

Almost a Biography

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The reality of Italian design and the history of its relationship with industry constitute at once both an exception and an exemplary case. Unlike most European countries engaged – during the postwar reconstruction – in fostering a *science of design* intended to meet the needs of an expanding industry, in Italy the first modernization of the country took place through a *culture of design*. This path followed the original and far from naïve direction of inventing new typologies that emerged already mature (Castelnuovo, 1989); of technological and linguistic transfer between different and even distant product sectors; of fertile flows moving from the war industry to the domestic furniture industry. A trajectory that never found its gravitational center in methodological certainty but rather in cultivated intuition, in a spontaneity not aligned with schools of thought, in authorial experimentation, in a strategic vision that transcends the object.

The industrial system itself, composed above all of small and medium-sized enterprises, represented at the same time both an exception

and an exemplary case. Devoid of the rigid organizational structures so characteristic of large American and European companies (Chandler, 1994), Italian small and very small firms implemented a flexible policy of free collaboration with the system of design, never integrated into the logics of the enterprise and therefore free in the almost-artistic expression of carrying out *cultural crusades* (A. Branzi, 2011a, p. 4) and of tracing unprecedented paths by experimenting with hypotheses destined to leave a mark and to become, in many cases, the *manifesto* of a way of practicing design.

Compared to the historic experiences of the Bauhaus and Ulm in Germany and the university and technical institutes developed worldwide – first in industrialized European countries and North America, then in emerging and more recently developed contexts – in Italy design, despite the worldwide success achieved since the 1960s by its designers and their products, for a long time could not rely on a system of university-level education and research. Until the early 1990s, in fact, university training drew upon individual courses within the Faculties of Architecture, while outside of them proliferated private institutions that compensated for this gap with targeted educational offerings.

As Andrea Branzi reminds us, «in the landscape of Italian design there have always been both designers trained in Architecture and self-taught figures such as Bruno Munari, Enzo Mari, Denis Santachiara, Joe Colombo» (Branzi, 2011b, p. 4), capable of using design «not to change the real world but that of ideas» (Branzi, 2011b, p. 5).

When, in the early 1990s, Politecnico di Milano decided to grant the teaching of Design its own path, autonomous from Architecture, it had to reckon with this important cultural legacy produced directly by manufacturing and instilled in the design of its products, without the mediation of a dedicated educational system.

Much of the history of the construction of this major system of education and research in design is owed to Alberto Seassaro. It is about him, and about this construction that engaged a community for almost two decades, that we now set out to write, placing at the center of this account the inseparable human and cultural intertwining between Alberto Seassaro and Politecnico di Milano.

Preamble

Arduous, certainly difficult, is the task of writing about Alberto Seassaro, because of the multifaceted nature of his design production, almost programmatically devoid of easily drawn boundaries; almost programmatically directed toward *producing exceptions*, as Beppe Finessi writes in his fine contribution on Design Philology digital platform; almost programmatically devoted to looking more at what still remained to be done than at what had already been achieved, to the point of discouraging any attempt at cataloging or ordering what had been realized. To archive one's own experiences as exemplary and worthy of being remembered does not belong to the somewhat dissipative disposition of someone who, when faced with the choice between gathering fragments of his own past and looking toward the future, always opted to move forward.

The ambition to collect achievements and professional successes, typical of those who punctiliously update their curriculum profile, was far from an attitude that was always first critical of oneself even before being critical of others.

A single great *exception* to the proliferation of *exceptions* that marked his intense life: that of his role as Dean of the Faculty of Design. A role that absorbed him during the mature phase of his career and into which he poured such energy that those who knew him at the time tended to conflate that role with his entire existence.

Personal determination, the ability to grasp shared ideas and contents, to give meaning to a unified project, to govern a process of legitimization – these created the conditions for the construction, at Politecnico di Milano, of a Faculty of Design of international stature. It was the early 1990s.

In this story, Alberto Seassaro entered almost by chance, drawn more by the insistence of colleagues than by personal conviction. Despite this initial reluctance, within this long and complex process of institutional construction, he would play the role of protagonist, absorbed into this endeavor in every effort of his design activity.

Both stage and secondary actor in this narrative was Politecnico di Milano, a University of design, until that time an institution for the training of engineers and architects.

As we write this book, it has been just over a year since the *Design Philology* platform has been online, reconstructing «the historical traces of the development and institutionalization of the teaching and research in design at Politecnico di Milano and, more broadly, at the academic level» (Bertola, Rebaglio, 2024, pp. 217-218).

