

Ricostruzione: Disertori/Libera

Toward a Historical Fable about Modernist Architecture and Psychology

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Script

[main title]

1.

[façade apartment building via Petrarca; balconies]

1. For many years I lived and worked in this building, the *condominio Petrarca*, 32 via Petrarca in Trento, built in 1961.
2. Did I like the architecture? Well, I don't know. It was one of those functional buildings of the post war boom years. The latest technical facilities. Low ceilings. I remember the balconies. Those which faced the street were spacious, whereas the ones on both sides of the building were rather small, tiny even. Hardly enough room to step outside and have a cigarette.

2.

[article Libera, "Loggie e balcone", cover "Strutture", balconies, b & w villas in Ostia, man on balcony, via Messina apartment building/balconies, loggia with women]

1. In 1947, I published an article on loggias and balconies in the second issue of a short-lived architectural journal I helped to create, *Strutture*. One purpose of this article was to propose a way to solve the crisis of the balcony in architecture.

2. Polemically, I wrote: “Hundreds of balconies follow each other in perspectival recession in many urban streets built in the last 20 years; [...] functionally insufficient, since they are only 80 to 100 centimeters in width, put there for the simple reason of pretentiously decorating the façade of a building, therefore useless and ugly [...] the view of so many deserted balconies, the perspectival flight of so much stupidity.”¹

3. My idea of a balcony has always been different. Look at my *villine*. I designed and built them in the early 1930s, near Rome, in Ostia, on the coast.

4. Vast balconies to step outside and watch the sea.

5. Or here, my apartment building from the early 1940s, in Rome, via Messina. I had no artistic ambitions when I designed it. At least, that’s what I claimed publicly. I wanted to have it as simple and modest as possible and necessary. I aspired to a residential architecture that warrants human dignity in a modern world of what I called at the time: ever larger social classes.²

6. These women, posing on one of the *loggias* in via Messina, enact a modern “mode” of dwelling. It is wartime, but they don’t seem to care. The camera has captured two of them in conversation. The third woman on the left keeps eye contact with the man on the opposite side of the street. City life and balcony life, interiority and exteriority, domesticity and publicity intersect.

3.

[cover Richard Neutra, “*Survival through Design*”, window with movie scene]

A high organism such as ours stands in a subtle relationship of sensory response to what happens outside. It has always been known that our ‘vegetative functions’ are not truly and fully removed or isolated from those of the senses. They are not really autonomically governed by a special nervous system. Their connection to the spinal equipment and the brain are so manifold that a mutual influencing is perpetual. [...] We must not forget that ‘aware and willful’ activities are relatively few and are directed from the motor areas of the frontal lobe. *Through design, however, man can, mediately or by a planned roundabout way, extend wilful events to his innermost realms were responses were formerly almost uncontrolled.*³

4.

[cover “De Anima”, inserted window with hands flipping pages of the book]

1. The soul has been one of Beppino Disertori’s major preoccupations. Considering that he was a neuropsychiatrist, this is hardly surprising. Astonishingly, however, he ventured to treat the psyche on almost every level of clinical, historical and philosophical reasoning.
2. He revisited the idea of *anima mundi* and cosmic consciousness, he reconstructed the mathematics of the soul from classic philosophy, he elaborated on the problems of metapsychology and metaphysics, he imported and translated the vitalist and neovitalist theories of thinkers such as Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch, he researched the interactions of physical and psychic life, and he committed himself, after the war, to the therapy of social neurosis.

5.

[images of piazza Venezia, de Gasperi monument, casa del Fascio, apartment building on via Galilei, balconies]

1. Largo Porta Nuova (or piazza Venezia) is a difficult site. One of the main traffic junctions in the centre of Trento, it is the scene of constant movements and memories.
2. Historically and politically, the symbolism of this urban event structure is complex.
3. In the piazza Venezia park that borders on Largo Porta Nuova, a monument for Alcide de Gasperi, the anti-Fascist, the founder of *Democrazia Cristiana* and the first prime minister of the post war Italian Republic, was erected in the 1950s.
4. Oddly enough, the futurist aesthetics of the memorial betray a peculiar continuity with the aesthetics and the “style” of Fascism.
5. This belated Futurism seems to rhyme well, a bit too well probably, with the former *casa del Fascio* (or *palazzo Littorio*), designed by Giovanni Lorenzi in 1938. The massive building with the stern tower clearly dominates largo Porta Nuova.

6. It was inaugurated in 1940. On that day the crowd gathered on the *piazza* to watch the very power of the party, embodied in an architecture loaded with authoritarian insignia: the relief with the muscle man of Fascist rule, the banners and the balcony – the latter of which with just enough space to hold a flag and gesture at the symbolic absence of the *duce*, the ruler.

7. In 1943 the *casa del Fascio* became the headquarters of the German occupants, and was renamed *Standortkommandantur*. The person who retouched this photograph has either enhanced the German writing and the swastika flag at the actual building or has added them to a picture that hadn't yet recorded the regime change.

8. Right next to Lorenzi's *casa del Fascio* was the site of Adalberto Libera's first commission after the war in 1949 – the INA-Casa dwelling on via Galilei that reaches into the piazza. Significantly, Lorenzi was hired to act as construction supervisor for Libera.

9. The residents who had moved into this typical housing block of the post-war reconstruction in Italy around 1949 and 1950 would have Lorenzi's former party headquarters right in front of their window – especially when they inhabited an apartment that faced the square. They would step onto their comfortably designed balconies and look at the heavy architecture of an immediate past that seemed to be long gone – submerged in the destruction that preceded the reconstruction.

6.

