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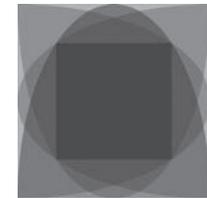
INVESTIGATING AND WRITING ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY:
SUBJECTS, METHODOLOGIES AND FRONTIERS

Papers from the Third EAHN International Meeting

Edited by Michela Rosso

INVESTIGATING AND WRITING ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY:
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Michela Rosso (ed.)

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Contents

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Preface, Michela Rosso

15

1. EARLY MODERN

1.1. Fortified Palaces in Early Modern Europe, 1400–1700,

33

Pieter Martens, Konrad Ottenheim, Nuno Senos

1.1.1 Fortified Palaces in Early Modern Sicily: Models, Image Strategy
Functions, *Emanuela Garofalo, Fulvia Scaduto*

35

1.1.2 The *Castrum Sanctae Crucis* in Cremona: From Fortified Castle
to Courtly Residence, *Jessica Gritti, Valeria Fortunato*

48

1.1.3 From Old to New: The Transformation of the Castle of Porto de
Mós, *Luís Serrão Gil*

62

1.1.4 Symphony in Brick: Moscow Kremlin at the Time of Ivan III,
Elena Kashina

72

1.1.5 Seventeenth-Century Fortified Villas in the County of Gorizia, with
Residences Modelled on the Type of a Venetian Palace with Corner Towers,
Helena Seražin