The platform recounts

[...] the process of collective reconstruction of the identity traits and cultural roots of the Department [of Design, ed.] and more broadly of the Design System of Politecnico and of its reference community». The *Design Philology* project, celebrating the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the first degree course in *Industrial Design* – the starting point of the entire *Design System* of Politecnico di Milano – is structured «as a project of codification and reconstruction of the historical memory of the Design System, as a tool for clarifying its identity traits and on which to ground new strategic perspectives. (Bertola, Rebaglio, 2024, p. 216)

Beyond describing the main stages that led to the construction of the Design System at Politecnico di Milano, the project also includes a section dedicated to the celebration of the *Maestri*, namely, those figures who, with their thought, ideas, reflections, and cultural positions, nourished the process of constructing the values and principles that animated the School of Design from its birth throughout its evolution: Attilio Marcolli, Raffaella Crespi, Francesco Trabucco, Ezio Manzini, Andrea Branzi, and many others testify to the cultural pluralism that marks the entire institutional project.

The remembrance of the *Maestri* cannot but begin here, precisely with Alberto Seassaro, the *craftsman-man* (an appellation borrowed from Richard Sennett's celebrated definition), the designing intelligence of an entire system, of which he was not only the ideator and architect but also embroiderer-weaver, goldsmith-engraver, blacksmith-maintainer. Like Sennett's craftsman, Alberto Seassaro, in addition to his personal visionary capacity, invested in this project all his passion, dedication, and personal commitment (Sennett, 2009, p. 28).

Sennett also reminds us that «the Greek word we translate as craftsman is *demiourgos*, a composite term combining the idea of pub-

lic (*demios: belonging to the people*) and of production (*ergon: work*)» (Sennett, 2009, p. 29). A term that, we believe, would have appealed to Seassaro the *man of the people*, for the way he liked to present himself and for his ease in establishing relations at every level, and also to Seassaro the industrious man, capturing in that word his commitment, inventive talent, and constructive skills. Craftsmen, as Sennett reminds us, are those who know how to use both head and hand, idea and technique, to achieve an end; those who, in other words, possess the capacity to design and the ability to devise both conceptual and material instruments to give body to ideas. An activity that, for Sennett, drawing on Plato, is always characterized by the «aspiration to quality» (Sennett, 2009, p. 31), by acting under the impulse of improvement without settling for «modest results» (Sennett, 2009, p. 31). In this spirit of the craftsman-demiurge we find that of Alberto Seassaro, a Dean endowed with personal qualities, including the *craft* astuteness typical of the artisan, placed at the disposal of a community to give design a home. A challenge not simple to face, for in the case of design we are confronted not only with a discipline worthy of teaching and of autonomous paths of research, but also with an emerging phenomenon of Italian culture whose achievements are celebrated as the splendor of an imaginative synthesis that, even beyond our country, has become a model of invention. We shall return to some of these reflections in the paragraph *The Demiurge*.

Collective Biographies

It is incumbent, in this introductory section, to offer a brief note on the theme of *biographies* (a theme that, in this case as well, will be taken up later) as a specific narrative genre which, distinct from autobiographies, makes it epistemologically necessary to distinguish among the literary, journalistic, and historical forms, given the risk of lapsing into anecdote of limited cognitive import.

Biography, as a historiographical genre, poses first and foremost the problem of the authoritativeness of sources and the correctness of their use. This issue is all the more pertinent to a philological, document-based inquiry such as the one initiated with the *Design Philology* project.

Studies on the subject, however, teach us that

the boundary between what is history and what is not has a neutral zone of its own, where the distinction becomes difficult, where differences increasingly blur: where history approaches the narrative genre and literature acquires certain historiographical connotations, both in the verification of facts and, above all, in the capacity to interpret their deeper reasons. [...] And at times literature, thanks to fewer constraints of documentation and therefore to the greater freedom it enjoys, succeeds in clarifying certain aspects of the past and above all the motivations of human actions better than historiography. [...] (Pignatelli, 1999, pp. 299 and 301)

The aim here is not to claim that the biographical recollection we propose lacks documentary foundations. Quite the contrary. Rather, we intend to privilege the category of *understanding* over those of *interpretation*, of proof, and of documentary control (Rebeschini, 2006, p. 435), which are more proper to a historical approach than to the approach, more typical of the social sciences, that we shall privilege here.

Moreover, the editors are not professional historians and, above all, their genuine interest is to unravel, in the telling, the rich interweaving between the story of a single individual and the story of the socio-cultural structures in which he was immersed; that is, they are interested in tracing the signs of the contribution the individual left to the micro-social system into which he was inserted and, conversely, in order to understand «what the dialectic between the person and his context has been» (Pignatelli, 1999, p. 302).

Such an attitude toward biographical reconstruction is especially apt when it proves difficult, and perhaps even inopportune, to isolate the peculiarities of the contribution of a single figure, however prominent, with respect to a system of collective actions to which the descriptive field is broadened.

For that matter, this stance also makes sense when one refers to biography as a historiographical genre. Even in this case, in fact, «the use of the category of individual as the entity to which to anchor historiographical reconstruction» (Rebeschini, 2006, p. 231) becomes a critical element, and the lens of microhistories becomes the one capa-

ble of «observing individual components within an institutional space» (Rebeschini, 2006, p. 235).

