

The school within the school

Carlo Cocchia at the Politecnico di Milano (1959-1961)

Initial waves of crisis and student unrest in Italian architecture schools during the 1950's found temporary respite in the alternative courses produced from within contested educational structures. One of these courses was the design studio taught by Carlo Cocchia at the Politecnico di Milano from 1959 to 1961.

In a cultural landscape still rife with academicism, the course led by Cocchia was characterized by a strong sense of responsibility towards the country's everyday problems. It postulated a pedagogical structure aimed at forming architects capable of thinking critically and anticipating the challenges of contemporary society.

The course themes produced a strong effect within the existing system: "the dominant praxis of ex-tempore exercises and obscure themes radically opposed the rigorous methodology and scientific approach to themes of political and social reality."¹ In the two academic years that Cocchia taught the course at the Faculty of Architecture in Milan, Giorgio Morpurgo (1959-60) and Cesare Blasi (1960-61) were his assistants while Bico Begioioso, Carlo Guenzi, Ugo La Pietra, Alberto Seassaro and Cesare Stevan participated - among others - as students.

Cocchia's course methodology was defined by two distinct operations. A first phase focused on the analysis of existing buildings with the objective of recognizing the genesis of the project and the relation between the built form and its graphic representation. A second segment was dedicated to the gradual development of an original design that advanced in-depth analysis, a preliminary architectural project and detailed construction drawings.

The 1959-1960 course was dedicated to the design of an elementary school. The subject was approached broadly to include questions that went beyond architecture: the pedagogical theories of John Dewey and Jean Piaget, the functional and logistic underdevelopment of Italian schools, the challenge of social integration, as well as the study of positive foreign models, in particular English and American progressive schools. Student projects took part in a competition organized by the *1960. XII Triennale di Milano* dedicated to the subject of Home and School; a group of Cocchia's students won a first prize.

Coherent to the needs of developing small to mid size settlements and strengthening local communities that Italy sought in its long post-war reconstruction effort, Cocchia's 1960-1961 course addressed issues of rural construction and community development. The theme was approached by direct engagement with the territorial reality and the design of mid-scale rural settlements.

¹ Cesare Blasi e Gabriella Padovano in Gabriella Caterina e Massimo Nunziata (eds.), *Carlo Cocchia, cinquant'anni di architettura, 1937-1987*, Sagep editori, Genova, 1987, p. 23.

Cocchia's pedagogical proposal can be read in relation to the student movement's first demands—as early as 1950—which voiced a need to focus on the problems facing Italian society. In effect, in 1963, within the context of the first countrywide occupation of architecture schools and in a climate of effervescence of ideas, Cocchia articulated a series of indications for the reorganization of Italian faculties. It was a realistic proposal, based on an effective prospect of change, and strongly indebted to the positions of Ernesto Nathan Rogers and Gio Ponti: the creation of a professionally-minded architecture school dedicated to addressing society's concrete problems and issues that, while being independent, maintained a connection to the country's productive forces.

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