81

1.2. Piedmontese Baroque Architecture Studies Fifty Years On,

92

Susan Klaiber

1.2.1 The Exchange of Architectural Models between Rome and Turin
before Guarini's Arrival, *Marisa Tabarrini*

94

1.2.2 Guarino Guarini: The First 'Baroque' Architect, *Marion Riggs*

102

1.2.3 The Multifaceted Uses of Guarini's *Architettura Civile* in 1968,
Martijn van Beek

109

1.2.4 Idealism and Realism: Augusto Cavallari Murat, *Elena Gianasso*

115

1.2.5 A Regional Artistic Identity? Three Exhibitions in Comparison,
Giuseppe Dardanello

121

1.2.6 Wittkower's 'Gothic' Baroque: Piedmontese Buildings as Seen
Around 1960, *Cornelia Jöchner*

122

1.3. On the Way to Early Modern: Issues of Memory, Identity and Practice, Open Session, Valérie Nègre	130	2.3. Layers of Meanings: Narratives and Imageries of Architecture, Open Session, Cànâ Bilse	259
1.3.1 Quadrature and Drawing in Early Modern Architecture, <i>Lydia M. Soo</i>	131	2.3.1 The Plan as <i>Eidos</i> : Bramante's Half-Drawing and Durand's <i>marche</i> , <i>Alejandra Celedon Forster</i>	260
1.3.2 Some Observations on Andrea Palladio, Silvio Belli and the Theory of Proportion, <i>Maria Cristina Loi</i>	132	2.3.2 'What do Pictures Really Want'? Photography, Blight and Renewal in Chicago, <i>Wesley Aelbrecht</i>	271
1.3.3 Moralizing Money through Space in Early Modernity, <i>Lauren Jacobi</i>	144	2.3.3 Content, Form and Class Nature of Architecture in the 1950s-China, <i>Ying Wang, Kai Wang</i>	272
1.3.4 Staging War in Maghreb: Architecture as a Weapon by the 1500s, <i>Jorge Correia</i>	152	2.4. Architecture, Art, and Design in Italian Modernism: Strategies of Synthesis 1925-60, Daniel Sherer	283
1.4. Architects, Craftsmen and Interior Ornament, 1400-1800, Christine Casey, Conor Lucey	153	2.4.1 'Fantasia degli Italiani' as Participatory Utopia: Costantino Nivola's Way to the Synthesis of the Arts, <i>Giuliana Altea</i>	285
1.4.1 Architecture Before the Architects: Building S. Theodore's Chapel of S. Mark's Basilica in Venice, 1486-93, <i>Maria Bergamo</i>	154	2.4.2 Carlo Mollino's Enchanted Rooms: Face-to-Face with Art in a Company Town, 1930-60, <i>Michela Comba</i>	296
1.4.2 Decoration in Religious Architecture of the Eighteenth Century in the South Eastern Part of Central Europe, <i>Dubravka Botica</i>	163	2.4.3 The Logics of <i>arredamento</i> : Art and Civilization 1928-36, <i>Ignacio González Galán</i>	307
1.4.3 Architects of the Islamic Work and Phrasing Concepts in Geometry, <i>Mohammad Gharipour, Hooman Koliji</i>	174	2.4.4 The Synthesis of the Arts as a Critical Instrument for Modern Architecture. The Role of Ernesto Nathan Rogers: 1944-49, <i>Luca Molinari</i>	308
1.4.4 Architects, Craftsmen and Marble Decoration in Eighteenth-Century Piedmont, <i>Roberto Caterino, Elena di Majo</i>	183	2.4.5 Gio Ponti's <i>Stile</i> , <i>Cecilia Rostagni</i>	316
2. REPRESENTATION AND COMMUNICATION		2.5. The Medium is the Message: The Role of Exhibitions and Periodicals in Critically Shaping Postmodern Architecture, Veronique Patteeuw, Léa Catherine Szacka	326
2.1. Public Opinion, Censorship and Architecture in the Eighteenth Century, Carlo Mambriani, Susanna Pasquali	195	2.5.1 Charles Moore's <i>Perspecta</i> : Essays and Postmodern Eclecticism, <i>Patricia A. Morton</i>	328
2.1.1 Public Opinion in Amsterdam: Building the Society Felix Meritis, <i>Freek Schmidt</i>	197	2.5.2 Between Language and Form: Exhibitions by Reima Pietilä, 1961-74, <i>Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen</i>	329
2.1.2 An Architect's Reputation: Libel and Public Opinion in Britain, <i>Timothy Hyde</i>	208	2.5.3 <i>Bau Magazine</i> and the Architecture of Media, <i>Eva Branscome</i>	330
2.1.3 Theater Acoustics in the Late Eighteenth-Century Press, <i>Joseph Clarke</i>	218	2.5.4 Entertaining the Masses: IAUS's Economy of Cultural Production, <i>Kim Förster</i>	331
2.2. The Published Building in Word and Image, Anne Hultzsch, Catalina Mejia Moreno	229	2.5.5 Image, Medium, Artifact: Heinrich Klotz and Postmodernism, <i>Daniela Fabricius</i>	332
2.2.1 Catalogues and Cablegrams, <i>Mari Lending</i>	231	3. QUESTIONS OF METHODOLOGY	
2.2.2 Illustrated Picturesquely and Architecturally in Photography – William Stillman and the Acropolis in Word and Image, <i>Dervla MacManus, Hugh Campbell</i>	232	3.1. Producing Non-Simultaneity: Construction Sites as Places of Progressiveness and Continuity, Eike-Christian Heine, Christian Rauhut	335
2.2.3 Lost for Words: How the Architectural Image Became a Public Spectacle on Its Own, <i>Patrick Leitner</i>	233	3.1.1 Mixing Time: Ancient-Modern Intersections along the Western Anatolian Railways, <i>Elvan Cobb</i>	336
2.2.4 <i>In Wort und Bild</i> : Sigfried Giedion, Walter Gropius and the Fagus Factory, <i>Jasmine Benyamin</i>	242	3.1.2 Steel as Medium. Constructing WGC, a Tallish Building in Postwar Sweden, <i>Frida Rosenberg</i>	347
2.2.5 Juxtapositions and Semantic Collisions of Text and Image in Architectural Magazines of the 1920s and 1930s, <i>Hélène Jannière</i>	247		