It is increasingly common, moreover, that «biographical interest in the strict sense proves secondary because it is dissolved into the context in which the *how* and the *why* are deemed significant» the *how* and the *why* (Pozzi, 1999, p. 290) that led a prominent subject to become the problem-setter and problem-solver of central issues within his institutional *milieu*.

Even in the biographies of scientists, entrepreneurs, and innovators, individual action is interwoven with the system of interests and with the infrastructures that become part and support of their agency; thus the celebration of autonomous, individual ingenuity does not, by itself, suffice to explain histories of invention and progress – no more than talent alone suffices for artists (Spagnolo, 2010). In the case of Alberto Seassaro, moreover, it becomes difficult even to define a role that can be rendered historiographically: what, in terms of collective memory, does the story of a Dean of Faculty represent and what does it tell us? What sort of figure do we face? A figure of the institutions? An academic? An intellectual? A bureaucrat? A politician? A man of design and innovation? Perhaps even an artist, given the flashes of insight that accompanied his action? «A great player of solitaire who always manages to finish the game», as Andrea Branzi once defined him in the pages of *Interni* (Branzi, 2020, unpaginated). Perhaps all these meanings together. And, very likely, in Alberto Seassaro's case it is also limiting to reduce his work to that of a Dean of Faculty, since before *to preside* over an institution, he created it, transformed it, made it evolve – indeed, in certain respects, even invented it – when no one would have imagined development on the scale we know today: that of a major international system for education in design.

The few biographical data, deliberately reduced to the essential, that we list below outline an academic career not unlike that of many university figures who, in their mature years, come to occupy managerial roles within the university system:

- Alberto Seassaro was born in Milan in July 1939.
- He graduated in Architecture from Politecnico di Milano in April 1964.
- Associate Professor in Architectural Technology in 1980 and

Extraordinary Professor in 1990, at the Faculty of Architecture of Politecnico di Milano; holder of the chair in Technology and Economics of Production and, from 1995, Full Professor of Industrial Design.

- President of the Technological Track Council of the Degree Course in Architecture at Politecnico di Milano from 1981 to 1989.
- President of the first Degree Course in Industrial Design at Politecnico di Milano from 1995 to 2003.
- Founder and Dean of the Faculty of Design from 2000 to 2010.
- Founder and President of the POLI.design Consortium from 1999 to 2002.
- Founder of the In.D.A.Co Department (Industrial Design, Arts, and Communication), today the Department of Design.
- Founder and President of the National Conference of Deans of Design Faculties (CPD) from 1999 to 2010.
- Founder and President of the Italian Design Society (SI.design) and of its antecedent associative forms (AUDI) of faculty and researchers of the Scientific Disciplinary Sector of Industrial Design from 2005 to 2010.
- Emeritus Professor of Politecnico di Milano since 2013.

Data which, rescued from the aridity of the curriculum list, present Alberto Seassaro as the first President of the first Degree Course in *Industrial Design* at Politecnico di Milano, where he then founded and presided over the first Faculty of Design in Italy and the first design consortium, POLI.design, and brought into being the first Department of Design (the In.D.A.Co Department, Department of Industrial Design, Arts, and Communication). This work of building a research and education system starts from Politecnico di Milano but then spreads at the national level, where Seassaro labored to promote the development of design within Italian universities, fostering the establishment of Bachelor's and Master's Degree Courses at various university sites.

From this action on a national scale, he went on to found and coordinate the *Conferenza nazionale dei Presidi di Design* [National Conference of Deans of Design] and the *Società Italiana del Design* [Italian Design Society], promoting the diffusion of design culture even beyond the strictly academic system, enabling it both to contaminate

and to be contaminated by the wider world of project culture – already highly active in Milan in particular, thanks to the rich presence of associations and cultural institutions, sector journals, fairs, exhibitions, and events. A process of cross-fertilization that reached the vibrant ecosystem of project professions suspended between industry and craft; between the intellectual sphere and production; between art, science, and technique [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) [8](#).

Some Notes on Method

When, as curators of this text, we sat around the table to draft the outline of Alberto Seassaro's biography, we were well aware that the most evident trait of his profile coincided with his academic life and in particular with his vital role as promoter first and Dean later of what, according to many, represented – after the creation of the Faculty of Architecture in 1934 – the most innovative event in the history of Politecnico di Milano: the establishment of the Faculty of Design at the

9. Cesare Stevan,
Professore Emerito del
Politecnico di Milano.
[Document](#) →



Milanese university [9](#).

It was equally clear to us that linking this important institutional achievement to the figure of its founder carried the risk of falling into the celebratory-biographic rhetoric typical of narratives that dwell on the biographical and personal qualities of a single protagonist, as is often the case in those entirely «internal» histories (Ferguson, 1974) that sacrifice, in the name of one individual, the collective dimension underlying the development of a major institution. While it is undeniable that Alberto Seassaro played the principal role in the establishment of the Italian Design System, in spreading from Politecnico di Milano to all Italian universities the teaching of design as an autonomous educational path, it is equally undeniable that attributing to one person alone the merits of what, for over a decade, was a widespread laboratory of didactic experimentation in this discipline risks relegating the history we are beginning to recount to a limited perspective.

