

Church of the Holy Family in Genoa (1956-'59)

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Abstract: The completion of the church in Genoa moves Terranova to question the vast range of “culturally correct” conventions regarding the relationship of architecture – and the architect – with the city, with history, with the client and normative restrictions, with the tyrannies of conservation and with innovation; with a past that forever conditions us and a modernity that forever throws us off balance. The history of the histories in Faculties of Architecture is one that will never come to an end until we come to grips with the fact (which the most sophisticated theoreticians and hermeneutics of modernity have revealed to us) that history is something that we look back on as we go forwards, and so we re-interpret it from the point of view of the issues of the present day: this is Quaroni’s lesson about the relationship between design and history, which can be learned also through this work.

Keywords: religious building, design and history, architectural works and the city.

When Professor Bruno Malara mentioned¹ Carlo Scarpa, I remembered Ludovico Quaroni (who was said to be rather uncomfortable with Olivetti because they used others, like Cosenza, as architects, and used him as a city planner), when he was being a bit snobbish, would say “if I were an architect, the architect I would like to be would be Carlo Scarpa”, and then the next time round he would say he wanted to be Albini or Gardella... I am responsible for naming a School of Architecture after Ludovico Quaroni, which is somewhat strange – it appears not to be the custom to give an entire faculty the name of an architect or a professor; usually just a classroom might be dedicated to him. Carlo Scarpa was one of the architects that Ludovico Quaroni said he wanted to be, but I think it was just a joke on his part. When we named the faculty after Quaroni, there was some doubt about whether, among all the Roman architects, he was in fact the most representative. Some colleagues of the time were more inclined towards others who were more associated with a robust, linguistically precise, almost ‘designer’ kind of architecture, and the main candidate was Adalberto Libera, who ho-

1. From the speech at the Seminar "The restoration of the Sacra Famiglia Parish Church of Ludovico Quaroni in Genoa" held in Genoa on January 30th 2009.

wever did not have a particularly close relationship with Rome. Other names proposed were those of old masters of the twentieth century, such as Giovannoni; no mention was made of Piacentini. We liked Quaroni precisely because he was not a 'designer-label' architect, one of those nowadays known as *archi-stars*. His pupils were more in favour of research, of experimentation: the more malicious spoke of *doubt*, but it wasn't the doubt we liked, it was this desire for experiment. The three churches that have been named were all built within a few years of one another and are more or less contemporary with Ronchamp and La Tourette, so we are talking modern post-war architecture, what some people call post-modern.

Giulio Carlo Argan, when Le Corbusier built the chapel, was appalled and thought «here there is no longer any religion».

These documents form part of the design project for Quaroni's church, in the sense that the image is worth more than the subject matter and in the sense that talking about something is part of that thing itself. We are not extraneous to a work if the work upholds our discourse and lends it authority. We are discovering that the work still sustains our discussion of it. This church is a thing of beauty, not out in the desert but in Genoa, in the suburbs, visited, signed with four signatures; these were the same years that Giancarlo De Carlo designed the school of Education at Urbino: if the Dean of the Faculty of Urbino, Carlo Bo, in order to give this work to De Carlo, had had to lay down rules, hold public examinations, adopt procedures, follow city planning regulations and so on, we would never have had these works by De Carlo. The quality of those works is directly proportional to the unilateral and responsible decision of the Dean. I find it scandalous that today, Rutelli, mayor of a city of 3 million inhabitants, is subjected to a political storm because he personally handed out a commission to build the structure to house the Ara Pacis. Cardinal Siri was right: making a church involves two opposing frames of reference – one is symbolic, monumental, imbued with the purpose of bringing forth the significance of the architecture; the other is the ugliness of the city, the unsightliness of its periphery. This conflict is always at the source of a work of architecture; there is the strong desire to construct a symbol, a tower, an archetype of architecture, because the sacred is not necessarily associated always with a

