

# Interpretation, Mediation, Narrative in Architecture

Pietro Derossi

The word city, in the sense of a unity of intents and form, does not correspond to any of the contemporary conurbations which have exploded in a thousand different directions, under the influence of a proliferation of relations and tensions; the word city has been replaced by the word metropolis (or megalopolis) which opens disturbing perspectives and excludes reassuring orders and recompositions. The great *récit* of the Modern Movement has broken down, and we find ourselves immersed in the maelstrom of fragments and differences. Together with that of the linguistic metaphor of the city, there also has been a breakdown of the legitimisation of civil behaviour and the sense of human activity; work and production are propagated without credible objectives, driven by rules of trade and finance. This overall condition creates a scenario of nihilism, in which the motivations of life are dispersed and in which all moral and political values are shattered.

At the turn of the century nihilism played an important role as an influence on art forms. **?** Art, inasmuch as it is an intention to communicate, loses all motivation when faced with the profound conviction of the emptiness of existence. The response of the avant-gardes in the field of the figurative arts was particularly explicit and radical. Paradoxically, the protagonists of these movements found themselves committed to communicating the impossibility of communication. The field in which the destructive effects were felt was that of language. **?** Language was denied its right to convey meanings and, thus weakened, was reduced to the level of a provocative game of nonsensical manipulation of meanings. This voyage away from reality for the purpose of throwing light on the decline of meaning in all social

**The choice of figuration, the choice of giving form to the object and therefore of arresting the complex process of thought in its investigation of context, history, architecture, subjectivity (including of course, my own history), is a troubling act because it includes the awareness of an exclusion.**

relations passed from Cubism, Surrealism, Abstraction to Pop Art and finished, we might say, with Conceptual Art, whose aim is to affirm the tautological destiny of any type of expression. A voyage and a defence, as Vattimo points out in *Poesia e ontologia*, a defence against the frustration caused by the loss of motivation to produce a discourse aimed at founding new social relationships. Having acknowledged the impossibility of art to promote a meaning for society, the only salvation is escape to a place protected from the practical demands of the world: a place in which one is permitted to play with the indistinct variations of language without having to deal with the disintegration of the forms and values of the metropolitan process. The posture produces and reinforces the idea of the autonomy of artistic action, an autonomy which is explicitly declared and pursued with continuous dislocations, shifts, digressions, ruptures (interesting parallels could be drawn with the Romantic Spirit, which had already announced the demise of art). This interpretation of the avant-garde in terms of nihilistic escape does not describe the entire scenario of artistic activity during the first part of our century: there were also utopian propositional efforts, but in order to examine this other scenario it is necessary to leave the field of the figurative arts and look at the field of architecture.

Architecture, in fact, took a different sort of voyage in temporal space. Contemporary to the works of Duchamp, from the followers of Art Nouveau to the great Expressionist revolution, the proto-rationalism born in Germany and in England led, through the initiatives of the Werkbund and later the Bauhaus, to the great propositions of the Modern. The Modern Movement, which from the twenties on transmitted its message to the entire Western world (with many, complex differences, from Functionalism to organicism and neoplasticism, etc.) presented itself as a great force to replace the bourgeois world of the nineteenth century. It is also a rather delirious force which, with a great sense of drama, as Giulio Carlo Argan has pointed out, defines precise lines of renewal subsumed in a new, general formalisation.

But we can also point out that beneath the propositional Utopia of the Modern we can glimpse the

**?** *Would this be the same nihilism as the nihilism of the megalopolis? Then an attitude emanating from a highly intelligent observation, now appearing as a normalised condition: a mere social outcome of a dated prophecy?*

**!** *Citing Wittgenstein, we can think of language as a city, and the city as a language. The megalopolis speaks a disturbing language, suggesting the vanity of existence, opening the way for nihilist thought. Nihilism is not 'intelligent observation', it is existential temptation. The artist is a metropolitan man who narrates his experiences, speaks of his life. To speak, as an artist, of nihilism appears to be a paradox. This speech is possible to the extent that nihilism is not identified with the absolute. A small peephole remains, through which to shout our suffering, our stupor, our nostalgia. A moment before the silence falls.*

