

Gaspere Oliva

**Resistant memory, notes on some (un-built) monuments for the Italian *Resistenza***

---

**Abstract**

The contribution starts from the reflection on the memorial as architectural theme and from the highlighting of the role played by commemorative monuments of the Second World War in the context of post-war reconstruction, then it develops the comparative reading of three un-built projects for memorials dedicated to the *Resistenza*. These artefacts are united by a strong abstract character and a deep confidence in the ability of architectural forms, understood in their most essential connotation, to evoke historical events and adequately represent the values they exemplify. They are analysed according to different ways in which they decline a common commemorative program and to the relationship they establish with the surrounding urban space.

**Keywords**

Memorial — Abstraction — Staircase — Ideal City — Geometry

---

**The memorial as architectural theme**

The commemorative action, remembering together for the purpose of collective reflection, constitutes the destination of the monument in general<sup>1</sup>, its reason. A theme presenting the significant peculiarity of the absence of any need for practical use.

The memorial, the type of monument we refer in this contribution, does not constitute a representative burial for an illustrious personality's remains; does not eternalize, through appropriate forms, the place of past important events: it is an architecture handing down in the absence of the object to be commemorated. Its aim is to evoke the virtuous action of an individual or a collective subject, or a socially or civilly significant event (regardless of the place in which it has historically happened) to represent and transfer the shared values exemplified by it.

The use of remembrance as a means guiding collective action, a peculiar alliance between Metaphysics and Ethics that concretizes itself in bending the former for the purpose of the latter, characterizes the statute of the monument itself on an ontological level<sup>2</sup>. This operation, in the case of the memorial, takes place with the highest degree of abstraction, precisely because of the absence of the object.

The memorials materialize in the space of the city a pause, an interruption, a hiatus that favours reflection and thought and that allows, through contemplation, recognition and identification with certain values.

### Monuments in post-war Italy

After the fall of the fascist regime, the re-founded Italian institutions had to deal with the reconstruction of collective identity through the transmission of new values which, sacralised in the *Costituzione*, had to constitute the foundation plan of the democratic society and the republican political course. To do this, however, it was necessary first dealing with political and cultural heritage of the regime, which had to be elaborated and therefore overcome, as well as recomposing the deep fractures left in the social body by the fratricidal clash of the civil war.

With these purposes, at the same time as the reconstruction of the destroyed cities, they have promoted the building of several commemorative monuments of the war events.

In the republican storytelling, the war, which Italy had begun alongside Nazi Germany and had concluded on the Allies side, was considered as a revealing epiphany of the true nature of the regime, that the country had tolerated for twenty years. The changed alliance was the plastic representation of the awareness that had led to the interruption of the fascist course. The conflict could be considered as a collective catharsis that freed the Italian people from the Cain brand of regime's support. This purification was sealed by the triple sacrifice of civilians died under bombs or in retaliation, of people deported to concentration camps and of partisans killed in battles or executed.

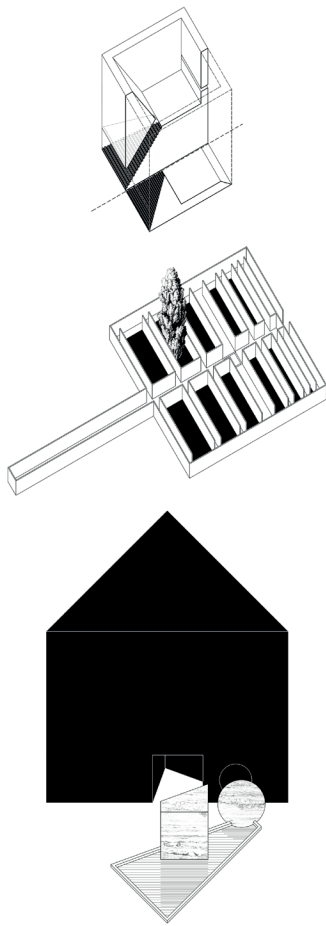
In this perspective we can try to distinguish two types of monumental programs with different objects and different purposes. On the one hand, the commemoration of victims, which allowed to clean up the waste of the past, founding the mythology of the Republic's origin on the unscratchable conceptual substrate constituted by the extreme collective sacrifice<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, the commemoration of the *Resistenza*, intended as a popular, democratic and libertarian movement contrasting the oppression, which allowed the identification between the values that had inspired and innervated it and those placed at the base of the democratic system, identifying in anti-fascism the connective tissue of the new social and political structure.

