

Pietro Derossi
**'The Risk of Interpretation':
Being Realo in Architecture**

Is there such a thing as asymptotic thinking, a way of thought that keeps approaching the heart of the matter but always pulls back just before reaching it for fear of repercussions? Are there ideas which aspire to being definite, but only if there are no consequences? Yes, such thinking and such ideas do exist – in the head of Pietro Derossi. He is an architect who never lets himself be pinned down; he is far more concerned about what he does not do, about what he fails to notice or even deliberately excludes, than about what he actually does.

He demonstrates that existentialist engagement lives on even though its spiritual father is dead, even though the political system it once supported now exists only as a fossil somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico, and even though people have become wary of those who suit the action to the word. Derossi's philosophy is a throwback to the pre-Socratic wisdom of never stepping twice in the same river (not even once, actually). Moreover, he has preserved the anti-authoritarianism of the sixties. Engagement without authority, that's what it's all about. Self-evidently, when such an approach is taken in architecture only the projects speak the (casuist) truth. The projects are always 'provisional', 'experimental', faintly 'anarchistic' or 'open to change'. They are also 'centrifugal' by nature, a 'mix of styles and references', lacking a coherent aspect, 'openly composed' as a 'system of episodes', and 'circumstantial' in conception. Thus this architecture does not attempt to rehabilitate itself as an institution but to provide favourable material for discussion. We could alternatively say that it is an attempt to anticipate as many variables as possible. Hence it is not meant for the critics but for the user, that ambivalent creature called mankind. The human being is inconsequential. Architecture must be human. Therefore architecture must be inconsequential, QED. For the inconsequential buildings of Pietro Derossi, we refer you to the illustrations and your local travel agency. As for the theory of inconsequentiality, we present you with the architect's own reactions on the eight themes of this book. He met our request with great assiduousness. Derossi does not see himself as an author; he has no wish to ordain a definitive meaning for his architecture with his seal and signature. So what good would interpretation do us? Everything has been left open, after all. The architect has used the scholarly structure of this book as a framework for bolstering his relativism with additional arguments. In the editors' view, these arguments should be allowed to speak for themselves. We give the floor to Pietro Derossi under the following heading:

Durée

Heidegger, harking back to the words of Hölderlin, tells us that the words of the poet endure. But I think that this type of duration has little to do with stability and permanence. The duration of poetry comes from its openness to change. Its polysemy leaves it open to an infinity of interpretations. Architecture, when it is capable of becoming poetry, is revolutionary in the sense that it deconstructs the metaphysical obsession of objectivity, of the definitive solution, of the foundational message. The pursuit of duration as permanence is not a posture of humility. It is a posture of violence which seeks to exclude risk from life by replacing it with the identification and repetition of types. The idea of permanence excludes and sterilises the growth of language. It is the development of language which gives reality form, and this becoming is not simulation, it is actual reality. The opposition between reality and simulation proposed by Baudrillard is a naive thought: it assumes that reality, now and in the past, can be closed in its objectivity; it assumes that simulation is an act of will (avant-gardistic), a stepping back from reality. The path toward reality is the path toward language. It is the duration of a voyage, it has the quality of nomadism. Language manoeuvres between intention to speak and seduction in order to convince, and seduction is often quite willing to simulate. The duration of architecture has little to do with its physical life. Architecture changes under the attentive scrutiny of our gaze, and opens itself to new interpretations. It is the duration of continuous change.