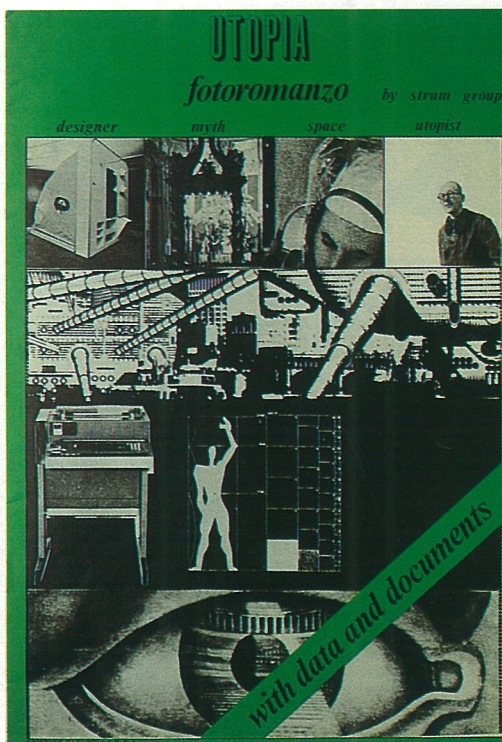
**?** *Wouldn't it be more appropriate to say that language constitutes the domain in which these effects came to light? The effects however have been felt outside that domain. Linguistics at least could find consolation in the thought of having conducted research into a biological instrument for survival in evolution (Fritz Mauthner). Art and ethics however were left (out) in the cold.*

**!** *I find it difficult to distinguish between language and its effects. We might ask if language speaks of art, or is the art itself. I lean in the direction of the latter. Concepts and things (including works of architecture) exist when they take form, when they express themselves as language. Furthermore – can an ethics exist which is not expressed, not communicated through its form, its language?*

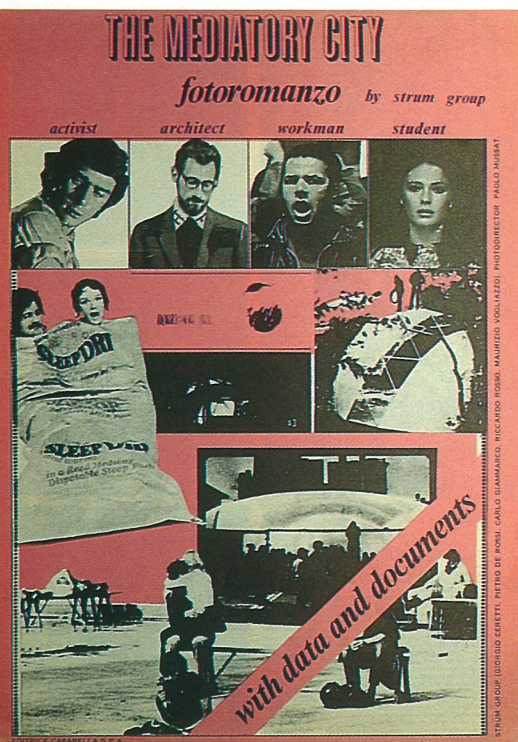


spectre of nihilism. To the extent in which one seeks to respond to an overall ideological crisis produced by a real situation of social transformation with a drastic breaking away from processes in progress in favour of the harmonious dream of a radical alternative, all references to history will be annulled, and with them the possibility of establishing a dialogue with the human experiences of the present and the past. Nihilism has to do with Utopia in the sense that it uses Utopia to give credibility, through hope, to the acceptance of a constituent negativity.

While this may be a simplified scenario (overlooking all of the crossover positions and contaminations between these two extreme positions) of the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, we can also note that today a transformation has occurred, almost an exchange of positions. While in the figurative arts there has been a softening of the destructive afflatus and a move in the direction of dialogue, or even narrative (consider the German neo-Expressionist movements or the Trans-avant-garde, or the most recent works of conceptual artists like Kosuth or Paolini), the architecture of the seventies



Strum Group (Pietro Derossi et al), picture story made for the exhibition 'New Italian Landscape (special issue *Casabella*), Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1972



'Pratone', a 'natural' armchair in polyurethane (with Gorgio Ceretti and Riccardo Rosso), 1966

? There was also a trend that abandoned utopian schemes, wasn't there, not because of their inner philosophical logic, but because of the disastrous effects on the quality of daily life? Simply because hopes weren't realised. Architects such as De Carlo, Hertzberger, Erskine etcetera implemented a scaling-down, preserving the spirit of hope at the same time. What space/place do you allocate this tradition in your historical perspective? Don't these architects matter, really?

