

FORM AND REGIME

ON THE WORK OF GIUSEPPE TERRAGNI AND RICHARD MEIER

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This paper will associate the similar works of Richard Meier and Giuseppe Terragni, looking at several recent projects of the former and following the comprehensive exhibition of the latter's work at the Milan Triennale last year. They are paired on formal/ideological grounds, finding a similar disengagement from the tough issues that accompanied the regimes they served, making a connection that may have been obscured by revisionist critiques and apparent doctrinal inconsistencies.

I recently spent a month working in the newly-completed Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona by Mr. Meier's office. The Museum's antiseptic demeanor, gorgeous linguistic reduction and pristine isolation are indeed striking in that gritty and fluid city. But when I visited the empty building another interpretation became evident. Predictably, all vertical surfaces are white and the cascade of light is awesome. These conditions contributed to a sense of *déjà vu*, inspired in part by illumination and form in the interior spaces of the building, but also by the extreme lengths to which the architect went to abstract the tectonics of certain elements. And that is what this building is made of, not walls, doors, windows, etc., none of that quotidian stuff. Instead this structure is composed of "elements," of planes and punctures supported by odd independent blocks rammed through windows or stuck under walls, masking the need for vertical support, for the physics of the actual.

Meier's building recalled some of the most exquisite, and formally abstruse, of all modernist compositions, those of Giuseppe Terragni. The Italian has already been claimed for Peter Eisenman, and one can see how, on an intellectual level, Eisenman's early gaming can be compared to Terragni's shifts and shears, to his ironies and complexities. But Eisenman's projects radiate a self-consciousness and textuality that is not there, or very secondary, in Terragni. In his work the formal games insist that the viewer accept the rules as defined by the artist and there can be no denying them. The work of Meier commands the same sort of adherence. When you enter one of his chaste structures, you must leave most of your cultural baggage at the checkroom. The laws are those of non-figuration and they are insistent. In this Meier is the natural son of Terragni, while Eisenman remains an enthusiastic nephew.

Como's Asilo Sant'Elia or Casa del Fascio, with their militantly disengaged rhetorical elements and compositional caprices could easily be seen as the smaller institutional work of the same hands that shaped the grander Barcelona building or the Canal complex in Paris. This connection may seem farfetched. A late 20th century post-modernist corporate-institutional couturier designer and a fanatical early 20th-century Fascist-Rationalist producing a product so close as to dissolve the lines between their practices and eras. Furthermore, this does not appear to be the result of imitation or perhaps even of conscious inspiration. Mr. Meier has been identified as a follower of Le Corbusier more than of any Italian. Those he leaves for Mr. Eisenman.

The reason for the marked similarity of compositional strategy in the work of Terragni and Meier is that both are examples of a very skillful architect avoiding an asphyxiating bind. In Terragni's case, despite his quite genuine enthusiasm for Fascism, the actual aesthetic edicts and contradictions of the regime forced the young architect away from the more ironic and rhetorically complex strategies of his contemporaries Libera or Moretti. In Meier's case the pressure is likewise intense, if the regime slightly less evident. The reason that he could become the most commercially successful and simultaneously the most aesthetic of the Whites rested on his ability to simultaneously appear to sidestep yet actually embrace the commercial culture of the 1980s, the period of his rise from neo-Avant Garde to mainstream practitioner. Meier's buildings, by avoiding the contradictions and figural absurdity of the work of most of his Post Modern generation, are perfect *bijoux* of late-capitalism, empty, gorgeous and thus ready to adorn, to serve or aggrandize the market in the tradition of the Late-Modern. Like Terragni's, Meier's projects are ethereal vessels available to hold whatever rhetorical concoction may be required, and as ready to be rinsed and placed back amidst the dinner-service of power. In their exquisite distance, they accessorize hegemony while insisting on their autonomy.

In the Fascist era the service required of architecture was clear, if numbingly contradictory. To simplify the criteria of a complex mandate, the Futurist-Classical requirements set forth, the simultaneous call for progress,

in its early 20th-century force, and alignment with the Roman Empire, in its imperial promise, led to the tense juxtapositions and compromises that made the architecture of the period between the World Wars so rich in Italy.

