

# 4. Undisciplined!

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## 4.1 Between Art, Science, Architecture and Design

For Alberto Seassaro, the years following his degree are marked by design fervor. The experimental attitude incubated during his training unfolds into multiple research pathways: in the university, where, just after graduating, he begins to collaborate with Ludovico Belgiojoso, with Cesare Blasi, and then with Giuseppe Ciribini; in the world of artistic practices, where he expresses himself by pursuing certain intuitions outlined in theoretical form during his university studies; and in the design sphere, where he moves from the scale of the object to that of interiors, to which is added the important experience at Montecatini that would translate into genuine design experimentations on housing modules composed of prefabricated systems and components.

These expressive planes of the project by no means distant constitute the testing ground of a *laboratory* in which the idea is concretely put into practice that the creative process works transversally across

the disciplines of form not through integration, juxtaposition, or opposition, nor through mere similarity or analogy, but through dialectical synthesis, through transfers and contaminations of languages, experiences, procedures, modes of thought, materials, and *aesthetic and ethical orientations*, in the search for that *sinestesia delle arti* [synesthesia of the arts] theorized with Ugo La Pietra in their degree thesis (La Pietra, Seassaro, 1964) in antithesis to the *intégration des arts* [integration of arts]. As Ugo La Pietra recalls in *La sinestesia delle arti*, their thesis research brought visual cultures together by identifying in the *segno* [sign] the lowest common denominator and in the *metodo dei modelli* [method of models] the operational tool useful for overcoming the separations codified by the various artistic-cultural systems (La Pietra, 2001, p. 15).

**A morphological model [...], in addition to being a tool for experimentation aimed at the scientific knowledge of behaviorist interactions with form, acquires a precise semiotic essence as a receptor of processes of formal intentionalization and thus as a vehicle of poetics. This intentionality can, in fact, lead a model to exceed its own ontological sphere and, by attributing to it properties of the 'real sphere', allow it to assume within itself an architectural design attitude. The first experimental objective of the research – the construction of a spatial model instrumentable for morphological operability – was approached through the introduction of a 'spatial system' characterized by a 'spatio-temporal module' [...] capable of receiving 'elements of position and situation' and the primary perceptual experiences of orientation, directionality, distance, size, density. This part of the research led to the construction of modules operable as 'spatial utensils', endowed with an elementary homeostaticity that makes them capable of inducing 'effects' and of receiving the operator's feedback. The acquisition of the architectural object can thus be carried out through modeling operations, in the constant verification of the relationship between formativity and objectification of elementary morphological events. As a further phase in an instrumental exploration of the entire research cycle, the verification of the 'elementary spatial system' that was realized was carried out by loading**

**the model with behaviorist and functional implications, that is, by operating projective precipitations upon it that render it a vehicle of formal intentionality. (From Ugo La Pietra and Alberto Seassaro, *La ricerca morfologica*, Exhibition Catalogue, Galleria Flaviania, 26 March 1966)**

On close examination of Alberto Seassaro's way of operating across these different spheres of design, one encounters a *continuum* that begins with certain theoretical reflections appearing in his writings and finds its first formalizations in the series of *Morfemi*, which then influence, both in language and in approach to the world of forms and surfaces, his objects conceived as modules extendable to infinity, as well as domestic interiors and installations for art galleries, up to the housing *modules* treated as *oggetti componibili* [combinable objects] or as *varianti* [variants] of the same object.

The theme of the *sign*, the minimal meaning-bearing element, and of the *model*, an instrument of *active and dynamic operability* – that is, interactive – derive for Alberto Seassaro from his readings and his interests in theories of form, semiotic cultures, and cybernetics. The latter discipline fascinated him after his university collaboration with Giuseppe Ciribini and following his attendance with Silvio Ceccato at the Verucchio seminars. It is the youthful phase of infatuations with approaches and disciplines that are fascinating precisely because they lie outside the canonical path of architectural studies; it is the time of granite positions, *without ifs or buts*, typical of a soul characterized by insatiable curiosity.

But it is also the moment of intellectual forays into the new universe of signs brought by the artistic avant-gardes and by the theme of contamination among different languages: music, painting, graphic design, comics, cinema. And again, it is the moment when the *solidity* of disciplinary boundaries gives way, and the art world, too, lets many walls fall, first among them the one that stood to enforce a sharp distinction between major and minor arts; between the visual and the sonic; between arts of pure aesthetics and functional arts. Among these is design, which for many has served as the blurred conduit between art and architecture. His library bears witness to the closeness among these different worlds, from which Alberto Seassaro drew