The monuments we are going to discuss here, designed several years after the end of the war, concern this second type of programs.

### Declination of the theme, ways of abstraction, relationship with the city: a comparative reading

Three un-built projects, presented in the context of three design competitions, are here analysed. They are the monument to the *Resistenza* designed by the team formed by Aldo Rossi, Gianugo Polesello and Luca Meda for Cuneo (1962), the one designed by Giorgio Grassi, again with Meda, for Brescia (1965) and the one designed by Costantino Dardi, with Giovanni Morabito, Michele Rebora and Ariella Zattera, for Milan (1971). They arrive to formal outcomes which, although different, show some common features. The first element consists in the fact that the evocation of the event is entrusted solely and exclusively to the architectural forms. These monuments are neither conceived as plastic objects to be contemplated as statues, nor as support infrastructures for pictorial or sculptural iconographic apparatus with didactic purposes. They also renounce the ambition of being *total artworks*, that is, they do not seek integration between architecture and other artistic expressions.

The second common element is the essentiality of the forms. Pure and absolute geometric forms, without connoting attributes, are organized



**Fig. 1**  
From top to bottom: Cuneo building, axonometric section with plan; Brescia building, axonometric view; Milano building, axonometric view. Graphic elaboration by the author.

through a syntax entrusting monumentality to the exactness of proportions and measures and to a solemn character, reachable with stylistic reduction procedures. A modality in continuity with some masters of the Modern Movement and above all with the Enlightenment tradition.

The purist choice seems to lead to a form without style, in which the author, if not completely hidden, seems to take a step sideways to make way for architecture with an auroral tone situated outside of time. An architecture that flaunts indifference with respect to its surroundings by virtue of its absoluteness. This tendency towards an anonymous condition, which unites the three projects, can be considered as a sublimated expression of the eminently collective character of the monument<sup>4</sup>.

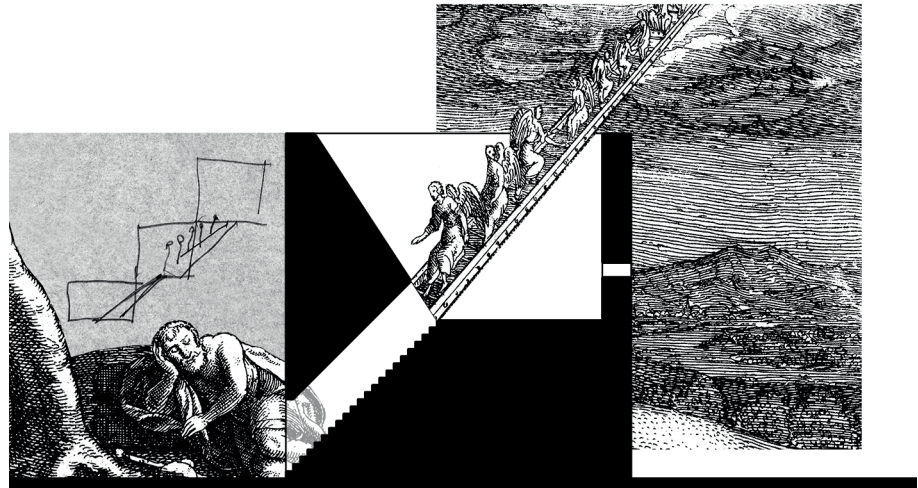
### Declination of theme

Starting from the idea of the monument as a place separated from everyday life, independent from city, the common commemorative theme is declined by the three artefacts in a different ways. The need for separation and the consequent definition of the place dedicated to collective memory are pursued by each of them with reference to three fundamental actions.