Terragni was a devout Fascist, but his career, both as a designer and polemicist, nevertheless inadvertently recoiled from the paradoxical building program of the period. In 1927 he wrote, with his colleagues of Gruppo 7, "We don't want to break away from tradition: it is tradition that is in the process of transformation, taking on new qualities that make it difficult to recognise ... We must succeed in this: ennobling architecture with the indefinable, abstract perfection of pure rhythm, of simple constructiveness, which alone would not be beautiful! ... We must convince ourselves that types must be created, a few fundamental types."¹

Twisting in the ideological wind, these writings attempt to meld the purity of Classical models and proud Italian form and the active energy of the latest European and Russian aesthetic mandates. The attempt at self-persuasion is not convincing. Terragni's justification, a decade later, of the Casa del Fascio as Mussolini's metaphor for the Fascist Party as a "glass house in which all can look" reveals the logical contortions that had to be undertaken in order to adhere to both reactionary and avant-garde political needs and to satisfy the desire for lucid Modern form. Despite the evident problems and given the strictures imposed by the aesthetic struggles of the epoch, certain extraordinary responses were proposed by some of Terragni's peers, overcoming a set of restraints which left most Italian architecture wallowing in pastiche while attempting to impress leaders and overpower the populace with massively simple form.

From the subtle transgressions of Ponti, Mollino or Moretti, to the metaphysical collage of Libera, De Renzi and Michelucci, to the severe urbanism of Pagano or Albini, to the mannered reductions of BBPR, Gardella, Figini-Pollini or Vaccaro, to the industrial baroque of Mazzoni and Ridolfi, this group of ideological survivors presented an unparalleled example of architectural invention and follow-through. The syntactic non-figuration indulged in by Terragni appears less compromised by the cultural semantics that it seems to ignore and is thus more palatable in an era that finds those semantics repugnant. For this reason, the very strong work of his contemporaries has been eclipsed by his exquisite but obscure production and, to a lesser extent, that of his younger colleague, Cesare Cattaneo.

Terragni, possibly the most determined Fascist of the group, likewise wrestled with the contradictions presented by the era's divergent ideological directives. His designs represent a formal circumvention of those contradictions. The dynamism of Futurism is stilled in his compositions, replaced by a self-reflexive movement and shear. The Classical is registered in the initial purity of the volumes he transforms and the apparent clarity of the laws of transformation. But, in the final assessment, the work largely avoids the appropriations and assemblages that make the work of his contemporaries at best complex and brilliant and at worst lugubrious and confused. Terragni tends to disengage a text, an actual written

account of the project relying heavily on political metaphor, from the design which relies equally heavily on the metonymic ability of the individual moment to represent an architectural whole that is autonomous. In other words, the apparent Fascism of the building is as deep as its description while the actual object engages in a discourse that is removed. It is, on one hand, about the play of composition and rules, in the manner of sculptors like Sol Lewitt. On the other, it is about the disengagement of architectural structure, plane and void, a disengagement that returns to an architecture almost independent of politics. The internal rules of composition suppress the dirty issues confronted by a more extrinsic representation.

A comparison of Terragni's projects to the work of his contemporary Adalberto Libera may elucidate some of the problems with the former practice. Whether Terragni and Libera were committed Fascists or not, and both were, they were driven by the era to express what Malaparte called "the revolutionary, imperial and ultramodern spirit."² The way this paradoxical mandate formed their architecture was quite different however. Libera's designs engage in semantic play and tense formal juxtapositions that verge on the surreal. Particularly appropriate for comparison is his post office in the Porta San Paolo in Rome completed several years before the Casa del Fascio. This building superimposes divergent references. The outer block of the building, its white surface and the neutrality of square windows, appears to conform to the rationalist rigor of Gruppo 7 and MIAR (*Movimento italiano dell'architettura razionale*), in both of which Libera had been an active member. These first perceptions seem peculiarly compromised by the crossing diagonals of the spandrels and mullions in the stairwells at the block's most prominent forward extension.³