! Nietzsche, inviting us to 'return to things', is inviting us to recompose philosophic thinking on the basis of experience. This does not mean that thought must become real: it means that thought must be based on reality. This is both its limit and its strength. Reality is full of hopes and desires. Of the three architects mentioned, Erskine is the one I find most interesting. I have always followed his work with attention. I like his experimentalism, his pragmatic stance, his ability to enter into the specifics of a time and place. What, at times, distances me from Erskine is the excess of signs, the disruptive expressivity which surreptitiously claims an autonomous role: an internal quality which is pleased with its own excellence, at the expense of communication. In any case, he is a great master.

has abandoned all of its utopian pretences, full of references and commitment to a process of reinvention of urban life, repositing itself as an autonomous discipline, selfreferential, which takes place in situations which are sheltered from the chaos of social events; or, in any case, it is the architecture which operates in this scenario which has been successful both in terms of criticism and of public attention. The most important protagonists of this approach on the part of architecture to the issues of the figurative avant-garde is, as is well known, Aldo Rossi. With a penetrating, precise critique of the simplificationary degenerations of the descendants of the Modern, Rossi shifts our attention toward the specific language of the discipline in order to reveal its historical genesis, internal rules, permanent features, analogies. With this approach, his works present themselves as essential, nearly sacred objects, expressing an enchantment far from the complex business of living. This is a surreptitious return to the sort of nihilism which declares, although nostalgically, that all is in vain and destined to die. There are also other tendencies in today's architecture which are a part of this neo-avant-garde scenario. So-called high-tech architecture, for example, extracts from the complexity of the reflections on the role of technical progress in society (one thinks of Heidegger's essay *The Question of Technique*, in which technique is considered as the concrete expression of the realisation of the metaphysical, and therefore also becomes the central theme for a revision/distancing from idealistic philosophies); extracts, we were saying, a partial, perhaps banal, aspect: the possibility of reducing an edifice to an assemblage of structural elements. The quality of high-tech architecture is identified with the celebration of those technical inventions which exalt the excellence of construction procedures. Once again,



the complexity of the metropolis is excluded from the design, its disturbing presence is ignored. Another very similar operation is that of the 'deconstructors': having accepted, in the same manner as Rossi's argument, the possibility of treating the linguistic specificities of architecture in an autonomous way, the deconstructors dismember language into a sequence of signs (those typical of the Modern) and the activity of the architect becomes that of manipulating the compositional rules which traditionally correspond to these signs.

It is legitimate to recognise, in these three predominant trends in contemporary architecture, a common matrix which is that of the rediscovery of the postures of the historical avant-gardes: an exclusion of the idea of any responsibility, on the part of architecture, for the concrete problems of habitation, and of any temptation to enter into a dialogue with the reality of the metropolis. But this escape into the manipulation of references no longer has the destructive force of the classical avant-gardes, which at least could recognise an enemy to be destroyed: the positivist optimism of the end of the nineteenth century. The manipulation of signs, their reduction to the level of symbols which communicate the impossibility of communication, today becomes an accepted paradox, strategically useful to passively respond to the demands of professional activity. The neo-avant-garde does not create ruptures or dismay; it becomes academic, standard operating procedure. It is within the open space of critical reflection on the self-referential involution of the Modern that the seduction of hermeneutic thought has taken hold.

Hermeneutics has suggested the possibility of not attempting to respond to the nihilism intrinsic to the explosion of the metropolitan condition, to which the decline of the credibility of strong, unitary thought corresponds, neither with a resistance to the frailty of the ideals of the 'polis', defending the utopian tradition of the Modern, nor by accepting the repression of any rapport with the 'living tissue', seeking refuge in the abstract sign of a language reduced to the level of an accumulation of demotivated symbols. Beyond this radical set of alternatives, hermeneutics opens up the possibility of mediation.

