

Ugo Rossi

Seven Forgotten Masters. Nanus positus super humeros gigantis

Abstract

At the end of the 1950s, Casabella, at that time directed by Ernesto Nathan Rogers, published a series of articles and monographic issues as intended contributions to the rediscovering of some authors that history and critics had marginalised from dominant culture. Casabella's objective was to give a new reading of the lesson of those architects seen at the time as proto-rationalists and proto-moderns (even anti-modernists), and in doing so providing an operational point of view aimed to make their thought well known. Likewise the present issues of FAM has the purpose of enquiring the bodies of work of a number of forgotten masters, exploring the actual reasons behind their sheer dismissal, that for so long has cut across the history of modern architecture, and to reconsider how contemporary the lesson of those architects actually is.

Key-words

Constantinos Doxiadis – Sedad Eldem – Hassan Fathy – Peter Harnden – Bernard Rudofsky – Edward Durell Stone – William Wurster

At the end of the 1950s the less senior editors of Casabella, directed at the time by Ernesto Nathan Rogers, published a range of articles and monographic issues with the intent of contributing to the reappraisal of some masters that criticism and written history had confined to its periphery or even completely ignored, architects like Dudok, Loos, Berlage, Behrens, Perret (Canella 1957, Rossi 1959, Grassi 1961, Polesello, Rossi, Tentori 1960, Gregotti 1957). Casabella's main objective was to put forward a new reading of their lesson and issue a point of view, in operational terms, aimed to acknowledge their thoughts, architects considered, at the time, proto-rationalist, proto-modern or even anti-modern (Pevsner 1973).

The present issue of FAM springs from the intent of the magazine's editorial board to create a small collection of essays devoted to those architects because they never found a rightful place in the history of architecture. Architects that never really earned much interest from the world of architecture and whose contributions are virtually unknown, or even ignored in light of their systematic dismissal by the history of modern architecture. A history of architecture that has left out all those ways and methods perceived as "odd" when compared to the panorama of supposed historical, critical and operational certainties (Furlong 2015). Amongst the many forgotten masters a number have been selected according to their geographical and topical similarities, they are: Bernard Rudofsky (Ugo Rossi), Peter Graham Harnden (Julio Garnica), Edward Durell Stone (Ray Bromley), William Wurster (Elisa Brusegan), Sedad Hakki Eldem (Serena Acciai), Hassan Fathy (Viola Bertini), Constantinos Apostolou Doxiadis (Pyla Panayioti).

The first thing that associates those architects is the fact that they all

quitted the International Style in architecture, making the difficult choice towards “other” architectures, namely regional, vernacular or traditional ones. All forms of architecture with cultural origins rather than defined and consolidated by Congresses or by the exhibitions organized by MoMA¹. The other aspect shared by these architects refers to the fact that they all experienced great professional prestige and acknowledgement by being protagonists of exemplary occasions in the history of the 20th century architecture, and assuming international, institutional roles: Rudofsky worked at New York’s MoMA curating very important exhibitions, and he was invited by the US government to manage the *US Cultural Exhibitions* in occasion of the 1958 *Brussels World Fair*; Peter Harnden was the United States’ architect in Europe, he was employed from 1949 to 1959 to organize and plan the traveling exhibitions and the international Fairs in order to promote culture, the *American Way of Living* and the rebuilding programme in Europe, and, in doing so, divulging the Piano Marshall and organizing more than 400 exhibitions; Edward Durell Stone was the architect of Conger Goodyears and Nelson Rockefeller, author not only of the MoMA in New York and of the American Embassy in New Delhi, but also of the US Pavilion at the Brussels World Fair; William Wurster, architect, Dean and Professor at the University of California, in Berkeley, and at MIT, closely linked to intellectuals and urbanists like Lewis Mumford, an important figure of Californian architecture and founder of the Bay Region Style; Hassan Fathy was the Egyptian government’s architect for New Ghorra and New Barys, he worked at Doxiadis Associates for the Iraq National Housing Program, co-operating to the realization of the urban planning of the main Iraqi cities: Baghdad, Mosul, Basra, Kirkuk and Surstinar; Sedad Helden was the architect at the Humanities department of Istanbul’s University and an actively involved professor aiming to demonstrate with his work the importance of tradition to define a National Modern language; Constantinos Doxiadis was one of the first to structure his office to deal with planning in global terms and above all he was the author of the planning and the building of institutional architectures in Islamabad, one of the most relevant capitals of “modernity” together with Brasilia, Dacca and Chandigarh.

