

Carlo Quintelli Rereading Carlo Aymonino: a difficult but useful exegesis

Editors: *Orazio Carpenzano, Federico Morgia, Manuela Raitano*

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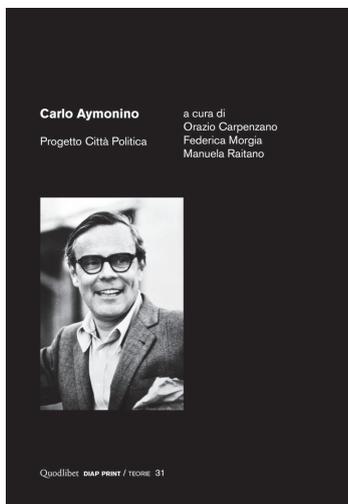
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Even at first glance, the volume *Carlo Aymonino. Progetto, Città, Politica* seems to spring from the climate of cultural effervescence promoted by Orazio Carpenzano at La Sapienza and in the Roman context, in particular regarding the themes of design research concerning the city, with respect to which Carlo Aymonino himself was a great promoter, inside and outside the academy. This is a complex book, the result of a twelve-tone chorus, specifically designed to capture the polysemy of the case through written essays, photographs of works, drawings, historical photos, and essays drawn in the key of a tribute to this important Italian master, a Roman lent to the Venetian school. The only thing missing, of course, are the video contributions, the sources of which are, however, reported, capable of corroborating the conference and the exhibitions that constitute the book's antecedents.

We are certainly facing a critical project capable, in the meantime, of bringing the figure of this master back into the realm of scientific perspective after the narrative and spectacular exhibition in 2021 at the Milan Triennale "Carlo Aymonino. Loyalty to betrayal". An idea of "betrayal" that also seems to resurface at times in this case but which in reality, as Luca Reale indirectly emphasises, I believe should be traced back to "a process of evolution and refinement" carried out by Carlo Aymonino's design research through an open dialectic between history, contexts, society, politics and obviously experimentation with form that becomes language but looking at the city, therefore free of self-referential drifts and eclectic reversals of direction.

The kaleidoscope of the 26 gazes turned to the Carlo Aymonino phenomenon stimulates curiosity to detect the orientation and consistency of the critical confrontation through the pre-ordained thematic sections given: "project, city and politics", certainly with blurred boundaries and even more so in this case.

The incipit is delineated by the sequence of key words dictated by Carpenzano where, not by chance, the first is "city, and the last, perhaps with less conviction, is "betrayal", almost as if to trace an initial series of clues useful for orientation, a viaticum for the design of a reasoned critical geography to be made.

After explaining the stimulating reasons for the invitation to “draw for Carlo Aymonino” in the form of a figurative homage, addressed to several no-longer-young Italian academics, the curator Manuela Raitano seems to adhere to Eisenman’s analytical sentiment that sees in Aymonino a drawing devoid of theoretical substance (unlike Rossi). An interpretation that leaves room for the hypothesis of an instrument that would be reduced to “playful insubstantiality” or at most to a moment of “intellectual curiosity”, perhaps failing to note that that *drawing-thinking* has often been an integral part of his most consistent theoretical essay.

The other co-curator, Federica Morgia, highlights the mine of experiences and materials that Carlo Aymonino’s life has given us and immediately emphasises his three fundamental theoretical texts: *Origini e sviluppo della città moderna*, *Il significato delle città*, and *Progettare Roma capitale*, to which I would add *La città di Padova*, a work no less decisive in Aymonino’s career, also because of how it affected the IUAV school and demonstrated his ability to organise his research activity in a collective key, that is, in a school key. As Caterina Padoa Schioppa emphasises, moreover, when she grasps Carlo Aymonino’s propensity to express a “group competence” in terms not only of research and school but also of project if we think of the Gallaratese or the laboratory for Roma Capitale.

Still in the preface, among the questions posed to the invited essayists regarding theoretical production, political commitment, and the search for language, the question of “betrayal”, inertia of the Milanese exhibition, emerges again, which from a debatable “alteration of the code” by Carpenzano comes to determine, according to Morgia “with respect to each completed project or to the feeling of disappointment with certain realisations” from which would derive the impossibility of producing epigones, according to a causal link that seems to me unproven even for other masters of his generation who have made the project a hermeneutic tool even before being a linguistic model.

In this volume, Rome, it must be said as well as expected, prevails over Venice in the essayistic arguments that attempt to explain Carlo Aymonino. Beginning with a Valerio Paolo Mosco who traces back to his uncle Piacentini the identity of an art nephew among the “last Italian architects to have had the courage to manifest an explicit figurative monumentality”, one that we struggle to see, however, as entirely internal to the dialectic of a plastic, artistic research derived from the references of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. Luca Porqueddu’s essay perhaps seems to better contemplate the degree of complexity that substantiates the figure of Carlo Aymonino, where he reverses the perspective starting from the datum of a studied city that “appears as the sediment of a problematic dialogue between politics, context, and project” within which the albeit significant “sculptural and objectual presence” of Aymonino’s project certainly does not renounce being “architecture as a critical moment” through which “to refine the dialectical sensitivity between reading and writing about the city”. As if to say, Rome is not enough, Venice is needed to understand Carlo Aymonino.