370 ***In deconstructive action nihilism and utopia lose their destructive force and reveal their impotence. Nihilism and utopia are a luxury we can no longer afford, or which is no longer permitted.***

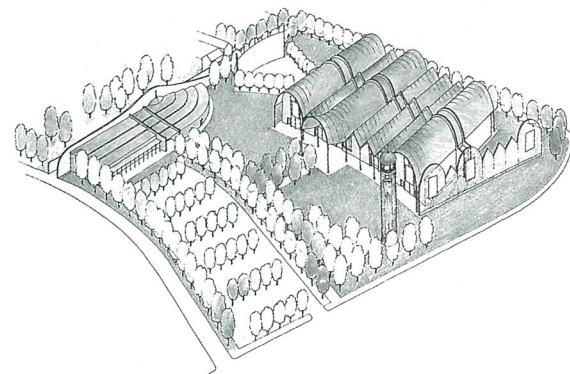
The dizzying dispersion of the metropolis – and of the theories on the destiny of the city – can be seen as a condition of the present which is full of seductive possibilities. The first step is that of accepting the impossibility of compressing the entire metropolis into a unitary framework: of compressing it into an absolute negativity, or of celebrating it as the realisation of the overall dispersion of events in an abstract triumph of pluralism. It is precisely this 'impossibility' that reveals the indications which can open the way for an operative path which takes into account, with all of its problems, the rapport between the parts and the whole. If we accept the fact that the occasional nature of a part does not exclude the presence/absence of the whole, we can define this open, disturbing partiality as the context of the project; attributing a literary sense to the term context, that which is found in the text (fabric, narrative, specificity, language) of the city.?

In order to make this approach to architecture explicit we can outline an imaginary design process. The request of the client, which constitutes the opportunity or occasion, is to design the completion, the restructuring, the improvement of a portion of the city. The first operation for the architect is to 'visit' the place (not any place, but *the* place) which displays its characteristics, some of them explicit, others latent, others indecipherable. A cognitive itinerary begins which opens a thousand queries: the history, the functions, the social customs, the predominant formal factors, the rhythms of the fabric, etcetera. Certain themes (few) finish in the place, others reach out into a network of connections: the history of the place into the history of the city; the architectural forms into the other similar situations located in nearby or faraway places; the functions into discussions which examine or seek to transform attitudes and behaviours; the economic pressures into the politics of the city, etcetera. The place, with its character and its reference, is the context of the project, a context in which, and from which, the place opens out toward a pluralism of relations which propel it into the entire city, into thought. A network of tensions, desires, thoughts expands out of the place into the world of life. The architect, a subject engulfed by the objectivity of the context, places his conditioned subjectivity in play. The condition of the project takes the form, even if there is attention paid to history and tradition, of a conflict, a difficulty, a

? You don't wish to allay complexity by means of artificial and simplistic order. Nor will you accept complexity as an accomplished fact which annuls our influence. You are active 'somewhere in between', halfway between God and Chaos. What is it like? Do you really conceive of this position as a 'between'? Or is it an alternative: a third position?

! My position aims at remaining 'between', but not between Chaos and God (which are the same, being disorder and absolute order). The 'between' I am seeking (I yearn for) is that of the circularity of thought between the part and the whole, the hermeneutic circle. The part is the opportunity for the design, in the here and now; the whole is the mystery of the metropolis, the 'free vastness of the land'. Two complexities which relate to one another in an endless process. The creative act, the design, is a mediation which does not permit itself general orders, absolute rules, great negations. Mediation is an assumption of responsibility, avoiding the temptation of reassuring simplifications.

Theatre complex, Turin, 1990





? The narrative, the story can only start after the observation, the study, the research, very much like you stated. That is: after the experience. But what is there left to tell, when this experience has been stipulated by demolition, by periphery wastelands, by short-lived experience due to prevailing culture? Can and will you hang on to the narrative, actively, when all recounting is miscounting, when telling is selling, when tale has become retail, when we don't relate any more to the unrelatable?

! This question is the result of a misunderstanding, perhaps an imprecision in my text.

