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Ignazio Gardella: architecture as an experience of oneness

Editors: *Angelo Lorenzi, Carlo Quintelli*

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It is a well-known fact – confirmed by all those of us who read the newspapers every day – that a ‘good’ title can be decisive in encouraging us to read something and, at the same time, in orienting us, thanks to a summary indication of a particular point of view.

I think I can safely say that also the title chosen by Angelo Lorenzi and Carlo Quintelli, editors of a recent volume dedicated to Ignazio Gardella, should be counted among those that are particularly spot-on. All of which is down to the introduction of the simple, indefinite adjective ‘other’, a word by which reference is made to a concept of differentiation with respect to anything that has already been said or tacitly alluded to. Ignazio Gardella other architectures is the title that has been given to the book; but, other than what? This is the question which springs to mind when glancing over the cover of the volume on which small, disparate pencil drawings cluster side by side almost like single frames making up a single filmic sequence.

However, it is the index which I would say unequivocally clarifies what the adjective ‘other’ refers to: the ‘other’ works of architecture referred to in the title are those less well-known, or perhaps simply less often studied, but all in any case heavily bound up with Ignazio Gardella’s design philosophy, demonstrating a coherence and methodological continuity that could link very different project scales.

Four strands are investigated in the volume: the construction of the domestic interior, that of the commercial and artistic exhibition space, and, last but not least, cultural training in reference also to the teaching of design and to relations with personalities from the academic world.

For each of these fields of investigation, a wide-ranging essay – entrusted to a different author each time – sets out to introduce the various issues addressed. These find a specific portrayal in the description and interpretation of some selected project experiences in a series of illustrative sheets drafted by young scholars and researchers.

This volume, the result of research work carried out over a period spanning approximately four years at the CSAC – Study Centre and Communication Archive – of the University of Parma which keeps all the work of this Milanese architect, represents an example of teamwork in which different voices and languages run side by side, building an interpretative

path of great coherence to underline that “idea of architecture as an experience of oneness” claimed by Ignazio Gardella on several occasions. This same ‘oneness’ of vision is also found in the composition of the volume which, although constructed starting from an examination of four different questions, is not divided into as many separate parts as such but, as if to reaffirm the coherence and continuity of a method, approaches the different themes in such a way that we constantly step from one to the other, almost effortlessly.

At the end of the reading – made particularly enjoyable by a rich iconographic apparatus consisting of archive drawings, documents for the most part previously unpublished, and beautiful original photographs in addition to those on the Casa Coggi made specifically by Marco Introini – certain words continue to haunt our mind: a few terms which sum up the general meaning of each of the projects illustrated, regardless of their specific function.

Gardella’s rejection of so-called ‘naïve functionalism’ is an important issue which, among other things, appears particularly clear when scrutinizing the so-called ‘more ephemeral’ projects linked to occasional use, the only purpose of which seems to have been the presentation of whatever it was intended to exhibit (the history of the Italian chair, or Borsalino’s hat designs, and so on...).

“Without a strong idea, it is difficult for me to begin a project,” said Gardella in a long interview given to Antonio Monestiroli more than twenty years ago, revealing that every work of architecture is the result of a learning path necessary to formulate the idea. Of course, in this research programme it has not been possible to avoid considering ‘function’ as such, but this is never the centre of the project development, which instead focuses on ‘representation’, on the theatrical nature of a project, sought as much in the construction of a city and its parts as in the design of an apartment or even a small exhibition stand.

Aldo Rossi – who, among other things, collaborated closely with Gardella on the project for the Carlo Felice theatre in Genoa – wrote that architecture is the “fixed scene of the affairs of humankind”: words which seem to me extremely fitting to describe Ignazio Gardella’s work. The ‘other’ works of architecture gathered in this volume are in fact the testimony of their capacity to build scenic spaces capable of changing character thanks to the life they find themselves containing from time to time. And this is as true for the artistic settings – the wonderful photograph of the exhibition on “The Italian Chair Over The Centuries” is just one of the many examples – as it is for the apartments or even for the commercial spaces. Each of these projects becomes the scene for a performance whose main characters are also the users of the spaces, as we can easily experience by entering that small ‘jewel’ namely, the PAC of Milan, which frequently pops up in the text.

This same theatricality can also be found in the domestic interior designs, whether apartments housed inside buildings of the historical city or homes inside buildings built from scratch. Gardella’s approach never wavered: to provide a scene for the performance of life, a life made up also of a precise relationship with the city which, in turn and with enormous consistency, also becomes part of a performance capable of linking history and ‘contemporaneity’. The tools used for interior design are the same as those which have been handed down to us for the construction of the conventional house, but each of them is redesigned and reinterpreted,



Images taken from the book

Milano, Casa Coggi sixty years later. Photo Marco Introini.

Preparation of the exhibition “La sedia italiana nei secoli”, Milano, 1951. Photo Ancellotti.

Stand Borsalino, Fiera Campionaria di Milano, 1964. Photo Casali.



to represent the underlying idea consistently and to build a place where one 'feels at home'.

"I want a house that looks like me (but more beautiful): a house that resembles my humanity," Ernesto Nathan Rogers wrote, when resuming publication of the magazine "Domus" in 1946, being rebuilt bottom up. Ignazio Gardella's other projects studied, described and gathered in this lavish volume can be read as none other than the practical realization of this great hope.