church. In Sicily there is a splendid work by an artist who appears to work as both an architect and a city planner, the Cretto by Burri, built on the ruins of the ancient town of Gibellina, which is a sacred place even though it is not a religious building, because it has in it an essence of commemoration, and this is another element in the conflict experienced by these artists before *Italia Nostra*, that is to say, an affinity made up of walls, flesh and blood, earth and bricks... the wrought iron cross reminds us of a church of pain; it is a representation of pain. In fact in those same years, Burri was burning some of his paintings. The wrought iron is analogous to the iron doors of the Fosse Ardeatine, a place of sacredness, and the wrought iron expresses that meaning. This seemed to speak of a strange 'monumentalisation' because conversely Ludovico also had this desire to be in the city, a need to be with its inhabitants, and I imagine that he would not have liked a restoration of a building that eliminated its vital functions, because the two frames of focus, the symbolic cube shape of the building and the people who live in it, are seen as being together. Aside from the choice of facing, on which I would be somewhat open-minded, I do not see the need nowadays to make this choice: today we should talk about it and carry on an ongoing debate. Maybe the only request we could make is that Alessandro Braghieri himself – spinning back together some of the things we are talking about, some drawings, some evaluations, some analogies – might redesign the project with the intensity and energy that he would probably repress out of respect for Ludovico Quaroni. I think that Quaroni would not want that kind of respect; I think he would prefer to be remembered by history for the changes he made to history itself, remembered for the changes of direction in that history, especially when it is looked at with hindsight. The history of the histories in Faculties of Architecture is one that will never come to an end until we come to grips with the fact (which the most sophisticated theoreticians and hermeneutics of modernity have revealed to us) that history is something that we look back on as we go forwards, and so we re-interpret it from the point of view of the issues of the present day: this is Quaroni's lesson about the relationship between design and history, which can be learned also through this work. It seems as if many historians of Faculties of Architecture do not understand this issue. So apart from

