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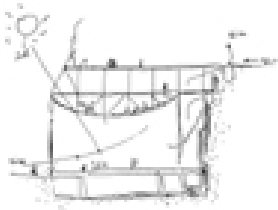
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Surface and Symbol: Giuseppe Terragni and the Architecture of Italian Rationalism

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In concluding his argument for a self-conscious local language, Kolb liberates us from fabricating a new first principle. We are at liberty to begin nesting in whatever place we find ourselves. His whole argument is remarkably pragmatic and mature in its avoidance of hellish or utopian polemics. Like Adolph Loos, Kolb's position is grounded in the present—the possibility of working within a nonutopian, yet critical program.

Any confusion about this book's proposal is the implication of a formal direction for critique. Philosophers think in linguistic rather than visual terms, and while the book does contain photographs, they are not significantly connected to the text. The reader may substantially question where the author might really be "at home." At one point he chastises Frampton for clinging to modernism a bit too tenaciously, a hint that Kolb does not object to the literal, historical signs that Frampton would dismiss as "scenographic." As a philosopher without experience in the material reality of making buildings, Kolb may not appreciate the possibilities for a "tectonic" expressiveness—Frampton's term for the poetics of construction.

But these concerns are the architect's desire for a visual manifesto. *Postmodern Sophistications* does succeed, with excellence, in offering the architect a serious place, *topos*, from which to make a formal critique—a place where the autonomy of high style is seriously challenged.

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Surface and Symbol: Giuseppe Terragni and the Architecture of Italian Rationalism

Thomas L. Schumacher

Princeton Architectural Press, 1991

295 pp., 457 illustrations

\$45.00 (cloth); \$29.95 (paper)

Arguably the most talented and original Italian architect of the period between the wars, Giuseppe Terragni has recently become the subject of a veritable cottage industry. Particularly since the sixties, the great Italian modernist has been discussed in countless articles, books, and symposia. The most recent and comprehensive of these investigations is Thomas Schumacher's *Surface and Symbol*. Schumacher is eminently qualified to undertake this investigation, having established himself as the author of a number of studies on the architecture of the period, most notably *The Danteum* (Rome, 1980; Princeton, 1985).

By applying what he calls a "post-CIAM" lens to Terragni, the author has attempted to give a balanced assessment of Terragni's oeuvre in the context of both the so-called heroic period of the modern movement in Europe and the highly politicized atmosphere of architectural production during Italian Fascism. In discussing the vicissitudes of Terragni's reputation, Schumacher polemically notes that as recently as 1987, on the occasion of a design competition sponsored by a prominent American professional journal, the otherwise astute jurors failed to acknowledge the striking resemblance of the winning entry to one of Terragni's projects. Given this perceived lack of recognizability of Terragni's works, the author declares his intention to firmly establish the architect as one of the great masters of European modernism, a status he has not yet fully achieved in Anglo-American circles. Thankfully, Schumacher has avoided the hagiographic overtones that have attended much Terragni scholarship, one of whose features has been a tendency to deny or pass over Terragni's devotion to Fascism. The author has also refused to join those Terragni scholars who have almost voyeuristically attempted to determine the cause of the architect's untimely death at the age of thirty-nine (whether from natural causes or suicide).