This concern, combined with our deep adherence to the new «biographical statutes» and «social biographies» of the *nouvelle histoire* (Le Goff, 1980), led us to write a text in which the personal biography is always immersed in its context of development and, indeed, finds in

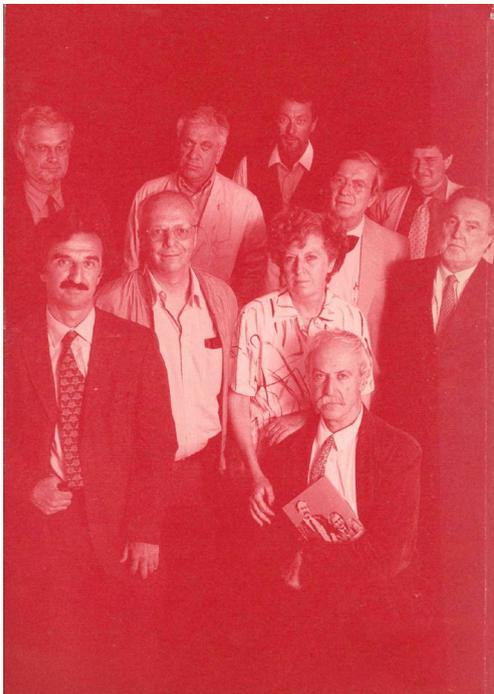


Figure 1.

On the back cover of the Student Guide for the academic year 1999-2000, the first Board of the Degree Course in *Industrial Design*. From top left: Ezio Manzini, Francesco Mauri, Arturo Dell'Acqua Bellavitis, Attilio Marcolli, Medardo Chiapponi. Front row, from left: Alberto Cigada, Giovanni Anceschi, Gabriella Belotti, Alberto Seassaro, Francesco Trabucco.



1. Politecnico di Milano, sede di Milano Bovisa, campus Durando.

[Document →](#)



Prot. N. 602

c.a. Rettore del Politecnico
Adriano De Maio
e p.c. Cesare Stevan
Pier Luigi Della Vigna

Caro Adriano,
in risposta alla tua (del 23 giugno) di commento alla mia informativa sull' o.d.g. del nostro prossimo Consiglio di Facoltà (il primo!) ti preciso:
- so bene che la Facoltà può fare solo proposte circa la nostra denominazione, ma poiché il Senato si è già più volte espresso nel corso dei suoi lavori (ad esempio da parte di Stevan e Della Vigna) in modo univoco e concorde, ritengo opportuno che anche i docenti della Facoltà riuniti nel loro organo deliberante possano esprimersi.
Quindi, in attesa di un prossimo formale passaggio alla configurazione delle "Facoltà tematiche", la (importante) questione comunicativa, come ti avevo già proposto, potrebbe essere così risolta:
a) adottando in tutti gli atti formali con il MURST, la denominazione "III Facoltà di Architettura con sede Milano Bovisa" (come dal decreto ministeriale);
b) adottando nelle comunicazioni interne relative agli atti istituzionali di Ateneo, (ad esempio, in questi giorni, nel calendario accademico), la denominazione "III Facoltà di Architettura/Design";
c) adottando nelle comunicazioni esterne (alla città, alla stampa, nella pubblicistica e nelle comunicazioni sociali in Italia, ma soprattutto all' Estero, nonché nel linguaggio parlato, sulla carta del lettera, ecc...) la dizione di "Facoltà del Design (III Facoltà di Architettura)", dizione adeguata per le esigenze internazionali e anche corretta dal punto di vista scientifico-disciplinare dei suoi contenuti formativi.

Queste sono le proposte che porterò ai colleghi in consiglio perché possano "democraticamente" esprimersi.

Sarà poi il Senato a disporre, accogliendo o meno (in toto o in parte) le proposte del Consiglio quando potrà (non sono al corrente del calendario accademico, ma penso che potrete sempre trovare una qualche molecola del vostro tempo per esprimervi nel merito).