freely, and of which he was a great collector. For Seassaro, to appropriate a world – be it musical, artistic, cultural, or object-related – means embracing it until he knows it in its entirety, a totalizing whole, almost manic. And if, on the musical plane, his jazz soul leads him to *put together* entire vinyl collections (from Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Ray Charles, David Murray, Thelonious Monk to George Gershwin), on the cinematic plane it is all of Fellini, all of Bergman, all of Kubrick, all of Hitchcock; all of Welles, all of Kurosawa, all of Antonioni, all of Visconti, all of Wenders, all of Tarantino, all of Truffaut, all of Allen, all of Monty Python, and so on – where *all truly means all*, obsessively. On the plane of visual culture, and in particular on that of linguistic invention and the contamination of different languages, his library then testifies, with numerous art-history books organized by authors, styles and currents, Schools, Museums and Art Galleries, etc., to a selective curiosity for comics culture: from Andrea Pazienza to Filippo Scòzzari, Tanino Liberatore, Tullio Pericoli, Moebius, Jean-Marc Reiser, not excluding the entire collection of Donald Duck (but NOT Mickey Mouse), and then *The Simpsons* (the whole family and all its characters still cover the bathroom walls of the Seassaro home), Mafalda up to Zerocalcare (but NOT Manga).

For Seassaro, collecting never coincides with possessing; rather, it means placing a thousand variants of the same motif side by side and grasping, precisely in the variance, even the smallest, the deep meaning and the interest in nuances and differences.

A whole chapter should be devoted, in collecting terms, to his interest in aesthetic disciplines, the art world, and the cultures of light. In other respects, his collection of *elephants* is also well known, with a preference for Indian ones over African, testimonies to his travels and to those of friends and family. No importance is given to the preciousness of the object but to its story and its placement within the material history of a people's culture, its symbolic aspects, its material characteristics, and its workmanship, which tell much about local know-how.

## 4.2 Brera as a Cultural *Milieu*

The enthusiasms and myths of his youth, his love for artistic cultures, and his political ideals were fed by the attitude of a voracious gleaner, an attitude that never left him, driving him to gather information, notions, and knowledge from diverse, even least conventional, sources and to go looking *here and there* for anything that satisfied his interests: not only books but also magazines, newspapers, atlases, brochures, photographs, reports and accounts, and then radio, cinema, and places of encounter. *Places of encounter*. Indeed, it is impossible to fully understand that *peculiar way* of living, being in the world, thinking, observing, communicating, and translating into design that marked Alberto Seassaro, if one omits to name, among the principal sources of his knowledge, being among people, learning *scambiando due parole* [exchanging a few words], the Fellini-esque *perder tempo* [wasting time] spent observing how the world turns, collecting points of view from the most disparate people, even the most humble – the ones you meet at the tobacconist's, on the stairs of the apartment building, at the bar, or along the streets of his beloved Brera neighborhood.

He breathed art in Brera as a student, and the artistic matrix made Brera a kind of *idealtipo* [ideal type] for the fertile humus that characterized it. Brera represented not only a place but also a season, a crossroads of milieus, situations, figures, and a concentrate of opportunities, of artistic and intellectual expressions. He chose Brera as the ideal place and neighborhood of his life, where he indeed *lived first* at Garibaldi 50 and then at 44, also, and perhaps above all, for its popular atmosphere: *Nora, Barbara, Coletta* made those streets and their inhabitants familiar. The Brera of the 2000s no longer corresponded to him, a *posto di fighetti* [posh hangout] and of *tourists who come and go*, where no one knows anyone anymore.

Brera is the milieu Alberto frequents at the start of his career: in Brera he gathers friends, initiates cultural exchanges, seeks stimuli. Brera, with its antennas always tuned to pick up the signals of the contemporary, is the place of encounters: artists, actors, photographers, painters, writers. Brera is guilty of having inverted Alberto Seassaro's biorhythm: by day, until late in the evening, wandering in search of stimuli and opportunities for exchange, seeking in (little) rest the mo-

ments of synthesis; at night, toward morning, the moments of feverish work. It would be so for the rest of his life.

Ugo La Pietra, who shared a professional studio with Alberto Seassaro in the first years after graduation, recounts the long, nerve-racking days spent waiting for him to arrive at the office. But Alberto would come late in the evening – very late – after stopping to talk with all the prostitutes of Brera (see Ugo La Pietra, in this volume). In Brera he began to spend time with Demetrio Stratos, bewitched by his voice and his vocal experiments. He had met him at the Faculty of Architecture and, although a few years younger, had started to see him and to attend his musical group, Area. In Brera he met Gian Maria Volonté (who later became his tenant at Garibaldi 50); Dario Fo, who gifted him the sketches for his stage sets; Giorgio Gaber (with whom he was often confused because of their thinness and aquiline noses); Uliano Lucas; and then, at the legendary Jamaica bar, the exponents of the Milanese avant-gardes, a term used here to encompass various currents and artistic practices in 1960s Milan characterized by a strong spirit of experimentation and innovation: Arturo Vermi, Emilio Isgrò, Piero Manzoni, Lucio Fontana, and also Fausto Melotti.