3.1.3 Between Technological Effectiveness and Artisanal Inventiveness: Concreting Torres Blancas (1964–69), <i>Marisol Vidal</i>	355	3.5.3 Architecture's Red Tape: Governmental Building in Sweden 1964-72, <i>Erik Sigge</i>	539
3.1.4 The Global Construction Site and the Labour of Complex Geometry, <i>Roy Kozlovsky</i>	366	3.5.4 Provisional Permanence: the NATO Headquarters in Brussels, <i>Sven Sterken</i>	549
3.2. The Historiography of the Present, <i>Andrew Leach</i>	376	3.5.5 The Jewish Agency for Israel - the Constructions of a Civic Frontier in Tel Aviv (1955-66), <i>Martin Hershenzon</i>	559
3.2.1 Proclaiming the End of Postmodernism in Architecture, <i>Valéry Didelon</i>	378	3.6. Revolutionizing Familiar Terrain: The Cutting Edge of Research in Classical Architecture and Town-planning, Round Table, <i>Daniel Millette, Samantha Martin-McAuliffe</i>	573
3.2.2 Architectural Discourse and the Rise of Cultural Studies, <i>Antony Moulis</i>	387	3.6.1 Residency Patterns and Urban Stability: A Theory for Republican Rome, <i>Lisa Marie Mignone</i>	574
3.2.3 After Nature: Architectural History and Environmental Culture, <i>Daniel Barber</i>	395	3.6.2 The Pompeii Quadriporticus Project 2013: New Technologies and New Implications, <i>Eric Poehler</i>	581
3.2.4 Looking Back, Looking Now: Architecture's Construction of History, <i>Inbal Ben-Asher Gittler, Naomi Meiri-Dann</i>	406	3.6.3 Reconstructing Rhythm: Digital Modelling and Light at the Parthenon, <i>Paul Christesen, Aurora Mc Clain</i>	587
3.2.5 Radical Histories and Future Realities – NOW, <i>Lara Schrijver</i>	416	3.6.4 The Urban Development of Late Hellenistic Delos, <i>Mantha Zarmakoupi</i>	593
3.3. On Foot: Architecture and Movement, <i>David Karmon, Christie Anderson</i>	424	3.6.5 Classical Architecture, Town Planning and Digital Mapping of Cities: Rome AD 320, <i>Lynda Mulvin</i>	599
3.3.1 Porticoes and Privation: Walking to Meet the Virgin, <i>Paul Davies</i>	426	3.6.6 Digital Modelling in the Sanctuary of the Great Gods on Samothrace, <i>Bonna D. Wescoat</i>	607
3.3.2 Defining the Boundaries of London: Perambulation and the City in the Long Eighteenth Century, <i>Elizabeth McKellar</i>	437	4. THEORETICAL AND CRITICAL ISSUES	
3.3.3 Walking through the Pain: Healing and Ambulation at Pergamon Asklepieion, <i>Ece Okay</i>	448	4.1. Histories of Environmental Consciousness, <i>Panayiota Pyla</i>	617
3.3.4 Raymond Unwin Tramping the Taskscape, <i>Brian Ward</i>	460	4.1.1 Environmental Counter Narratives in India c. 1960, <i>Ateya Khorakiwala</i>	619
3.4. 'Bread & Butter and Architecture': Accommodating the Everyday, <i>Ricardo Agarez, Nelson Mota</i>	477	4.1.2 We Want to Change Ourselves to Make Things Different, <i>Caroline Maniaque Benton</i>	629
3.4.1 Humdrum Tasks of the Salaried-Men: Edwin Williams, a LCC Architect at War, <i>Nick Beech</i>	479	4.1.3 Zoo Landscapes and the Construction of Nature, <i>Christina Katharina May</i>	640
3.4.2 Third Text: Albert Kahn and the Architecture of Bureaucracy, <i>Claire Zimmerman</i>	492	4.1.4 Experiments on Thermal Comfort and Modern Architecture: The Contributions of André Missenard and Le Corbusier, <i>Ignacio Requena Ruiz, Daniel Siret</i>	651
3.4.3 The Architect, the Planner and the Bishop: the Shapers of 'Ordinary' Dublin, 1940-70, <i>Ellen Rowley</i>	493	4.1.5 The United Nations Headquarters and the Global Environment, <i>Alexandra Quantrill</i>	663
3.4.4 Layers of Invisibility: Portuguese State Furniture Design 1940-74, <i>João Paulo Martins, Sofia Diniz</i>	501	4.2. Architecture and conflict, c. 300 – c. 1600, <i>Lex Bosman</i>	664
3.4.5 Bureaucratic Avant-Garde: Norm-Making as Architectural Production, <i>Anna-Maria Meister</i>	514	4.2.1 The Palace Hall of Chrysotriklinos as an Example of Emulation and Contestation in the Early Byzantine Period, <i>Nigel Westbrook</i>	666
3.5. The Architecture of State Bureaucracy: Reassessing the Built Production of (Colonial) Governments, <i>Rika Devos, Johan Lagae</i>	515	4.2.2 Building Identity and Community in the Post-Crusade Greece: The Architecture of Interaction in the Thirteenth-Century Peloponnesos, <i>Heather E. Grossman</i>	683
3.5.1 SOM, 1939-46: From 'Engineered Dwelling' to the Manhattan Project, <i>Hyun-Tae Jung</i>	517		
3.5.2 Unmonumental Buildings, Monumental Scale: Santiago Civic District, <i>Daniel Opazo</i>	527		