Grazie, ciao
Alberto Seassaro

Via Durando 38/a, 20158 Milano - tel. 02.23995961 - fax. 02.23995977 - mail: ldi@mail.polimi.it
*denominazione, sede e recapiti provvisori per lo svolgimento delle procedure di costituzione della facoltà



PIANO DI SVILUPPO della III Facoltà di Architettura - Design ANNO 2001

Delibera del Consiglio di Facoltà del 13 ottobre 2000

Milano,
27 ottobre 2000

il Preside
Prof. Alberto Seassaro



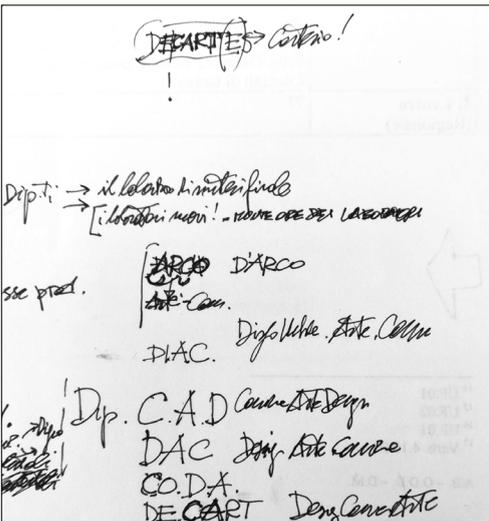
2. Alberto Seassaro, Lettera al Rettore Adriano De Maio sulla denominazione della III Facoltà di Architettura-Bovisa.

[Document ->](#)



3. Piano di sviluppo della III Facoltà di Architettura-Design, anno 2001.

[Document ->](#)



4. Alberto Seassaro, appunti per la denominazione del Dipartimento INDACO.

[Document ->](#)



conferenza nazionale dei presidi
delle facoltà di design
e dei presidenti di corso di studi
delle classi di disegno industriale e design



5. Logo conferenza nazionale dei Presidi delle Facoltà del design. Progetto Mario Piazza.

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6. Fotografia di Alberto Seassaro con il Rettore Giulio Ballio.
[Document →](#)



7. Fotografia di Alberto Seassaro, Cesare Stevan e Antonio Scoccimarro.
[Document →](#)



Figure 2.
Meeting of the Italian Design Society (SID). From left:
Medardo Chiapponi, Patrizia Ranzo, Massimo Ruffilli,
Alberto Seassaro, Antonella Penati.



8. Fotografia con Alberto Seassaro, Benedetta Spadolini, Gillo Dorfles, Vico Magistretti, Vanni Pasca.

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the context itself the cultural and political humus capable of shaping Alberto Seassaro's interests and passions, as well as his constant orientation toward the Institution as the end to which he aspired.

In this sense, the biographical premises themselves, here read in close connection with events, people, and facts, become an open space of narration, allowing us not to exhaust the account entirely within the figure of Alberto Seassaro.

Politecnico di Milano is both place and secondary actor, and following Seassaro's trajectory means at the same time following the rich history of the Milanese university where he graduated, built the greater part of his career, and held a significant role in determining its evolution toward its contemporary form.

As historians know, the starting point of a story is always important. The close bond between Alberto Seassaro and Politecnico di Milano establishes, in essence, the entry threshold to our narrative, which does not begin on March 16, 1995, the date on which Seassaro was officially elected President of the Degree Program in *Industrial Design*, but rather during his university studies.

Alberto Seassaro graduated on April 14, 1964, the very day when, by extraordinary coincidence, his second daughter was born, significantly named Ulla Laurea Seassaro.

The years of Alberto Seassaro as a student were turbulent years for the Faculty of Architecture. Years well recounted by Raffaele Pugliese, Francesca Serrazanetti, and Cristina Bergo in a book with the emblematic title *Sperimentazione o dell'architettura Politecnica. Origini e sviluppi della cultura moderna dell'architettura nella ricerca e nella didattica al Politecnico di Milano* [Experimentation or of Polytechnic Architecture. Origins and Developments of Modern Architectural Culture in Research and Teaching at Politecnico di Milano] (2013), which collects many documents and grey materials depicting the events that marked, in those years, the teaching of design and the true turning point represented by the creation of University Institutes, later to become Departments, establishing the need to build disciplinary knowledge nourished by research aimed at teaching. These intense student years constituted an invaluable reservoir of experience and left a deep mark on Seassaro's subsequent cultural trajectory, shaping his interest and aptitude for engaging in institutional transformation process-

es and in the relationship between cultural content and organizational forms. As an example, one might cite the inseparable link between research and teaching that Seassaro-Dean always placed at the forefront, to the point of considering design teaching as a distinctive form of investigation capable of nurturing and enriching the more canonical modes of academic research. The entire structure of his approach to the management of design education carried with it this idea, with deep roots reaching back to his own training.

An additional critical knot that has oriented the writing, especially in the part concerning the years of the long rise of design at Politecnico di Milano and in Italy the years of the Presidency of the Faculty of Design and of the – Presidency of the *Associazione Italiana del Design* [Italian Design Association] – is the still too recent character of the events, where the short temporal distance makes it difficult to lend the facts historical perspective. Being personally involved in the construction of this institutional history, and having worked side by side with Alberto Seassaro, can likewise be read as a critical element liable to influence the way of recounting and interpreting events that are intrinsically political in nature and for which it is right to seek an objective and impartial vantage point, distinguishing between facts and objective data, and between opinions and interpretations. Proximity of perspective also carries the further risk of unduly emphasizing, in a misleading way, both the positive and the negative aspects of a story that we do not wish, let us reiterate, to render through an epic lens.