[screen shots "Il conformista", dir. Bertolucci]

First of all, the house is an object for geometry. You're tempted to analyze it rationally. Such a geometrical object should go against the metaphors which take up the human body and the human soul. However, the translation into human-ness happens immediately when you apprehend the house as a space of consolation and intimacy, as a space that should condensate and protect the inwardness. Then, beyond any rationality, the field of dream action opens up.⁴

7.

[cover Disertori, "Trattato delle nevrosi"; window with hand flipping the pages of the book; picture with dummy puppet, fade to: "mirror of the soul" fresco]

1. In my *Treatise on neuroses*, written in the immediate post war years and published in 1956 to great acclaim, I developed a theory of psychoneurobiology, complete with a doctrine of diagnosis and therapy, introducing principles of a holistic analysis of neural diseases and their optional treatment with hypnosis. The *Treatise* was meant to provide the framework for an etiology of the present and a social psychology, responding to what I and others perceived as the traumatizing events of the war and its aftermath.

2. Thus, the psychobiology of mass culture was my major concern before and even more so after the war – the pathology of a civilization that was trying to reconstruct itself. In order to arrive at a position from which to find solutions for this pathology, I turned to parapsychology to relate to the suffering and survival of the soul. One might say that I tried to ground the contemporary psyche by transcending its historical confines.

8.

[images Villa Lagarina; diagrammatic drawings of man sitting at desk]

1. Solving real and human problems in a "normal mode" – that was my mission, already in 1941. Two years later, when the Germans occupied Italy, I retreated into my family's palazzo in Villa Lagarina, a village between Trento and Rovereto. I stayed there for three years, until 1946.

2. I spent most of the time during these years of inner emigration writing and drawing a treatise on "The Functional and Distributive Technique of Dwelling".

3. This work, though never published, became my personal escape plan from an intense involvement with the Modernism of *razionalismo* and the Fascist regime.

9.

[movie scenes "I vinti", juxtaposition, construction site]

In opposition to an anonymous architecture for an anonymous mass, this is an architecture for individual families, who [...] might be categorically uniform, but whose houses would nonetheless accentuate and express distinction and singularity. The very respect for the individual in social housing provided by the State is the finest achievement of a truly democratic architecture – houses for all, but style for everyone; justice for all, but no levelling, the same board and lodging for all, but different houses for everyone.⁵

10.

[book cover, INA-Casa, floor plan/inverted image of building facade]

1. Modernism, and modernist architecture and urbanism in particular, were projects to come to terms with history and change – by freezing them within a total present.
2. One of the means of achieving this goal was to define building norms. Standards and types responded to the economic demands of an industrialized architecture. The machine of dwelling had to be designed and constructed in a way that allowed for a maximum of repetition and seriality.
3. INA-Casa, the vast program of urban reconstruction based on a Keynesian plan by secretary of labour Amintore Fanfani, was entirely organised around the idea of the norm. When I entered the project management of INA-Casa in 1949, it was clear from the beginning that the logic of reconstruction would be characterized by an economy of standardization.
4. The men and women of reconstruction Italy had to be housed in the most feasible way, taking into consideration their specific social and psychological condition. The new workforce should dwell according to the new regime of the Marshall plan and the Keynesianism of people such as Fanfani.

5. The age of rationalist and Fascist “style” was over and a new “politics of architecture” had replaced it: a politics of social housing and worker’s dwellings, of so called “normal constructions”.

11.

[still from Giedion, “Die neue Wohnung”, 1930]

“The functionalists ignore the psychological function of the environment. [...] one has to reach a dynamic conception of forms [and face] the truth that every human form is in a state of perpetual transformation. [...] Architecture is always the ultimate realisation of a mental and artistic evolution. It is the materialisation of a particular stage of economic development. [...] to create an architecture is to built an environment and fix a way of living.”⁶

Notes

1. Adalberto Libera, Logge e balcone. Analisi funzionale, in *Strutture*, 2, July 1947, pp. 9-11
2. [Adalberto Libera/Giuseppe Pagano], Una casa di Libera; una opinione sull’architettura, in *Stile*, 9, September 1941, pp. 6-7
3. Richard Neutra, *Survival Through Design*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1954, pp. 317-318
4. Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l’espace*, Paris: Gallimard, 1957
5. “Contro un’edilizia anonima per un’anonima massa, questa è un’architettura per famiglie individue che, sindacalmente, possono essere uniformate in categorie, ma di cui la casa accentua ed esprime la distinzione e la singolarità. Questo rispetto per l’individuo in un’edilizia sociale promossa dallo Stato è il più sicuro raggiungimento di un’architettura democratica – casa per tutti ma stile per ognuno, giustizia per tutti ma non livellatrice, costo a vano uguale per tutti ma case per tutte diverse” (Bruno Zevi, L’architettura dell’INA-Casa, in *l’INA-Casa al IV Congresso nazionale di urbanistica*, Venice 1952, p. 16)
6. “Les fonctionnalistes ignorent la fonction psychologique de l’ambiance ... Les rationalistes fonctionnalistes, en raison de leurs idées de standardisation, se sont imaginé que l’on pouvait arriver aux formes définitives, idéales, des différents objets intéressant l’homme [...] On doit parvenir à une conception dynamique des formes, on doit regarder en face cette vérité que toute forme humaine se trouve en état de transformation continue. [...] L’architecture est toujours l’ultime réalisation d’une évolution mentale et artistique; elle est la matérialisation d’une stade économique. L’architecture est le dernier point de réalisation de toute tentative artistique parce que créer une architecture signifie construire une ambiance et fixer un mode de vie” (Asger Jorn, *Pour la forme. Ébauche d’une Méthodologie des Arts*, Paris: L’Internationale situationniste, 1958).