

The role of phenomenology in the formation of the Italian Neo-Avant Garde

(Interview: Milan, June 30, 2000)

Interview with Vittorio Gregotti

Jorge Otero-Pailos



Vittorio Gregotti, left, with Jorge Otero-Pailos.

Vittorio Gregotti (b. 1927), one of the principal figures of the Italian Neo-Avant Garde, is best known for his defense of historical interpretations and contextual references in design. His writings and buildings were instrumental both in the revision of some of Modernism's foundational myths and in the spectacular rise of Postmodernism during the late 1960s and 1970s. Because the focus of attention has been on the heated debates of his generation with the older masters such as Le Corbusier (1887-1965), Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe (1886-1969), and Ernesto N. Rogers (1909-1969), historians have often overlooked some of the intellectual threads linking the two sides. In this interview, Gregotti discusses their shared commitment to interdisciplinary work, and their common interest in history. In addition, in recounting this little known chapter of architecture's intellectual history, Gregotti identifies the importance of phenomenology as an intellectual framework that helped articulate exchanges between disciplines and generations.

Jorge Otero-Pailos (JO): Would you say that the journal *Casabella* was a vehicle for disseminating phenomenology within the post-war Italian architectural discourse?

Vittorio Gregotti (VG): Certainly, because [Enzo] Paci was present on the editorial staff. Besides, Ernesto Rogers, director of *Casabella* between 1953 and 1963, was a great friend of Enzo Paci.

JO: How was this relationship between phenomenology and architecture established? Who were the protagonists?

VG: The reasons [for this relationship] are many. But, in any case, there is another figure that I think you should take into account: Giulio Carlo Argan. The book that he had written in those years on the Bauhaus explained [Walter] Gropius's position from a Husserlian point of view, even if Gropius himself was not conscious of it—at least I don't think so. In any case, I think it is valuable to observe Argan's interpretation of this subject carefully. His analysis is especially sharp in the introduction of the book, [but] the historical part is more conventional. In the introduction he tries to explain the question of the Bauhaus from a phenomenological point of view; why it was constituted and what relationships it had.

JO: In your book *New Directions in Italian Architecture* (1968) you identify Argan as one of the important forces who, together with philosophers [Theodor] Adorno and [Enzo] Paci, spurred Casabella's critique of Modernism during the post-war era. What made Argan different from other historians and architects of the time?

VG: Argan is an art historian who had a unique position within the Italian academy, which in those years was influenced primarily by [Benedetto] Croce. Argan appealed to another school [of thought], more influenced by a critical version of German philosophy, including Marxism, which attempted to reconstitute legitimacy to the avant-garde. There was also a French influence through Lionello Venturi. One could even see this in his [Argan's] way of writing. If you read the Crocians, their reflection is of a different nature—even from the stylistic point of view—and has other references; a case in point is Bruno Zevi's history of architecture.

From the post-war on he [Argan] was politically engaged with the left. In this sense he was very influential for the history and criticism of architecture and for its treatment of the themes of ideology and language. For example, I think that Manfredo Tafuri, who most certainly for my generation has been the most important historian of architecture, derives from Argan's thought and develops the problem of architecture itself as ideology.

Argan knew Heidegger well. He wrote a book entitled *Progetto e Destino* [1965] that was typically Heideggerian. Therefore, this—let's call it—German matrix, was important for Argan. In short, these were the two trends.

JO: How did you meet Enzo Paci and his circle?

VG: It is a little complicated. Just prior to graduating, I was in Rogers's studio as an intern. Rogers was very good friends with Paci. The two men had known each other since the Resistance and had spent time together as refugees in Switzerland. When Rogers started *Casabella* in 1953, Paci was one of the people that immediately joined the editorial board.

Having finished my degree the year before, I went to take Paci's philosophy lessons. There I met some of his students, including Enrico Filippini (who was the Italian translator of Husserl), Giulio Neri (who then became involved in aesthetics), and many others. They had constituted a small commune. They all lived together, with their girlfriends, in a big apartment.

In a sense, this is the way in which this relationship was born among many of them and the circle surrounding the journal *Casabella* and, in the years after 1960, with the journal *Edilizia Moderna*.

readings

JO: Did Rogers attend these discussions too?