Precisely to avoid simplifications or generalizations of contentious elements, as curators we have preferred, in the part of the biographical account closely connected with his role as Dean, more subject to differing points of view, to rely on a documentary repertory that presents the history plainly, leaving to the authors who have written the contributions in this section of the text the opportunity to grasp identifying traits of Alberto Seassaro's complex figure. These are authorial standpoints not called upon to explain, in political terms, what happened in those years of intense institutional work, but rather to characterize the narrative by discerning distinctive qualities more closely tied to the person than to the office he held.

A final note derives once more from the *nouvelle histoire*, which urges us to attend to the *retrobottega della storia* [backstage of the sto-

ry], to everything that happens behind the scenes. This vantage point makes it easier to identify, in the specific contextual circumstances, not only individual events but also the constraints, opportunities, and demands of different actors, as typically occurs within complex organizations, as well as the occasions offered by regulatory changes and institutional needs, which are significant in prompting strategic shifts and adaptations.

Stories that take as their privileged vantage point the concrete unfolding of everyday activities make it almost natural, among other things, to take distance from narrative frameworks made up of accounts of progressive successes and triumphs, from a way of telling events as a linear, obstacle-free process.

Multiple decisions taken daily at every level, interwoven with events in the institutional, social, and regulatory spheres, bring to the forefront the complexity of the context and the plurality and richness of the factors and actors that contributed to this important academic history.

In adherence to *Design Philology* project, the philological reconstruction, organized around texts and testimonies, lends itself well to supporting this narrative approach, which recounts, materializing them in documentary artifacts of various kinds, the different passages in the process of designing an immaterial object: the birth of an institutional organization devoted to teaching and research in a field that is new to the Italian educational landscape.

As anticipated in the preface, at the time this volume is being composed, *Design Philology* platform has already been online for more than a year. Within it, in fact, the history of the birth and development of the *Design System* is already present, with a great wealth of materials. This text takes shape, as far as possible, in a hypertextual form that refers, whenever deemed appropriate, to documentary in-depth materials available on the online platform, where the presence of Alberto Seassaro hovers strongly everywhere, even when his name is not explicitly cited in the various narrative passages.

Alberto Seassaro. The Demiurge

Demiurge is the attribute chosen to describe the role played by Alberto Seassaro in the years of the founding of the *Design System* at Politecnico di Milano and of the diffusion of design across the network of numerous Italian university campuses. For those who knew him, however, the nature proper to the demiurge more generally describes his way of positioning himself before projects both of elementary scale and of complex nature.

We have used the term *demiurge* in this contribution on Alberto Seassaro not to extol divine qualities but deliberately in contrast to the term *artefice* [maker], in an anti-rhetorical sense. Not the creator who gives life, brings forth, and thus generates, but the one who is able to take pre-existing elements of a given context, produced by others, and, by conferring order upon them, create value and impart meaning.

If Cesare Stevan – Dean of the Faculty of Architecture – and Tomás Maldonado – a leading figure in design education, with a long career at major international schools – were the two true makers who created the political and institutional conditions for the birth of this new educational reality at Politecnico di Milano, Alberto Seassaro was, by contrast, the skilled weaver of human, institutional, and conceptual relations who took this reality by the hand in its initial phase and brought it to completion, to the systemic state we know today. Possessed of a deep knowledge of institutional mechanisms, he immediately proved able to use the dynamics and logics of a complex organization such as Politecnico to introduce continual innovations.

The figure of the demiurge, as is well known, is central in Plato's *Ti-maeus*. The demiurge emerges precisely in contrast to the god of creation, the *artifex* [maker], and represents one who is able to transform the available material, shaping it and giving it form according to necessity (Reale, p. 28).

The documents of this history make it clear that even the *Design* – then *Disegno industriale* – full professors most inclined to found a course of study autonomous from Architecture, toward which there were initially no great expectations, all showed a certain reluctance to proceed with the launch of a specialized teaching path, believing that, in that particular historical moment, Architecture did not possess

the necessary competencies (Penati, Rebaglio, 2024). The disruptive strength of Alberto Seassaro's action lies precisely in *taking* what the system had at its disposal, in terms of human resources, knowledge, equipment, spaces, organizational habits, and, through minute work of adaptation, micro-transformations, and tactics, designing a strategic action of unimaginable scope, building consensus around a political project that, from being individual, immediately became collective.

Seassaro also possessed the patience of the demiurge: none of the synonyms that can be used to objectify the ability to *put things in order* with determination, almost stubbornly, step by step, were foreign to his way of working: «to put in order; to settle/adjust; to arrange; to distribute; to align; to catalogue; to classify; to fix/adjust; to regulate; to regulate (formally); to set right; to organize/sort out; to codify; to standardize; to coordinate; to prepare; to prearrange; to make arrangements; to give an order/orders; to command; to decree; to prescribe»; even to «impose» when necessary [1](#).