Brera was not only a place of easy encounters but a living environment of artistic ferment, immersed in a bustle of signs left by established artists and street artists alike, concrete testimony to their presence in the near-daily production of installations, images, drawings, sculptures, and creative artifacts. Everything that Seassaro, on the threshold of 30, found in Brera he would later seek in his countless journeys through distant lands and cultures.

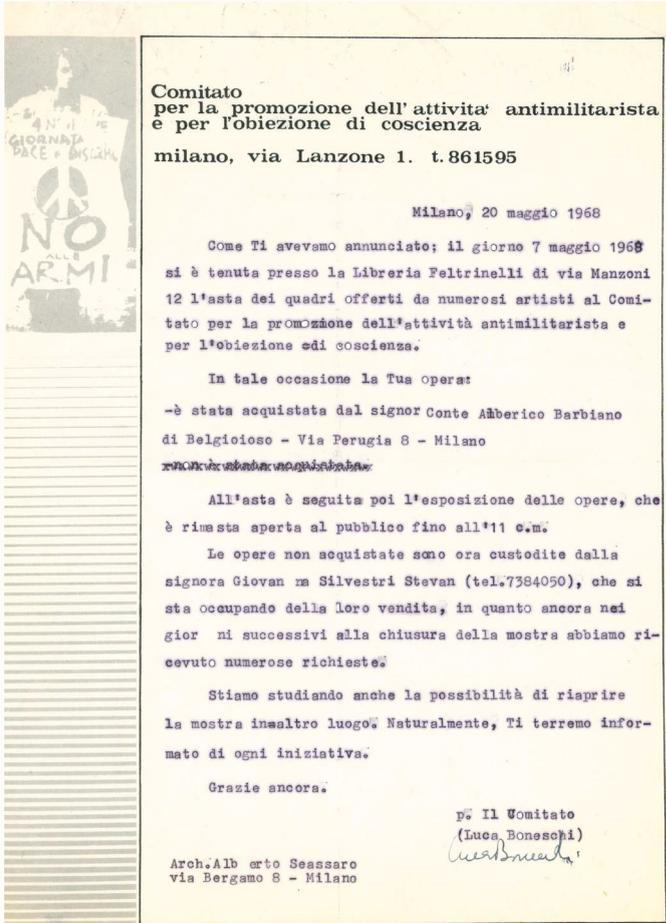
Personal curiosity nourished by the art world tells only part of Alberto Seassaro's story. To grasp his *animus* fully, his youth must be situated within the culture, political struggles, social movements, and hopes of a generation. His political commitment marks his design choices and, more generally, his life choices. It began while he was still a student, with active participation in the ferment at the Faculty of Architecture; it then entered the university classrooms, first as a young assistant and later as a lecturer, through themes that testify to his sensitivity toward the housing problems of the most vulnerable social classes above all. He also made various interventions of a political nature within the Faculty Council and in the research seminars of

1. Lettera del Comitato  
per la promozione  
dell'attività antimilitarista  
e per l'obiezione di  
coscienza, indirizzata ad  
Alberto Seassaro.  
Document →



*Cultura tecnologica* [Technological Culture] and in the *Gruppo Nazionale di Ricerca CNR* [CNR National Research Group], where the political dimension of technology is always predominant. His vibrant militancy – which ended as soon as he sensed the first warnings that would lead to the dark moments of armed struggle, from which he

forcefully distanced himself – also expressed itself outside the academic sphere, with participation in the movements of '68 and the 1970s. As an artist he took part in several fundraising events for the Anti-militarist Committee by auctioning some of his works; still as an artist, he withdrew his works from the XXXIV Venice Biennale of Contemporary Art in 1968, where he had been invited by Argan to the *Rassegna giovani* [Young Artists Review], joining the dissenting demonstrations of numerous artists; as a professional coordinating a design unit in a major industry such as Montecatini, he took to the streets with workers in labor protests against *the ex-*



*ploitation by the bosses.* The act cost him his job [1](#) [2](#).

He was a keen observer and, also by supervising many theses, analyzed the life of cultural and political circles, social centers, and all those places that appeared confined and minor yet bore a counter-culture capable of fueling change and prefiguring new and different futures. He gave voice to housing-occupation movements, bringing the concrete experience of civic associations, neighborhood committees, and organizations active in the territory into university re-

search at a time when housing was one of the principal social emergencies. Within the university sphere, he fostered places and modes that made practices of self-reflection possible in order to bring to the surface the problems of youth; he took an active part in feminist movements, thanks also to his closeness in life and political militancy to Ida Farè [3](#) [4](#).