Context

What is the difference between place and context? The term place (or topos) begins with a body and moves toward dialogue. The term context begins with dialogue and moves toward a body. Dialogue, in the hermeneutic sense, is an interactive process rapport between demand and response. It is an intrigue (as Ricoeur would put it) of demand and response in action in the city, perhaps more legible in its parts. The context, as a dialogue in progress, has the character of spectacle and narrative. An infinite narrative, in movement. The architectural project inserts itself in this intrigue, placing a story within the more general story of the context. The formal choice of the design presents itself as the stopping point of an investigation determined by an operative necessity, and not by the achievement of an essentiality, a cogency. In the specified form which temporarily closes itself in a narrative all that which the choice has excluded hovers. The narrative, surreptitiously, also speaks of what it leaves unsaid, of that which in the process of figuration has only been glimpsed, that we have been able to arrest. Paradoxically, this limitation of the responses to the demands of the context brings what is left unsaid into play, and opens toward the vastness of possible worlds. And this vastness, to which the work of architecture alludes, introduces the work into life, in the sense that it legitimises its openness to successive interpretations. The con-

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Men are blind to their own cause

He who pays the piper calls the tune

A reed before the wind lives on, while mighty oaks do fall

Practice makes perfect

Death is the great leveller

Better some of a pudding than none of a pie

Thought is free

Patience is a virtue

Do as you would be done by

He that makes himself a sheep shall be eaten by the wolf

A fault confessed is half redressed

Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh

text is an intrigue of dialogues in different languages: that of physical forms, of history, economy, politics or love. They speak, removing themselves from other situations and other contexts, or from that which differs from them. By making its difference explicit, the context appears as a temporary piece of the world, suspended, waiting. The architectural project can tell a good story.

Border

Death is the limit. That which limits me and on which I reflect. And it is this reflection that gives a sense to my life. Death speaks to me of the temporary, of the transience of all I can know. To make architecture is to know, to know in the temporary. The Utopia of Modernism wanted to transcend the limits. To constitute a new world order, definitive and therefore immune to vital processes and the contingencies of the worldly. Architecture as a definitive solution presents itself as a 'work', an 'opera', and a true work is timeless, classical. The origin of classical thought in the Egyptian world was aimed at exorcising death with the force of an essential monumentality. The classical work (perhaps misunderstood) has no conceptual or physical limits. It is eternal and it is everywhere. In a hermeneutic approach the problem of the limit is present in all actions, not as a deprivation or a lack but as a destiny, a single chance for survival. The presence of the limit offers us the possibility of reality. We could say: it is the condition which enables me to act without first acquiring general orders which are designed to cancel out all limits. In architectural design, the limits are physical and conceptual, but two limits mingle and confront one another. In giving form to a thought and a thing (a thought within a thing and vice versa) the design, on the one hand, obeys its limits while, on the other, precisely by accepting limitation it places it in discussion, open to interpretation. Precisely because it has limits, architecture speaks to us of what is excluded by the limits, of the mystery of life and death, of the mystery which



Biffi Scala, Restaurant, Milan, 1988

gives us a significance as particular entities, as human beings. The limit delimits and displays its temporary nature. The uncertainty and doubt of the temporary can be the force of poetics, the strength of placing oneself in discussion and of accepting, without subjective presumption, the risk of interpretation.

Topos

The topos is an occasion, and has the consistency of a body. It is the opportunity to make the intention of design explicit, in its state, in a time. Here and now. Things are located in the place, a multiplicity of things that display their singularity and their relations. We say things, and not objects, to bring out the fact that we are not dealing with presences external to the observing subject (in contrast to the subject), but with sensible figures that involve things amidst existing ones: things which, modifying the place, make new functions, new uses possible, communicating new messages (or repropounding old ones). The topos is delimited by walls, ceilings, floors, poles, or by rows of trees, canals, paths, profiles, etcetera. But these limitations are not a secondary part of an overall design: even the limits have the sense of an opportunity. On the one hand, they exercise the violence of a closure, on the other, thanks to their occasional nature (and the temporary nature of the here and now), they raise questions for all of the things they exclude. Design, if located in the topos, with its intentions and programs is conditioned by the finite nature of the occasion, but this finite quality is that which 'tells us that there is always an infinity of meaning to develop and interpret'. It is the specificity of the project, in the place, here and now, that opens us to reflection regarding the universal, the free vastness of the land.