Note 1.
[Link→](#)

And finally, like every demiurge who «sets measure to things» (Reale, p. 18), according to ends that remain to most inscrutable until the results of the action have taken shape, Alberto Seassaro had the intelligence to steer a long process, not without obstacles, employing the art of persuasion. Skilled at weaving political relationships at various levels, he knew how to move among currents and countercurrents, seeking to bring innovation without altering internal equilibria, recomposing conflicts, governing divergent options among numerous actors and social and institutional stakeholders; meeting the expectations of interest groups; taking on the arduous task of modifying organizational and institutional arrangements and forms by weaving strategically oriented links, studying quid pro quos and counterbalances, especially in the years of *la grande bouffe*, when many were feasting while keeping their hands free of managerial and political responsibilities. As a shrewd strategist, every move was conceived to facilitate the insertion of *clusters of innovation* (of themes, of methods, of tools, of infrastructures) within a system entrenched in the historic domains of Engineering and Architecture, and rich in political appetites.

But beyond being a refined innovator who often knew how to move cautiously by following a policy of incremental innovation, when nec-

essary he also assumed the uncomfortable role of an agent provocateur who triggers innovation, at times with disconcerting intuition, at times with vehemence, exploiting the system's contradictions and not always finding an easy reception.

One quality, however, always accompanied him: the ability to navigate the meanders of the organization and to identify what, with Langdon Winner, we can define as «flexible character» of a long-standing politico-cultural system such as Politecnico di Milano, knowing how to leverage them to the advantage of the common cause and thus finding legitimation for continuous evolution (Winner, 1985, pp. 28-40).

Always poised between the drive to design and innovate and a sense of *measure* in assessing contextual conditions with their constraints and timings, the strength of Alberto Seassaro lay in his openness to dialectical engagement – constant and at times even rough, yet always open.

This way, over the span of a decade, the initial system of education in *Industrial design* transfers to the realm of research and then reverberates through socio-cultural and economic-professional systems, penetrating and infusing the Milanese design system with new lifeblood, before expanding first at the national level and then internationally.

It is a slow yet progressive motion, punctuated by moments of acceleration, that builds, around new scientific interests, new social relationships, professional ties, and economic investments, the reality of a socio-technical system – that of design – with its institutional artifacts, with new expectations, new widespread interests, and a material base that asserts itself by the force of its very evidence.

In the last years of his long tenure, a lively critical debate developed around the figure of Alberto Seassaro, between those who regarded him as the father of a far-reaching cultural project and those who criticized the hegemonic role of someone exercising unchecked decision-making power over many aspects of academic life. It was the most difficult phase, politically, in the life of the community.

Today, more than a decade after his departure from the system, the fruits that matured thanks to his work still endure in all their vitality, allowing us a reconciled view of his actions and helping to return, in shared form, an identity resolved as a figure who enjoyed indisputable authority and considerable prestige within the community.

History will never be able to tell us what the existence of this system would have been like, or what form it would have taken, without the work of a patient and tireless demiurge.

The steps to arrive at the *Facoltà del Design* [Faculty of Design] are complex [...]. Minister Ruberti [...] shared and supported the project, placing it within statutory legality. [...] Tomás Maldonado supported me throughout the process [...]. Angelo Cortesi, then president of ADI [Associazione per il Disegno Industriale], worked to establish a connection between education and professional outcomes. What followed is better known: my fraternal friendship with Alberto Seassaro and his talent fueled the growth and development of the initiative as no one else could have done. We held nothing back and thus laid solid roots for international recognition in a place of undeniable prestige. Today the *Facoltà del Design* stands in the Olympus it deserves. (Cesare Stevan, 11 April 2024) [↵](#).



Note 2.
[Link →](#)

Structure of the Text

As stated in the introductory paragraphs, the text aims to highlight the close bond between Alberto Seassaro and Politecnico di Milano. It is, in fact, the cultural climate of the great Milanese university, and in particular of the Faculty of Architecture, that influenced his choices and his thinking from the 1960s onward, when Alberto Seassaro entered Politecnico as a student.

The book indeed opens with a chapter, edited by Antonella Penati, devoted to the years of study and thus to training in the culture of design, at the Faculty of Architecture of Politecnico di Milano, where Alberto Seassaro enrolled in 1959. While studying, he taught and worked as a renderer in leading architecture firms, immediately showing the profile of a person of irrepressible industriousness, both by inquisitive, experimental temperament and by economic necessity. Being deeply engaged in professional activity did not distract him from political commitment within the university, then the stage for the first student demands that would open, within a few years, an extraordinary season of reforms.

These were the years that shaped his thinking and his institutional action up to his most significant political episode, namely his election as Dean of the Faculty of Design at the same Politecnico that had seen him as a student.

After graduating, Alberto Seassaro began a frenetic design activity at every scale: from furnishing objects to the interiors of private homes and exhibition spaces, to participation in various competitions for the construction of buildings, alongside an artistic production that would see him present in several solo and group exhibitions.