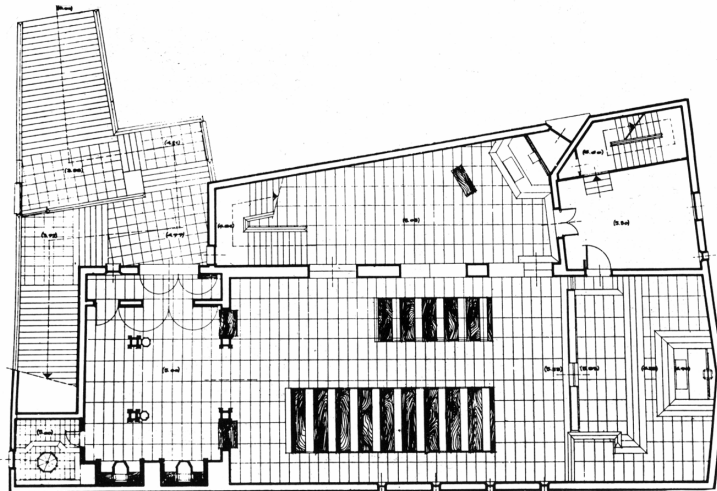
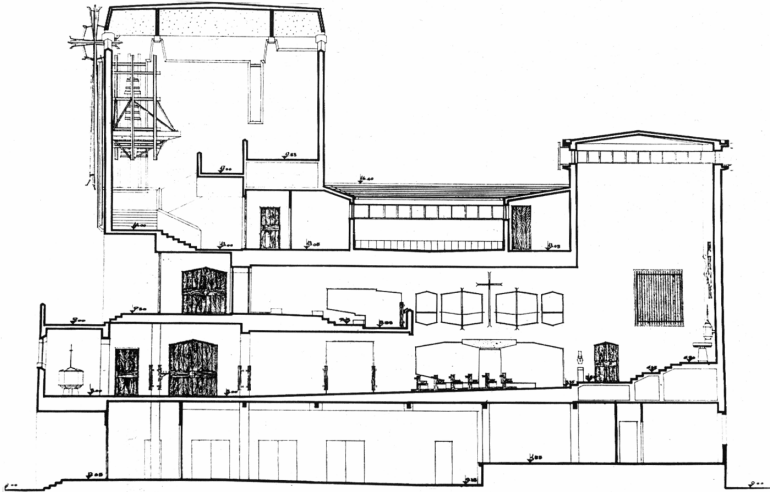
the choice of facing, which I read as an invitation to further design, I do not like the word 'respect' or the word 'caution'. A city is built out of continual power struggles between its buildings, as an English writer said: «The fight between works of architecture is a fight to the death». The better work replaces a worse one in the anthologies, and this should also be the case in cities. We cannot preserve all of a city: the new St Peter's replaced its predecessor, which replaced the one before. Maybe the previous work was better, but the fighting goes on. The lesson we have to learn (or at least ask ourselves if we can still learn it) is in fact this design relationship between city and history, which takes into account the issue of conflict. The surrounding context is ugly, off-putting, and I take it to task: there is none of that automatic eco-friendliness that we find with architecture today, where there are always green lawns and artificial parklands with buildings artificially constructed inside them. Buildings find their life in the encounter-confrontation with the territory and the existing city; when I speak of conflict I do not mean we should destroy, I mean there exists a contest, a challenge, where the designer has to compete with what already exists. It is not actually true (and is a touch of current affectation in our Italian culture) that everything that now exists is fine and all that went before is better than what exists now or will exist in the future; in that case the old masters wouldn't have existed, and we need the old masters to make comparisons with modern masters. Just now I mentioned Italia Nostra; this church was built in 1958, and Italia Nostra was founded in 1955; in 1960 the National Association of Historical and Artistic Centres was set up, followed a few years later by the Ministry of Culture and the Arts. Here in Italy we speedily moved from a situation where conflicts could be fought out inside cities, letting people like entrepreneurs, architects, arts patrons and monument-builders gallop off in all directions, to a situation that is totally administered, almost as if it no longer existed – filled with earth, grass, water, poor people, rich people – but as if there was a fine network of procedures, laws and regulations (the latest of which is the UNESCO plan for managing historical centres), which eliminates that magic moment when the design project suddenly sparks off and fuses.