Programme

Often by programme we mean a plan (town planning) which comes before a project. The task of the design project is that of giving a finite form to the specifications of the programme. This dependency of the project on the plan has led to very poor results. The plan defines abstract objectives which are not verified and the project, excluded



So many men, so many opinions

Grasp all, lose all

Every law has a loophole

The more the merrier

Pride comes before a fall

Discretion is the better part of valour

It is as well to know which way the wind blows

Each to his own

Don't put all your irons in the fire

Prevention is better than cure

Easier said than done



Biffi Scala, Restaurant, Milan, 1988

from the objectives, seeks legitimacy in self-referentiality. We have to reconstruct a direct dialogue between plan and project. A necessary strategy in the present situation, heir to a strong credibility granted to the plan/programme, might be to invert the hierarchy: beginning with the project/programme, considering the project not just as a proposal of solutions, but also as a tool for study and reflection. The project is a thought which approaches things in their presence and represents them to us, in the sense that it presents them to us (re-presents). The presence speaks to us of time and suggests the relative nature of our activity. The relativity of the here and now. The project is a limited programme: it does not seek general rules as the basis of an absolute legitimacy. It appears, instead, as a strategy to extricate ourselves from the complexity of the appeals in progress in a place. The appeals are political, functional and economic in nature, and come from the history of the place and that of the designer. The project is the temporary representation of a mediation in the midst of the pluralism of the appeals. The occasional nature of the commissioning agent (the client, but not only the client – we could also say of the civil society) must not be considered as an obstacle and an annoyance, but as an essential nutrient of the project. The project/programme does not have an autonomous quality, a priori, which can be imposed. The quality comes from the specific dialogue of the occasion: it is the narrative of the factors and events which have accompanied the unfolding of the dialogue, of agreements and hostilities. The project/programme reveals the plurality of the appeals and proposes a possible solution through a work of mediation. In presenting itself in a form which offers a view of its temporary character, the result of mediation, the project speaks of the complexity of the world and of the earth. That is, it can wear the language of poetry.

Space

It is the time of life which makes the measure, poses the issue of finiteness. But time is not an abstract category, above things. It is the decline, the ending of men and things that introduces us to the specifics and enables us to feel time. Time is the time of designing (finite), of being, therefore it unfolds and manifests itself in a proximity which has to do, first of all, with space. Space makes time relative, it introduces it to the expe-

rience of the world; and time makes space relative, revealing the temporary nature of its presence. To design and to construct means arranging things in a place: but it also means entrusting those things to the course of time, which will lead them to assume an infinity of meanings. We might say, like Gadamer, that architecture is an art which makes space both in the physical sense of offering an opportunity for other forms to penetrate it, use it, modify it, and in the more general sense of subjecting itself to future interpretations. Thus every architectural space presents itself as an event in waiting. Space thus understood does not call for an abstract contemplation, but rather for immediate use: it wants to be the container of living phenomena. In calling for use it provokes the poetic message and specifies its qualities. For example, we are not interested in a monumental space, but rather in a space which induces us to reflect on the idea of monumentality. Space and time, with their uncanny interweaving, are inscribed in the language of architecture. Their reciprocal relativisation keeps its distance from the great 'recits', and deconstructs (metaphysical) attempts to form a 'style' within the continuing pursuit of meaning in living.

Identity

It is well known that identity, in Aristotelian terms, means that things are identical if the definition of their substance is identical, and that substance is that which exists by virtue of an internal necessity. If this is the definition of identity, the Modern Movement and, in particular, its transformation into an international style has had the definition of its identity as its principal objective, or the recognisability of its objects as belonging to an already defined substance (or, we could say, idea). The architectural criticism of today which condemns the Modern Movement for 'a loss of identity' paradoxically attributes the term identity with the meaning of difference, without making a profound investigation of the meaning of this substitution. A hermeneutic knowledge which attributes the pursuit of truth to a process of dialogue views the problem of identity with



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You cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear

Forewarned, forearmed

Moderation in all things

There are two sides to every question

There's no accounting for tastes

Tomorrow is another day

Nobody is perfect

Two heads are better than one

Judge not, that ye be not judged

Every Jack must have his Jill

It takes two to make a quarrel



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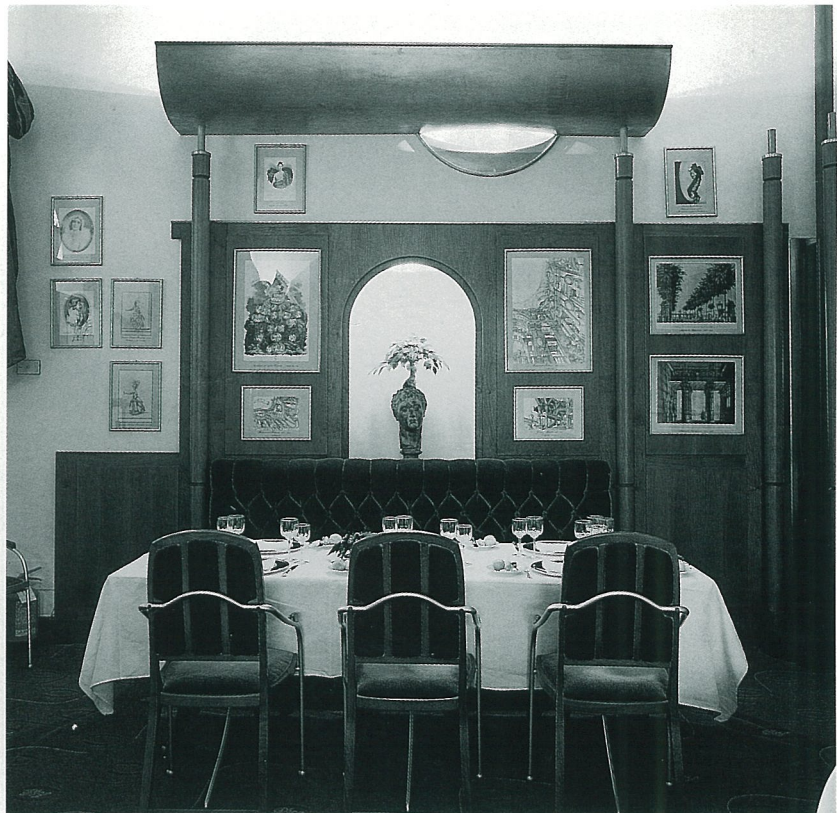
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suspicion precisely inasmuch as identity implies the objectivity and stability of substance: in architectural terms, we might say that it implies a stable reference model. If by identity, in a transgression with respect to its literal meaning, we mean the capacity to be recognisable for the quality and specificity of the message within a complex accumulation of communications, then we are talking about the evidence of a difference. A work of architecture expresses its difference when, in describing or narrating itself, it establishes a dialogue with all that is different from itself. We return to the problem of the context, the physical and mental environment, starting with which architecture attempts to provoke an event of communication. Difference thus understood is the denial and dismissal of presence; or, better, the breakdown of any pretence of the definitive quality of presence (Vattimo). In the place of identity, we could speak of the authenticity of architecture. Authenticity is the condition which is born of the deconstruction of universal models, of the acceptance of the finite nature of experience and of its precarious nature. It is the authenticity of the existence of habitation.

Representation

For Hegel, art is dead because it speaks in an obscure manner, in its sensible form, of a concept which is better expressed by the language of philosophy. Art, for Hegel, represents in a reductive manner a meaning which can be better represented with another messenger, one capable of guaranteeing the evidence of truth. We can rediscover art (and architecture as art) as we accept the temporal and spatial relativity of truth. Representation, therefore, does not mean giving a sensible form to truth, but rather seeks to speak of the truth, of the constant pursuit of its occurrences: we could say that