This section of the volume hosts writings by Beppe Finessi, Gianpiero Bosoni, and Antonella Penati, who comment on the design and artistic activity of a newly graduated Seassaro, in the fullness of youth and with «the strength and happiness of all the body's cells working well», as Ettore Sottsass put it in his presentation contained in the catalogue of the exhibition *i Morfemi* held at Studio 2B in Bergamo [10](#). What emerges is the profile of an *engaged* artist, involved in anti-militarist claims and in favor of conscientious objection, and of a designer inclined to experimentation in the use of materials, in modular composition, and in a language that intertwines structural elements with exhibition elements. These traits are recognizable in the intense design work, with Ugo La Pietra (interviewed here by Agnese Rebaglio), at Montedison, where for several years Alberto Seassaro was responsible for coordinating the Study Center on heavy prefabrication processes with Silicalcite, in which, with youthful ingenuous faith, he placed the hope of a democratic building culture.

Included in this section is Giovanni Baule's contribution, which highlights the consistently design-oriented nature of Alberto Seassaro's thinking, expressed predominantly through a verbo-visual language.

Despite the fact that his professional activity was intense immediately after graduation, he never left the University. In 1964 and 1965 he held two Ministry Scholarships, which led him to deepen the research themes initiated with his thesis, aimed at constituting the first nucleus of the nascent Library of the *Istituto di Composizione* [Institute of Architectural Composition] of the Faculty of Architecture, with a section dedicated to studies and cultures of form. At the same time he began to assist various professors in teaching: first as *Assistente volontario* [voluntary assistant], later as *Collaboratore alla didattica*

10. *Seassaro. I morfemi.*
Presentati da Ettore
Sottsass Jr.
[Document →](#)



catalogue of the exhibition *i Morfemi* held at Studio 2B in Bergamo [10](#).

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[teaching collaborator], and finally as *Assistente incaricato* [appointed assistant] in courses taught by Ludovico Belgiojoso, Cesare Blasi, and Giuseppe Ciribini, both at Politecnico di Milano and at Politecnico di Torino, and finally at the University of Abruzzo. Over this long experience, which led him to the associate professorship in 1980 and to the full professorship in 1990, he never failed to contribute culturally and politically to the process of transformative tension that marked the 1970s and 1980s in the Faculty of Architecture. Testimony to this are the design themes proposed to students in his teaching activity and his membership in research groups on housing and the forms of dwelling, where the closeness of his design interests to the problems of a rapidly changing social context is evident.

This is the phase in which Seassaro honed and matured his ability to involve, in teaching and research, groups, institutions, and movements active in the territory, in order to immerse design exercises and research in the concreteness of reality.

These passages are outlined in the section *In the folds of technological culture: premises for the birth of the Design System*, where Antonella Penati, Fabrizio Schiaffonati, Luciano Crespi, and Cristina Tonelli help to contextualize, within the furrow of a technological culture, the mature period of Alberto Seassaro that precedes that of builder of the Design System. A technological culture that unites the birth experiences of this disciplinary sector – young across the various universities of the Italian landscape.

These years can be considered as preparation for the subsequent roles he would hold at Politecnico di Milano where he became increasingly involved in building *parts* of the institutional system. On the research front, for example, we see him engaged in the creation of the CNR National Research Group *Produzione Edilizia*; on the teaching front, by contrast, in the design and coordination of the *Indirizzo di Tecnologia dell'architettura* [Architectural Technology track].

As anticipated in the preface, the concluding section of the text, *Building the institution to open up to emerging content*, adopts a different narrative style. The birth of the *Design System* and the story of its tenacious builder use, as primary sources, Seassaro's own writings, institutional documents, and communication materials, privileging a documentary narration. In particular, our choice has deliberate-

ly sought to bring to the forefront the back-room activity of a Dean, represented, for example, by more-than-daily epistolary exchanges interwoven with various institutional interlocutors, inside and outside the University, to obtain funding, to encourage actions of political support, to request cultural mediation, to expand the impact and diffusion of design, to promote associations, to verify technical data useful for launching classrooms, laboratories, and workspaces, etc.

Among these exchanges we have selected above all those that reveal not only the builder's tenacity, political foresight, and capacity to sensitize the Institution's leadership, but also Alberto Seassaro's personal traits, his way of being, ironic, provocative, but also affectionate, playful, sly. These documents are accompanied by tributes from colleagues (Paola Bertola, Luisa Collina, Flaviano Celaschi, Eleonora Lupo, Antonella Penati, Paolo Tinelli, Raffaella Trocchianesi), which add to the more institutional and formal narration Seassaro's manner of positioning himself with respect to problems; his way of working *as a team* while always personally tackling the preliminary investigative phase of the issue; his constant awareness of the political and structural features of the institution in which he moved, and of the themes and cultural interests dearest to him; his quips, which are also the quintessence of what, over time, has been termed the *seassarian spirit*.

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