

3. Alberto Seassaro, a Memory

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I attended the first year at the Faculty of Architecture of Politecnico di Milano in 1962-1963. The initial two years were modeled after those of Engineering (a decision dating back to 1934, when Architecture was established as an autonomous faculty). Architecture was reduced to just a few subjects: *Constructive Elements I and II* (Carlo Villa, with the manual by Enrico A. Griffini), *Elements of Architecture and Survey of Monuments* (Claudio Buttafava in the first year, Umberto Sabbioni in the second, later replaced mid-course by Piero Bottoni), *History of Art and History and Styles of Architecture* (Alessandro Degani in the first year, Carlo Perogalli in the second), *Stylistic and Constructive Characters of Monuments* (Luigi Crema, the only one who gave lectures of any real interest). The rest – the predominant part of the teaching – consisted of the so-called *scientific*. If you managed to overcome the *catenaccio* – the barrier of the first two years – you arrived at the third year starved for architecture. Upon this scarcity, the first occupation of the Faculty in the winter of 1963 had its entirely legitimate reasons. But the occupiers were too absorbed in their demands to involve the new students. Freshmen were left only to observe the fire burning in a

barrel at the entrance of the newly inaugurated building in Via Bonardi and to labor, with T-square and triangle, on the drafting tables in the old headquarters in Piazza Leonardo da Vinci. At my side, bent over the drawings, were Demetrio Stratos and Thalia Istikopoulou.

A light in the darkness came, in the second year, with the arrival of Piero Bottoni, who revolutionized the course in *Elements of Architecture and Survey of Monuments*. At the invitation of a group of fifth-year students, who had been among the protagonists of the 1963 occupation, the designer of QT8 transformed the exercise into a research project on the settlement and socio-economic characteristics of some villages in the *bassa milanese* (a context that at the time, especially in agriculture, was still in conditions of poverty). For many students it was a plunge into reality, with field investigations and surveys conducted in groups (another novelty). It was, at least for myself, a formative experience.

Another light, again for this writer, came from some panels displayed in the library. They were the works that Ugo La Pietra and Alberto Seassaro had just presented for their thesis defense. An unusual project, so innovative in theme and in graphic presentation that the examining committee, chaired by Piero Portaluppi, decreed that those works deserved to be exhibited so that all students could see them. I have preserved over time the memory of the communicative force, effective and captivating, of those panels.

Seen again more than sixty years later, the two innovations, that of Bottoni and that of La Pietra-Seassaro, take on the character of anticipations of certain paths that the Faculty of Architecture in Milan would embark upon not only in the tumultuous decade that followed, but in the history thereafter.

While Ugo La Pietra went his own way, Alberto Seassaro was among the not few *assistants* who, in the heart of the 1960s, sided with the student movement in demanding a radical renewal of studies in Architecture.

The substantial harmony that arose between student demands and the orientations of much of the faculty, beginning with Dean De Carli and the Faculty Council, was not welcomed by the university leadership, who invoked and obtained from the central government repressive interventions that remain an exception – a *vulnus* – in the history of republican Italy. The first to take a heavy hand was Minister of Edu-

cation Giovanni Battista Scaglia (Leone II government), who on August 9, 1968 revoked the appointment of Carlo De Carli as Dean. More than three years later it was Minister of Education Riccardo Misasi (Andreotti I government) who, on November 23, 1971, suspended eight members of the Faculty Council (Franco Albini, Lodovico Belgiojoso, Piero Bottoni, Guido Canella, Carlo De Carli, Paolo Portoghesi, Aldo Rossi, and Vitoriano Viganò). Finally, between May, October, and November of 1972, the new Minister of Education Oscar Luigi Scalfaro (Andreotti II government) completed the work with the dismissal of 23 appointed professors: Emilio Battisti, Sandra Bonfiglioli, Dario Borradori, Bianca Bottero, Maurice Cerasi, Raffaella Crespi, Sergio Crotti, Mario De Micheli, Adriano Di Leo, Giorgio Ferraresi, Leonardo Fiori, Giorgio Gaetani, Corrado Levi, Lodovico Meneghetti, Antonio Monestiroli, Guido Nardi, Augusto Rossari, Giovanni Salvestrini, Giacomo Scarpini, Fabrizio Schiaffonati, Alberto Seassarò, Cesare Stevan, Gio Vercelloni.

A strong and tenacious commitment to research was the response of students and professors to the commissioner's control of the Faculty (entrusted to Corrado Beguinot). A form of resistance which, combined with the mobilization of eminent figures of Italian culture, led in 1974 to the rehabilitation of the members of the Faculty Council. A phase of renewed energy then began in the Milanese Faculty, along with tensions and heated confrontations.

The conditions of the broader context were also changing. Within a few years, the entire Politecnico di Milano, like the rest of Italian universities, was entering a fertile season, dense with hope, under the banner of self-government. At the Politecnico, the establishment of Departments in 1981 and several steps toward reducing, at least formally, the imbalance of decision-making power between engineers and architects bore abundant fruit, thanks also to three farsighted rectors: Emilio Massa, Adriano De Maio, and Guido Ballio. The construction of the *Politecnico network* (De Maio) – with the regional campuses of Como (later suppressed), and of Lecco, Cremona, Mantua, and Piacenza – and the establishment in 1995 of the Faculties of Civil Architecture and of Design in Bovisio were among the best results of this season. I had the good fortune to follow these developments closely in various governing bodies: the Integrated Academic Senate, which drew up the Statute of Autonomy; the University Commission, which

played a strategic role in stimulating and monitoring the creation of departments; and finally, the Academic Senate in full operation. It was an exhilarating phase, even more so if compared with what came after 2009 with the Gelmini counter-reform.

And Alberto Seassaro? The heated and persistent turmoil that for years preceded the creation of the Faculty of Civil Architecture saw him withdrawn, halfway between detached and amused, with that vaguely ironic smile under his moustache. In appearance, he was lined up on the front opposite mine; yet this did not prevent us from exchanging jokes about the inconsistency of the holders of academic power.

But, willingly or not, hesitant or simply waiting, his turn came. With the establishment of the Faculty of Design, the very promoters realized that, for the project to succeed, a figure was needed, a cultivated and prudent weaver. Few others in Milan possessed the competences and the network of relations that he could boast. Under his guidance, the Politecnico and the city thus saw a remarkable enterprise take shape.

Later he and I stood shoulder to shoulder in the Academic Senate in the years when the counter-reform emerged. There, with others – I particularly recall Renzo Rosso and Antonella Penati – we resisted with all our strength the decline toward which the Italian university was heading, warning of its dangers. In vain. The Gelmini tsunami swept away our resistance along with others. The consequences are plain for all to see and have turned Italian universities into entities incapable of self-government and, above all, into sad places.

Of Alberto Seassaro I retain the memory of a person who knew how to combine a joyful disposition with lightness and nonchalance. With those marvelous ties (crocheted by his wife) serving as his calling card.