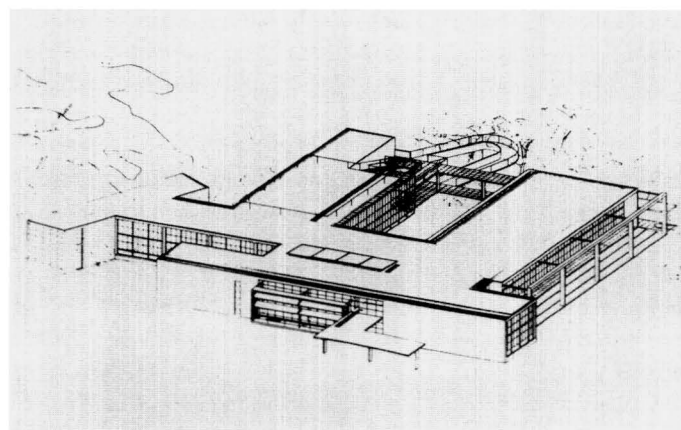
Although Terragni can claim only twenty-six built works (and about fifty unbuilt projects) in his brief fifteen-year career, his works do not always fit into precise stylistic categories, nor do they follow a neat linear progression from figuration to abstraction. Schumacher has confronted the problem of organization by arranging his material thematically in four major divisions: an outline of Terragni's life and a historiographic investigation into his reputation; a study of Terragni's evolution to modernism; an examination of the architect's major public buildings of the thirties, as well as his monuments and tombs; and an analysis of the mature work of what the author calls Terragni's International Style. In addition, useful appendices contain a chronological table of Terragni's major buildings and projects in relation to modern Italian architecture, modern history, and European and American architecture, as well as a list of built works and projects, a bibliography, and a map guide to Terragni's buildings.

The author leads the reader through the complexities of Italian architectural culture of the period, placing the rationalist movement in the context of Italian and European modernism. Schumacher correctly views the pervasive nationalism of the time in which Terragni worked as the continuation of the nationalism of Italy's post-unification period in the late nineteenth century and deftly explains the political, aesthetic, and semantic concerns that defined the architectural polemics of the Fascist years. In this context, Terragni's ardent Fascism is explained. However, by stating that "Terragni, like almost all in Italy, was duped by Mussolini" (p. 48), the author reduces the complex nature of Fascism and its widespread appeal to a facile argument.



1. Giuseppe Terragni, Stecchini Tomb, Como, 1930, side view.

Although the preface contains an apology for an “indulgence in formal analysis and speculation” (p. 8), one of the book’s greatest strengths is in fact Schumacher’s ability to elucidate Terragni’s design processes. There are especially compelling analyses of the architect’s best-known work, the Casa del Fascio in Como (1932–36), and the five Milan apartment houses of the thirties (designed with Pietro Lingeri), examples of the most advanced modernism in the Italian architecture of the period. Terragni’s interest in planarity, in evidence in these projects, is one factor that links his works to those of Le



2. Giuseppe Terragni, Sant'Elia Nursery School, Como, 1936–1937, axonometric.

Corbusier, and the author shows his skill at drawing comparisons of this kind. The shifted rectangle is another element central to an understanding of many of Terragni’s works, including his late masterpiece, the Sant’Elia Nursery School in Como (1936–37). This motif, the author explains, may have been a direct influence from the painter Mario Radice, a central figure in the group of Como abstractionists and the author of some of the interiors of the Casa del Fascio. That the architect was so influenced by abstract painting is interesting, because his own forays into that medium are characterized by a Novecento-inspired figuration. Indeed, Terragni was open to influence from a truly eclectic group of sources, including Michelangelo, Sant’Elia, Borromini, Novecento architect Giovanni Muzio, Vignola, Palladio, and various classical and medieval typologies.

In addition to these analytical expositions, the author also effectively summarizes the scholarly opinion on Terragni. This feature of the book is particularly helpful with regard to the more controversial of Terragni’s works, such as the Novocomum apartments in Como (1927–1929). There is no scholarly consensus about the sources of this lyrical rationalist work, and the reader is left to ponder the possible influences from Golossov, Sartoris, Gropius, Mendelsohn, and Caranchini, architect of the building adjacent to the Novocomum. Schumacher convinces us, however, that these sources are ultimately “remote and abstract.” He does see a more general influence, that of the Venetian palace type, on many of Terragni’s works, including the Casa del Fascio, the Sant’Elia Nursery School, and the Casa Rustici apartments in Milan. In an analysis of the latter, the author examines Terragni’s literal reading of the metaphorically open Venetian porch and explains the convergences between the two different building

typologies, the Venetian palazzo and the bourgeois urban apartment block.

