

A Review, Half a Century Later

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Abstract: In the text we offer a re-reading of the book *La torre di Babele* (The Tower of Babel), 1967, by Ludovico Quaroni, in order to try and understand, fifty years after its publication, whether the theses proposed by its author are still, at least partially, valid and effective. As is common knowledge, since 1967 the conditions of the city have changed radically, and this might imply that Quaroni's theses are outdated. In fact, the book touching on the basic themes of urban development, it contains numerous arguments that are still relevant, as well as insights that would be of considerable interest were they developed further. Beginning with some hypotheses from his book regarding Quaroni's teaching activities we will try to analyze the complex introduction by Aldo Rossi, beyond the Milanese architect's appreciation for the author's theses. The recurring themes in the text are then summarized, animated by the desire to seek a new and more complex unity between architecture and urban planning.

Fifty years have gone by since the publication of the book *La torre di Babele* (The Tower of Babel) by Ludovico Quaroni, which I read with great interest as soon as it was available in bookstores, and discussed it a long time afterwards with friends who shared the studio in Corso Vittorio. I was then a student of the author, whose courses I followed in my fourth and fifth year. The book seemed to me a notable argumentative contribution, both in breadth and in depth, to my knowledge of the city, though it aroused in me more than one doubt, beginning already with the relationship Quaroni's text and the introduction by Aldo Rossi, to which I will come to later. Aside from these reservations, which I will try to explain in the brief notes that follow, I had not fully understood, in my first reading, the meaning

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that the publication of this volume had then, during Quaroni's teaching experience. Together with Luigi Piccinato and Bruno Zevi, Quaroni had returned in 1963, four years prior to the book seeing the light, as lecturer in the School of Architecture in Rome, from Florence, where he had been professor of Urban Planning. Most likely *La torre di Babele* was on the one hand a synthesis of what the Roman teacher had thought of the city until then; on the other hand a symbolic farewell, but still evolving, in a subject that he had cultivated since the beginning of his university experience. There is, however, more. The book constituted, in my view, a brief portion of Quaroni, Piccinato and Zevi's itinerary towards the Asse Attrezzato (New Roman central business district) envisaged by the 1962 Rome Zoning Legislation, especially due to Piccinato, then considered by the same Zevi Italy's most important urban planner. In all probability, the return of the three and the *Roxy Conference*, during which the great historian outlined a new layout for the Faculty of Architecture of Rome by limiting Saverio Muratori's role, who in those years was responsible for the final design studios, were the initial test of a strategy aimed at the realization of an imposing urban and architectural planning, which the new center-left government, recently sworn in, would have made possible. At that time the architectural spokesperson for the Christian Democrats was Muratori, creator of Palazzo Sturzo in EUR. It was therefore necessary to quash the academic consensus and the political credit collected he enjoyed so as to replace it with a program which, after the 1960 Olympic Games, would have concluded the transition of Rome to the status of a metropolis. This strategy, paradoxically, was facilitated by Muratori's own temperament, an uncompromising and centralizing personality, who liked to isolate himself with a few students in a more theoretical than practical world. In 1963 he had printed a major work, *Studi per un'operante storia urbana di Roma* (Studies of a Working Urban History of Rome), which followed his previous *Studi per una operante storia urbana di Venezia* (Studies for a Working Urban History of Venice), a synthesis of his work at the IUAV (Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia), where he taught from 1950 to 1954. As is well known the Asse Attrezzato was never built and there were not even any detailed plans. In this unfortunate affair only preliminary and partial studies, ever scarcer, kept the possibility

of this major project alive, which surely would have changed the face of Rome for the better. The work carried out by Studio Asse (1967-70) deserves to be remembered. It included Zevi, Mario Fiorentino, Riccardo Morandi, Lucio Passarelli, Vincenzo Passarelli, Quaroni, Vincio Delleani, who worked on a volunteer basis towards a proposal for the entire Asse Atrezzato characterized by a deep Utopian spirit.