The Cuneo building refers to *ascending* (going up). The place where the theme takes place is located at a different height than the street level and looks like an open-air room from which the guerrilla war landscapes can be observed through a thin horizontal slit: the evocation takes place through the visual indication of places where the facts really happened. The open-air room is reached via a staircase materializing the preparatory moment for memory and it is characterized by a strong and constant altitude compression opposed to the continuous decreasing in width as you go up.

This idea of ascent has also strong symbolic implications as it can be iconographically linked to the Old Testament event known as *Jacob's dream*, in which angels use a ladder to reach the kingdom of God<sup>5</sup>. According to Jewish exegesis in particular, these ascendant figures correspond to virtuous men who after death, by virtue of merits obtained in life, reach angelic status. In this perspective, the Cuneo staircase would allow the heroic partisans to ascend to heaven, or to an eternal dimension. The virtuous choice made by ordinary citizens who have turned into fighters would therefore have a transcendental character, it would be connected to a profound human feeling rather than to political contingencies. This reading follows the position expressed by Piero Calamandrei. He considered the birth of the collective awareness that had led to the *Resistenza* as a *natural* and *cosmic* event, elevating this movement to a higher level than the historical contingency<sup>6</sup>. In those years, an interpretation of this type, also adopted for the commemorative programs of other monuments to *Resistenza*<sup>7</sup>, had the task of responding to the need to overcome political counter-position, within a broader process of national pacification.

The Brescia monument insists on the celebration of death and mourning by building a dense network of analogical references, linking it in several points to the history of the collective commemoration of the dead. It separates the commemorative space from the urban space through an exact enclosure. The fundamental action of *entering* is expressed in terms of an interruption in the continuity of the white wall, from which, however, it is not possible to immediately see the internal articulation<sup>8</sup>. The user is then channelled onto one of the two perimeter paths, from which he can see the different walled gardens and then reach, through the transverse paths, the main longitudinal axis. As claimed by the authors themselves,

**Fig. 2**

Cuneo building. Section of the building, sketch by Aldo Rossi and "Jacob's Dream" by Wenceslas Hollar. Graphic elaboration by the author.

the planimetric scheme takes up by analogy the design of an Italian formal garden and, at the same time, the urban layout of an ideal city, in which the walled gardens correspond to the urban blocks. Given that, as is well known, the order of the seventeenth-eighteenth-century geometric garden was intended to be allusive to an ideal urban order, we can recognize that in this project the analogy mechanism develops concentrically, as in a system of Chinese boxes.

The game of references does not seem to end here. In fact, starting from the eighteenth century, the ideal city also became the reference for numerous cemeteries and therefore, wanting to look at the Brescia memorial as a cemetery in which bodies are missing (the tomb without the object), we can identify the gardens with burial fields without the stems signalling the presence of the dead. To confirm this lack, however, there is an exception: in one of the enclosures, the presence of a pre-existing monumental tree animates the scene.

If the gardens are also hollow urban blocks, incomplete parallelepipeds missing two faces, we can look at this monument in terms of an incomplete, un-finished city. A non-finiteness disguised or perhaps made possible precisely by the clarity of the geometries and the exactness of the measures. This reading can be linked with the concept that will be clearly exposed a few years later by Aldo Rossi with reference to its extension for the San Cataldo Cemetery in Modena. He presents his cubic ossuary as a building *without a roof* in which the «windows are without frames[...], an unfinished house [...] analogous to death»<sup>9</sup>. An incompleteness which, in an ironic multilevel and multidimensional analogical game, also affected the construction of the complex, which was only half completed.

If the tomb is therefore a non-finite house, the cemetery is consequently a non-finite city, just as non-finite, in the sense of absence of conclusion, is life after death. The Milano project concretizes the fundamental act of *crossing*. The monument fruition takes place in fact by crossing the tensional space defined by detached geometrical elements constituting the *primary configuration*. The originating figure is a cube split along the diagonal: on one side of the cutting stands the «present section identified by the solid of a three-dimensional metal structure», on the other side «the absent section is occupied by a marble cube and a marble sphere, to whom a plane oriented at 30° removes



**Fig. 3**

Brescia building. From left: axonometric section and plan fragments of the project; hypothetical plan fragment of an ideal city, an Italian formal garden and a cemetery court. Graphic elaboration by the author.