## 4.3 Youth Projects

This is the cultural, artistic, and political landscape that forms the backdrop to many of his early projects, which began as early as 1964 when, together with Ugo La Pietra, he opened the *PIS Project Studio*. In those years, project experiences matured in the fields of interior architecture, exhibition design, and product design, leading to built works and artifacts published in sector journals including *Domus*, *Abitare*, *Interni*, and *Edilizia Moderna*, in addition to important work in the field of construction industrialization for Montecatini Edison.

Many projects were nourished by the shared path that had seen them work together on their degree thesis on the terrain of form, a crossroads of art, architecture, and design.

These are strongly experimental projects that find their cultural and methodological premises precisely in their thesis work. Thus, for example, the project *Tuberie* [Pipes], submitted to the competition *Monumento alla Resistenza per la Città di Brescia* [Monument to the Resistance for the City of Brescia], in which Nanda Vigo took part. Seassaro had met her in front of a bar counter at the port of Genoa. In his passion for wandering, ports were privileged places of encounter.

The project draws inspiration from one of the famous *liriche oggettuali* [object-poems] by the Futurist poet Farfa (Vittorio Osvaldo Tommasini): *Tuberie*. A commodity poem that enumerates «real and imaginary pipes, symbolic and industrial, transfigured and oneiric; pipes that tangle with one another in a continual leap from one sensory sphere to another, from one context to another. Metaphorical, erotic, and hydraulic pipes, pipes 'for every use'» (Francesca Bergadano, 2018).

As La Pietra and Seassaro themselves recount, the *Monumento alla Resistenza per la città di Brescia* was to represent «an urban route

IL COMITATO, PER LA PROMOZIONE DELL'ATTIVITÀ ANTIMILITARISTA E PER L'OBIEZIONE DI COSCIENZA AL FINE DI RACCOLGERE FONDI A FAVORE DEGLI OBIETTORI DI COSCIENZA, INDICA UNA MOSTRA ALLA LIBRERIA FELTRINELLI IN VIA MANZONI 12, MILANO DAL 7 AL 9 MAGGIO 1968.

**INVITO PERSONALE**

ALLA LIBRERIA FELTRINELLI  
7 MAGGIO ORE 21.00 :

• inaugurazione della mostra, dibattito antimilitarismo, politica delle sinistre con Felice Accame, Luca Ronchini, Giorgio Maiorino, Marco Pannella.

ORE 22.15 :

asta; presenzieranno la signora Pia Rame ed il prof. Gillo Dorfles.

hanno aderito offrendo loro quadri, tra gli altri, i pittori :

accame, simone, annarotone, bai, benevelli, bianchi, bini, brindisi, cardè, cesa, cazzani, ga, arandine, gazzi, d'ottavi, nova, fabbri, franceschini, gambardò, gentili, kodra, la piovra, mazzoni, maia, maria, marinese, marzot, minneco, miles, naglia, oberro, d'apola, pieraccini, pignatelli, pozzani, ramona, rambaldi, risoni, rossello, scanavino, scognamiglio, seassaro, serlonga, simetti, simonetta, sponzo, to, taccani, vico, volpini, zambini, zannini, zivetti, zullo.

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partecipazione alla coscienza  
della classe operaia  
e dei lavoratori  
per la liberazione  
della patria  
dalla tirannia  
dei militari in italia



2. Invito alla mostra del Comitato per la promozione dell'attività antimilitarista e l'obiezione di coscienza, Libreria Feltrinelli Milano.

[Document ->](#)



3. *Lo scontro di classe sul territorio*. Iniziativa capitalista e lotte sociali a Milano. Facoltà di Architettura, Politecnico di Milano.

[Document ->](#)

Milano deve essere una città fatta a misura degli interessi dei lavoratori.

## Gli studenti di architettura

del Politecnico partecipano alla lotta unitaria di tutti i lavoratori milanesi contro la speculazione edilizia e il caro affitti.

Lo sfruttamento e la "violenza privata" dei padri della fabbrica e dell'ufficio continua in modo infame nella

# CASA

di ogni lavoratore ad opera dei padroni che strumentalizzano a tali fini la scuola e la produzione scientifica.

L'Università ci prepara ad essere i costruttori della città controllata dal capitale: lottiamo per una città libera dalla speculazione: lottiamo per una "CULTURA LIBERA E RESPONSABILE".

LA FORZA DEI LAVORATORI PUO' SALVARE LA CITTÀ DALLA DISTRUZIONE DEI SUOI VALORI STORICI E UMANI E TRASFORMARE LA SCUOLA DI ARCHITETTURA IN UNO STRUMENTO DI CULTURA DEMOCRATICA.