4.2.3	Sieneſe Fortifications in the Age of the Guelph Commune, <i>Max Grossman</i>	684
4.2.4	'Faciendo sette et ſedicion': Architecture and Conflict in Sixteenth-century Verona, <i>Wouter Wagemakers</i>	697
4.2.5	Political Power through Architectural Wonder. Parma, Teatro Farnese, <i>Susanna Piscicella</i>	706
4.3.	How It All Begun: Primitivism and the Legitimacy of Architecture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries , <i>Maarten Delbeke, Linda Bleijenberg, Sigrid de Jong</i> ; Respondent: <i>Caroline van Eck</i>	715
4.3.1	On the Colonial Origins of Architecture: Building the 'Maison Rustique' in Cayenne, French Guiana, <i>Erika Naginski, Eldra D. Walker</i>	717
4.3.2	Out of the Earth: Primitive Monuments between Prehistoric and Gothic Ambitions, <i>Jennifer Ferng</i>	718
4.3.3	Viel de Saint-Maux and the Symbolism of Primitive Architecture, <i>Cosmin C. Ungureanu</i>	727
4.3.4	Primitivism's Return: Theories of Ornament and Their Debt to Eighteenth-century Antiquarianism, <i>Ralph Ghoche</i>	728
4.3.5	Cultural Transformations and Their Analysis in Art and Science: Anthropological and Curatorial Concepts Stimulated by the Great Exhibition of 1851, <i>Claudio Leoni</i>	729
4.4.	Socialist Postmodernism: Architecture and Society under Late Socialism , <i>Vladimir Kulić</i>	730
4.4.1	A Dialectic of Negation: Modernism and Postmodernism in the USSR, <i>Richard Anderson</i>	732
4.4.2	When Tomorrow Was Cancelled: Critique of Modernism in the 1970s, <i>Daria Bocharnikova, Andres Kurg</i>	733
4.4.3	The Friedrichstadt Palace, <i>Florian Urban</i>	734
4.4.4	Neither Style, nor Subversion: Postmodern Architecture in Poland, Lidia Klein, <i>Alicja Gzowska</i>	735
4.4.5	Sources of Postmodern Architecture in Late Socialist Belgrade, <i>Ljiljana Blagojević</i>	736
4.5.	Histories and Theories of Anarchist Urbanism , <i>Nader Vossoughian</i>	747
4.5.1	The Legacy of the Anti-urban Ideology in Bruno Taut's Architectural Practice in Ankara (1936-8), <i>Giorgio Gasco, Meltem Gürel</i>	748
4.5.2	Henri Lefebvre's Vers une architecture de la jouissance (1973): Architectural Imagination after May 1968, <i>Łukasz Stanek</i>	760
4.5.3	City of Individual Sovereigns: Josiah Warren's Geometric Utopia, <i>Irene Cheng</i>	761
4.5.4	Architectural Aporia of the Revolutionary City, <i>Peter Minosh</i>	771
4.5.5	'Housing Before Street': Geddes' 1925 Anarchist Plan For Tel Aviv, <i>Yael Allweil</i>	780

5. TWENTIETH CENTURY

5.1.	In-Between Avant-Garde Discourse and Daily Building Practices: The Development of the Shopping Centre in Post-War Europe , <i>Tom Avermaete, Janina Gosseye</i>	795
5.1.1	Shopping à l'américaine in the French New Towns, <i>Kenny Cupers</i>	797
5.1.2	From Million Program to Mall: Consumerism in the Swedish Town Centre, 1968-84, <i>Jennifer Mack</i>	798
5.1.3	Reinventing the Department Store in Rotterdam: Breuer's Bijenkorf 1953-57, <i>Evangelia Tsilika</i>	799
5.1.4	Chilean Commercial Snail Buildings: Typology, Shopping and the City, <i>Mario Marchant</i>	812
5.1.5	Building European Taste in Broader Communities: The Role of the David Jones Stores in the Promotion of Design and Architecture in Australia, <i>Silvia Micheli</i>	824
5.2.	Ideological Equality: Women Architects in Socialist Europe , <i>Mary Pepchinski, Mariann Simon</i>	833
5.2.1	GDR Women Architects between Emancipation and Professional Obstinacy, <i>Harald Engler</i>	835
5.2.2	Women in Hungarian Industrial Architecture between 1945 and 1970, <i>Péter Haba</i>	846
5.2.3	Famous or Forgotten: Women Architects in Communist Poland, <i>Piotr Marciniak</i>	855
5.2.4	Emancipated, but Still Accompanied, <i>Henrieta Moravčíková</i>	867
5.2.5	Female Students of Jože Plečnik between Tradition and Modernism, <i>Tina Potočnik</i>	876
5.3.	Missing Histories: Artistic Dislocations of Architecture in Socialist Regimes , <i>Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss, Carmen Popescu</i>	885
5.3.1	Scene(s) for New Heritage?, <i>Dubravka Sekulić</i>	887
5.3.2	Radical Space for Radical Time: The Intersections of Architecture and Performance Art in Estonia, 1986-91, <i>Ingrid Ruudi</i>	888
5.3.3	Appropriation, Commemoration, and Resistance: A Shifting Discourse on Political Space in Socialist China, <i>Yan Geng</i>	898
5.3.4	'Our House': The Socialist Block of Flats as Artistic Subject-Matter, <i>Juliana Maxim</i>	908
5.4.	The Third Life of Cities: Rediscovering the Post-Industrial City Centre, Round Table , <i>Davide Cutolo, Sergio Pace</i>	910
5.4.1	When Turin Lost Its Myths, <i>Cristina Accornero</i>	912
5.4.2	The Case of Paris, <i>Joseph Heathcott</i>	916