representation gives form not to a completed occurrence, but to an expectation. Representation reveals itself through an activity of symbolism. But what is the symbol if not a shard of pottery (the so-called *tessera hospitalis*) given as a souvenir to a friend and guest, in the expectation of a future meeting? Representation is a 'fragment of being' which speaks of ancient, secret rapports with the world, but which wants to reconcile itself with the world, wants to be understood by the world. Representation does not refer to another meaning, but is itself the meaning of this expectation. The representation of a work of architecture can change the world because it, in itself, is a fragment of the world which offers itself to reality, participating in the play of differences. It does not represent change. It is (in the exposure of its language) the change. If we take this 'function' of representation into account, architecture is urged on toward its primary pragmatic role. Its truth or, better, its occurrence of truth, knows the uncertainty of circumstances: its role is not to stop but rather to produce movement. And this task can be achieved at a variety of levels: the tactile, physical, institutional level, etcetera. And it can be aimed at many categories of users. The choice of reference points, on the one hand, is part of a process of manifestation of an intention to establish a dialogue with the world (with the context) and, on the other, it is precisely the contact with these references which reveals, due to its finite nature, the possibilities which have remained hidden. Even criticism, if it is to follow the process of representation 'in its dual quality of discovering, revealing, manifesting on the one hand, and of hiding and secrecy on the other' (Gadamer), must get closer to things. Criticism, which from afar launches curses or consecrates heroes diving into the murky sea of obsolete ideologies could, and must, finally abandon the field.