The narrative approach does not begin after experience. In my text I wrote 'A breaking down of the approach to the place into two successive moments – first I observe, study, investigate, then I narrate – would be false and inadequate'. Still I would like to respond. The existing city, the context in which I operate, manifests itself as a story: a story which is not an objective description, but an interpretation, one of many possible interpretations. The interpretation of a place requires intent, and the intention of the architect is that of transforming a place with a function, a form, in short through a work of architecture: the architecture which I must create, which will be a new story.

How can a careful, profound interpretation avoid the 'evils of the earth'? Not only will it not avoid them, it will even utilise them as nutrients (however bitter) for the design.

The 'objective' analysis, the abstract declaration of intent, the great artistic gesture avoid the evils of the earth, overlooking the intrigues of the world.

? We could add Lawrence Stern's Tristram Shandy to the list. The book always trails the life of the author. The grammatical 'perfect' doesn't coincide with the actual 'complete': life cannot be described. Of course, this lucid intercourse with narrative and time in eighteenth century tradition should be distinguished from present day language games. To objectify the structure and space of a text, then an extraordinary discovery, is now all too often a cliché. We yield to the overwhelming amount of narrations which discuss themselves. How would you update the values recognised in the work of Diderot and Cervantes?

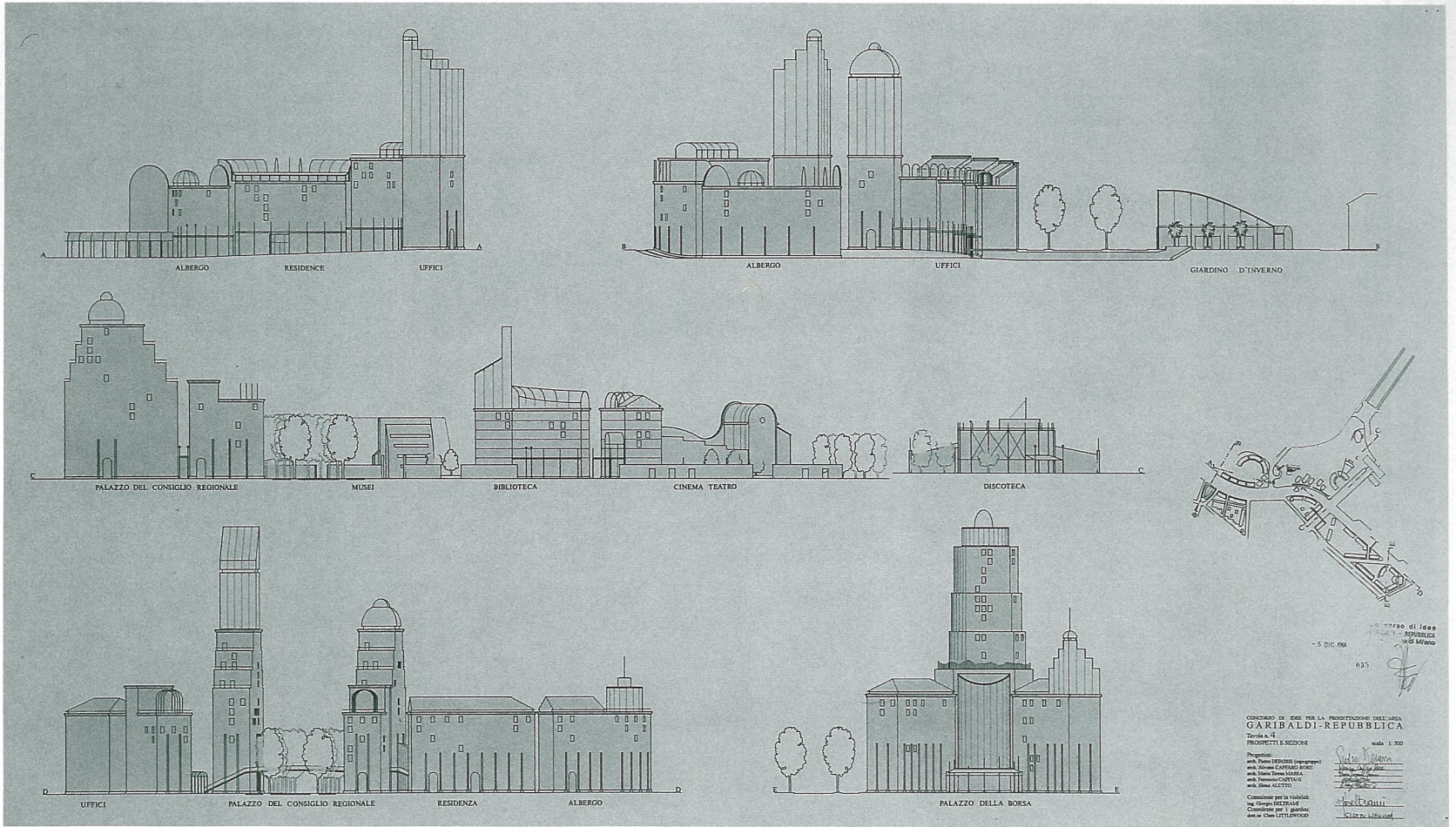
! The examples of Diderot and Cervantes can be useful to reveal the procedures of the construction of a work of intelligence. Let us assume that the task of intelligence is to promote an opening of the field of reflection through an exposition of the play, relative as it is, of possibilities. The stance of those who wish to explain, predict, put things in order for us, is not interesting. In Diderot and in Cervantes the exposition of the hypothetical character of the work takes place through constituted semantic bodies. Their approach is different from that of contemporary authors, who have attempted to produce a deconstruction of language by working with signs, at the level of semiology (in architecture the example is Peter Eisenman). This theme is interesting and complex. A fundamental reference for a development of this discussion is the text *The Living Metaphor* by Paul Ricoeur.

