

Preface

One becomes an architect through education, learning, and the decisive role played by the transmission of experience from those who have already traveled certain paths. Likewise, there are figures who are born architects, meaning those who answer to both nuances contained in the term itself. *Archí*(ἀρχή) indicates command or primacy, such as *chief* or *first*; *Téktōn* (τέκτων) designates a *builder, craftsman, maker*, or someone engaged in action and operative practice.

What everyone recognizes in Alberto Seassaro, hidden among the eclectic and layered micro and macro-histories that mark his personal story, is the rare ability to construct a trajectory aimed at delineating the disciplinary autonomy of the field of design from the structurally foundational and historically structuring realm of architecture. This path reached its highest expression with the founding of the Faculty of Design and, subsequently, with the promotion and introduction, within the arduous magma of ministerial frameworks, of the Scientific Disciplinary Sector of Design: a development with far-reaching consequences for academic careers and for the future of entire generations of designers in the most contemporary senses that the term now evokes.

Over the course of his academic career Alberto Seassaro enacted the most meaningful gesture a professor can offer: placing at the service of the community his intelligence, undeniable foresight, and boundless talent and intuition.

If today the center of gravity of education and research in the world of Milanese design possesses a universal reach – understood not in a rhetorical or static sense but as dynamic, fluid, national, and international – we owe this in large part to him: an intellectual moving between consensus and dissent who, in *looking far ahead*, made of it a life philosophy and, on that basis, contributed to the growth, by reflection, of the Politecnico di Milano. His wide and diverse interests – devoted to design and experimentation, to practice and research, to building production, but also to art and craftsmanship, to future technologies, coupled with an attraction to history – animated his work throughout his life, directing him, some years later, toward new horizons, those of design, which at that time were likely already taking shape.

Starting from his interests in technology and building production, prefabrication, art, craftsmanship, and experimentation – passions that led him to realize works in industrialized construction and interior architecture and, between 1962 and 1969, to conduct theoretical and applied research in form, in the visual arts, in industrial design, and in architecture – his commitment progressively and decisively shifted toward industrial design.

In this scenario he held numerous institutional roles, including President of the five-year degree program in *Industrial Design* from 1994 to 2003; President of the POLI.design Consortium from 1999 to 2002; and Dean of the Faculty of Design from 2000 to 2010, the first Faculty of Design in Italy, both chronologically and in scale. It was precisely at the outset of this extraordinary growth – rare and exceptional within the Italian academic landscape – that our paths crossed, straddling the late 1980s and early 1990s. The setting for this encounter: the spaces of the Department, technological in spirit, then bearing the unforgettable name PPPE (an unpronounceable yet easily memorized acronym for *Programmazione, Progettazione e Produzione Edilizia* [Programming, Design, and Building Production]), later retitled Di.Tec (Industrial Design and Architectural Technology), also intended to give visibility and substance to the area of Design.

This was a world progressively assuming an ever more significant and strategic role within the University – one that figures such as Alberto helped to shape day by day. In those cramped yet extraordinarily rich spaces – teeming with people, papers, notes, documents, ideas, and visions – the first national degree course in Design was born, thanks to him. It was the first seed and fragment of what today constitutes the Politecnico di Milano's *Design System*, a place of excellence in teaching, research, and experimentation, an international model of reference.

Precisely in a period such as the present, which underscores the importance of contamination among bodies of knowledge and the evident heteronomous *status* that the worlds of architecture and design claim and display, the figure of Alberto Seassaro is all the more current and operationally modern. His thesis, focused on the project of form and concerned with the synaesthesia of the arts, signaled a step beyond the more customary disciplines of design and composition, telling much about his interest in interdisciplinarity and the interrelation of competences.

A student of Architecture already projected toward a sense of institution and eager to grasp its problems, Alberto was first and foremost interested in the relationships between teaching and research, between Faculty and Department – then Institute – between research for teaching and research for professional practice. These themes, deeply nourished by the impulses of the student movement, would later reappear, with greater vigor, in his roles as lecturer and, even more, as Dean.

Likewise, Seassaro as artist and professional reveals his chief quality: curiosity and a hunger for experimentation. His artistic training at Brera, his encounters with the Milanese avant-gardes, his focus on form and on the theme of light, his political engagement, also and precisely as an artist, all converged. On the professional front, his projects are distinguished by having addressed the articulated scales of design: from furnishings to interiors to architecture.

At the heart of this colorful, multidirectional, eccentric picture emerges the genesis of design as a discipline at Politecnico di Milano: an embryo that, evolving, would spread throughout Italy. Fundamental in this context was the role of Architectural Technology within the then Faculty of Architecture, nourished by environments devoted to innova-

tion and change. The entire technological area, the technical cultures, and the Department of Technology played a primary role in the birth of design. Alberto undoubtedly succeeded in stitching together his artistic experience with his professional one, shared with Giuseppe Ciribini, Marcello Grisotti, Raffaella Crespi, Giacomo Scarpini, and stimulated at the Department of Programmazione, Progettazione e Produzione Edilizia [Programming, Design, and Building Production] of the Politecnico di Milano by central figures such as Marco Zanuso, Raffaella Crespi, Achille Castiglioni, and later Tomás Maldonado, Ezio Manzini, and Francesco Trabucco, each bringing vibrant experience to the field.

Equally unforgettable and strategic, for the success of the large-scale program he had in mind, was the contribution of longstanding friends of the Department who, through dialogue and often tenacious, passionate debate, contributed directly and indirectly to the evolution and birth of *a new discipline*, the result of a fusion of knowledge and competences that each personality brought to bear. Antonio Scoccimarro, then Head of Department, Guido Nardi, Bianca and Maria Bottero, Fabrizio Schiaffonati, Valerio Di Battista, Claudio Molinari: all central figures in enabling the Department to open itself to this new undertaking and in positioning Alberto as the standard-bearer of that crusade.

Similarly, in other Italian Schools of Architecture, it would once again be the technological component to nourish the first experiences of design within the university, unfolding along the entire length of the country.

The stages Alberto Seassaro lived through in conceiving and creating the multiform cultural platforms that saw him as a protagonist in research and teaching culminated in his role as Dean of a Faculty – today a School – that still bears, incisively, the imprint he formulated and shaped. From these succinct traits Seassaro emerges as a *demiurge* who makes experimentation his operative instrument: an activity straddling artistic, interior, and design projects, where the imagination of inhabitable space becomes a system through coherent control of the technological aspects of architecture.

His work in education and research interprets, through a specific approach, a civic and social role, valorizing his recognized capacity to embrace innovative contents of the art of design and translate

them into institutional form. For this reason, and not for this alone, as Pro-Rector Vicario – but even more as an architect who had the good fortune to know him – I feel compelled to thank Alberto Seassaro for what he managed to conceive and realize for the Politecnico di Milano and for its steady evolution and international standing in the field of design and the applied arts.

Therefore, on behalf of the Rectorate and its progressive and institutional spirit, I sense both the pleasure and the duty to extend to him, Professor Emeritus and devotee of the discipline, a tribute for the effort by which he anticipated themes, dynamics, and timings that are undeniably current today: the alchemy and fusion of disciplines as an antidote to the too-often exhibited self-referentiality of architecture and design, opening the doors to a global and universal concept of the applied arts in which Milanese design stands as a genuine world pioneer among innovation, tradition, and new horizons.

In this light, the features of Alberto Seassaro emerge as those of a heteronomous intellectual, bearer of an idea situated between architecture and design: a dream of then, now transformed into a domain of vivid resonance and contemporary relevance.

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