5.4.3 Prague – Buildings, Spaces and People in its Re-discovered Centre, <i>Petr Kratochvíl</i>	920	6.2.3 Foundations of Renaissance Architecture and Treatises in Quentin Massys' S. Anne Altarpiece (1509), Jochen Ketels, Maximiliaan Martens,	1072
5.4.4 Turin to Naples, Stopping in Milan: Urban Transformations between Heritage and Theme Parks, <i>Guido Montanari</i>	925	6.2.4 An Invented Order: Francesco di Giorgio's Architectural Treatise and Quattrocento Practice, <i>Ageliki Pollali</i>	1084
5.4.5 Rediscovering a Port-City: Genoa's New Waterfront, <i>Luca Orlandi</i>	932	6.2.5 Donami tempo che ti do vita – Francesco Laparelli (1521-70). Envisioning the New 'City of the Order', Valletta, <i>Conrad Thake</i>	1085
5.4.6 A Return to Growth, <i>Ted Sandstra</i>	940		
5.5. Strategies and Politics of Architecture and Urbanism after WWII, Open Session, <i>Adrian J. Forty</i>	941	6.3 European Architecture and the Tropics, <i>Jiat-Hwee Chang</i>	1095
5.5.1 From Visual Planning to Outrage: Townscape and the Art of Environment, <i>Mathew Aitchison</i>	942	6.3.1 The Afro-Brazilian Portuguese Style in Lagos, <i>Ola Uduku</i>	1097
5.5.2 Germany's 'Grey Architecture' and its Forgotten Protagonists, <i>Benedikt Boucsein</i>	953	6.3.2 Tectonics of Paranoia: The Matshed System within the First Fabrication of Hong Kong, <i>Christopher Cowell</i>	1098
5.5.3 Process Above All: Shadrach Woods' NonSchool of Villefranche, <i>Federica Doglio</i>	964	6.3.3 Architecture of Sun and Soil. European Architecture in Tropical Australia, <i>Deborah van der Plaats</i>	1119
5.5.4 Sacred Buildings in Italy after World War II: The Case of Turin, <i>Carla Zito</i>	976	6.3.4 Health, Hygiene and Sanitation in Colonial India, <i>Iain Jackson</i>	1131
5.5.5 Architecture Resisting Political Regime: The Case of Novi Zagreb, <i>Dubravka Vranic</i>	986	6.3.5 Climate, Disaster, Shelter: Architecture, Humanitarianism and the Problem of the Tropics, <i>Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi</i>	1141
		6.4 Lost (and Found) in Translation: The Many Faces of Brutalism, <i>Réjean Legault</i>	1142
6. CIRCULATION OF ARCHITECTURAL CULTURE AND PRACTICES		6.4.1 When Communism Meets Brutalism: The AUA's Critique of Production, <i>Vanessa Grossman</i>	1144
6.1. Afterlife of Byzantine Architecture in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century, <i>Aleksandar Ignjatovic</i>	1007	6.4.2 Gravitas and Optimism: The Paradox of Brutalism in Skopje, <i>Mirjana Lozanovska</i>	1145
6.1.1 Suburban Byzantine: Tradition and Modernity in the British Catholic Church, <i>Robert Proctor</i>	1009	6.4.3 Bringing it All Home: Australia's Embrace of 'Brutalism' 1955-75, <i>Philip Goad</i>	1146
6.1.2 To Find the Right Style: Byzantine Revival Synagogues in America, <i>Michael B. Rabens</i>	1010	6.4.4 African Ethic, Brutalist Aesthetic: Vieira da Costa in Huambo, <i>Ana Tostões, Margarida Quintã</i>	1158
6.1.3 France-Byzantium: The Authority of the Sacré-Cœur, <i>Jessica Basciano</i>	1019	6.4.5 Hard Cases: Bricks and Bruts from North to South, <i>Ruth Verde Zein</i>	1159
6.1.4 Architectural Explorations of Byzantine Revival in 1920s Greece, <i>Kalliopi Amygdalou</i>	1031		
6.2. Building by the Book? Theory as Practice in Renaissance Architecture, <i>Francesco Benelli, Sara Galletti</i>	1042	6.5 Southern Crossings: Iberia and Latin America in Architectural Translation, <i>Marta Caldeira, Maria González Pendás</i>	1160
6.2.1 'Restaurenti e Restituzioni di Case'. Book VII on Architecture by Serlio and the Dissemination of Classical Order in the Language of Monumental Architecture and Basic Building in Ferrara, <i>Alessandro Ippoliti, Veronica Balboni</i>	1044	6.5.1 Southern Readings: Lucio Costa on Modern Architecture, <i>Carlo Eduardo Comas</i>	1162
6.2.2 'Libri tre nei quali si scuopre in quanti modi si può edificare vn Monast. sý la Chiesa': Architectural Treatise of Capuchin Friar Antonio da Pordenone, <i>Tanja Martelanc</i>	1058	6.5.2 Avant-Garde Crossings between Italy, Argentina and Spain: From Gropius and Argan to <i>Nueva Visión</i> and <i>Arte Normativo</i> , <i>Paula Barreiro López</i>	1174
		6.5.3 Shells Across Continents, <i>Juan Ignacio del Cueto Ruiz-Funes</i>	1175
		6.5.4 Emili Blanch Roig and Modern Architecture: Catalonia and Mexico, <i>Gemma Domènech Casadevall</i>	1180
		6.5.5 Re-entry: Antonio Bonet's Return to Spain, <i>Ana Maria León</i>	1186