But the Venetian lesson Carlo Aymonino also invests in his political-administrative experience for Rome’s historic centre. I would almost say aware of the design paradox that Samonà uses to design the Venice of the future through the island Venice of the past, that of the ‘Novissime’ project for the Sacca del Tronchetto competition. A dialectical issue between the modernisation of the city and the preservation of its historical dimension

emphasised by Jean-Louis Cohen and taken up by Patrizia Gabellini when she recalls how Carlo Aymonino wanted in the case of Rome “to make the historical delay the occasion for the future progress of a different capital”. That of the Special Office for the Historical Centre, with the generous contribution of Raffaele Panella, was in fact a great participatory workshop, at the same time of political and planning elaboration, with an evident university derivation, capable of searching for a new authoritativeness of public government over the city, and therefore able to move, as Fabrizio Toppetti rightly points out, between ‘general inertia’, ‘maximalist benculturalism’, ‘mannerist environmentalism’ and ‘strong powers’. Then, of course, such a determined policy, Gabellini observes, cannot fail to make use of ‘vision’, the exercise of ‘power’ and last but not least the ability to ‘pilot’, and it is perhaps because of this last failing that an intellectual who does not betray himself like Carlo Aymonino will see most of the design proposals for Rome’s historic centre unimplemented. In this sense, I would not entirely agree with Rafael Moneo that the ideological political substratum of Carlo Aymonino, and of his generation, would have limited its scope in terms of architectural outcomes; on the contrary, it characterised its character of a critical operation in history, in the concrete not only physical and formal of the city, obviously with greater difficulties in terms of consensus and even more so in terms of the market.

The varied framework of the volume’s essayistic contributions is not lacking in curious and perhaps at times eccentric glances. The refined exegesis with a literary flavour developed by Pippo Ciorra to understand the expressive hedonism of Aymonino’s design brings us back to the Sheaffer fountain pens of Quaronian memory as the “distinctive sign” of a “way of thinking about architecture” that will direct the postmodernist figure between the north and south of Italian design culture. The comparison proposed by Sara Marini between Aymonino and De Carlo is difficult to make, and even more so between Pesaro and Urbino, for which the fact that they share a common administrative district is certainly not enough, due to the obvious differences in context, history and themes. Better is the comparison with Ungers of the “archipelago city” outlined by Gabriele Mastrigli, of a West Berlin that, notwithstanding “certain Koolhaasian scripts”, relates to the project-collage of East Rome by Carlo Aymonino and companions in terms of palimpsestic reality and dialectic of the parts.

Manuel Orazi’s reading of Aymonino’s speech and Rossi’s silence from the Gallaratese is no less than reductive, worse if traced back to the reasons of their professional fortune inversely proportional to their rate of eloquence (paradoxes of communication technique).

Finally, the essayistic task that should have argued the ambitious title ‘Fragile Colossi. The idea of monument in the work of Aymonino, Rossi and Canella’ by Luca Molinari, who indulges between the Cinecittà of ‘The Colossus of Rhodes’ talking about Aymonino’s Colossus, the ‘donchisottesque condition’ on the part of these masters when faced with a contemporary city they would not have understood, as far as that they were faced with the “need to give recognisable form to the new public architecture required by a political and social demand for new civil monuments to represent the Italy of the economic boom and uncontrolled urban growth”, as if civil values and economic boom could give rise to a common idea of monument all the more so in that historical ideological context. The ideas of monument in Rossi and especially in Canella seem to be postponed to another essay.

On a merely critical interpretative level, the drawings “for Carlo Aymonino” dedicated to the master add little, as they are either too homagable with refined Aymonino oleographies, including colossi, Gallaratese, archaeological oneiricism and Pesaro enclosures, or self-homage through celebration. A parade of beautiful drawings that would have amused CA but also, I think, pissed him off a bit for using the slang he was allowed to use. In any case, an attempt that is as promising as it is difficult, and certainly to be repeated with added direction.

In conclusion, what does this substantial critical restitution on Carlo Aymonino and his work tell us? It seems to me that Franco Purini sees it first and foremost as a good starting point for “outlining an exhaustive and carefully structured thematic map” of that master, involving a historical context to which he intensely related and in which he became a protagonist. But, adds Purini, starting from his formative genesis in relation to Muratorian theory, urban analysis, and the relationship between typology and morphology, he sought a “fruitful coincidence between architecture and the city”. Coming from him, who in the 1990s in his Venetian experience could be understood as the anti-Aymonino, this seems to me a credible statement that has certainly matured. All the more so today when the false currency, both ideological and architectural, of the *smart city* rather than the *urban jungle* to the point of preaching *the end of the city* requires tried and tested disciplinary antibodies of which Aymonino, among others of his generation, is certainly still a good repository. For an architecture-city relationship to be rediscovered, without which both terms lose their meaning, become something else.