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Vittorio Gregotti's Casabella (1982-1996)

Abstract

The journal «Casabella», founded in 1928, shaped the architectural debate in Italy throughout the 20th century. In the years 1982-1996 «Casabella» was edited by the Milanese architect and educator Vittorio Gregotti. Gregotti's editorship produced a dense and seminal corpus of architectural theory. The reason of the interest of Gregotti's Casabella twofold. Firstly the articles published by the journal span over a wide range of theoretical position, thus offering a vivid representation of the richness as well as the acrimony of the architectural debate in the post-modern era. Secondly as to the method Gregotti had the ambition to create a "monopolistic" palimpsest in order to achieve his cultural and political project: the architect as the individual who is responsible for the modification of reality based on the interpretation of the context and on the specific technical knowledge. This essay takes into account the fundamental features of the journal, by focusing on its editorial staff and analyzing the theoretical core of «Casabella», that is, even today, its greatest legacy.

Keywords

Casabella — Vittorio Gregotti — Criticism

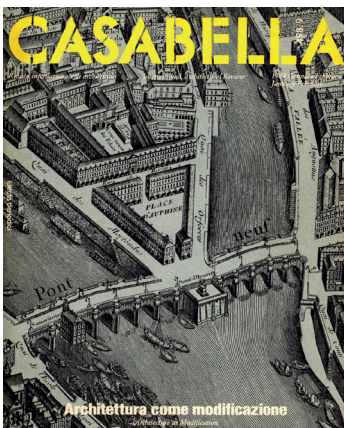


Fig. 1
 498-499 double number cover
 (January-February 1984) "Architettura come Modificazione".

Introduction

From number 478 (March 1982) to the number 630-631 (January 1996), the architecture journal «Casabella» was edited by Vittorio Gregotti. In his long and passionate direction Gregotti builds around the journal a true cultural project on architect role in the transformation of the city and the territory, involving colleagues and scholars from different disciplines. This cultural project builds on themes and authors able to move and re-center the architecture contemporary debate, in Italy and in Europe. Among the most significant issues raised by «Casabella» is the relationship with the modern movement project, the convergences between architecture, urban planning and engineering, the "progetto urbano", the attention for the environment and for the modification of the existing. The architects mainly published in the journal Gino Valle, Mathias Ungers Oswald, James Stirling, Tadao Ando, Hans Kollhoff but especially Alvaro Siza, whose intervention in Evora occupies the front pages of the inaugural issue of march 1982.

The journal

The specific point of view on contemporary architecture also involves a precise and rigorous formal organization. Already in the choice of the print media, it is evident the criticism that «Casabella» addresses to other journals. For inside pages, instead of coated paper, it is chosen a thick paper, ivory-coloured, particularly suited for the publication of technical drawings and designers sketches but much less effective for photographic reproductions. A confirm of a clear hierarchy between architectural design and its representation is the choice to publish