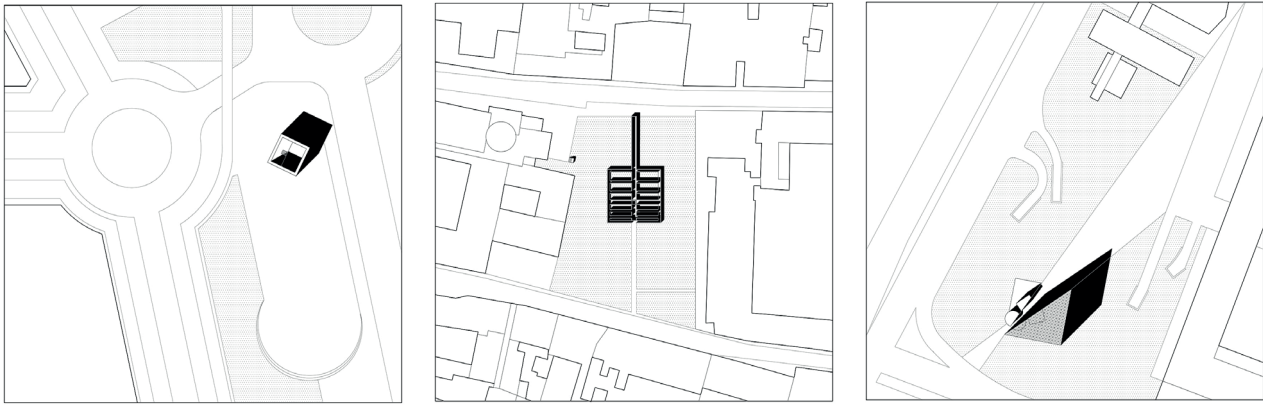
**Fig. 4**

Milano building. Planimetric scheme with El Lissitzkij "Break the Whites with a Red Wedge". Graphic elaboration by the author.

a part, which manifests itself as an imprint and a cast in the sectioned face of the metal structure»<sup>10</sup>. The two fragments of primary solids rest on a thin, triangular-shaped water-sheet, fixing one of the vertices of the base figure. The decompositions and breaking of solids define a system of conceptual, figurative and material oppositions and antinomies: full versus void, presence versus absence, primary form described versus mutilated primary form, noble materials versus *poor technologies*<sup>11</sup>. The *Resistenza*'s guerrilla war relives in the forms of Euclidean geometry. In the peculiar form of pure analogy that this monument stages, the concrete elements of the historical event are transfigured into geometrical elements giving rise to an *inverse allegory*. Describing the monument from this perspective, the main figure of the technological half cube can represent the regime's *moloch* split by partisan action. This specific figurative choice, which sees a main bigger element broken by the intervention of a smaller figure, effectively represents the idea of a conflict in which an initially disadvantaged subject achieves victory against an overwhelming and apparently unbeatable enemy, just as happened in El Lissitzkij's 1919 illustration "*Break the Whites with a Red Wedge*", with which the Russian master praised the Bolshevik victory against the Menshevik army in the civil war.

These projects can be labelled as abstract architectures but each one refers to a different way of conceiving abstraction.

We can propose a first differentiation between *iconist abstraction*, which works on the sublimation of the figure, and *processualist abstraction*, which focuses on the process leading to form and not on its representational capacity<sup>12</sup>. If the Cuneo monument can be frankly placed in the iconist field, the Brescia artefact, while assuming a clear figuration, shows a certain satisfaction in the description of the formalization criterion. In fact, the main longitudinal axis is extended up to a point outside the square from which,

**Fig. 5**

Urban relationships. Mass plans. From top to bottom: Cuneo, Brescia and Milano. Graphic elaboration by the author.

turning the gaze towards the *crossroad*, the criteria assumed for the proportioning of the enclosed gardens' widths are clearly shown and they can be recognized in the rules of perspective geometry applied to the scenography. In the Milano project, lingering on the formative process becomes almost fetishistical: operations leading to form (decompositions, offsets, rotations, etc ...) are represented and themselves become tangible and concrete elements of the composition in a true metalinguistic operation<sup>13</sup>, a discourse through forms on the ways in which abstract language is produced, the staging of analysis and verification of forms' evocative capacity.

