

Giovanni Comi
**Possible inventions from the ancient.
 Between architecture and archaeology**

Author: *Angelo Torricelli*
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Il momento presente del passato. Scritti e progetti di architettura collects and re-proposes essays and projects by Angelo Torricelli on the relation between old and new in architecture.

The book – divided into three chapters, *I. Saggi, II. Album: opere e disegni, III. Antico e nuovo: progetti* – can be considered as an autobiography from which the coherence between Torricelli’s design activity and his theoretical approach emerges in a clear way.

These writings are motivated by the need, as an architect, to take a critical position on issues that have marked the cultural debate in the decades of training of the author.

This collection is an ordered and circumscribed selection of Torricelli’s production aimed at «deepening the theme of project conception in the relationship with stratification»¹.

The writings and projects are collected according to a non-chronological sequence but as pieces of a large «deposit of materials, facts and ideas, accumulated over time, in the set of works and cities studied or lived»² – including Milan, Athens, Alexandria Egypt, Hadrian’s Villa – which only give a glimpse of the greater order of which they belong.

The result is a new collage of works, of «heterogeneous times that form anachronisms»³, which thus offer themselves to new possible unveilings of unedited concatenations.

Torricelli entrusts to the first essays, and in particular to *Non per altro si restaura che per apprendervi: l’antico nelle città e nelle tradizioni del moderno*, 1991, the task of exposing his own interpretative line which «far from re-proposing the clash between innovators and conservators, between designers and restorers, wants to test the relationship between the old and the new as a specific theme of architecture»⁴. A theory that comes true in the design and research experiences conducted within the work group he coordinates on the subject of *Archaeology and architectural design* at the Politecnico of Milan, which were the original sparks of this reflection.

The analogy between project and archaeological excavation thus takes the form of a “going back” towards the past, in an “investigation” which, however, does not assume historical research as a means through which the project can learn about the past, but rather as the only possible access route to the present. A necessary act that aims to place the work in the history of

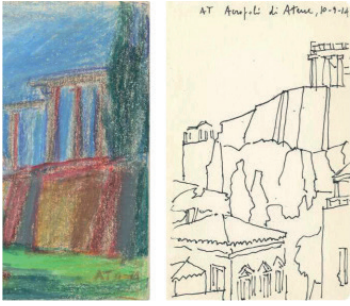


Fig. 1
Angelo Torricelli, Atene sketches, 1974 and 2014.

Fig. 2
Angelo Torricelli, Concorso per la valorizzazione dell'area archeologica "Aosta Est", 2018. General plan with shadows inside the plan of Roman Aosta, Angelo Torricelli (group leader), Giovanni Comi, Gianluca Sortino, Lorenzo Jurina, Cesare Taddia.



the place, as a new layer added to those that preceded it. It means tracing a method of reading the city and interpreting it as active memory: the time the author speaks of is not something finished in a past point, but a force that animates and feeds the present.

It is in this circularity that we understand how “making a project” is not only the natural extension of “knowing”, but the way able of offering an explanation of reality, beyond the appearance of things, to find «beyond the multiple formless, the first form, the origin not historical or genealogical, but substantial»⁵. That motion of proximity to the *arké*, at the origin not only located in a chronological past but contemporary with the historical becoming.

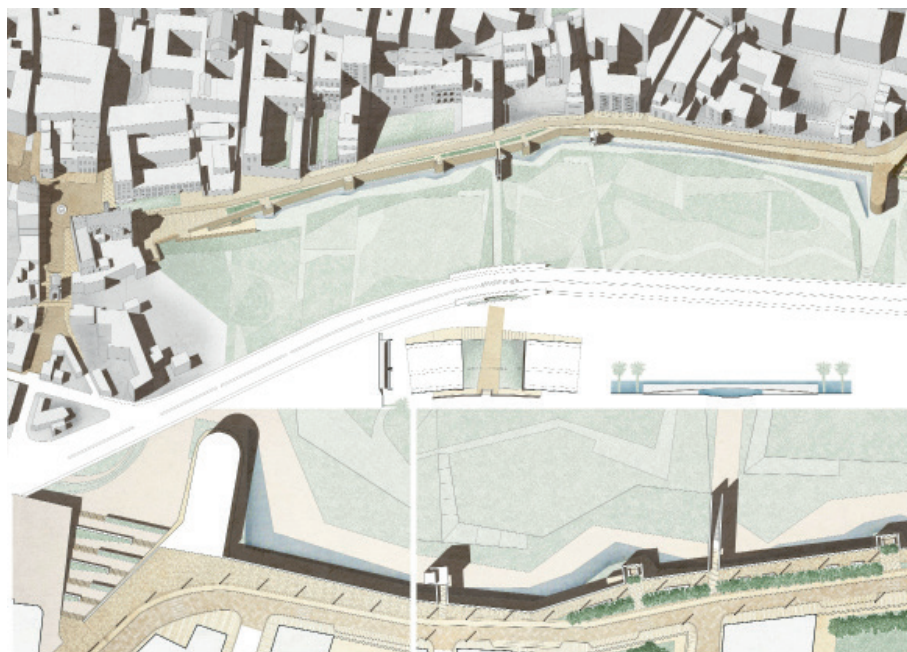
Proof of this is the fact that Torricelli speaks of the «potential for novelty enclosed in the vestiges of the past» with a humanistic attitude, a slow proceeding that studies the ancient or measures it without any form of sentimental admiration but in order to «understand which canons and which “rhymes” inform them»⁶. Expression of that “anachronistic” method – in the proper sense of *aná-krònos*, in contrast with one’s own time – through which to study, or read the city and architecture, beyond appearances, but also beyond history as a succession of events.