An innovative spirit resolved in an urban composition that implied a system on a large territorial scale, in which colossal buildings were to be organized into a morphologically complex whole, intermediate between order and randomness. In many ways the visionary nature of this project had already been announced in the book *La torre di Babele*, which constituted the theoretical premise the moment itself in which it highlights the conceptual and operational limits. Incidentally, the visionary legacy of the project may be found both in the Corviale by Mario Fiorentino and in Casilino by Quaroni, the two protagonists of the Studio Asse experience, the first work as an *out of scale* poetic, in the second as an estranging *archaeological image*.

Throughout its short history, beginning in the Twenties, the School of Architecture of Rome, considered by Zevi the sphere of an academy closed in on itself, oriented towards the celebration of tradition, rigidly imposing compositional models, was in reality a structure in which the student was free to adopt whatever references they chose. Arnaldo Foschini, one of the most important professors, was a staunch advocate of the empirical method of teaching, allowing students almost total autonomy. It is with Muratori, on his return from Venice, that the situation changes. He established undoubtedly authoritarian, as well as authoritative, teaching management in his courses. An activity, no longer simply didactic, but above all aimed at providing students with a comprehensive view of the relationship between *ecumene civile* and architecture and, within this, between the collective dimension in which it is expressed and the individual architect's interpretation.

All within a method to be followed precisely in all its phases, so as to master both through rigorous analysis and through knowledgeable linguistic synthesis the complex relationships between typology and morphology. Muratori's method, however, was at first rejected by the students, who accused him of traditionalism then, as mentioned above,

by the three new professors, who assumed the leadership of the Roman School of Architecture in 1963. It should be said, however, that Quaroni himself, along with Piccinato and Zevi, wanted to promote a strong and recognizable method of teaching, preferring, however, not to impose it in a confrontation with the students, but by limiting his role and suggesting apparently more open and diverse design methods. Quaroni's famous *systematic doubt* is the best known example of a Socratic teaching behind which, however, one recognizes the presence of deeply held opinions. Opinions, as we would say today, which are *not negotiable*.

Turning now back to *La torre di Babele*, a book that I cannot wholly cover within the space of these notes, but in which I will limit myself to the themes and motifs that I believe to be the most relevant. The book was not conceived as a unit. It is in fact the collection of a series of writings by Quaroni for conferences and seminars. The first five being written in 1966 and the sixth in 1967 gives them a thematic unity, so obviously coherent and contemporary that they seem as one complete and independent work. To contextualize the book when it appeared in the architectural debate it should be remembered that the mid-sixties saw the publications of books which are important to this day. In 1965, the year Ernesto Rogers left the direction of Casabella, Carlo Aymonino published his *Origine e sviluppo della città moderna* (Origin and Development of the Modern City); *Il territorio dell'architettura* (Territory and Architecture) by Vittorio Gregotti was in 1966, as well as *L'architettura della città* (Architecture of the City) by Aldo Rossi. The following year, the book, subject of this paper, comes out and the *L'urbanistica e l'avvenire delle città* (Urbanism and the Future of the City) by Giuseppe Samonà is expanded and reprinted, and offers a not scholastically modernist interpretation of urban settlements. In summary, the period in which these books were presented in the debate is one of the most fruitful of the Italian Novecento. Recalling the birth of the Gruppo '63, the origin of a real cultural revolution dedicated to the discovery of mass culture and its rites of communication. If the end of this period was a time not only architecturally articulated by precise dates it is still relevant in its effects on a national and international level. Effects that are still lasting.