doubt, rather than of an organic continuity with that which exists. But here a question arises: in what manner does the interference take place between a condition of presence (active abandon) in a context and the genesis of a word, of a language, of an architecture? The impossibility of accepting unitary and general frames of reference does not permit us to lead the fluctuating and indefinite complexities of the context into a subsystem of a general structure. If the beginning of a design is there in what I see, in the reminders of vastness produced by the place, this is the condition which I can express, and this expression takes the form of a narrative. The context cannot but take the form of a story, just as a story cannot but find its form in the limits of a context.

A clarification is necessary. A breaking down of the approach to the place in two successive moments would be false and inadequate: first I observe, study, investigate, then I narrate. The interpretative observation of the place already expresses itself as a story – that is, it already contains relativity, partiality, singularity – and the narrative, because it is influenced by initial requests of the client, contains the act of designing. The story design is a narrative which inserts itself within the more general narrative of the context and, in doing so, modifies it, putting it back into the interpretative cycle with new 'fuel'. If we think of Cervantes and his *Don Quixote*, a possible analogy emerges. In *Don Quixote* there is a principal story, that of the voyage of the knight and his faithful squire. During the voyage, the protagonists encounter many strange personages who enter the overall narrative with their fantastic tales, stories which do not seem to play a coherent part in the general plan of the novel. They are like heteronomies, and they introduce themselves as temptations. Cervantes often digresses from the main story line and, captured by the seduction of the unexpected guest, introduces a new narrative alongside the general itinerary. These stories are sometimes so interesting that it is difficult for Cervantes and also for the reader to abandon them and return to the 'main road' of the voyage of Don Quixote. We find a much more radical form of this type of open-mindedness in Diderot. In his *Jacques le fataliste*, he makes explicit in a direct manner that which Cervantes did surreptitiously. He confronts the reader with the problem of the structure of the story. Within the main narrative, which tells of the love affairs of Jacques, he inserts several lateral novellas, each a more profound treatment of a theme, a character. At a certain point these novellas stop and the author, Diderot, asks the reader: how would you like me to proceed? Should I continue to develop this new theme, or should I return to the original story? In this way Diderot induces the reader to reflect on the procedures with which one constructs the design of a novel. The design doesn't say what it already knows; rather it is a succession of attempts which develop, unravelling in a sequence of alternatives. Cervantes and Diderot, although in different eras, between Mannerism and Enlightenment, suggest a possible interpretation of the act of designing, an action which assumes and expounds its own relative nature. The choice of figuration or refiguration, as Ricoeur says, in which one remarks the connection between the new and the density of the past, the choice of giving form to the object and therefore of arresting the complex process of thought in its investigation of context, history, architecture, subjectivity including of course, my own history, is a troubling act because it includes the awareness of an exclusion. In the established form, which is temporarily closed in a story, all that is excluded from my story hovers. The story surreptitiously speaks of all that it does not say, of that which, in the process of figuration, has only been glimpsed, all that we have not been capable of stopping. Paradoxically, this exclusion, which brings what is unsaid into play, opens out toward the vastness of possible worlds. An exclusion which opens. The refiguration, which has the nature of a narrative, is there, wavering between that which we have, in some way, fixed and the complexity of the contexts of which the work alludes, introduces the work into life, in the sense that it legitimises its openness to successive interpretations.