An operation that brings to light, starting from the reality of things, that condition of possibility which is such because it precedes reality and which only the “precise” drawing – because it eliminates what is superfluous – of the hand sketch is able to investigate⁷. The archaeological investigation is, in fact, always a search in the past for a possibility for the present.

Fig. 3

Angelo Torricelli, Concorso di idee per la riqualificazione del percorso delle antiche Mura del Carmine a Barletta, 2017. Axonometry, plan with shadows, plan and section details.

Angelo Torricelli (group leader),
Claudia Calice, Giovanni Comi.



From this thesis which is based on the «conviction that the past is modified by the present» as written by T.S. Eliot in *Tradition and individual talent*, Torricelli derives his reflection on time as an uninterrupted circle, in which ancient and contemporary are welded according to a conception of the past «which lives in memory and is continually rethought, recreated, reinvented». If the attempt to understand the present forces us to interrogate the past, it is equally true that the fraction of the past to which we address always depends on the present from which we move. A “revelation” that is achieved through the ability to see among the “gates still open” possibilities that, although never realized, show themselves as an alternative to the construction of the city, an opportunity to search for its authentic essence.

The choice of the title – almost in the form of an oxymoron, as Giuseppe Di Benedetto observes in the introductory essay to the book – precisely recovers this concept, dear to Torricelli, to express his own theory of composition which, in its operational meaning, must assume the burden of keep tensions together, never excluding complexity.

For many years a pupil of Torricelli, the writer is aware of his rigor and severity of judgement, the multidisciplinary nature of cultural, artistic, historical and literary references – citation as a re-enactment of the past – the idiosyncrasy for current events as simplification and subjection to contingencies.

For these reasons, *Il momento presente del passato* is a necessary book for architecture because it defines research as the temporal “gap” that allows for making appropriate choices with respect to reality and giving the project a predictive value in that it is capable of recognize the roots of one’s actions.

Notes

¹ Torricelli A. (2004) – *Conservazione e progetto*, now in Torricelli A. (2022) – *Il momento presente del passato. Scritti e progetti di architettura*, Franco Angeli, Milano, p. 45.

² Torricelli A. (2022) – *Op. cit.*, p. 7.

³ Didi-Huberman G. (2007) – *Storia dell’arte e anacronismo delle immagini*, (tit. orig. *Devant le temps. Histoire de l’art et anachronisme des images*, 2000), Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, p. 19.

⁴ Torricelli A. (1990) – *Non per altro si restaura che per apprendervi: l'antico nelle città e nelle tradizioni del moderno*, now in Torricelli A. (2022) – *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁵ Pigafetta G. (1990) – *Saverio Muratori architetto. Teoria e progetto*, Marsilio, Venezia, cited in Torricelli A. (1993) – *Goethe, Schinkel e il principe di Salina*, now in Torricelli A. (2016) – *Palermo interpretata*, LetteraVentidue, Siracusa, p. 55.

⁶ Cacciari M. (2019) – *La mente inquieta. Saggio sull'Umanesimo*, Einaudi, Torino, p. 52.

⁷ Some sketches and drawings taken from travel and study notebooks were exhibited in the exhibition of Angelo Torricelli, *Disegni dal confino & C.*, Palazzo Bocconi, Milano, from September 15th to October 5th, 2022.