I briefly mentioned, at the beginning, an introduction by Rossi, undoubtedly an important comment, but which always seemed somewhat *misplaced* with respect to the actual contents of the book. Aside from the fact that the the Milanese architect, director of the Polis series of the publishing house Marsilio, wanted the book as the fifth volume of the set, one may detect duplicity, if not an ambiguity, among some of the relevant observations, that are not only biased, but at the very least approximate, if not inaccurate. The young Milanese architect and Quaroni had a relatively recent common experience, the famous Seminar in Arezzo in 1963, incompletely and evasively concluded. The issue addressed at that time was the relationship between architecture and urban planning, with a view to create a new course of study on planning, within *the intent to separate* the two disciplines. In fact architecture in those years tended towards an autonomous conception that asserted for architecture itself a field of knowledge not subordinated to politics, economics and sociology. A knowledge for which the project was configured primarily as a critical judgment on the world with a view to a progressive transformation. Urban planning chose, instead, a consubstantial path with political and economic power that be with the intention of influencing them to ensure a more efficient government in the territory. Within this framework, architecture was considered a necessary derivative, but in fact its superstructure insufficient. In the synthesis of Quaroni's text, Rossi claims that this opposition was resolved by considering the: «city as something constructed via architecture, itself as architecture, [which] provides new substance to the individual architectures. This formulation or trend may be detected in many ways: from competitions, writings, teachings, from a different quality of the architectural culture, starting in large part by overcoming or wanting to overcome the single architecture or its stylistic quality, from which the modern movement had not escaped, ends up today proposing architecture as an object, not as something closed in itself but a moment in the entire urban construction».

Rossi's position shown in these words is quite clear. It consists in thinking of the building within a series of fundamental rules that allows it naturally to be presented as an *urban element* itself. Thus the urban dimension would be subsumed by the architectural, in a perfectly

circular direction. But this conception, however, consistently, is not Quaroni's, even though the two parties tended towards a recomposition of the two subject areas. When he speaks of the *design of the city* he certainly did not intend to imply a connection between urban planning and architecture expressed synchronously by a building, but rather a diachronic convergence between an evolutionary scheme and a set of urban artifacts which can fit into this pattern, conferring on it identity, variety and form. Even the introduction's conclusion aroused and continues to arouse in me strong misgivings.

«This project of modern city made by parts and monuments linked together in a single structure – Rossi writes – designed entirely in its manifold aspects where, as in all great collective events (for example: revolutions) different personalities emerge, with their experiences and their myths, represents a great hope and alternative to the ugliness, nearsightedness, exploitation, and limits of all types of our cities. It is a challenge to architecture, like the Tower of Babel. That is our answer, paraphrasing, the question that Quaroni poses at the end of the book».

Rossi is describing the city counterpointed in parts, in its fabric, of great polarizing buildings. But this is the city of the Tendenza, certainly not Quaroni's, who perhaps in the design passage of the book describes more than convincingly. «Connected by green agriculture and forests of urban parks the units – residential, industrial, tertiary as they may be – will dispose themselves organically in the territory, mingling their oriented geometric patterns with free forms of the orography of the terrain, its folds, the streams of thick vegetation, all tied and bound by the communication lines: highways, railways, service roads, etc., which can penetrate even within the units themselves, to subject them, superimpose them or insert them within itself. The possibility of using air-conditioning and artificial lighting will alter the basis of the building structure, because air and natural light cease to be of a naturally functional element and become instead, of a formal nature, composition».

This image of a new city, alongside memories futuristic echoes of Broadacre City is even clearer in another description, which expresses with great precision the principle of urban unity. «With modern means,» says Quaroni, «it is possible that our new unit will not be a set of buildings, and not just one building (skyscraper or container).

Of the one building it will have the characteristic of continuity: rather even more so, because it will be free from the limits of the building, the façades and of land. The continuity, in a similar architectural discourse, is the first and most important feature.»

It can and must be traversed in all directions, not just horizontally as we are accustomed to think; it may have thickness, or only the one corresponding to the height of a floor, and vary in different points; stacks of skyscrapers may fold outward; roads may lie alongside, or most likely be far from a road (highway), or have it instead over, under, or within itself. For air and light, limited to what (little) is required to maintain contact between man and the alternating day and night, between man and the clear skies, between man and vegetation, to breathe the fresh air, whenever that is, that natural light and breezes will correct artificial ones, will there be apertures, holes and canals in the continuous building that will be something other than courtyards and streets, because they will not be the aim of the construction, the fabric that will continue within them».

