino 1976, published posthumously.




Ill. 1. Pier Paolo Pasolini and Ninetto Davoli during the filming of the documentary *Pasolini e … la forma della città*, 1974

Ill. 2. Skyline of the city of Orte (Italy), highlighting a modern building. Still from the documentary *Pasolini e … la forma della città*, 1974




Ill. 3. View of the city of Orte (Italy), with modern buildings added. Still from the documentary *Pasolini e … la forma della città*, 1974

Ill. 4. Panoramic view of the city of Sabaudia (Italy). Still from the documentary *Pasolini e … la forma della città*, 1974




Ill. 5. Arcade in the city of Sabaudia (Italy). Still from the documentary *Pasolini e … la forma della città*, 1974

Ill. 6. Civic tower in the city of Sabaudia (Italy). Still from the documentary *Pasolini e … la forma della città*, 1974

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[1] *Le mura di Sana'a*, dir. P.P. Pasolini, short film, Franco Rossellini, Italy 1971.
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