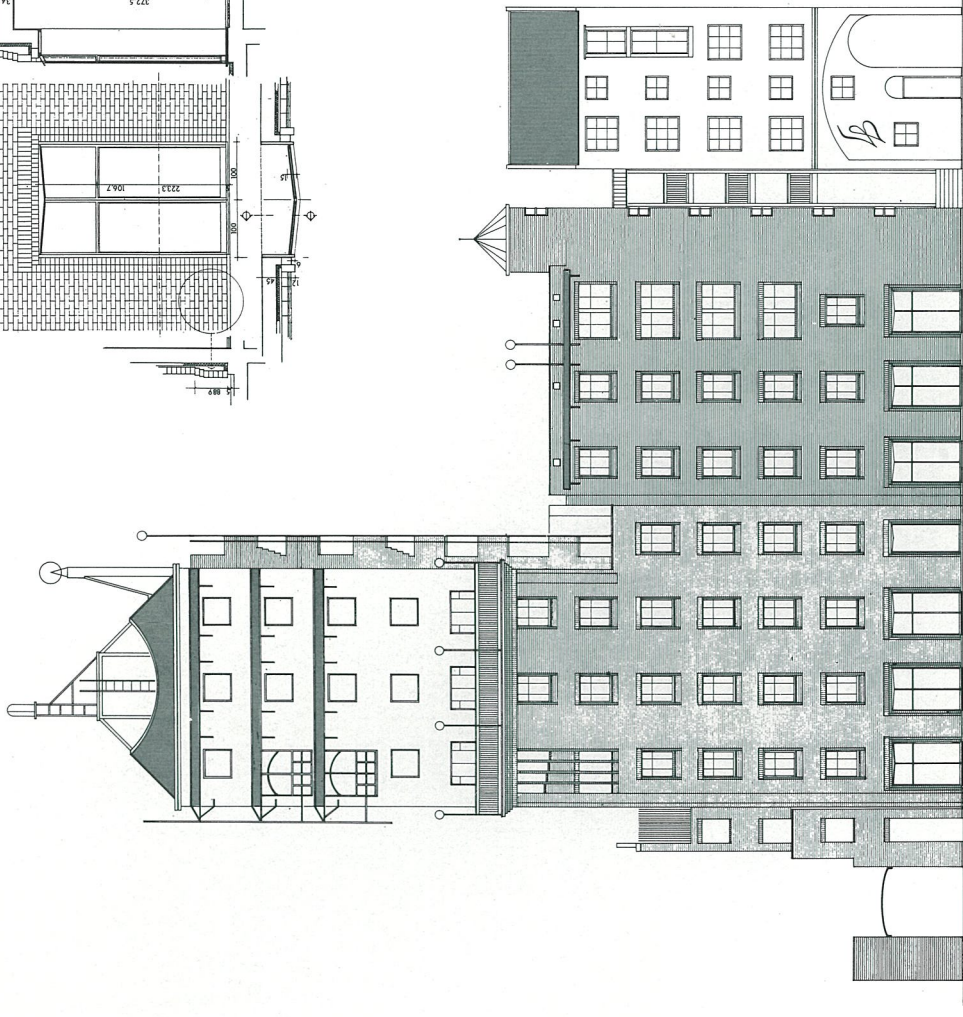
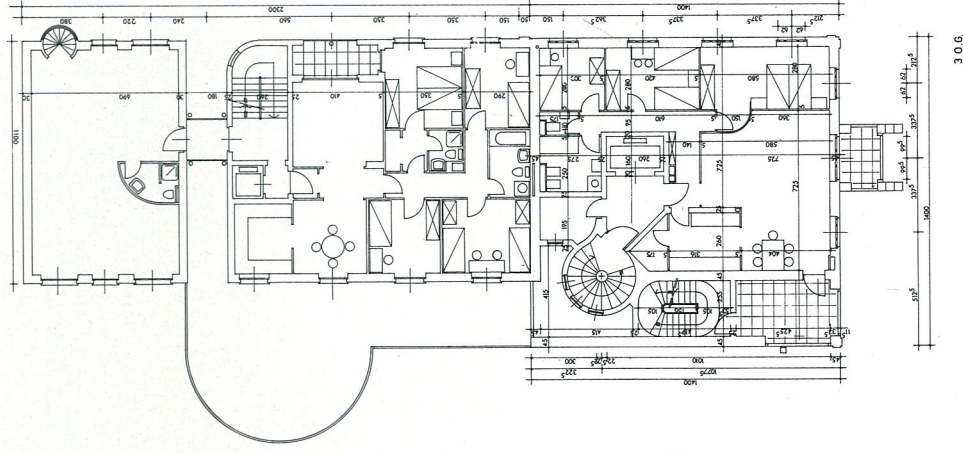
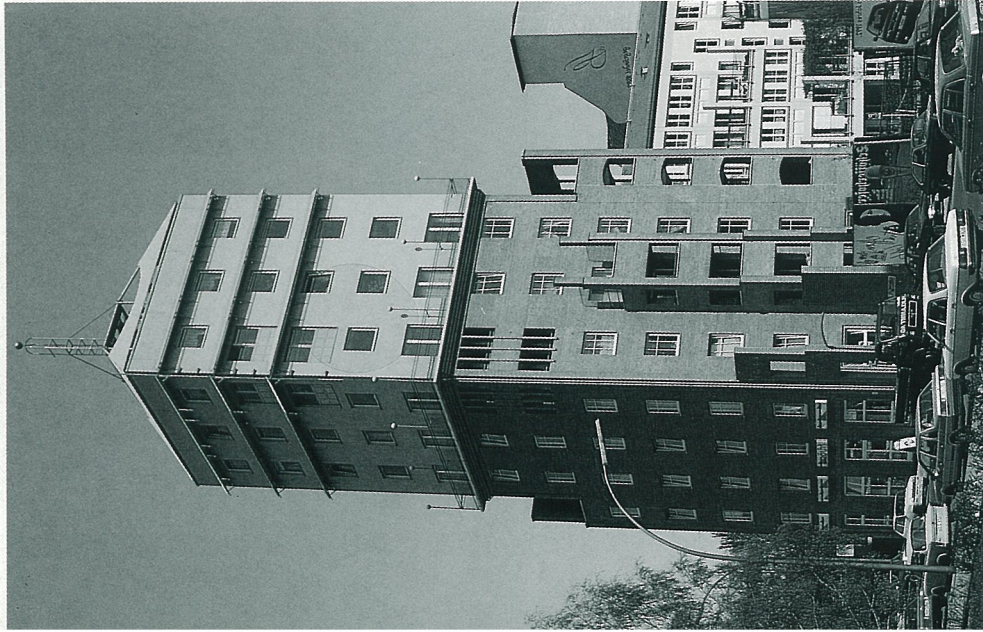
Take care of the pennies and the pounds will
take care of themselves