The woven marble screen that covers the windows at the back of the post office and the marble skin of the outer block, in the slight but intentional unevenness of its surface, also contest the initial purity of the mass. Held within this frame is the public hall, a glazed metal oval, a civic form like the nearby Circus Maximus and Piazza Navona. Its own stainless-steel structure carries this object-space which protrudes glistening from within the arms of the surrounding icy stone block. In front of these elements is a portico that extends beyond the mass on either side. This arcade, originally clad in contrasting black marble, was intentionally given its own structural grid. Leading from the boulevard to the portico is a wide stair-ramp originally set between pools. These elements do not resolve or harmonize. They collide, sitting in an adjacency typical of period photo-collage, and like that revolutionary and critical medium, they generate the friction that such adjacencies must produce.

Current American practice, above a certain scale, can be loosely defined as either decorating or brooch-making: Adorning the field or shaping icons. The former process, of the embellishment of the mute boxes that contain and represent the mute institutions of economic and administrative power, is probably most interestingly practiced by the firm of Kohn Pedersen Fox, but it is also practiced by most of the large corporate architectural organizations which are modeled, in their anonymity and

hierarchies, on the clients they serve. There is a select group of relatively smaller firms who produce a more sculptural product, an object-in-the-round to be clipped onto whatever institution needs to be ornamented. This group includes the firms of Antoine Predock, Frank Gehry and Gwathmey/Siegel, but Richard Meier, whose success came with the flood of deficit-fed borrowing during the Reagan era, is certainly the most refined of all jewelers in the American guild. In a culture where little but production and acquisition are valued, Meier has managed to walk a line as fine as the exquisite drawings his office produces between the forces of capital which seem to automatically suppress quality in those of his peers who seriously enter the economic field and an esoteric distance, a *salon-de-refusé* hermeticism, that has marginalized those who have chosen not to enter the same field. Meier accomplishes this feat by a detachment very similar in nature to Terragni's and thus it is not surprising that their works portray a synonymous version of the Modern. The American's work projects an remarkable neutrality given the apparent lengths made to articulate various conditions and to shape a multitude of experiences. In the end the work arrives at a Tafurian silence that is almost deafening.

The immediate adjacency of two other new projects sets up a strong dialogue with Meier's Barcelona building. Dani Freixes' new faculty to the immediate north of the Museum is one. Freixes had the museum, with its inevitable white enamel panels, to react to, as have many of the artists who have exhibited in the Meier building. Freixes metallic aircraft-engineered silver panels reflect both the rough structures of the surrounding neighborhood and the adjoining project. The elemental insistence of his structure and the simple reaction to program and locale are indeed conspicuous in comparison to Meier's choice to disregard the same. A stronger and more direct comparison is between the Museum and the Center for Contemporary Culture next door by Helio Piñón and Albert Viaplana. The project by the Catalan pair is a massive reconstruction of an ancient palazzo with the addition of a new section. Like Meier's, this project includes a south-facing glass wall, an odd gesture in either case given the strong Mediterranean light of Catalonia and the potentially oppressive quality of sunbathed space in the long warmer months. But glass, and *transparence*, are the *lingua franca* of current European practice and no self-respecting structure of any monumentality is without its acres of rhetorical curtain wall.

Jean Nouvel pushes this requirement to the point of humor in the Fondation Cartier in Paris where the glass wall extends beyond the conditioned envelope presenting layers of pure glass and masking the fact of the building itself. Less droll, the Piñón/Viaplana project tempers the obligation in several ways. The glass is tinted thus mellowing the strong light. The interior materials are travertine and steel, more absorptive and softening than the powerfully reflective whiteness of the Meier Museum. The space behind the wall is a vertical circulation shaft that rises to the top of the building. Summer heat thus facilitates a thermal pull through the structure. And the glass wall argues its presence by involving visitors to the project in a visual experience which brings many to the

building just for that reason. The addition is taller than the original building and the top of the new glass wall tilts out, an enormous abstract cornice. By so doing, it provides a reflected view of the skyline of Barcelona and the Mediterranean over the roof of the old building.