The urban unit described by Ludovico Quaroni as an artifact that expands in all directions, excavated by large voids, buried or immersed in the landscape, derives from his vision both from suggestions of Le Corbusier and that Utopian imagination that in the sixties resurfaced in the international architectural debate. A vision radically at odds with Rossi's realism that sinks its roots in European rationalism which, although critically modified, by architects who a few years hence would follow the *Tendenza*, did not abandon a diagrammatic simplicity of planimetric installations and spaces that resulted. A simplicity absent in Quaroni's proposal which, as remarked, will find in the project of Studio Asse his architectural manifesto. It remains to say that Quaroni's continuum, also involving landscape, seems to anticipate another manifesto, proposed by Zevi in Modena thirty years after the publication of *La torre di Babele. Paesaggista e grado zero della scrittura architettonica* (Landscape and Degree Zero of Architectural Scripture) is a text in which the Roman historian and critic seems to follow some of Quaroni's insights projecting them onto the city's new situation arising from globalization.

La torre di Babele is divided into six chapters and a section called *Immagini di riferimento* (Reference images). In fact this second part is a sort of book in itself in which the author proposes a marked historical synthesis of urban evolution which, although has a certain autonomy, instigates a perceptible dialectical tension with what was maintained in previous chapters. The gallery of urban images with comments, which incidentally recalls the *Atlante di storia dell'urbanistica* (Atlas of the History of Urbanism) by Mario Morini, shortly before the publication of *La torre di Babele*, is revealed as a inertial background to which Quaroni's inventions oppose a lucid and passionate pursuit of new urban scenarios. In the six chapters, which constitute an organic body of reflections and proposals, some references and a series of very interesting theoretical assertions are presented. These included the idea of structure formulated by Louis Trolle Hejlslev, the concept of *homo poeticus*, derived perhaps from the work of the writer Danilo Kiš, the drawing as a cognitive and creative sphere in which all aspects of the city to be built and of the community that will live in it: *Utopia*, *urban unit* as a morphological component of a *new city*, the *continuum*, the *ideal city*. These conceptual and operational categories are arranged in an organic unity of signs and contents, constituting a system of discursive spaces that recur cyclically in the book as settings of architectural thought and action. An action in which the meanings of architecture and urbanism may find new expression. *La torre di Babele* is a synthesis of research where the ability to open and innovate theoretical prospects is probably greater today than in 1967. In a certain sense the presence of a second text in the book, constituted by the reference images, had ensured that the novelty of the discourse would be somewhat mitigated by the presence of both the history of the city and by the fact that some contemporary urban experiences were within the orbit of the historiographical narrative thus losing part of their relevance. Today, however, this risk has vanished, and Quaroni's prophecy of a future urban universe to be discovered counterposes a panorama of the global city and megalopolis and confirms what was more than an intuition in the pages of the book.

Finally *La torre di Babele*, of which these notes are a sort of *review half a century later*, is a programmatic text that in some way has been overlooked after it participated in the architectural and urban

debate by the the author's choosing the *modello direttore* (directing model) or meta-project. It was, for those unfamiliar with this topic, a procedural method to control and direct urban development through choices aimed at the systematic definition of the intervention in its overall lines, subordinating more properly architectural plans in the final scalar definition, that relating to the building. In this way the architectural object was, so to speak, largely deduced from the general framework of relations. Quaroni himself went beyond this deterministic view of the architecture in the book *Progettare un edificio* (Designing a Building) which, ten years after *La torre di Babele*, represents the ideal and, finally, successful conclusion.

I believe there still remains a small mystery. The cover of the book bears, solarized, a reproduction of Erastus Salisbury Field's painting, entitled *Historical Monument of the American Republic*, begun in 1867 and completed in 1888. A triumphant image containing ten entirely completed towers, seven of which are united by elevated walkways. Towers more distant than ever, in their definition, from Babel, still incomplete. It is difficult to find out if this painting was selected by Quaroni or a designer at Marsilio.

Perhaps this doubt is not important. In any case, the misalignment between the contents of the book and the work of the Leverett painter could allude, even if indirectly, to the fact that the work that gives Quaroni's book its title is in fact complete precisely in its being abandoned at some point in its construction. This is because, as the history of architecture reminds us, the whole is necessary and visible with maximum intensity only in the fragment.



*Erastus Salisbury Field, Historical Monument storico of American Republic, 1867-1888.
(source L. Quaroni, La torre di Babele, Marsilio Editori, Padova, 1967, cover)*