GLI STUDENTI ARCHITETTI INSIEME CON TUTTI I LAVORATORI LOTTANO PER UNA CITTÀ CIVILE E UMANA CONTRO LA METROPOLI CAPITALISTICA.

Il Comitato Esecutivo degli studenti di architettura del POLITECNICO di Milano



4. Manifesto del Comitato Esecutivo degli studenti di architettura del Politecnico di Milano.

[Document ->](#)

in which the narrative element used is the conducting cylindrical tube. The relational character of the tube is expressed as a symbolic fact by Farfa's poem *Tuberie*. The monument is conduit, and the route of the conduit itself, and the transmission of historical events. The route: from narrow passage to fracture and thus to a sum of landscapes and routes, is the metamorphic representation of a historical path that goes from fascist obscurantism to the Resistance and ends with the reconstruction of the country» (La Pietra, 2001, p. 34)

pipes of water of air of gas / of drain of discharge of exhaust / of stoneware of terracotta of concrete / of glass of rubber of ebonite / pipes of all merchandise / pipes of the water closet of feeling / pipes of the stove and of boredom / tunnel pipes hungry for railway / pipes of torment and of joy / pipes of all metals / pipes of the yellow gloves / hydrant pipes of the firemen / launching cubes of fresh water / to calm the heat of the flames / pipes of fountain pens / pouring thought / black as the mood / red as love / pipes of blood pressure / digestive pipes / for the slow waltzes of digestion / pipes of guts / for the tarantella / of visceral grimaces / tangled pipes of breasts / genital and virginal pipes / pipes of workshop chimneys / of steamships of locomotives / with seed of smoke / demonstrating the nullity / of voluptuousness / pipes of garden benches / scented with jasmynes / pipes for every use / pipes for every abuse / dairy pipes bent / by the grasping hand / whose expelled water / lengthens the fingers / pipes of reeds of gutters of mouthpieces / Bergmann pipes / Togni pipes Mannesmann pipes / pipes of all machines / pipes of all motors / pipes of the stems of flowers / pipes of rifles and of cannons / for the rapid change of generations / pipes bones holes of chickens / that were well-fed and sated / pipes of chilled noses / pipes of softened hearts / pipes of telescopes / that on beautiful nights / fill with stars / pipes of organs and of winches / of musical instruments / beating with breath / on the eardrums / very old motifs / pipes stopped and unstopped / named and unnamed pipes / pipes of every species and every type / pipes of every thickness and size / pipes upright and with sharp elbow / pipes in the everlasting operation / of masturbation / of their own content / intake pipes / descent pipes / ascent pipes

**/ all in universal heat / every pipe an umbilical cord / that binds  
that welds to life / rushing and silent pipes / I am your singer / I am  
a snake charmer. (Farfa, *Tuberie*, 1993. Farfa, *Noi miliardario della  
fantasia*. Milano: Edizioni La Prora)**

Other projects, while not abandoning the stamp of experimentalism, already display a more complete design and professional maturity (even if both Alberto Seassaro and Ugo La Pietra complain that they never managed to get paid by their clients). Among these are projects for art galleries, again with Ugo La Pietra, and modular furnishing systems and living spaces, where Seassaro instead favors individual endeavor. In the project, the forms, the materials used, and the processing techniques are pressed into their expressive potential both in the artisanal sphere and in industrial production.

Among the projects with Ugo La Pietra, in 1968, the *Galleria privata Walter Spaggiari* [Walter Spaggiari Private Gallery] in Milan, published in *Domus* (n. 465, 1968) where the experimental attitude is directed toward rethinking the traditional typology of the art gallery as a space not only for viewing works of art, but also for housing a storage area for works and a space for dwelling [5x6x](#).

**A complex typology that found in the succession of textures the structural motifs of the various environments. It is one of the first examples of an opening of the *galleria d'arte* [art gallery] typology [...] capable of breaking the traditional system through 'addition and integration'. (La Pietra, 2001, p. 42)**

**The perforated metal sheet, the weave of tubular elements in the ceiling, the panels, and the modular parallelepipeds are signs of a peculiar language that we also find in the other gallery project, 'Il Cenobio', in Milan, designed in 1967. (*Domus*, n. 451, 1967)**

Conceiving environments as a single, large, unified object is a hallmark we find in the projects of La Pietra and Seassaro, and it recurs even when Alberto Seassaro works on his own, as in domestic interiors. His projects are few and similar to one another in their exhibition-installation and material language. It is a highly recognizable language that