VG: No. It was a very informal rapport among young students who related not just on the intellectual level, but also on the level of life. One of Paci's students, Salvatore Veca, who is now the director of the Feltrinelli Foundation, was particularly interested in architecture. When we began our different university careers, we often held seminars together. I went to lecture in his class, and he came to mine.

JO: What themes were discussed between architects and philosophers?

VG: We sought to establish the problem of our experiences as practicing architects at that time. For example, we discussed the problem of architecture's relationship with tradition and with history in general—a question that had remained suspended at the time when the tradition of Modernism was forming. Then, Modernism came to be particularly opposed to history as academy, and began arguing for history as present. Subsequently, discussions on the relation between artistic language, the political left, and ideology became central. Furthermore, in Italy, at the end of the fifties, one became aware of consumer culture and its problems, of the influence of American sociology on the Frankfurt School, and many other themes. It was from these debates, which were held first with Paci and his circle and then with other groups such as those around Umberto Eco, Edoardo Sanguineti, or Nanni Balestrino, that the Gruppo 63 was born.

JO: Did architects always return to the philosophers as a point of reference or departure?

VG: The philosophers were important for the architects of the sixties, as I have tried to convey, in terms of our collective work. It was this Pacian idea of relationism, the notion that you must first know your own identity as different from that of the other, which is, in a sense, foundational to the discussions I was referring to earlier. To engage in a relationship does not mean agreeing, but, rather, it means establishing differences, elaborating upon these differences, to discover our own identity in the other. This was Paci's idea. It also became the idea of his students and part of the thinking of those around them. The idea allowed, even required, our relationship, because I might be an architect with my problems, and you might be a philosopher with yours. So, let us see what our distance is, and what we can do to measure it. Then, we can each use this difference to build that which is useful and necessary.

JO: Was there opposition to this dialogue?

VG: There was, above all, the opposition of those architects that remained active from the past political régime, and also the opposition of those who were indifferent. Then there was also that of the orthodox masters, even though the Communist Party was, at the time, rich in internal critiques.

JO: All the people we have been discussing were in some way or another related to *Casabella*. What role did the journal play in these exchanges between generations and disciplines?

VG: Without a doubt, there was tension among the two generations. We were searching for a certain experimental direction. But then, a preoccupation would always arise: What will Rogers think of this? And what will the entire line-up of great masters think? We always had this problem of having to justify ourselves, because, as a small group working on *Casabella*, we had international contacts in the fifties, at a time when this was unusual in Italy. For example, I had to confront their [the masters'] opinion about our work when I went to the CIAM [VIII] at Hoddesdon.

But in all fairness, Rogers was a great mediator in this international world, because he understood that in Italy there were certain types of tensions derived from ideas which stood between us, but that at the international level there was a middle generation that wanted to use the outcome of rationalism positively, even at the expense of transforming the ideals of Modernism in a practical sense. Then, there was a small attempt to exit this model on the part of my generation, which was ten to fifteen years younger.

JO: Rogers helped introduce the new generations to the international sphere then?

VG: Absolutely yes. He had a very strong role in introducing us to international relationships and in establishing a series of international exchanges.

JO: At that time, the question of architecture's autonomy was also a highly debated issue. How was this idea articulated among interdisciplinary groups?

VG: Rogers's thinking concerned the issue of autonomy in itself. It dealt with what we called the concept of "material." That is, that one would have to be very open to materials that came, not only from the physical world of building but also those that came more gen-

erally from culture. And these materials should all be valid elements in making an architectural project. Then, when the project is built, when it is given form, it becomes evident that the resulting architectural element is itself autonomous as a discipline. Without the presence of these materials, the project could not be built.

The debate between the autonomy and heteronomy of artistic production was very much alive in those years. Personally, I had just published a book in 1966 entitled *Il Territorio dell'architettura* in which I dealt with this and other questions. One chapter was dedicated to the problem of the relationship of architecture to history, another to the issue of large scale, and yet another to the relationships of types to meanings.

JO: What relation is there between your own ideas on this issue and Rogers's concept of "environmental pre-existences"?