The second level of differentiation regards the abstraction intended as a *transitive* or *intransitive operation*. In the first case the forms represent and signify other than themselves, they are the stylization of real elements or of historical architectures, their purification carried out through linguistic reduction procedures<sup>14</sup>. In the second case, forms represent anything other than themselves and the processes generating them, they possess a meaning and a value in themselves. It is clear that the Brescia building is clearly positioned in the field of transitivity, as demonstrated by the many analogue threads unravelling from it, while the Milano memorial, as previously mentioned and considering the author's declared adhesion to the so-called *Linea Analitica* that pursuing a self-referring artistic language<sup>15</sup>, pertains to the second world. For the Cuneo artefact, however, the positioning appears to be more problematic. While on the one hand we can recognize that it evokes other architectures and other worlds, on the other we can say that it also embodies a deep reflection on the ability of form, properly manipulated, to build meaningful spaces.

### Relationship with the city

The specificity of the commemorative theme and the form of monumentality assumed by these three buildings imply the need for the autonomy of forms from contextual constraints or relationships. By statute, the monument deduces values from reality in order to transfer them to transcendental level and therefore can only come true in forms exclusively responding to its internal logic, to its commemorative purpose. In this way, these forms define, through configurations tending to be self-referred, a character of otherness with respect to the surrounding space<sup>16</sup>.

The planimetric rotation of the Cuneo cubic artefact derives in fact from the entirely internal need to build a specific visual relationship at a distance (due to the declination of the theme) and therefore it does not recognize the arrangement of the important territorial road axis along which it is located. The shape, size, arrangement and position of the Brescia building do not

derive from any *urban relationship*<sup>17</sup>. The square enclosure placed in the centre of the park and oriented along the north-south axis, while responding to absolute laws, does not deny the pre-existence, rather it overlaps it, determining a coexistence that is concretized in the presence of the large tree within one of the walled gardens. Furthermore, this monument builds a visual relationship with the outside in the opposite direction to what happens in Cuneo monument: a stage located on the park's edge allows user to see the form of the artefact which coincides with its planimetric order. Unlike the two previous artefacts, the Milano monument seems to extend itself beyond the limits set by the positions of the solids constituting it, producing an emanation that redesigns the large open space in which it is located: the fundamental building's geometries define a paved path converging towards the *tensional space* in which the commemorative theme is concretized. In this case, the condition of otherness is expressed in formal terms, but not in terms of fruition modalities. The underlying concept seems to question the idea of monument as a sacred, physically separated, place, proposing its restitution to the urban worldliness, a *profanazione*<sup>18</sup> that, while weakening its solemnity, is aimed at maximizing its didactic and educational capacity, making it freely usable by all people crossing this urban place.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the concept of building's destination, read Antonio Monestiroli, *La ragione degli edifici*, in Renna A. (1980), p. 180.

<sup>2</sup> Renato Capozzi, *Il monumento, tra memoria e ragione*, in Visconti F. (2013), p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> The monuments built in the early post-war period almost always followed the first type, also because in many cases they were collective burials or cenotaphs. Their program was therefore centred on the theme of mourning and it was declined in the representation of death's tragic nature. This is the case of the monumental burial for the victims of the *Fosse Ardeatine* massacre built in the Roman countryside by Fiorentino, Perugini and others; the monument for the men killed in concentration camps built by BBPR in Milano monumental cemetery and the partisan ossuary at the Bologna cemetery built by Bottoni.

<sup>4</sup> To deep the issue of relationship between collectivity and architectural theme read Antonio Monestiroli, *Il tema di architettura*, in Renna A. (1980) 236-238.

<sup>5</sup> Reading proposed by Thomas L. Schumacher in the analysis of the various phases of Giuseppe Terragni's project for the funeral monument to Roberto Sarfatti, in Schumacher T.L. (2001), pp. 229-250.