While the author weaves into his text a reasoned discussion of the powerful Marcello Piacentini, a proponent of monumental classicism and the influential editor of *Architettura*, he takes a polemical stance against the “rhetorical cartoons of the *Piacentiniani*” (p. 170). This position leads Schumacher to deny some of the important traditional architecture produced by Terragni’s contemporaries. For example, the author’s otherwise thorough analysis of the famous competition for the Palazzo Littorio (National Fascist Party Headquarters) understandably centers on Terragni’s entries but does not provide an illustration of the winning design by “monumentalist” architects Del Debbio, Foschini, and Morpurgo.

Throughout the book the author makes a convincing case for Terragni as a contextual designer. However, this position is difficult to sustain in relation to Terragni’s urban planning designs. In particular, his unbuilt intervention for the Cortesella quarter of Como placed modernist housing elements in the heart of the city’s dense medieval fabric. Even if, as Schumacher notes, Terragni sited the tallest slabs in the center of the scheme to create the least disturbance to the existing area, this project should be seen as very close in conception to the architect’s CIAM-inspired project for the Rebbio satellite town, designed in collaboration with Alberto Sartoris.

It must be noted that the book contains an inexcusable number of misspellings and editorial infelicities. In addition, in comparing the Novocomum apartments to the Palazzo Gualino in Turin by Pagano and Levi-Montalcini, the author mistakenly refers to the latter as an apartment house when it is in fact a significant example of the modern Italian office building. Last, mention should be made of the awkward placement at the beginning of the chapter devoted to the Casa del Fascio of an English translation of Terragni’s lengthy report on that building (originally published in a monograph issue of *Quadrante* in 1936). This eighteen-page text breaks the continuity of Schumacher’s narrative and would have been more serviceable as an appendix. These shortcomings, however, are minor compared to the considerable contribution this book makes to the literature on Terragni. Beautifully produced according to the distinctive graphic design standards of the Princeton Architectural Press and containing a wealth of excellent illustrations, *Surface and Symbol* will surely establish itself as the definitive study in English of this great master of twentieth-century modernism. The author has succeeded in writing a challenging and thoughtful study of an architect whose formidable complexity and talent continue to fascinate.

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Urban Concepts

Denise Scott Brown

St. Martin’s Press, 1990

96 pp.

\$19.95 (paper)

In the preface to this collection of essays in the *Architectural Design Profile* series, Denise Scott Brown tells us that most of her professional life “has been spent trying to connect urban thought with architecture” and that the key to understanding the work of Venturi Rauch & Scott Brown is to see it as having been derived from urban theory—a theory that elicits the determinants of urban form and then interprets them from a designer’s perspective.

In the first and most autobiographical essay, “Between Three Stools,” Scott Brown provides a fascinating and pleasantly rambling discussion of the intellectual circumstances behind the great rift between architecture and planning that now characterizes most urban design education and practice in the United States. It is told from the viewpoint of her experiences as a young architect, raised in Africa, studying at the Architectural Association in London in the early fifties and teaching at the University of Pennsylvania in the late fifties and early sixties, at Berkeley and UCLA in the mid-sixties, and at Yale and Rice toward the end of that decade before her full-time commitment to professional practice with Robert Venturi after 1970. She is uniquely qualified to tell this story, not only because she was there and reached her own intellectual maturity while it was occurring, but also because she takes no side and sees the conflict from the perspective of one for whom there is no struggle—only a seamless fabric of thought and action.

At its worst, the rift can be characterized as naive aesthetic visionaries on one side and boring analytical statisticians on the other; at its best, it is the conflict between form and content or even essence and existence. Scott Brown describes how difficult it is to bridge the gap, to inject a detailed understanding of urban dynamics into the visions of designers, and to infuse socioeconomic analysis with a dose of aesthetic substantiality:

A poignant confrontation took place one day in a faculty meeting, sadly far from students. It was between Kahn and Anthony Tomazinis, a transportation engineer and planner on the faculty at Penn. The issue was roughly between artistry and scientific rigor. Each was diehard in his view and their dedication to the professions was equivalent. Lou saw their differences most perceptively; “We have reverence for different things. He for books, I for architecture.” Each resented interference from others in what he was most personally invested in. “You can’t