

Luciano Semerani
Phalaris. An architectural journal

Abstract

The invention of a Journal of Architecture appears to us as the story of a great intellectual adventure, which consists of travel insights, art, literature, cinema, theater and architecture. Above all architecture, which presents itself in the often provocative and sometimes strange forms – designs and models – put on display at the Masieri Foundation's "Architecture Gallery": at beginning from the Lambrate railway station of Ignazio Gardella and ending with a "great mechanical hand" immersed in the waters of the Grand Canal of Santiago Calatrava, passing through Henselmann, Manuel de Solà Morales, Bob Venturi, "The Italian School" and "The other modern" by Bogdanovic, Pikionis, Gustav Peichl and John Hejduk and and not too many others.

Keywords

Phalaris — Journal of Architecture — Luciano Semerani — Magazines



Fig. 1
 Cover of the number 0 of «Phalaris».

In Vienna, the year I taught at the ABK, I saw, in foyers, but also in small specialized bookstores, some unusual magazines and newspapers, out-market and trendy, that mixed shows and exhibitions with current events; publications that I hadn't yet seen in Italy. So later, as I holed up like a cuckoo in the unused spaces of the Masieri Foundation, *in volta de canal*¹, I found the money to create a first magazine. I thought about a few pages of news put together with documentation, in large format, of projects exhibited in the "Gallery of Architecture" that in the meantime we had set up in the Masieri Foundation. 24 projects were exhibited between 1987 and 1989, including original sketches and specially-made models.

We began with the "Lambrate Railway Station", by Ignazio Gardella, and ended with a "great mechanical hand", a white pasta armed supported by an internal device, immersed in the waters of the Grand Canal, by Santiago Calatrava.

The activity involved me, and alternatively the teachers and researchers of the Department, and above all, two graduate technicians: Anna Tonicello, who started a first nucleus of what became later the IUAV Archive of Projects, and Gianni Testi, for the realization of the wooden models.

"*El Mol de la Fusta*" by Manuel de Solà Morales, and the Sainsbury Wing of the New Gallery "by Bob Venturi were among the first works to be published.

Manuel and I were friends since the days of St. Sebastian; Bob thanked me a lot for the lunch at the Locanda Montin and, above all, for not having bored him speaking of architecture.

Tapiro, the graphic designer, mixed with an monochrome once acid green, once violet, once blue, texts and images so that they resulted illegible, both



the words and the drawings; but the giant format did justice and at the end, thanks to the format and to the high quality of the typographic Venetian tradition, the reading of the projects was perfect.

Not according to Massimo Vignelli.

Massimo and Lella invited us for dinner, I was with Giovanna in N.Y., and I showed him with pride the first issues of the magazine: "...a publication as this belongs to the underclass of reading, a newspaper must be dark, if it is a newspaper". Said Massimo, who had just won the "Reagan Prize" for the graphics of the USA parks, a sort of Nobel in his field.

We tried to rethink the Journal. It still needed to be colorful, but with a precise structure: my editorial on topical subjects, debates, interviews, foreign correspondents, theater, cinema, poetry, visual arts, graphics, design and not only architecture, comments on customs and daily life, as in the magazines of architecture in the '30s, Ponti's "Domus", Bontempelli and Bardi's "Quadrante".

Meanwhile, in '88, Gigetta Tamaro, Marco Pogačnik and I went to Berlin. The "Stalin Allee" was for us, since the days of our trips with Carlo Aymonino and Aldo Rossi in DDR, an absolute model in fact of urbanism and, despite all the perplexities of the "modern" on both sides of the "wall", we succeeded in publishing it in the first year.

We became great friends of Hermann Henselmann, a communist full of humanity and of joy of life. He was the author in the "Stalin Allee" of "Strausberger Platz". To convince Erich Honecker, President of the DDR, of his "Tower of Television", while they were sitting at a table, he demonstrated by sliding an orange onto a knife.

A great friend of Hermann was Jurgen Treder, an important theoretical physicist who lived into a woods only a short walk from the Tower Einstein in a house suspended on stilts, built by Konrad Wachsmann for another famous physicist, Albert Einstein.