VG: To a degree, he understood it stylistically. That is, he thought that one should find an agreement with what existed before. His problematic was born with CIAM [VIII] Hoddesdon in 1951 where the issue of "the core of the city" was discussed—how to act within the heart of a historic European city and in relation to it, not against it. It was an important turn in the ideology of the Modern. Naturally, very different opinions were born from these discussions. We sought to extend his [Rogers's] dictum and to shift the issue towards the general relation between modernity and history: continuity and discontinuity within history; belonging and internationalism; the new and modification. The project emerged gradually in the form of a dialogue between the new and the existing; a dialogue, that is, between different people which must, however, keep in mind both the one and the existence of the other. Architecture is a way of rethinking that relationship, of filling it without crossing over towards conciliation.

JO: How did the interest of Italian architects in phenomenology relate to the broader European, post-war fascination with existentialism?

VG: The question of the relationship between phenomenology and existentialism was an issue that was treated many times in *Aut Aut*, Paci's journal. Traditionally, Italian culture has maintained a relationship with France. I spoke French as a second language. France was the first foreign place I went to, that was in 1947. It was easy to meet Sartre and the great protagonists in cafés or at friends' houses. We also all spoke French much better than English. Then, there was the very strong rapport with [Maurice] Merleau-Ponty, in particular. Once, with Paci, I met Merleau-Ponty in Paris. Merleau-Ponty also came to give lectures in Milan. Many of Paci's students worked on Merleau-Ponty during

those years. The question of perception, as well as the writings on Cézanne, spoke of many themes close to architecture. Naturally, I tell you these experiences with all the sketchiness of someone who is a mason, not a philosopher.

JO: Our discussion has made me think of the problem of inter-subjectivity. In your texts you make oblique references to this problem when you describe the difficult relationships between elite architects and the working classes for which they had to build in the post-war.

VG: Yes, this was a problem that was discussed a lot, especially in relation to the notion of the physical environment as an indispensable element in its [inter-subjectivity's] function.

JO: I'm wondering if the attention given to inter-subjectivity was not in fact a mechanism of idealization and universalization of otherness, instead of a true attempt at understanding and opening up towards the other.

VG: In this sense, one must turn again to Adorno. In 1967, at the inaugural lecture of the *Deutsche Werkbund*, Adorno says precisely, concerning the issue of "Functionalism Today," that there exists a particular contradiction within architecture. He speaks of the autonomy of architecture. He speaks of the fact that architecture must be independent. But, at the same time, it cannot be, because it always has finality.

The other is not conscious of that which is necessary to our own path, in our specific field. It is the capitalist society that impedes understanding. The task of architecture, as an artistic practice, is to reveal an aspect of it to the other. Adorno said that society is in such a state of contradiction that the critical function of an artist is to make society itself discover what its true interest is. This means the unveiling, therefore, of a typical contradiction in the work of negative thought. On the other hand, it is a contradiction that we hold as very present, even today.

JO: To whom are you referring when you say "we"?

VG: I am referring to some of the architects who worked in Milan, Rome, and Venice, and also at universities during those years; to this group of architects, and to this somewhat strange group of intellectuals that I came in contact with during this period. The phenomenon of interconnection with other intellectuals suffered a marked decline after the end of the sixties. That is, after the explosion of 1968, all this did not remain together. In reality, this entire problem was a discussion

that began in the second half of the fifties and that lasted until the first half of the sixties. During those ten years, there was this strange case in which, particularly in Milan (we can say also a little bit throughout Italy) there was this whole attempt to put ideas and relationships together in an effort to understand what the correct path was.

JO: Were Adorno's objections to phenomenology known?

VG: Certainly after the end of the fifties, as well as his differences with [Walter] Benjamin on the one hand and with Heidegger on the other. Heidegger was strongly ostracized in Italy until the end of the fifties because of his political commitments and also because of the unjustified identification of him with irrational positions. He began to have a great influence in Italy, I would say, after the end of the sixties. I wrote my first book, *Il Territorio dell'architettura* [1966] citing Heidegger, and I was criticized because of it.

JO: Can one say that phenomenology is dead?

VG: Can one say that Aristotle is dead? I don't know. It is part of our Western culture, and in particular of the European tradition of critical reason; and I hope it is not altogether dead. Husserl writes about very precise things when he says that we all speak the "European language," meaning that we all come from the tradition of critical reason. This critical reason can assume different forms and diverse interpretations in history. In this sense, yes, it is true that no one today speaks of phenomenology, but it is part of European history, part of our tradition. I think it is important not to forget it.