I quote Quaroni: «A project should surely be a fusion of beauty, usefulness and strength» – the Vitruvian triad, seemingly banal, but

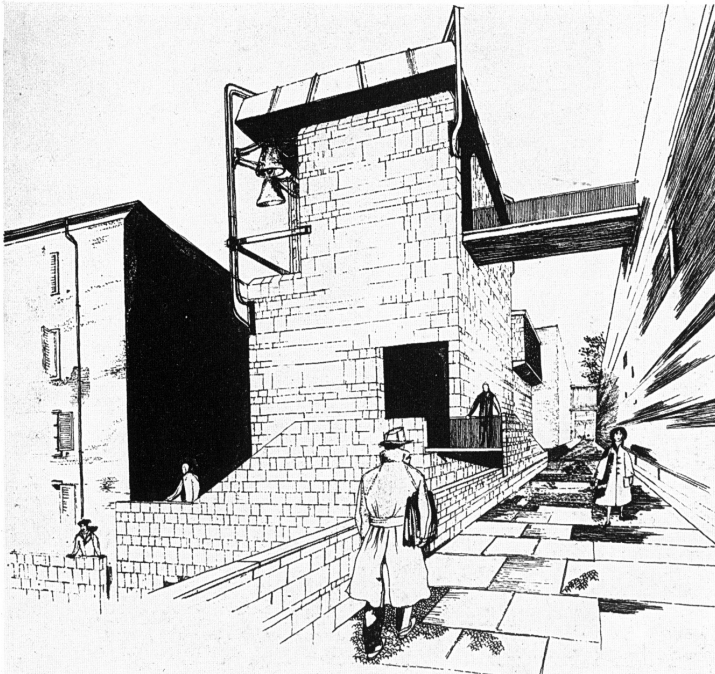
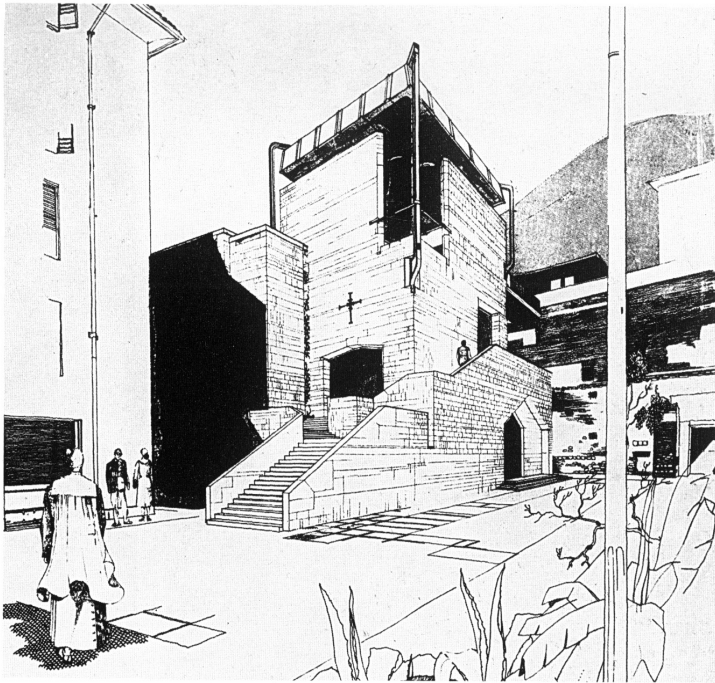
these three things are actually what is difficult. If many of these things are already bound up in a mass of regulations, there is no longer that magic that Quaroni remembers, that could arise from the friendship of two people who meet each other in India, get to know one another and inspire each other – and then they build a church. This is the heart of the quality of this project: two men strive for a set purpose, making no reference to a self-conscious idea of the sacred that uses the cross in a superficial way, but employs it as a potent symbol that uses the cross.

As does Tadao Ando in his church, which is practically a cube, with a cross that divides it into four sections and which immobilises you as stand before the Mystery. Nowadays however we find lots of self-conscious crosses or Le Corbusier Ronchamp-type walls. What Le Corbusier did at Ronchamp sprang from his encounter with Padre Couturier, a confrontational yet interesting meeting between an architect who described himself as a rationalist, a man of the Enlightenment, and a personification of the Catholic Church. The result was a work of art which is again a kind of miraculous representation of the Mystery. The walls with the windows splayed in different directions cannot be seen as an awkward restatement of the idea of the association between God and light, which would be overdone in this case. The relationship with light is one of the pivotal features of this church. I don't know if all that I am saying here is just an effect of nostalgia; if so, let us rephrase the problem in different words, in more modern terms. Are we really sure that nowadays it is not possible to make a cross out of wrought iron? Is the idea that craftsmanship is dying today in our post-modern society not due to the fact that we are taking progress a bit too far, and nonchalantly rubbing out the traces of many of our traditions? A society is not only made up of people, but also of their activities, which should somehow be protected – but this is another, more complicated argument. We need to develop more research in a different way: a way in which to achieve a rapport with the project. In Italy there are certain people who deal with this with a degree of skill; for years we have spoken about a specifically Italian disposition towards knowhow, and I think that, after the crisis in craftsmanship, after the crisis in independent cinema, we have somehow magically re-discovered that certain refined operations in cities – and I would include certain operations that are valid for chur-

ches and that deal with sacred spaces – have need of an artist's hand. I think we are going astray in our search for artistic talent, for that ability to declare one's intentions and apply them properly. Perhaps we should reflect on the history of that period in order to ask ourselves how today, with materials that are different from wrought iron – using a reflective coating, for example – we can adapt ourselves to the diverse conditions of the present day and how we can recover that relationship between project and city that we seem to have in some sense lost.



Sezione longitudinale, pianta del livello inferiore



Prospettiva della versione realizzata e della prima soluzione

