LANDO BARTOLI,
LISINDO BALDASSINI,
PIER LUIGI NERVI
FIRENZE, 1956–62

SEEN FROM AFAR **pp. 9–17**

ITALOMODERN

DIARY OF A SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY THROUGH A FORGOTTEN ITALY

While I was still a student in Vienna in the early 1980s, Gino Valle visited our studio and gave a talk: in addition to showing a number of prestigious, pragmatic buildings, he threw in a much smaller project, the *Casa Rossa* in Udine [**1**], and this building in particular puzzled me. It struck me as a better example of the architecture Robert Venturi was referring to in *Complexity and Contradiction* than the iconic house Venturi had designed for his mother. Valle's design could be considered a subtle variation on the theme of the ordinary house. At about the same time, I came upon a very different building in a Japanese magazine, one that looked like a gigantic typewriter. It was Cappai & Mainardis's La Serra [**2**], a training center commissioned by Olivetti in the late 1960s for Ivrea's *centro storico*. These two poles made me want to find out more about the diversity of Italy's post-war architecture.

I had an intense desire to visit these buildings and see how they had stood the test of time. What signs of appropriation would I find? Did the elaborate concepts have an influence on the surroundings? Were the buildings still used as originally planned?

In 2004, my brother Werner and I began to systematically photograph throughout northern Italy. We were first and foremost interested in the buildings themselves, and only as the project progressed did we begin to take note of the architects' distinct biographies.

When we learned that we would have the opportunity to exhibit our photos at AUT, Innsbruck's architecture gallery, our work intensified. At this point we had to find a title for our endeavor, a title that would embrace the scope of the projects. Disregarding fiercely contested demarcation lines, I simply called it ITALOMODERN. The first phase, which culminated in the exhibition in Innsbruck in 2011, documented 84 structures.

A second exhibition with 132 additional works followed four years later. Each of the exhibitions was accompanied by a catalogue; in his essay in the first volume, entitled "Atlantis Revisited," architecture critic Otto Kapfinger reflects on the era's cultural climate – including the intense interaction among the different art forms – as well as on the societal and economic circumstances that made Italy's postwar decades so prolific.

A variety of journals, monographs, and surveys – for example, G. E. Kidder Smith's *Italy Builds* – served as the basis for my research. Domus was an especially important source for this project all along. For example, in 1998, Itinerary 142 presented Giuseppe Pizzigoni's work in Bergamo, an oeuvre with many shifts – moving from neo-classicism to rationalist architecture, then on to studies in geometry and experimentation with thin concrete shells. In 1960, he employed his shell technique for both a church and a pigsty [**22**]. I just had to see those projects in situ!

Our documentation adheres to a chronological structure. Italomodern begins in 1946 with Pizzigoni's *casa minima* in Bergamo [**21**], a row-house prototype, and culminates thirty years later in Giuseppe Gambirasio & Giorgio Zenoni's elevated courtyard houses in Spotorno [**20**]. This time-span encompasses a remarkable range of groupings and stances: *Tendenza organica*, *Neorealismo*, *Neoliberty*, brutalism, various neorationalist positions, as well as technological stances, daring structures, and extravagant spatial conceptions. We included some masterpieces by celebrated architects – for instance, the Glass Church in Milan by Angelo Mangiarotti & Bruno Morassutti [**7**] – but our attention was more often directed to minor works by much-acclaimed architects and, most often of all, to works by lesser-known architects which, upon completion, received only limited or regional exposure.

Throughout the course of this project, dualities propelled my search for ever more examples. These contrasting pairs also enhanced my understanding of how rich and varied the architecture scene was during this era. In the case of Milan-based Luigi Caccia Dominioni [**8**], choosing among his hundreds of completed buildings was a nearly impossible task. Caccia Dominioni once proclaimed that he felt more at home on a building site than participating in academic discourse. Yet with his refined designs of ceramic facades, he established a school of his own. In contrast, Vittorio Giorgini's work consists of just a few buildings, two of which are located right next to each other in Baratti: his own wooden, tree-house-like hexagonal cabin faces his most extreme project, a zoomorphic concrete-shell structure [**4**]. In 1969, Giorgini moved to New York, where he began a career in academia.

Another pairing of extremes has to do with magnitudes of scale. Luigi Carlo Daneri's gigantic Forte Quezzi housing complex high above Genoa – dubbed *il Biscione* – consists of five serpentine apartment structures which follow the contours of the hillside. At the other end of the spectrum is a bivouac perched atop the Grignetta [**15**] designed by Mario Cereghini. His career had two distinct phases: on Lake Como he had conducted himself like a committed rationalist, while in the mountains he was a contextualist who took cues from local building traditions. On the peak of the Grignetta, however, Cereghini metamorphosed into an engineer. His design of the space-capsule-like bivouac employed prefabricated aluminum panels light enough to be carried to the summit by hikers.

These pairings give just a small glimpse of this prolific period – a period characterized above all by playful experimentation, vitality and passion. Otto Kapfinger sums up his essay on a similar note: *A timeless message shines through these long-ago-completed buildings: Eros, who, as Ponti said of Rudofsky, has been lent wings by the Mediterranean, yet possesses a universally valid attitude toward life, toward building, toward individuality, and toward the undeterred quest for a balance between a wholly tangible, necessary usefulness and an every-bit-as-necessary inspiring uselessness – which is so much more difficult to grasp, understand, reason, tolerate, and place.*

Martin Feiersinger

1 GINO VALLE
UDINE, 1965–66

2 IGINIO CAPPAI,
PIETRO MAINARDIS
IVREA, 1967–75

3 ALDO ROSSI
MARINA DI MASSA, 1960

4 VITTORIO GIORGINI
BARATTI, 1961–62

5 MARIO RIDOLFI,
WOLFGANG FRANKL
IVREA, 1954–68

6 ROBERTO GABETTI,
AIMARO ISOLA
IVREA, 1968–74

7 ANGELO MANGIAROTTI,
BRUNO MORASSUTTI
MILANO, 1956–57

8 LUIGI CACCIA DOMINIONI
MILANO, 1959–63

9 GIO PONTI, NANDA VIGO
MALO, 1964–69

10 VICO MAGISTRETTI
FRAMURA, 1967–70

11 DANTE BINI
RUSSI, 1973

12 GIOVANNI MICHELUCCI,
BRUNO SACCHI
COLLE VAL D'ELSA, 1973–83

13 ETTORE SOTTSASS SR.,
ETTORE SOTTSASS JR.
PREDAZZO, 1951–52

14 SERGIO JARETTI,
ELIO LUZI
TORINO, 1970–74

15 MARIO CEREGHINI
LECCO, 1966–67

16 MARIO GALVAGNI
BERGEGGI, 1954–66

17 GLAUCO GRESLERI,
SILVANO VARNIER
ARBA, 1967–73

18 ENRICO CASTIGLIONI
BUSTO ARSIZIO, 1960–64

19 BBPR
MADONNA DI CAMPIGLIO, 1965–67

20 GIUSEPPE GAMBIRASIO,
GIORGIO ZENONI
SPOTORNO, 1976–83

21 GIUSEPPE PIZZIGONI
BERGAMO, 1946

22 GIUSEPPE PIZZIGONI
TORRE PALLAVICINA, 1960–64