This view is now partially blocked by Mr. Meier's building to the south, which replaces much of the immediate and diverse roofscape of the city with a white gridded frame. But the sea is still visible beyond from the deep courtyard, an incessant reminder of the particularity of this only marginally Iberian city. Meier's glass wall, on the other hand, floods the ramped and screened circulation spaces with hard south light through clear windows. The vestigial *brise soleil* on that facade do little to mitigate this blinding event. Light penetrates into the gallery spaces carried by the luminous wall and ceilings. The building is everywhere illuminated, everywhere arguing for its exquisite form, its perfect commodification.

In contrast, the promenade into the Piñón/Viaplana project is down a ramp from the viewing courtyard into a dark horizontal space beneath that court where light is controlled, limited, precious and dramatic, sneaking in against a wall from above or radiating from precise events in the room. From this hall the visitor enters the aforementioned light-filled space behind the glass wall and ascends to various points in the upper tiers of the building where again light is controlled and the emphasis is on the objects or activities displayed. Here the dramatic light of display is quite opposite to the promiscuous and undifferentiated luminosity of Meier's project. Piñón/Viaplana's controlled historical light contrasts to the universal ahistorical light of the modern in the American's project. His white building maintains the Modernist distance from physical and cultural expedients. In fact the city is collaged and contained within the exquisite body of the building while it is excluded.⁴

The analogical argument finds a degree of ratification here as does the heterotopic. The building replaces and cleanses the city. Terragni, and the Rationalists in general, had attempted a universalization through abstraction: in Tafuri's terms, an effort to "purify the signs to the point of annihilation, articulate their interrelationships on the basis of a complete freedom of relations." Meier makes no such claim but, in its mute distance, the Museum presents a detachment that is inclusive.⁵ It replaces the city. Piñón/Viaplana's project apparently takes a much more conventional stance in relation to the givens it confronts.

Are the works of Libera or the Catalans therefore better than those of Terragni or Meier? Obviously, on the level of a rich dialogue with certain local conditions, with materiality and with reference, the answer to this is yes, but that sort of dialogue is intentionally denied by the two compositionists and their autonomy is supported by polemics in the arts extending from Trotsky, Breton and Diego Rivera's "Towards a Revolutionary Art" of 1938 to the committed arguments for autonomy put forth by Europeans after World War II and the equally strong arguments for abstraction extended in America at the same time. Critiques of the last 30 years have shown that neither formalism nor abstraction nor autonomy can be so easily identified, let alone condemned, despite all current attempts to dismiss or marginalize theory and

neo-Avant Garde practice by rejecting formalism *a priori*. Thus, a compromised endeavor such as Libera's or Piñón/Viaplana cannot be so easily premeditated. A stronger argument must be made than that which relies on condemning formalism or the theoretical. Both are quite defensible, even laudable.

In the revered language of non-objectivity, Meier and Terragni are certainly extraordinary, but there does seem to be, in the multivalent strategies adopted by the other architects, a greater potential, if not a realization, for critical action and even for certain works of resistance. But, with the introduction of these criteria for the evaluation of architecture, several problems become immediately evident. The notion that architecture can do other than subserviently aggrandize the economic forces that support it, that it can critically engage the political field that it forms and is formed by, is often accepted without convincing methodological follow-through.

