

Polyhedric and Polytechnic

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My first encounter with Alberto Seassaro coincided with one of those moments when a group's energy and capabilities exceed the sum of its parts. I remember a smoky room, the kind that still existed in the 1990s, in which a small cluster of people occupied the little space left free by cupboards and tables on which stacks of documents were heaped, sheets with notes and corrections, and diagrams crowded with boxes, arrows, and connections. Earlier still, I recall an equally cramped basement where, when I was still a student, I worked with him on mounting an exhibition that later led to my thesis, for which Alberto Seassaro was supervisor and which allowed me to begin to know him in a way decidedly more intimate and profound than is usual in the relationship between teacher and graduating students.

Perhaps Italian design could have a mythology of the basement just as Silicon Valley has that of the garage, because I later remember another basement, in a condominium in Via D'Ovidio that the Politecnico di Milano had rented to cope with the shortage of space, which represented the very first, tiny expansion of the project we subsequently called *Design System* of Politecnico di Milano: the POLI.design

Consortium, the Faculty (now School) of Design, and the Department of Design. Having been there from the beginning, I am certain that the overall scheme was not preordained and that we operated within an emergent model, seizing every opportunity and exploiting all available resources rather than formulating a strategic plan that foresaw the construction of all the system's components. Yet what was then Alberto Seassarò's vision, an intuition to be cultivated, has today become a solid presence, grown to the point of becoming one of the three souls of Politecnico di Milano and internationally recognized.

This growth was grounded in Alberto Seassarò's contagious direction, in his ability to hold together people with diverse and complementary competences and temperaments, but also in the grind of procedures, of equilibria and boundaries to be renegotiated continuously. When I think back to those early years, endless working days come to mind, in which up to a certain point I took part while simultaneously pursuing professional practice and leading a double working life that absorbed many of my weekends and holiday periods. I recall, for example, the many times we climbed over the gates to enter Politecnico di Milano on the weekend, or a summer spent with Flaviano Celaschi drafting a major development plan for laboratory teaching and the supporting infrastructures that had to be delivered at the beginning of September, which perhaps trained me for the deadlines of European research projects that would arrive years later, always scheduled at the beginning of September. It is an experience that has taken on a *heroic* dimension in the memories of almost all the members of the group, which perhaps today would deserve a critical rereading in the light of a necessary balance between professional and private life.

It was not a linear path, free of errors, second thoughts, setbacks, and recoveries. When Alberto Seassarò decided to take on the challenge of building the educational pathways in design at Politecnico di Milano, resources were extremely scarce. Alberto Seassarò was able to recognize and bring together differences and complementarities, gathering colleagues, engaging diverse competences and dispositions, opening internal and external dialogues, finding the resources needed to enlarge the group, and working tenaciously on the construction and then the consolidation, also in formal terms, of the system's various components. Along this path, inspiring and uneven as all

great challenges are, Alberto Seassaro managed to hold together visions and constraints, imagination and rules, the urgency of innovation and the patience of the institution.

His *polyhedral* nature has always struck me. His interests, which the contributions in this volume portray in their variety and complexity and which ranged from architecture to lighting design; from the exploration of form poised between art, architecture, and design, to the technology of building components; through to the relationship between the construction industry and the building supply chains, functioned as hinges capable of opening dialogues and creating connections. This disposition toward transversality made the *Design System* intrinsically open and relational, sustaining its vitality over time and welding the founder's multifacetedness to the polytechnic character of the project.

His distinguishing trait, what, in my view, made him most interesting, was his fertile contradictions. Alberto Seassaro was, at the same time, an anarchist, a visionary, and a man of institutions. The anarchist who refuses frames that are too tight and opens passages; the visionary who recognizes opportunities and trajectories for imagining the new and reimagining what already exists; the institutional man who accepts the responsibility to give stable form to novelties, so that they may endure beyond individuals and cycles, without, however, relinquishing the drive toward the new. In this sense, Alberto Seassaro was multifaceted but also profoundly *polytechnic*: not only a leading figure of an institution, but the engine of a project that, perhaps for the first time, truly integrated the different components of knowledge that characterize Politecnico di Milano. From this perspective, the *Design System* is the result of an orchestration capable of holding together diverse elements according to a principle of dynamic coherence: education, research, technology transfer, relations with the productive and cultural fabric, internationalization.