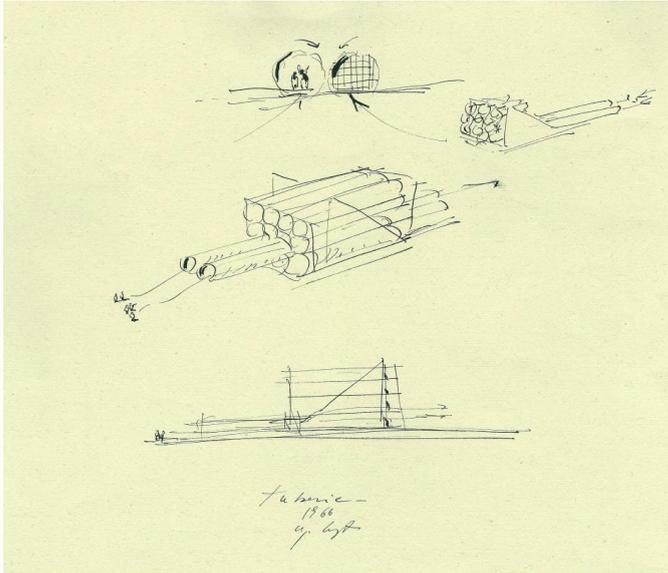
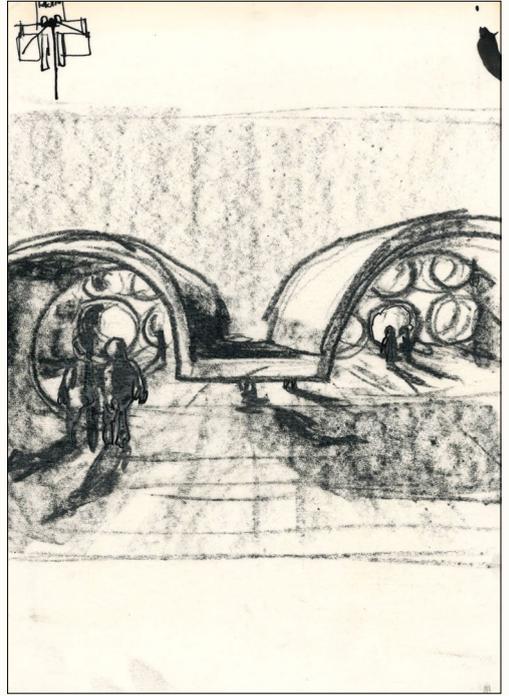
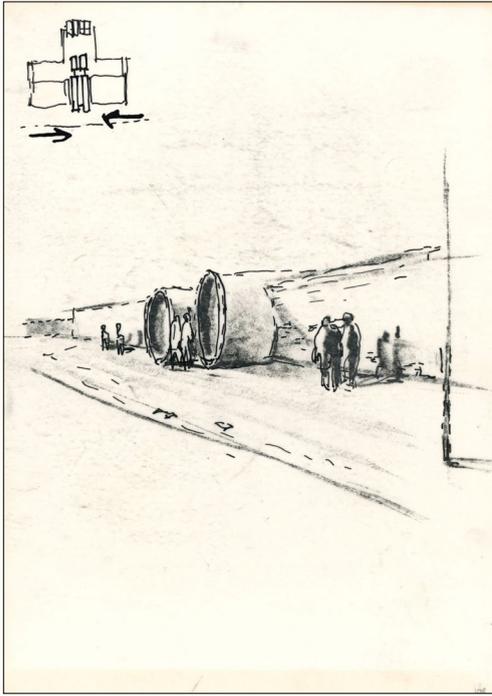
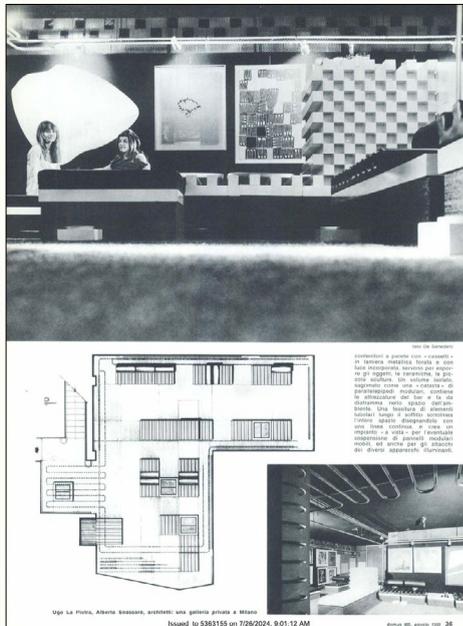
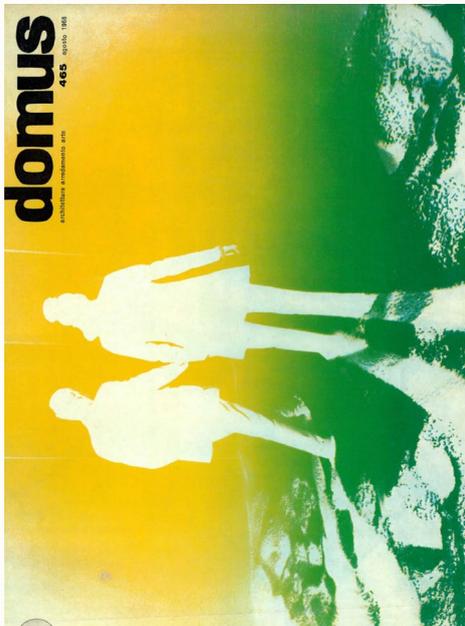


Figure 1.  
Tuberie project by Ugo La Pietra, Alberto Seassaro, Nanda Vigo (1966).