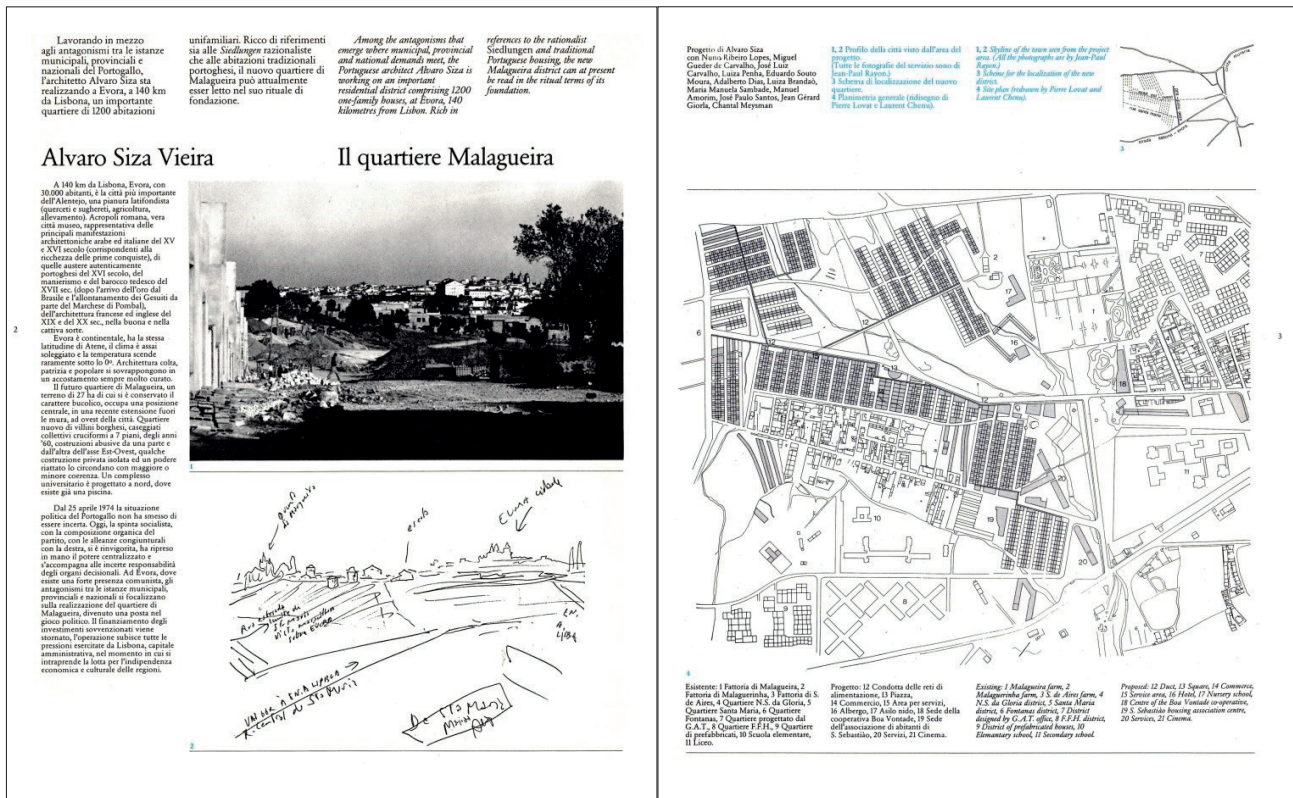


Fig. 2
The article on Malagueira quarter in Evora by Alvaro Siza, published in the first issues Vittorio Gregotti's «Casabella», n.478 march 1982

the drawings (even those executive) in large format, full pages, relegating photos to the sidelines.

Another peculiarity of «Casabella» during those years is the prevalence of texts on the images, fact quite unusual for an architectural journal. The anomaly is justified in the accuracy and level of detail of published contributions (especially those historical-critical), which reduces the space for pictures and images, often printed in small and infra-text; there is also a prominence of critical analysis on drawings of presented architectures. The main projects of each number are always published with a text signed by editors or well-known critics that it's never merely descriptive. The graphic design, by Pierluigi Cerri, emphasizes the scanning of the internal structure with the distribution of text in columns, which thicken and widen according to the sections. The result is a smooth and orderly layout, as an architectural facade partition, with symmetries, pauses, “intercolumns” and “pillars.”

Another evident choice of «Casabella» is to present itself as a “news magazine” and not thematic. The monthly publication does not allow a timely review; however the absence of a specific theme leaves the editorial staff greater freedom in the selection of projects and reviews to be published. This fact leads also to precise ideological implications: for a thematic journal is easier to have a strong political direction - even in a more narrow sense - as it had been such the precedent «Casabella», that of Tomás Maldonado. Gregotti believes instead that his journal should be directed to a professional audience, who intends to keep current with last projects and the most interesting architectures, without that they must relate to a specific theme. The thematic model is not altogether abandoned: it is proposed through “double numbers”, special issues published at the beginning of the year, which give depth and solidity to the cultural project promoted by the journal. Among the most significant “double numbers” we remind *Architettura del piano* (1983) *Architettura come Modificazione* (1984), *Il*

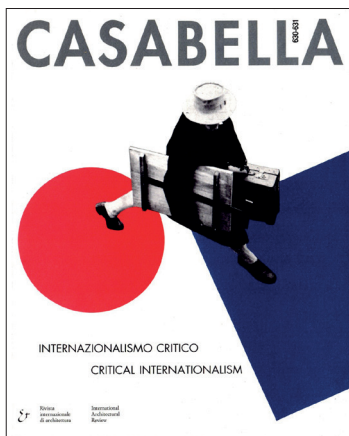


Fig. 3
630-631 double number cover
(January-February 1996) “Inter-
nazionalismo critico”.

disegno degli spazi aperti (1993) e *Internazionalismo critico* (1996).