7.1 Architectural History in Italian Doctoral Programs: Issues of Theory

and Criticism, PhD Round Table, Mary McLeod, Maristella Casciato

- 7.1.1 Meyer and Paulsson on Monumentality: The Beginning of a Debate, 1198
1911-40, *Giacomo Leone Beccaria*
- 7.1.2 A relational issue: towards an international debate on habitat from 1200
the 9th Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne, *Giovanni Comoglio*
- 7.1.3 The Urban Landscape as Cultural Heritage. The Contemporary 1203
Debate in France and Italy, *Elena Greco*
- 7.1.4 'A Home': Östberg's search for the total artwork, *Chiara Monterumisi* 1205
- 7.1.5 Order and Proportion: Dom Hans van der Laan and the 1207
Expressiveness of the Architectonic Space, *Tiziana Proietti*
- 7.1.6 The Use of the Convenzioni Urbanistiche in the Historic Centre 1209
of Milan: Negotiation and Planning Instruments in the Second Post-War
Period, *Nicole De Togni*

7.2 Architectural History in Italian Doctoral Programs: Histories of

Buildings, Architects and Practices, PhD Round Table, Mari Hvattum

- 7.2.1 Ahmedabad. Workshop of Modern Architecture: The National 1213
Institute of Design, *Elisa Alessandrini*
- 7.2.2 Transformations of Public Space in Paris. From Infrastructure to 1215
Forme urbaine, *Daniele Campobenedetto*
- 7.2.3 Layers of Narration: The Architecture of Piero Bottoni in Ferrara, 1217
Matteo Cassani Simonetti
- 7.2.4 Architecture that Teaches. Swiss School Buildings During the 1950s 1219
and 1960s, *Marco Di Nallo*
- 7.2.5 Star-Shaped Rib Vaulting in the Church of San Domenico, Cagliari, 1221
Federico M. Giannusso
- 7.2.6 The Evolution of Domestic Space in Southern Italy and Sicily, 1223
Serena Guidone
- 7.2.7 From the South. Ernesto Basile's Routes and Destinations, 1225
Eleonora Marrone
- 7.2.8 The Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum, Paradigm of Modern Architecture 1227
in Postwar Germany, *Benedetta Stoppioni*
- 7.2.9 *Magnificentia*. Devotion and Civic Piety in the Renaissance 1229
Venetian Republic, *Emanuela Vai*

INVESTIGATING AND WRITING ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY: SUBJECTS, METHODOLOGIES AND FRONTIERS

6.5.4 Emili Blanch Roig and Modern Architecture: Catalonia and Mexico

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ABSTRACT

On 22 May 1942, the architect Emili Blanch Roig disembarked at the port of Veracruz. He was just one of over twenty thousand Spanish refugees who arrived in Mexico, fleeing the Fascist repression of General Franco and the horror of France during the German occupation under Hitler. Emili Blanch studied at the Barcelona School of Architecture and played an active role in the renewal of architecture and the approach to avant-garde European trends in Catalonia during the 1930s. The proclamation of the Spanish Republic and the Catalan Republic in April 1931 ushered in new policies to provide dignified housing for the working classes, modern urban planning in designing the city, the building of public amenities, and the protection of cultural heritage. The military uprising led by General Franco in July 1936 and the Fascist victory over Catalonia in January 1939 towards the conclusion of the Spanish Civil War marked the end of all dreams of renewal as well as the start of the nightmare of repression for the supporters of the Republic. Fleeing reprisals and retaliations, half a million Republicans crossed over the border into France. The demographic, social, and economic consequences of this exodus were compounded by losses of cultural significance, as many of the exiles were writers, philosophers, teachers, artists, and architects. The talent lost to Catalonia and the rest of Spain would make major contributions to the countries that hosted the refugees. During this period, some fifty architects left Spain. Many had been part of the architectural renewal group and would later introduce the new trends to their host countries. In this paper, we will analyse the professional career of Emili Blanch Roig (1897-1996) and his role in the introduction of modern architecture in Mexico.

KEYWORDS

Modern, Avant-Garde, exile, Mexico

EMILI BLANCH AND CATALONIA DURING THE SECOND SPANISH REPUBLIC (1931-9)

Emili Blanch (La Pera, Girona, 1897) graduated from Barcelona School of Architecture in 1925. His fellow students Francesc Fàbregas, Raimon Duran, Ricardo de Churruga and Germán Rodríguez Arias were to play leading roles in the Catalan architectural renewal of the 1930s as members of the Group of Catalan Architects and Technicians for the Progress of Contemporary Architecture (GATCPAC) under the leadership of Josep Lluís Sert. Their aim was to promote contemporary avant-garde European trends based on functionalism, the absence of superfluous decoration, and the rupture with historical architecture.¹ The GATCPAC soon had over eighty members, but many others, including Emili Blanch, although not actually affiliated (often because they did not live in Barcelona city, where the group was based), shared its ideals of modernising the country in the light of the new trends in European architecture by building schools, hospitals, abattoirs, covered markets, and proper salubrious housing.