When it is actually confronted, how one goes about being resistant has been a thorny topic indeed, generating exhilarating discourse from Argan and Adorno to Frampton and Cacciari. On the design front, connected texts of "revealing" and "subversion" abound without adequate documentation. These vie for a right to self-legitimization through "resistance" with a soft social-realism which largely professes to reject "formalism" in the old and tired argument against "elitism" while clearly finding itself overwhelmed by form's inevitability. Resistance is a tricky topic itself, having been somewhat discredited by the collapse of Marxist political experiments with which the term had become overly associated by some of its own supporters and particularly by critics on the right who wished to dismiss it. An "architecture of resistance" was also put into question by the emergence in recent years of a *politics lite* in the halls of architectural discourse. Like the new safe Democratic Party in the US, this mode of political discussion could not accommodate such a vital concept within its very low-threat and often opportunistic nomenclature. Also, both the pluralism ratified in the concept of the Post Modern and the desire for markets and activity make the architectural profession, and its critical operatives, extremely reluctant to swim upstream against the forces that oversee the profession's dismantlement while temporarily supporting it. As Hal Foster writes, "Sometimes this passion, this fetishism, made it difficult to distinguish, among postmodernist artists and post-structuralist critics alike, between *critics* of the reification and fragmentation of the sign and *connoisseurs* of the same process."⁶

Despite the old arguments for autonomy and abstraction, it is indeed hard to imagine that work as removed from much of the messy discursive material of architecture as that of Meier and Terragni can engage in a rich response to the political culture that architecture is dependent on and represents. It is a simple equation: to disengage most of the apparatus of description is to be precise in the description of that which is left but incapable of confronting the complexity of a very complex field. Its delicious detachment may be both the limit, and the

appeal, of this work.

Perhaps the most lucid conclusion to draw from the marked similarity of the works of Meier and Terragni and the comparison to the lesser-known projects by Libera and Piñón/Viaplana rests in the obvious but largely overlooked fact that strategies of resistance may not primarily lodge in the formal manifestations of buildings at all. While form is a powerful bottom line of our practice, while it manifests and in the end is all there is, the production of buildings is a complex interplay of form with technique, science, philosophy, economics, politics, to name a few. These other "hidden" architectural criteria seem much more available to the critical devices employed by current theory and the profession, yet the discussion in both realms remains almost exclusively about form and its discontents, staying often inconclusive or even tautological. In a product-focused culture this is not particularly surprising. Perhaps strategies of resistance generally should cross over into the largely intangible and invisible realm of architectural production, into activity rather than commodity, only occasionally surfacing, like a dormant virus, in projects as ripe as those of Libera or Piñón/Viaplana but carefully scrubbed from the antiseptic surfaces of works like those of Terragni and Meier.

NOTES

- ¹ Article by Gruppo 7 (Figini, Frette, Larco, Libera, Pollini, Rava and Terragni) in *Rassegna Italiana* (1927) - from Zevi, Bruno, "Gruppo 7: The Rise and Fall of Italian Rationalism" in *Architectural Design* 51, 1/2 - (1981), p. 41.
- ² So read Curzio Malaparte's paean to genuine Fascist architecture — that of Sabaudia, The Casa del Fascio in Coce, Santa Maria Novella Station in Florence — in opposition to the work of "architects of bad taste...(who) pretended to incarnate the creative, innovative and revolutionary spirit of Mussolini." This appeared in an editorial announcing the issue of *Prospective* 7, the literary-cultural journal founded by Malaparte, dedicated to the new architecture and edited by Libera and Moretti.
- ³ Giorgio Ciucci points out this detail as a repetitive X motif in Libera's work, possibly deriving from the Roman numeral X commemorating the 1932 anniversary of ten years of Fascist rule and the Roman Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista for which Libera designed the principle facade and shrine. Francesco Garofalo sees a continuing desire for the meshing of pattern, often in diamond modules, and structure throughout Libera's work, resulting in both the woven front and back motifs of the block. It also seems to me that there is a tendency in Libera's designs to establish pure figures and then to engage in acts of distortion or transgression in the development of their skin or shape, or through the juxtaposition of these figures to others of a radically different nature, culminating in the extreme works of the 1950s and '60s.
- ⁴ Here the issue of "whiteness" should not be confused with the latest rich discourse on this condition. The interpretation is more linked to the Modernist significance of purism and the absence of color.
- ⁵ Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976), p. 154.
- ⁶ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT, 1996), p. 96.