Live and let live

A man who sees both sides of a question is a
man who doesn't see anything at all

Respect is greater from a distance

Time will tell



The project for the tower block and adjoining building on the former site of the Luderitz and Bauer bookbinders has been conceived as a completion of the city plan drawn up by the architect Tarrago. As an overall concept we have adopted the suggestion of a division of Tarrago's ninth block into separate parts, assigning greater importance to the internal road on which our tower block is located. For this reason the point where Wilhelmstraße and the internal road meet should be regarded as a true junction between two roads and is reminiscent of the typology of the classic 'Berlin street corner', a feature still to be found in many parts of the southern Friedrichstadt. Thus our building has been conceived as if it were made up of two superimposed parts. Up until the sixth floor we have carried out a reconstruction of the historic corner of the block with a brick building, with regular openings, extending along Wilhelmstraße; its ground floor can be used to house stores. This building terminates in a coping, or cornice, that marks the start of the second part, the tower proper. The tower will be

plastered or faced with a uniform material to distinguish it from the base, and it will have a different form of window together with enclosed loggias. The tower is partially covered by a roof that opens to reveal a structure rising toward the sky. We envisage setting a solar lamp on top that will project a luminous spot onto the blank wall in front, on which a sundial will be marked out. The round terraces, providing a link with the fire escapes on the north-west side and the loggias on the south-east side, mark a diagonal twist that should impart a sense of rotation to the tower. Thus while the lower six floors of the building hold a dialogue with the memory of the past and form a street front, the tower holds a dialogue with other towers, campaniles, or obelisks that stand out against the sky in the distance, protruding above the average height of buildings in Berlin. This superimposition proposes a complex and differentiated interpretation of the city and attempts to suggest a reflection on the relationship between high rise buildings and life in the streets. *Pietro Derossi*

Location Wilhelmstraße, Berlin, Germany **Assistants** S. Caffaro Rore, F. Lattes, F. di Suni and others **Client** IBA and H. Klammt **Design** 1983 **Completion** 1987

Pietro Derossi Architetto **Apartment Building with Tower**



'Comrades! Today a friend of mine died; he had renounced life. But I want to speak to you about life not about death. The goal of every man, as recorded in some constitutions, is the search for happiness. One might argue that individualism like this is the consequence of May '68, a date that already belongs to the past. No, it is older than that.'

'In 1821 Leopardi wrote: up till now we have employed the politics and science of nations rather than of individuals, their progress and their happiness. And yet we know that we should live justly. I am here today to talk to you about a personal problem. Comments... murmurs...'

I will address the meeting in the form of a question. People ask questions in order to know something... Primo, is it forbidden for an old comrade like myself to feel love as though I were 18? For it is true, I love a woman whom, because she is married, I shall refer to as G.T.





Stills from La Terrazza, movie by Ettore Scola.

'Secondo, would it be lawful for me to live with this woman and leave the woman who has been my companion for 35 years? Who has grown old along with me, forgiving me, even consoling me for a certain reserve that I felt in the bosom of the party? But let us not talk about that now...'

'Tertio, can this hypothetical and painful undertaking be reconciled with my wife's right to happiness? Here too I am indulging in paternalistic nonsense, as though the personality of a woman was dependent solely on her married state. Even so I ask myself the question,... I ask you: is it reconcilable with the equal sharing of responsibilities?'

'And with the defence of pluralism against individualism, with our ideals for a better society, consisting of free and equal human beings. In short,... is one permitted to be happy if this happiness causes unhappiness to someone else? I am asking you to tell me: 'yes' or 'no'. Thank you. The meeting is silent, ... dumbfounded'