In the early 1930s, these young professionals fully identified with the progressive policies of the Second Spanish Republic. For them, the proclamation of the Republic on 14 April 1931 in Catalonia and the rest of Spain would be the materialisation of a utopia of dignified housing for the working classes, modern urban planning in city design, the building of public amenities for community use, and the protection of heritage.²

Emili Blanch fully subscribed to this longing for renewal. He espoused the principles of rationalism and introduced this new type of architecture to Girona province. The Catalan government commissioned him to lead major projects for improving and modernising public services, particularly in the fields of health and education, the two basic pillars of the Republic. Emili Blanch extended the map of school premises throughout the region, and expanded and renovated the hospital network according to the GATCPAC principles, i.e., well ventilated buildings with good orientation, flat roofs, and total absence of ornamentation and grandiosity. At the same time, in his own studio, he was designing what would become the best-known buildings of his professional career: the Junquera, Blanch, and Teixidor houses in Girona, and the Reig and Guillamet houses in Figueres.³

The military uprising led by General Franco in July 1936 heralded the end of the renovation dream. Emili Blanch continued to design social amenities for the Catalan government during the three years of the Spanish Civil War. However, as the battlefield drew nearer, lack of supplies and manpower meant that an increasing number of projects never left the drawing board. All efforts were destined to creating defence works and field hospitals, both of which were under the responsibility of Emili Blanch, who was also officially

involved in protecting cultural heritage at the height of the iconoclastic violence that occurred during the first weeks of the Civil War.⁴

After the war, the Fascist victory marked the start of a strong wave of punitive repression against the supporters of the Republic. Apart from the thousands of deaths and imprisonments, everybody who was in any way associated with democratic politics was brought before the specifically instituted *Tribunal of Political Responsibilities*. Emili Blanch's political militancy and his work for the government of the Second Republic earned him a conviction that led to the seizure of all his assets, and professional disqualification and relegation that obliged him to seek work outside the peninsular territory for a period of fifteen years.⁵ In its fervour to wipe out the recent past and to find adepts for the new ideology, the Franco regime brought in civil procedures designed to punish and – above all – intimidate the vanquished, which resulted in an intense purge of professionals who had worked for the Republic. From the end of July 1939, the *Purge Commissions* set up inside the architects' associations examined the conduct of each of their members according to the parameters of the new regime. In July 1942, the professional tribunal declared Emili Blanch completely disqualified from practising architecture.⁶

EMILI BLANCH IN EXILE: FROM FRANCE TO MEXICO

By the time these sentences were passed, Emili Blanch had already travelled far from Catalonia. He was among the half a million republicans who crossed the French border in January 1939. The pre-war climate existing in Europe and the German invasion of France in May 1940 placed their lives in danger, and many of the exiles decided to avail of the facilities for crossing the Atlantic offered by the Mexican government. On 14 April 1942, Emili Blanch and his wife, Maria Batlle, left the port of Marseille aboard the *Maréchal Lyautey* bound for Casablanca, continuing their journey to Mexico on the *Nyassa*. They disembarked on 22 May.⁷

Once established in Mexico City, Emili Blanch began to work for CON-TE building company. He also opened his own studio, where he received commissions from both local residents and the large Catalan community. Later on, he set up a company called *Rivaud and Blanch Architects* in partnership with Spanish brothers José and Juan Rivaud, engineer and architect respectively. In his six years in Mexico, Emili Blanch designed over forty projects for dwellings and industrial premises, most of which displayed the rationalist repertoire he had brought with him from Catalonia. Examples of the use of modern forms of architecture into Mexico include the Emilia García house (Figure 1), the José María Fernández shoe factory (Figure 2), *Durkin Motors*



Figure 1. Emilia García house, México D.F., 1943. *Source:* Ajuntament de Girona. Arxiu Municipal de Girona