Advertisements, which serve to economically support the high distribution costs of a widely distributed magazine, do not interfere with articles and presentations, but are collected between the cover and the summary. They are printed full-page, on coated paper, in color or in black and white, and constitute a sort of separate dossier from the journal. This is not an unusual choice for a specialist periodical; much less usual is the advertising section that named “Innovazione edilizia” and published at the bottom of the magazine. This is an advertising section where the accurate systematization explicit a pedagogical intent: each issue addresses a specific theme, ranging from ‘isolation and waterproofing’ to ‘professional studio equipment’. The brief introductory text, edited by a Casabella collaborator, frames the theme from a normative point of view and typological classification; the following pages were dedicated each to a specific product of different companies. The product-cards are subdivided into “owner data”, “general characteristics”, “morphological-dimensional characteristics” and “technical-performance characteristics”. The images supplied are often detailed drawings, technical tables, or diagrams that explain the operation of single components.

The editorial staff

The editorial staff of «Casabella» consists mainly of young critics and architects (Pierre-Alain Croset, Giacomo Polin, Mirko Zardini, Sebastiano Brandolini, Silvia Milesi, Antonio Angelillo and Chiara Baglione), accompanied by an “external” editorial staff, which was composed, in several years, by Bernardo Secchi, Jean-Louis Cohen, Jacques Gubler, Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani, Massimo Scolari, Giorgio Ciucci, Marco De Michelis, Boris Podrecca, Richard Ingersoll and Carlo Olmo. Some “external” editors are also assiduous collaborators: Bernardo Secchi intervenes in almost all numbers with an opinion article; Jean-Louis Cohen writes numerous articles and critical essays; Jacques Gubler signs, besides the famous appendix - the “Postcard” to Mrs. Tosoni - many pieces.

The work of the intern editors requires a full-time commitment and they often follow personally the printing layout and the collection of published drawings. In evaluating the architectures to be published the direct experience of the artifacts is taken into large account. The intention of the editors is to present a “critical narrative” of the works published: through the precise selection of images and technical drawings they intend to reproduce, as faithfully as possible, the experience of a direct comparison with the architecture represented. The frequent abroad missions to visit the architectures and gather the most significant drawings and images directly from design studios also become important to expand contacts network and discover young talents still unpublished.

European geographic areas are subdivided by the editors of Casabella according to specific language skills: skills essential for a job that continuously requires the translation of texts and correspondence with the various published foreign authors. There are also «Casabella» news correspondents: since 1986, the contributions from Jean-Claude Garcias from Paris, Martin Pawley from London and Reyner Banham from New York appear regularly under the heading “Argomenti”. The articles of the correspondents constitute a lively and sharp criticism of events affecting French, English and US architectural culture.

The “exclusion strategy”, which brings the journal, on the model of the

avantgarde journals of the beginning of the century, to publish only the authors in line with the cultural project of «Casabella», is partially hindered by young editors. In fact they push to publish works and architects in contrast to director's choices, especially in the last period. Starting from n. 610 of March 1994, were published a series of critical essays on the undisputed protagonists of the architectural debate of those years - but often absent from the journal's debate - such as Rem Koolhaas, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, Peter Eisenman, Jean Nouvel, Santiago Calatrava, Philip Johnson and Arata Isozaki. These articles, that contraddict the exclusion principle expressed on several occasions by the same Gregotti, testify to the maturation, even professional, of young editors and a change in the internal equilibrium of the editorial staff.

If, therefore, in defining the theoretical setting of the journal cultural project, the Vittorio Gregotti's editorials play an unmatched role compared to other contributions, it should always be considered that «Casabella» is constructed, even materially, by a much wider working group, which intervenes - through the selection of contributions and architectures to be published - in a non-neutral way.

Over the years young editors acquires a remarkable autonomy that makes their contribution to the journal more conscious and involved, in a single word more "critical". The persuasive power of the pedagogical project of «Casabella» demonstrates its effectiveness first and foremost towards its interior, towards its own staff.

«Casabella» and the value of criticism

All the features analyzed so far in the journal clearly show the consistency of the critical attitude promoted by «Casabella», an attitude that only marginally has to do with controversy about the postmodern style, that took hold in Italy in the early 1980s.

