Italy: Modern Architectures in History
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Published online: 04 Oct 2013.

To cite this article: David Rifkind (2013) Italy: Modern Architectures in History, Journal of Architectural Education, 67:2, 308-309, DOI: 10.1080/10464883.2013.817186

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10464883.2013.817186

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Of the many assumptions challenged in Diane Ghirardo’s survey, *Italy: Modern Architectures in History*, the most persistent may be the nature of the historical survey itself. Rather than presenting a dispassionate chronicle of buildings and movements, the text weaves together a series of polemical reconsiderations of aesthetics and agency into a coherent and provocative discussion of Italian architecture since the late nineteenth century. In contrast with the numerous existing surveys that privilege stylistic and rigid periodization as determinants of architectural form, Ghirardo’s book revolves around the question of how modernity has shaped the built environment in Italy. Her critical stance toward historiography helps her identify conceptual continuities between projects that are rarely linked in the literature on Italian modernism, and demonstrate the importance of activities (such as public corruption) that rarely find their way into historical surveys.

Ghirardo’s iconoclasm will not surprise readers familiar with her work. The author, a professor of architecture at the University of Southern California and recipient of the ACSA Distinguished Professor award, has penned several incisive critical evaluations of the disciplines of architecture and architectural history. Her 1996 book, *Architecture After Modernism*, reveals her skepticism of tidy overarching narratives, and essays like the repeatedly anthologized “The Architecture of Deceit” have detailed the roles of historians and critics in shielding architecture from productive self-reflection. She is also an accomplished historian of Italian modernism who reshaped the field in 1980 with two landmark articles that revised the dominant postwar misconception, perpetuated by Bruno Zevi, Giulia Veronesi, and others, that Italian Rationalism was only peripherally interested in the political values of fascism.

*Italy: Modern Architectures in History* presents a carefully researched social history of the built environment in Italy. Ghirardo details the political and cultural contexts of Italy over the last 150 years to provide an analytical framework for the country’s richly diverse strains of architecture. She traces architecture’s role as an instrument of identity formation since unification in 1861, paying close attention to architects’ engagement with intellectuals, political leaders, industrialists, and other elites during the Risorgimento and subsequent phase of national consolidation, the twenty-year period of fascist rule, the postwar reconstruction and economic “miracle,” and the post-industrial transformation of the country. Ghirardo balances consideration of nationwide movements and practices with ample discussion of regional variations, and explains the importance of both new construction materials and lingering craft practices. She examines the expanding nature of “Italian” architecture in an age of globalization, discussing both Italian architects’ work abroad and foreign architects’ work in the peninsula.

Ghirardo makes clear that Italian architecture has never consisted of formal experiments executed in a void, and her survey is notable for the range of historical events included as important influences on the country’s built environment. The most provocative of these are the author’s detailed discussion of the systemic corruption—from organized crime to the nepotism that defines academic appointments—that shapes disciplines and landscapes. She explains how the vast scale of illegal building, including projects by media tycoon and former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, have undermined serious attempts at urban and regional planning and have exacerbated environmental degradation. The profound impact of modern Italy’s tumultuous political and economic cycles rarely finds such serious consideration in architectural histories, and Ghirardo approaches this social history from both the vantage of a scholar immersed in archival research and of a long-time resident well versed in the difficulties of everyday life there.