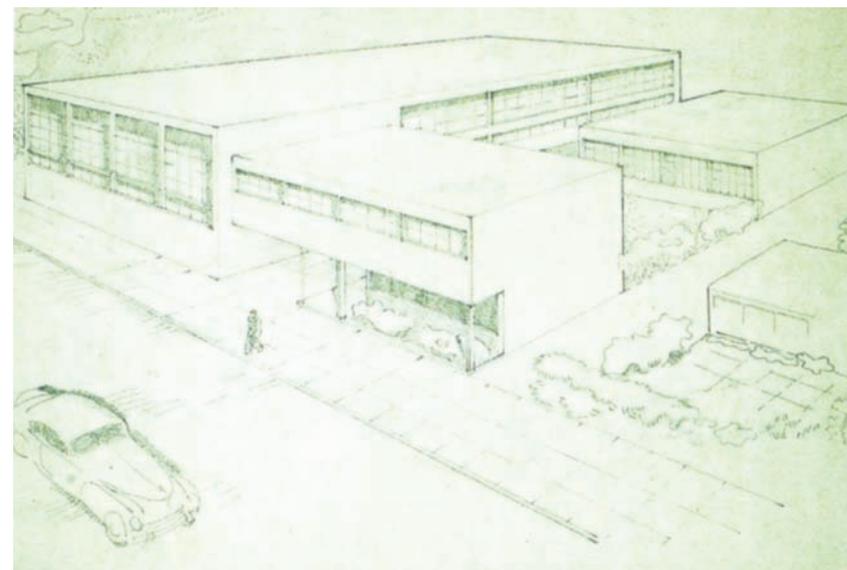


Figure 2. José María Fernández shoe factory, México D.F., 1944. *Source:* Ajuntament de Girona. Arxiu Municipal de Girona

dealers, affordable housing for *P.H. Cooperative* (with the Rivaud brothers), the Alfredo B. Cuéllar apartment block (also with the Rivaud brothers), the *Productos* business and apartment building, the Laguillo-García block, and the *Sears, Roebuck & Co.* commercial centre, all located in Mexico City. Unlike architects who stayed behind in Catalonia and the rest of Spain, Blanch and his companions in exile were able to continue practising modern architecture in Mexico. He was obliged to relinquish his avant-garde ideas in only a few projects commissioned, curiously enough, by members of the Catalan community, probably nostalgic clients who favoured a return to Catalan traditional architecture.⁸ The exiled community after the trauma

of the war and the crossing of the Atlantic created the imaginary of the “lost Catalonia”. The architectural style that best represents this image was the *Noucentisme* movement. A cultural phenomenon based on the promotion of Catalan identity. This artistic phenomenon was linked to the nation-building movement that takes place in the early twentieth century in Catalonia. The *Noucentista* postulates of a modernity that did not forsake the austerity of classicism, and included forms, colours, and materials taken from Catalan culture, with much reliance on artisan techniques. Emili Blanch uses forms of the *Noucentisme* style in the Catalan pavilion of La Feria del Libro de Mexico (1946), the Elsa Sandoval House (1946), the García Borrás House (1946), the headstone of the grave of the Catalan poet Pere Matalonga (1947) and the project for the new building of Orfeo Català (1947).

The professional success of Emili Blanch in Mexico was obvious, but it was not an exception. Mexico was a developing country that integrated the refugees quickly by offering them a life of prosperity. In addition to the support that Mexico gave República during and after the Spanish Civil War they also facilitated the arrival of refugees who received the status of political asylum seekers. Half of the fifty architects fleeing from Spain found that Mexico offered favourable conditions for developing their careers. The corollary of the deplorable drain of talent for Catalonia and the rest of Spain was the major gain for the countries that hosted the refugees. Juan Ignacio del Cueto examined the careers of the architects who settled in Mexico after the fall of the Republic, and considers that this group of largely first-rate professionals with a solid background, experience, and level of commitment contributed much to the enrichment of the country.⁹

EPILOGUE

Exile was a positive experience for Emili Blanch, as he claimed in an interview given in 1995: ‘Exile was the best thing that happened to us during the Franco period.’¹⁰ However, for Blanch and the other exiles who were hoping for a restoration of democracy in Spain after the Allies’ victory, the end of the Second World War made them aware that the Franco regime was there to stay. The realisation that exile was no longer a temporary situation made many decide to return home, including Emili Blanch and his wife, who arrived back in Catalonia in March 1948.

On his return, Emili Blanch had to face the difficult situation of having all his assets seized and of being suspended from practising as an architect. By a lucky clerical error, his professional disqualification did not appear in the archives of the Architects’ Association of Catalonia and the Balearic Islands and in 1950, he was provisionally readmitted to the association. From then

on, his activity as an architect was limited to designing some small dwellings and tourist facilities, mainly for friends and family members.¹¹ The society that received him back prevented him from attaining the same level of social and professional prestige that he had enjoyed before the Civil War. This was a society cut off from European trends, closed in upon itself, and ideologically distant from the one he had left in 1939. However, despite the adversity of the times, Blanch never renounced the underlying principles of modern architecture.

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2 Gemma Domènech and Rosa Maria Gil, *Un nou model d'arquitectura al servei d'una idea de país* (Barcelona: Fundació Josep Irla - Duxelm, 2010), 41-60.

3 Gemma Domènech, *Emili Blanch Roig (1897-1996). Arquitectura, patrimoni, compromís* (Girona: Institut Català de Recerca en Patrimoni Cultural, 2012), 26-35.

4 Ibidem, 42-8.

5 *Boletín Oficial de la Provincia*, 32 (March 14, 1940). *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, 75 (March 15, 1940).

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11 Gemma Domènech, *Emili Blanch Roig (1897-1996). Arquitectura, patrimoni, compromís* (Girona: Institut Català de Recerca en Patrimoni Cultural, 2012), 90-104.

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