The interest for the work of those architects though, after a period of great critical favour, slowly declined and in some cases their lesson was viewed almost like a threat for modern architecture itself. Their destiny was to be marginalised and forgotten by history and by architects. The present issue of FAM attempts to investigate the reasons that caused those masters to be marginalised by written history and forgotten by architects. The authors of these essays, who have been invited as experts in relation to the specific studies they have carried out so far, have been all asked the following questions:

1 Which was the historical context in which the architect addressed by the article operated? Which one was/is the historical and critical consideration of the architect’s work?

2 Why was his work forgotten? Which ones were the actual obstacles in the environment he worked in? Which ones are the reasons for his “exclusion” from the history of architecture?

3 What was/is the lesson? Why was/is it ignored? Why is it not acknowledged today as it was in the past? Why should their lesson have been – and should still be today – acknowledged and appreciated?

Despite the very many answers, what really brings together all of their interpretations is that, regardless of the historical reconstruction/revision, it has been preferred to convey a portrait that depicts the single-handedly marginalization of those masters, hoping, nonetheless, for their lesson to be gradually restored.

In my essay on Bernard Rudofsky I address on one hand the matter regarding the inevitability of the exclusion, almost self-inflicted, of his own work from the historical and operational context, and, on the other, I introduce what we could, perhaps should, learn from his lesson. Julio Garnica presents the body of work of Peter Harnden as one of the most emblematic experiences of American architecture in the world, regardless of the critical and historical fortune met by his work. Ray Bromley relates the story pertaining the validation of Edward Durell Stone's work obtained with an original strategy, without associating it to the new cultural trends of critique and of cultural written history. Stone's decline, according to Ray Bromley, has intrinsic motivations, due to very personal reasons and caused, mainly, by the transition from an extremely personalised activity as an architect to the anonymity of a large professional office, a matter that opens up the discussion to other interesting aspects (see: Hitchcock 1947, Saint 1983, Deamer 2014, Kubo 2014). Elisa Brusegan convincingly conveys how William Wurster's lesson goes well beyond the local boundaries and how there still is to learn from his planning thought. She tells us that even though Wurster's body of work is well known in the United States, because well contextually rooted, it never found fertile grounds to extend his teachings beyond national borders. Viola Bertini, after describing the cultural context and the historical narration of Hassan Fathy, delivers a portrait of the architect stressing out his planning and theoretical thought, and his incessant research of a form of architecture bond to cultural roots, showing also how Fathy's work is still prolific in terms of other possible lines of architectural enquiries developments. Serena Acciai, transcending the ups and downs of written history, introduces Sedad Eldem as a great interpreter of modern architecture in Turkey, as the one who first thought about modern forms of architecture in his home land, a master and teacher able to mold an entire generation of Turkish architects, using central identity issues to shape his own design and planning research. Pyla Panayiota's essay offers a detailed reconstruction not only of the body of work but also of the principles adopted by Constantinos Doxiadis to rebuild a urban and housing discipline, principles such as the economic development in harmony with the environment, the city and the human and urban geography and the principle of critical consideration on the functionalist version of the city, which is the most original aspect of Doxiadis' work.

These essays, besides reconsidering the body of work and the thought of some of the many 'forgotten' architects, suggest a broader historical insight, aimed to ponder on the thought of Bernard of Chartres: *Nanus positus super humeros gigantis*² can look at the world differently and much further away.

Notes

¹ I refer here to the CIAM Congresses and to the MoMA exhibition, *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* [MoMA Exh. #15, February 9-March 23, 1932]; to the catalogue and the book by HITCHCOCK H.R., JOHNSON P. (1932), in which Alfred Barr states, in his introduction, that the relevance of the book is in the fact that

«[Johnson e Hitchcock] have demonstrated, I believe, beyond any reasonable doubt, that nowadays we can see a modern style as original, logical, coherent and widely spread as any other in the past, a style christened by the authors Internazionale Style». p. 25.

² [Tran.]: “Dwarf on the shoulders of a giant”, Bernardo from Chartres (XII century), quote from John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon* (III, 4): «used to say Bernard of Chartres that we are like dwarves on the shoulders of giants, in order to see more things than they do, much further away».

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Ugo Rossi, trained as an architect in Venice and Milan. After his master degree at the Polytechnic in Milan, he continued his studies in Venice, where he received his Ph.D. at Iuav University with a thesis on Bernard Rudofsky.

His theoretical and practice interests focus on the investigation of the different meanings of the modernity and the intersections between history and culture in the critical practice of modern and contemporary architecture.

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