5. Ugo La Pietra e Alberto Seassaro, Galleria privata Walter Spaggiari, in *Domus*, n. 465.  
[Document →](#)



6. Ugo La Pietra, Alberto Seassaro, *Il Cenobio*, in *Domus*, n. 451.  
[Document →](#)

we find in the project for *Casa Rizzi* in Camogli [7](#), in the family house in Camogli, and in the dwelling on Via Franchetti in Milan for his sister Paola [8](#). The interiors are conceived as equipped spaces in which reticular components integrate the walls, becoming one with them, and it is no longer possible to distinguish the structural elements from those that enrich them to facilitate use and organize space.



7. Alberto Seassaro,  
*Casa Rizzi a Camogli*, in  
*Interiors '70*.  
[Document →](#)



8. Alberto Seassaro,  
*Spazio abitativo a Milano*,  
in *Interiors '70*.  
[Document →](#)

The exhibitory apparatus, characterized by protrusions on the walls and ceiling, in fact cancels the difference between container and content, generating a continuum where the furniture disappears and is everywhere, without the eye perceiving a clear break between elements that function as container, as lighting apparatus, as multipurpose structure, etc.

In the exhibition-based design of domestic space, the forms and juxtapositions of materials recall his more artistic works, in which he experiments with new expressive languages, where white, shaped in many surface treatments, prevails.

This way of conceiving the design of spaces presupposes that every single element, every single object, every constructive and exhibition detail be designed ad hoc: tables, tops and shelves, storage units, shelves and bookcases.

In the photo, note the table designed for the apartment on via Franchetti, conceived for artisanal fabrication but later reappearing in a simplified version for industrial production in the *Add* project for Acerbis [9](#). If in these projects the interiors are governed as if they were a large object conceived in all its details, then all the more so with the project of the *Monoblocco per arredo integrale* [Monoblocco for integral furnishing], presented at the international exhibition held in New York in 1972, *Italy. The New Domestic Landscape*, we are faced with a veritable object-space in which different environments and different functions are composed, almost assembled.



9. Alberto Seassaro,  
*Addition, Tavolo  
attrezzato componibile,  
Acerbis*.  
[Document →](#)

Hovering here is the philosophy of *macchine per abitare* [machines for living] (Fagone and Favata, 2011) that, in those same years, animated Joe Colombo's design experiments: the use of new materials such as methacrylate; the idea of a system composed of modular elements brought to the scale of total furnishing; the construction of an environment completely detached from the architecture that contains it, a

Figure 2.  
Table designed by Alberto Seassaro  
for the house in Via Franchetti.



10. *L'intero mobile  
corre su rotaie*,  
Alberto Seassaro, in  
*Domus*, n. 489.  
[Document](#)→



kind of *house within the house*; the concept of a *mobile* space in the literal sense, that is, a space that can be moved according to changing needs. Alberto Seassaro's *Monoblocco*, produced by Acerbis as an experimental model, anticipates many of the problems of living in minimal spaces and, at the same time, reflects processes of rationalizing housing systems (see *L'intero mobile corre su rotaie*, Alberto Seassaro, in *Domus* n. 489) [10](#).

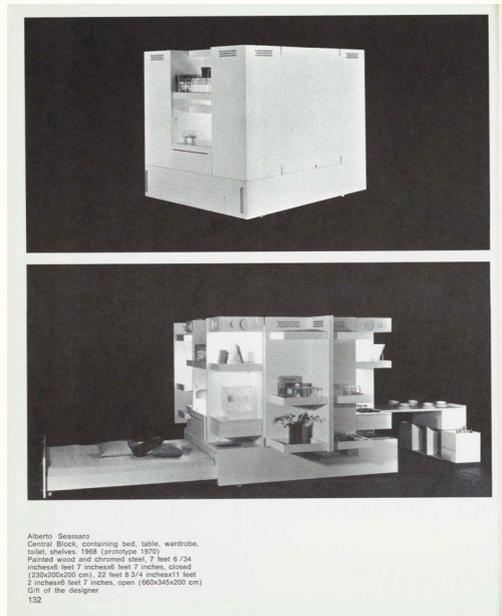
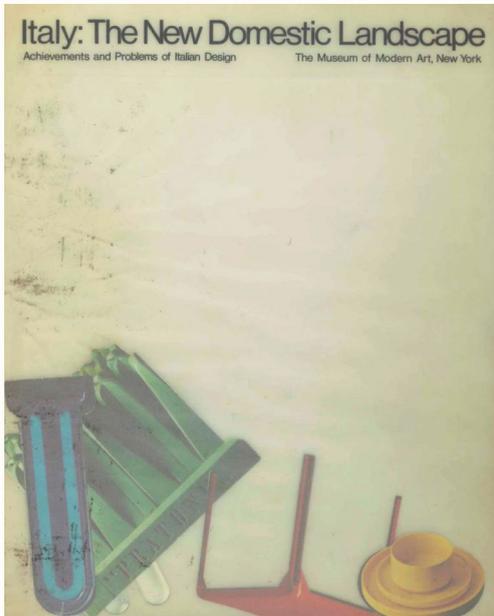
**In the project, the social issues of inhabiting are reworked not by seeking a**