Maybe he didn't like the house, or simply, as it happens with the mathematicians and the theoretical physicists that are genial but also crazy, he didn't like us, so he got carried away to sustain the superiority of the onanistic orgasm over that of couple; then he went on to insult the architects that, he sustained, should have been submitted to the treatment that the Tyrant of Akragas (now Agrigento) had reserved for his Athenian architect.

That architect had been forced to be the first to test one of his commissions, a habitable sculpture, a Taurus. Inside the hot bronze, the cry became a bellow and echoed across the whole lowland.

Henselmann smiled amused, but we and the nanny hardly succeeded in hiding our unease. Treder was struggling in silence because he couldn't recall the name of the Tyrant.

The nanny had prepared the tea with biscuits but, because of this kind of talk, the visit had been saddened.

We said finally goodbye and Marco started the car. It was right then, after we had almost left that, unexpectedly, Treder went out of the wooden house suspended on the wachsmannian stilts, with a scream that melted away in the woods: *Phalaris....* The name so long pursued had come back to the mind.

With that name and that motto, 20 issues of the magazine were published, unusual in its search of themes and images able, above all, to avoid the usual funereal and authoritarian tone of the architecture and to force the readers to reflect more on the sense of things.

It was particularly to the credit of Enrico Camplani, one of the two part-



Fig. 4 - 5

Covers of the newspaper of the Architecture Gallery with the first and last exhibition that took place at the Fondazione Masieri in Venice: Ignazio Gardella, Lambrate railway station; Manuel de Solà Morales, "El Mol de La Fusta" in Barcelona.



ners of *Tapiro*, and of Giovanni Fraziano who was, among my assistants, the right person for the role of editor-in-chief if this moral demand was going to be transmitted with the lightness of play.

Each issue was built on a subject, partly suggested by an exhibition, articulated in the ten sections of the magazine (correspondence, short essay, investigation, etc.) as dictated by reality.

In the columns, very important names in the theater (Bernardi, De Incontrera) poetry (Zanzotto, Universo) and even gourmet cooking (Cipriani, Danieleto), were alternated as collaborators or as authors of the projects, to capable people destined to become someone. An original idea was that of the double page indifferently destined to painting (Gillo Dorfles, Miela Reina, Felicidad Rodriguez), photography (Leo Castelli) and architectural drawings (the giraffe/house by Frank), etc.

For the architecture, the red threads were two: "The Italian School" (BBPR, Figini e Pollini, Gardella, Canella, Portoghesi, Rossi, Polesello, Semerani e Tamaro, Grassi, Monestiroli) and, in the discovery or rediscovery, "The other modern" (Luis Moya Blanco, Bogdan Bogdanovic, Dimitri Pikionis, Sedad Eldem, Josef Frank, Gustav Peichl, John Hejduk, Boris Podrecca, Vojtech Ravnika).

Only two among the guests, perhaps the most important, George Grassi and Rafael Moneo, gave me one drawing of theirs.

The illusion was also to form, through a discussion free from commercial comparisons, an aware public opinion and a different responsibility in the schools of architecture not only towards the Local Authorities or, worse, the mechanisms of success.