The cultural project of «Casabella» has its foundation in the critical attitude of the subject - the architect - facing the world and the tools - the project - with which reality can be modified. Significantly, the latest issue of Vittorio Gregotti's direction is dedicated to 'Critical Internationalism', presenting itself as a kind of legacy of the editor to his readers.

But what are the characteristics of that design strategy called (using the words of another famous double number) "architecture as modification"? What are the contact points among heterogeneous authors and projects presented over the years on journal pages? What links, for example, Ungers, Stirling and Siza's projects - protagonists of that «Casabella» season? First, figurative heterogeneity excludes that the answer may be sought in the question of language. The "architecture as modification" does not require formalistic membership; The rigid grid of the Ungersian projects, the eclectic forms of Stirling's projects, the poetic freedom of Siza's architecture, are not a contradiction. This is coherent both with the youthful reflections of Vittorio Gregotti and the Italian post-war architectural culture (let's think of "Neo-Liberty" controversy, the programmatic refusal of adherence to a modern language that had characterized the early works of Gregotti himself) both with the criticism to the concept of style so often expressed in the pages of «Casabella».

Second, the diversity denies the deductive approach of the method. This does not mean a rejection of the methodological consistency within the project, but the denial of the possibility of defining a rule or set of rules, which, as a priori, can ensure the quality of the final result. This aspect is also evidently opposed to certain assumptions that animated in those

years disciplinary research on urban analysis. The starting point for the “architecture as modification” are the conditions of the context; there is no possibility of appealing to autonomous compositional rules, nor even applying experimented recipes.

The “architecture as modification” has some characteristics that are not measured on the strictly formal plane. It is not denied the possibility of figurative similarities (think of the similarities between some Ungers’ and Gregotti Associati’s projects, between the Frankfurt Fair and the Bicocca Quarter in Milan), but they are the result of parallel reflections and not the result of a rigid linguistic program.

What matters, however, is the centrality and irreducibility of the design act, the full assumption of the responsibility of the “modification” of the “real”. Adherence to specific rules or languages is refused precisely because it would tend, on the contrary, to de-responsibilize the designer in favor of an abstract method, a “program”.

The verification of the “architecture as modification” is therefore moved to the point of view of ethics: both the poetic architecture of Siza and the rigidly schematic design of Ungers give shape to a precise idea of transformation that is not dictated by external contingencies but arises from the individual as response to these contingencies. The mechanisms for constructing that response are internal to the individual and therefore not known and non-codifiable. Only the contour conditions can be known. However, the “project” cannot be limited to the reproduction of such conditions, but is called for their reinterpretation. The designer have to employ his “critical look” in order to express in the project “what is not in any way present”, taking Gregotti’s words.

Conclusion

In March 1996 is published the number 632 of «Casabella». The new director is the architectural historian Francesco Dal Co, who had already collaborated with Gregotti’s journal. The editorial staff include Antonio Angelillo and Chiara Baglione. Yet the discontinuity with the previous season is clearly visible from this first number. It changes the format, which is closer to the almost square of the origins. It changes the paper support, where thick coated paper is preferred for photographs, illustrations, and a less drawn layout. But it is on page 22 of the same number that the break becomes apparent and almost controversial. In fact, eighteen pages are published on the Aldo Rossi project on Schützenstrasse in Berlin.

The “exclusion strategy”, which had an illustrious and main victim in the Milanese architect, is permanently archived. With it also ends the setting of Casabella as a trend journal and as a specific point of view oriented to the debate and contemporary reality. The change is also evident in the choice of double numbers themes that Dal Co decides to continue to publish in the beginning of the year in continuity with the previous direction: they will be dedicated to Sacred Architecture (1997), Factories (1998), Single Family Houses (1999), the Schools (2007), the Libraries (2008).

What is missing, beyond the changes of content and forms, is the fundamental orientation, the will - rooted in Gregotti’s «Casabella» - to present the journal as cultural project of recomposition.

The sunset of ideology, described by Dal Co as well as by Gregotti in their editorials, necessitates as a consequence the inversion of the path that Marx had inaugurated more than 150 years earlier with Theses on Feuerbach: from the attempt to modify the reality, to its mere description.

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