The wager, by no means a foregone one, was that design could be cultivated as an academic discipline without losing its project-oriented vocation and its capacity to engage the world. I do not know whether we have succeeded: design is a young discipline and the challenge demands sustained commitment. Yet I believe that the best answer, thirty years on, is the one we can read in the numbers.

in the reputation, in the projects, and in the people who have grown within this community and who today are part of it.

This publication, curated with sensitivity by Antonella Penati, Agnese Rebaglio, and Paola Bertola, conveys the figure of Alberto Seassaro in all his richness and complexity through a plurality of voices and formats. From critical profiles to the *quasi-biography*, from interviews to cameos, from documents to thematic reconstructions, it offers a framework consistent with the person and with the project to which he contributed in a decisive way. It is neither a hagiographic account nor a celebration of what was accomplished, but rather a critical reappraisal of a trajectory, in which to reflect on the choices made, on the goals achieved, and also on the challenges encountered and the ways in which they were addressed, so as to look to future prospects with renewed energy and capacity for innovation.

The opening sections, devoted to the *heteronomous intellectual* and to the fertile relationship between architecture and design, frame his cultural posture and capture the core of the formation and evolution of his thought. The pages on *where it all began* take the reader back to the Politecnico di Milano of experimentation, with that blend of vision and pragmatism that made it possible to reach unforeseen results. The interview with Ugo La Pietra and the cameos, including the recollections by Giancarlo Consonni, Bianca Bottero, and Luigi Bistagnino, add emotional depth and lateral perspectives.

The section devoted to Alberto Seassaro's artistic and design experiments after his graduation and before the full unfolding of his academic career, featuring contributions by Antonella Penati, who highlights the artistic practice that shaped his training, and by Giovanni Baule, who identifies in his *visual notations* Seassaro's most distinctive mode of expression, together with essays such as *Doing Everything, Doing It Artfully* (C.vo) by Beppe Finessi and *Imagining the Living Space Between Experimentation and System* (C.vo) by Giampiero Bosoni, sheds clear light on the hallmark of his presence on boundaries and at intersections. It is a thread we then find again, in the folds of technological culture, in the premises to the birth of the *Design System*: the social role of education and research, the capacity to catalyze energies and ideas, as recalled by Fabrizio Schiaffonati and Luciano Crespi, and the vivid images of Cristina Tonelli's *penguin* and *bats*, which

render the human dimension and the tenacity required to manage an institutional construction site in the making.

Building the institution to open up to emerging content is perhaps the core of Alberto Seassaro's legacy. Building institutions is, in fact, a cultural project: it means translating innovative contents into shared and durable forms, giving learning and research processes structures capable of supporting complexity and future developments. In the contributions in this section – from reflections on teaching for design to the documents and testimonies of transformation, through to the in-depth examinations of visual notations, cultural heritage, and lighting design (*Each Student is in their own Way a Master*) – one recognizes a way of thinking that sees *bricolage* as the path to creating resilient systems. It is a theme that I later, somewhat by chance, encountered again in research on social innovation, where *bricolage*, as an approach tied to structural resource scarcity, has been widely investigated.

Looking today at the *Design System* – at its international reach, at the quality of its research, at the breadth of its educational offering, at its strong relation to social, economic, and cultural developments – I recognize Alberto Seassaro's capacity to look to the future and the *cathedral thinking* that invites one to imagine undertakings larger than the time span of those who initiate them, and that enables the production of exceptions, ensuring that systems remain alive, attuned to the new, capable of learning and evolving.

On behalf of the community that constitutes the *Design System*, I would like to thank all those who contributed to this volume. The editors' merit has been to give a choral shape to memory, without smoothing its edges and by restoring its contradictions as well, so that it may become a legacy rather than a repertory. To those who will read, I therefore wish that these pages prove not only a tribute to a fundamental figure, but also a call to action: to design while holding together the vision needed to imagine the future and the tenacity required to achieve concrete results. It is, ultimately, what Alberto Seassaro asked us to continue to do.