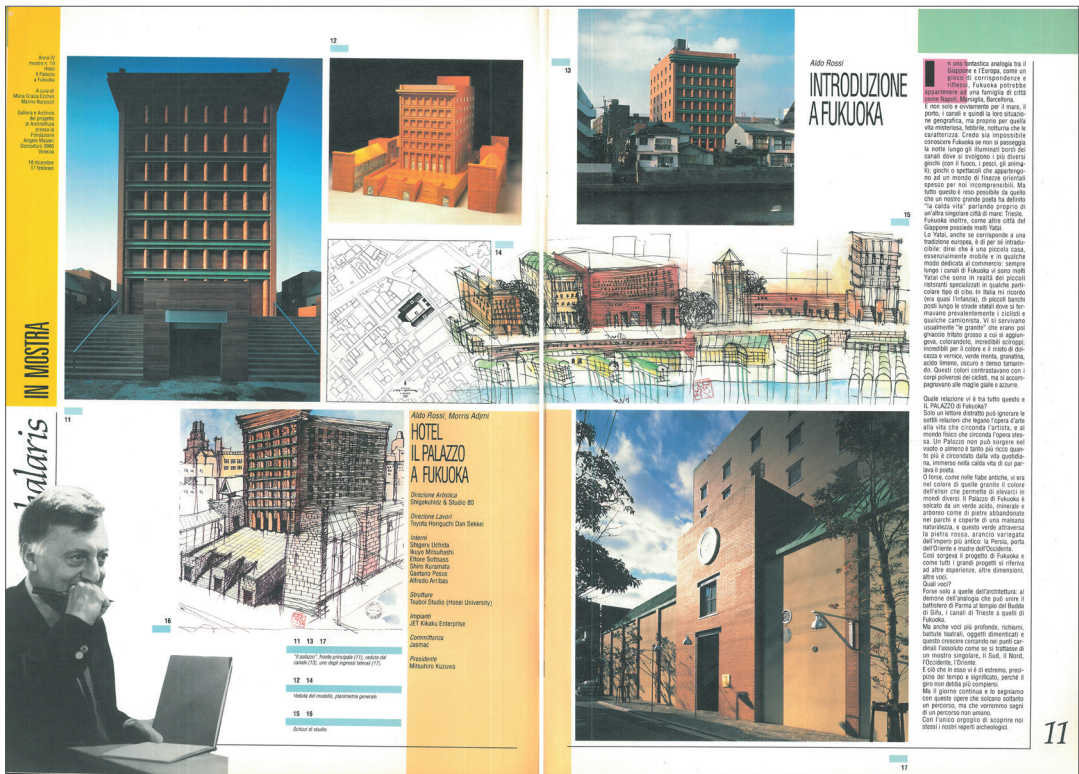


Fig. 8

An internal double page of the «Phalaris» number 11 on the “pleasure architecture”: amusement parks, cafes, hotels.

Fig. 9

A double internal page of the number 2 of «Phalaris».

Both the publisher of the first ten issues (*L'Arsenale*) and the second publisher (*Marsilio*) found in the University and in the two sponsors, *Bonifica*, from the IRI group, and Italcementi, a generous and illuminated commitment accompanied by the success of the magazine sales and subscriptions. The enthusiasm made us believe that there would be some economic recognition also for the collaborators.

I was with Barbara Ernst, the first secretary, at the hotel Bauer to wait for Andreotti for a meeting, born from his idea that «Phalaris», also published in English, acquired an international diffusion spreading through the architecture and the design made in Italy, the know-how of the whole productive sector.

But that day, the helicopter didn't land in Venice.

It happened that in just those days the history of his kiss with Riina was published in the daily paper. Tangentopoli also arrived and the president of Bonifica, a good person and the president of Italcementi, also had some significant judicial issues. A season of ambitious ideas escaped from the control of mediocrity, was ended. Not only «Phalaris».

Notes

¹ In Venetian dialect in the text, this expression refers to the curve of the Grand Canal N.d.T.)

Luciano Semerani leaves significant works of architecture for the history of the Italian city. Author of important cultural events ("KF Schinkel" in Venice and in Rome in 1982, "Trouver Trieste" in Paris in 1985, "Lina Bo Bardi" in Venice and in San Paolo between 2004 and 2006, "Tu mi sposerai" in Trieste in 2017) he directed the Architecture Gallery of the Fondazione Masieri in Venice and the «Phalaris» newspaper from 1988 to 1992. Present in all the major international architecture exhibitions his personal exhibitions of drawings were made in Florence, Mantua, Parma, Turin, Trieste, Venice. Academician of San Luca, a member for three years of the "Gestaltungsrat" of Salzburg, he taught architecture and urban planning in Trieste, Venice, Vienna, New York. Coordinator of the Ph.D. in Architectural Composition of Venice from 2002 to 2012 he directed the research towards a formal analysis of the composition practice. He is one of the founders of "Stazione Rogers", the cultural center that in Trieste, with the recovery of a petrol station, has carried out since 2008, in the name of a friend and Maestro, an architectural dialogue with other disciplines.