Any survey text can be faulted for its omissions, and *Italy: Modern Architectures in History* neglects several important figures. Ghirardo spends too little time discussing Futurism, despite its significance as the first Italian avant-garde movement to attract considerable attention from artists and critics across the Alps. This is particularly curious given the author’s interest in discourse and theory, the chief legacy of Futurism. She also treats Giuseppe Terragni in a curious manner, criticizing his dogmatism and the technical problems associated with buildings like the Casa del Fascio in Como (both fair points), but giving only passing consideration to his nuanced attempts to reconcile modernity and Classical aesthetics, his collaborations with visual artists (a concern shared with many Rationalist architects), and his extraordinary merits as a designer. Enthusiasts of particular architects (e.g., Franco Albini and Franca Helg) will argue that they are unfairly underrepresented here, though others will happily note the due consider-
Ultimately, the strength of this text is in its inclusiveness. Ghirardo recovers projects that have rarely received just consideration in surveys of Italian modernism. Her discussion of Adalberto Libera’s long-neglected Tuscolano III workers’ housing outside Rome (1950–54) emphasizes the architect’s unusual sensitivity to its inhabitants’ social customs and nuanced interpretation of typological precedent. She discusses the oft-maligned Marcello Piacentini’s important contributions to the streetscapes of modern Italy, including his support for some of the country’s most significant architects through his roles as an urban planner, design competition jury member, journal editor, and well-connected impresario. Ghirardo’s inclusion of historic preservation projects (beyond Carlo Scarpa’s well-known Castelvecchio and Querini Stampalia museums) is a welcome addition to the conventional scope of survey texts, as is her consideration of Italian architecture’s dire environmental legacy. *Italy: Modern Architectures in History* introduces a number of younger architects and firms, such as FAREStudio (Riccardo Vannucci and Giuseppina Forte), Maurizio Oddo (in collaboration with engineer Alessandro Barracco), and Elena Manferdini, who have emerged as important voices in the past decade.

Ghirardo’s ability to see beyond stylistic labels and the superficial arguments of many architects is indebted to the writings of Edoardo Persico, an Italian Rationalist designer and critic whose pithy 1935 critique of Rationalism she translated in 1979. Persico argued that the sharply divided camps of architects practicing in fascist-era Italy mistook stylistic differences for substantive ones, since all sides were attempting to give concrete forms to the abstract ideals of Mussolini’s government. He took his contemporaries to task for neglecting pressing social issues—such as working-class housing—while arguing the merits of piloting versus classical columns and uncritically serving the elites of their time. Like Persico, Ghirardo is unconcerned with questions of taste, and instead unravels the complex web of patronage, compromise, use, and reception necessary to understand the vicissitudes of modern architecture in Italy.

A key insight of *Italy: Modern Architectures in History* is that major historical events can be considered simultaneously as moments of both continuity and rupture. This is particularly valuable in assessing the architecture and urban planning of the twentieth century, in which the fascist period (1922–43) brought many radical changes to the transformation of the built environment, but which is also notable for significant continuities in spatial practices with the preceding and succeeding historical periods. One limitation of the work is, arguably, the national boundary that defines its scope. This constraint was mandated by the volume’s inclusion in the Modern Architectures in History series, an otherwise excellent group of books published by Reaktion Books that regrettably reaffirms the central importance of national identity in architecture, when modernism is more usefully defined by its transnational practices, connections, and discursive networks.

Ghirardo refers to a wide range of cultural production to situate architecture within the broader context of Italian modernism. Neorealist films provide a particularly valuable source for both understanding the social and political impact of the built environment in postwar Italy, and for weighing the popular reception of buildings and spaces—many erected during the fascist period—used as sets. She draws on important literary sources, such as Antonio Pennacchi’s brilliant novel *Canale Mussolini*, and contemporary news accounts as evidence of the lived reality of a country in which cities and buildings serve as indices of rapid social and technological change.

Diverse audiences will find this book compelling and instructive. Writing as both a historian and a critic, Ghirardo is able to situate individual works of architecture within a broad historical context while also respecting their merits as discrete projects. She prizes richness and nuance over ideological purity, and understands the works in relation to both professional discourses and popular reception. Informed by a unique combination of archival research, extensive fieldwork, and close friendships with major protagonists (most notably Aldo Rossi), Ghirardo’s work is distinguished by its breadth and insights. Readers will argue about specific parts of the text, such as the disparity between the author’s harsh judgment of buildings like Luigi Carlo Daneri’s INA-Casa Quar- tiere Forte Quezzi housing in Genoa (1956–58) and her praise for Rossi’s Gallaratese housing in Milan (1970–73), but that is precisely the point of this survey. Every project is discussed critically, within a social context defined by a sophisticated understanding of cultural and political forces. While provocative and partisan, this well-balanced book treats its subject matter with appropriate respect. Specialists in the field will find its historiographic stance a welcome challenge to the conventional reception of Italian modernism, and students will find it a compelling introduction to the richly diverse architectural production of modern Italy.

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