This condition of the design project permits us to make sense of the Heideggerian metaphor of the dual presence of the World and the Earth. To give definition to an architectural narrative means accepting the need to make the world, but in hazarding the action of design the infinite mystery of the Earth appears in the background, an impregnable vastness which, painfully, hides, excludes itself. It is worth specifying the fact that the Earth does not evoke only the mystery of its origin, the indecipherable *archè* of the genesis a possible reading of the meaning of the Earth in Heidegger's thought, but also the complex tangle of transformations in the continuous play of opening and exclusion. Design, in making the world, accepts and emphasises the presence of this alterity. An architectural project can live in this aleatory condition of presenting and negating itself, of declaring in order to speak of the unspeakable. But, always, it is speech, a waiting to be spoken, and thus never proposing the ecstasy of silence. Silence





372 'Garibaldi' area project, competition entry, Milan, 1991



Row houses on the Turinese Hill, 1974

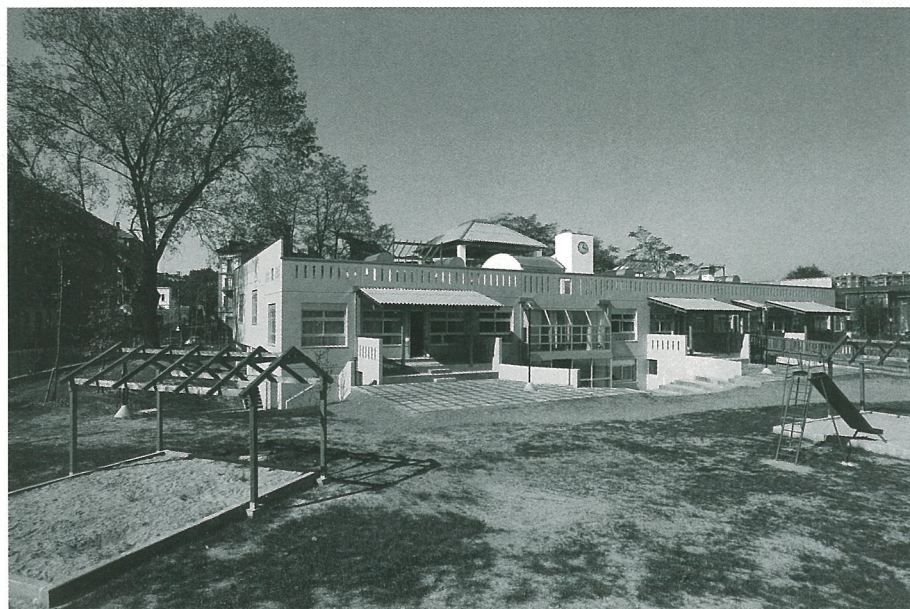




**?** *Your words imply a vivid preoccupation with 'exclusion'. Mentally and materially, the excluded issues rival the included ones in the process of designing. The layman might expect the designer to be proud of incorporating the foremost important issues in his design. Thinking beforehand of the process of exclusion, you foster all sorts of doubts, sans gêne, for that matter. You won't advocate the Übermensch's escape from nihilism, you would rather restrain yourself, supported by menschliches alzumenschliches daily life. Hardly a life in splendour, would you say, even when your pride climaxes now and then. If – at all – you do want to be remembered: by what token?*