<sup>6</sup> Sentence by Piero Calamandrei quoted in Croset P. e Skansi L. (2010), p. 117

<sup>7</sup> This is the case of the monument designed by Gino Valle in Udine, in which the idea of the transcendental dimension of the *Resistenza* intervenes in the very conformation of the building, whose elements are composed according to the "rhythms of cosmic life". To deep, read Croset P. e Skansi L. (2010), p. 117-118.

<sup>8</sup> See the description by the authors in the competition panel quoted in Crespi G. e Pierini S. (1996), p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> Description by Aldo Rossi in Ferlenga A. (1987), p. 54

<sup>10</sup> Excerpt from project description by Costantino Dardi in Dardi C. (1987), p. 113.

<sup>11</sup> Definition given by Costantino Dardi in Dardi C. (2009), p. 65.

<sup>12</sup> For the differentiation between these two ways of abstraction, refer to essay by Valerio Paolo Mosco, *Puro, Purezza (Pur, pureté)*, in Grandinetti P., Dal Fabbro A. e Cantarelli R. (2019) pp 39-40.

<sup>13</sup> Filiberto Menna quoted in Dardi C. (1987), p 23.

<sup>14</sup> Refer again to Mosco V.P. in Grandinetti P., Dal Fabbro A. e Cantarelli R. (2019), pp 36-37.

<sup>15</sup> For a broader definition of *Linea Analitica* in art and architecture, please refer to Dardi C. (1987), pp 21-24.

<sup>16</sup> It is an extreme form of *a priori* architecture that Dardi has explained as follows: «All the architectures whose poetics are based on the object, on its formal authority and on its self-significant charge move in the area of monumentality», in Costantino Dardi, *Tre risposte alla monumentalità*, in Dardi C. (2009), p. 66.

<sup>17</sup> Crespi G. e Pierini S. (1996) p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> For the concept of *profanazione* and relationship with the sacred see Agamben G. (2005)

## References

- AGAMBEN G. (2005) – *Profanazioni* - Nottetempo, Milan
- CRESPI G. E PIERINI S. (editors) (1996) – Giorgio Grassi. *I progetti, le opere, gli scritti*. Electa, Milan
- CROSET P. e SKANSI L. (editors) (2010) – *Gino Valle*, Electa, Milan
- DARDI C. (editor COSTANZO M) (2009) – *Architetture in forma di parole*. Quodlibet, Macerata,.
- DARDI C. (1987) – *Semplice lineare complesso. L'acquedotto di Spoleto*. Edizioni Kappa, Rome
- FERLENGA A. (editor) (1987) – *Aldo Rossi. Architettura 1959-1987*, Electa, Milan
- GRANDINETTI P., DAL FABBRO A. e CANTARELLI R., (editors) (2019) – *Gianugo Polesello un maestro del Novecento*, Lettera Ventidue, Siracusa
- RENNA A. (1980) – *L'illusione e i cristalli*. Clear, Rome
- ROSSI. A. (1999) – *Autobiografia scientifica*. Pratiche Editrice, Milan.
- SCHUMACHER T.L. (2001) – “*Seamlessness Is Next to Godliness*”: *The Theme of the Monolithic Block in Giuseppe Terragni's Tombs and Monuments*. *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, Vol. 46, 229-250
- VISCONTI F. (editor) (2013) – *Il razionalismo italiano. Storia, città, ragione*. Aracne, Rome

Gaspare Oliva (Aversa, CE, 1986), architect, in 2011 he graduated with praise and dignity of publication at Facoltà di Architettura e Disegno Industriale “L. Vanvitelli” of Seconda Università degli Studi di Napoli (today Università degli Studi della Campania “L. Vanvitelli”) with prof. Francesco Costanzo, with which he carries out teaching and research activities. He is PhD in Architectural and Urban Composition at the same University, obtaining the degree in 2017. He collaborates with the Standard-FAU research team which deals with architectural and urban non-finiteness, set up at the aforementioned University. He edited, together with others, the publication of proceedings of ProArch VIII Forum(2019); he published articles and essays in national and international journals and collective volumes.