**!** A choice emerges from a thousand exclusions. This Yes, that No, and the Nos are infinite in number. In a schematic way, we can say that metaphysical thought has sought to avoid the dramatic nature of the choice with 'grand récits'. The Nos were excluded, before the fact! Contemporary hermeneutic thought proposed a pragmatic approach which brings choice back, in the everyday project of living, to things. Choice, fragmented in the complexity of life, rediscovers its hypothetical character and reopens the confines of knowledge. This is a triumph of knowledge, not a repression. I would feel repressed if I had to take on the task of proposing a definitive truth: I would be repressed by the awareness of my stupidity and my hypocrisy. The splendour of a communicative act consists in opening the discourse to new interpretations. Designing, or selecting the figuration of a work of architecture, prepares us to become involved in the interweaving of discourses: discourses which deal with choices and conclusions. We await this involvement with trepidation. I hope that I will be remembered for having promoted reflection on architecture, not for having invented a style.

can only be the offering of the void or of absolute truth. **?** Designing within the fluctuating alternation of the World and the Earth can be said to have a deconstructive intent; or, perhaps, not an intent but a destiny for us, disenchanted hermeneutics, victims of the relativity of interpretation. Thus an acceptable meaning for the word deconstruction is revealed a word much abused today to indicate an ingenuous attempt to found a style based on the decomposition of semiologically classified elements in architecture. What is deconstructed is not the structure of the language but rather the remembrances of the metaphysical beliefs of architecture; a procedure which is more closely linked to a necessity than to a decision or an ingenuous will to transgress. The deconstructive process comes to life if it develops within the pragmatic procedure of making architecture. It can be seen in the intentions of the designer which manifest themselves simultaneously as will and commitment to choice and as painful doubt and ironic second thoughts: but it is important to understand that the sense of transience permeates the act of choice does not exclude passion, but rather exasperates it, exposing it 'without a safety net' to the unpredictable play of interpretations. In this activity there is a weakening of the subject. The subject gives up the presumption of legitimisation to escape from the viscous burden of objectivity to evaluate, freely, according to his own aesthetic conscience, rediscovering a function as interlocutor with the dense consistency of reality. In so doing he deconstructs perhaps with nostalgia every illusion of being able to seek refuge in a place which is external to compromise with the physical nature of things, in the gratifying world of metaphysics.



Nursery school (with Gorgio Ceretti), Turin, 1982

**?** *You advocate the kind of pragmatism that conceptually ranges from opportunism to the most profound wisdom. Your approach attests a great sense of responsibility, but how would you define the criteria that constitute this responsibility? When do you draw the line – for instance in the nature of the commission, in the time span allocated to research and the beginning of the narrative, etcetera?*

**!** If making architecture means responding to the needs of a client, if it means having the opportunity to resolve a real problem, it seems to me that there is a direct question of responsibility. This is the responsibility of communicating one's own point of view, of taking the risk of an interpretation. Architecture becomes irresponsible when it illudes itself that it has the right to close itself off, in its development, within the affable sphere of aesthetic consciousness. If we view design as a dialogue with a context, the problem of ethics appears every step of the way.

The deconstructive process also manifests itself in the things encountered by the project: the techniques, the materials, the functions become troubling words, each balanced between a possible relevance to the present and thousands of remembrances. Even the rapport with the clientele as context but also as a real professional opportunity opens a dialogue which does not lead to security and which places the very bases upon which the roles are founded in doubt. Deconstruction, seen as an opening and a breakthrough with respect to all preconstituted propaedeutics, can appear as the space and the time of a profane transcendence which does not hover 'high in the sky', but releases its energy in pragmatic action, in our case that of designing and building. A transcendence which cannot be monumental, but which reveals the fluctuating weave of memories and therefore brings back into play the mysterious afflatus of the monumental. **?**

Just as hermeneutics cannot be defined as a new philosophy, but as a response to the present condition of thought after the decline of the great metaphysical *récits*, thus the deconstructionist temptations emerge, as a necessity, in the conditions of metropolitan living. In deconstructive action nihilism and Utopia lose their destructive force and reveal their impotence. Nihilism and Utopia are a luxury we can no longer afford, or which is no longer permitted. Deconstruction seen as the product of a mediation distances us from the radicality of the avant-garde movements and proposes, in a new light, the process of anamnesis which they contain.