**rhetorical, ironic, or unconventional response, but by pursuing a solution that serves use, playing with the themes of modularity and flexibility [11](#). (Catalogue of the exhibition Italy: The *New Domestic Landscape*, MoMA, 1972)**

The principles of flexibility and modularity; interior proposals that look not so much to tradition as to social evolution, new lifestyles, and new needs that open up to new ways of living; experiments with new materials, new technologies, and new languages, these are found not only in interior design but also in the design of housing units created through prefabrication and mass production.

This area of design would engage him for several years at the Research Division of Montecatini Edison and would be developed in collaboration with Ugo La Pietra.

Modular design and industrial technologies for the prefabrication of building components certainly constitute a fundamental, perhaps the most significant, part of Alberto Seassaro's professional design research. Within the prefabricated module and in the design of integrative equipment rests the hope for a democratic architecture for a



generation of architects who, due to their close proximity to modes of industrial production, approach the design methods most typical of design. The competences Alberto Seassaro developed in this field through his professional research would become a subject of study in university life as well and would constitute the point of approach first to the technological area and then to that of design.



11. Estratto del Catalogo della Mostra *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, MOMA. [Document](#) →

The theme of industrialization in the construction sector and the production of industrial components and manufactured elements for residential use, for buildings of public interest, or for industrial facilities brings him close to figures such as Giuseppe Ciribini, Marco Zanuso, and Giacomo Scarpini, and to enterprises such as Edison S.p.A. and Finsider S.p.A., for which he worked as a consultant. For the Sviluppo Silicalcite S.p.A. of Montecatini Edison, together with Ugo La Pietra, he developed the *Programma di ricerca per la sperimentazione e lo sviluppo di un Sistema di prefabbricazione in Silicalcite per case unifamiliari e tipologie affini* [Research program for the experimentation and development of a silicalcite prefabrication system for single-family houses and related types] (1966), which kept him engaged for several years.

The research program envisaged the testing of the Silicalcite product and of the production process, aimed at refining a *Catalogue*

of *standard housings*, of component typologies, and of typologies for assembling series-produced prefabricated elements.

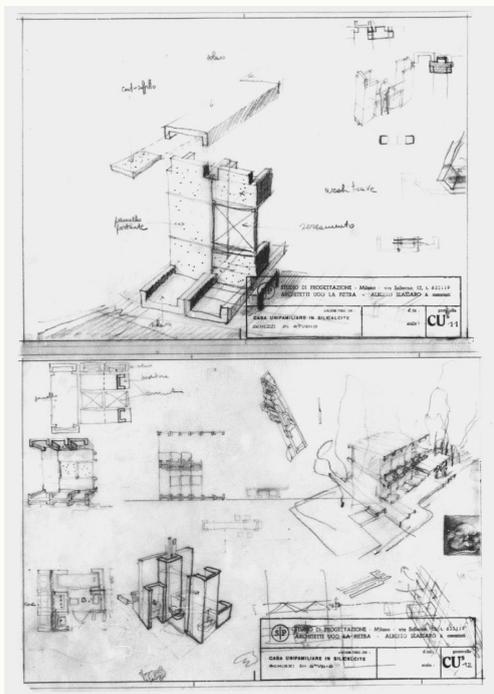
The catalogue can also be read as a compendium of new materials and of the new vocabulary that accompanied the evolution of the construction industry.

In 1971 he joined the Montedil Research Center of the Montecatini Edison Group as the person responsible for the development, coordination, and integration of building products, and for supervising the implementation of works across the various building complexes carried out by the Montedison Technical Office and by external designers. What emerges in these studies is an enthusiasm for the use of modular elements in architecture for the aspects of functional flexibility made possible by assembling simple components into complex systems, and for their propensity to create, through juxtapositions, surface textures.

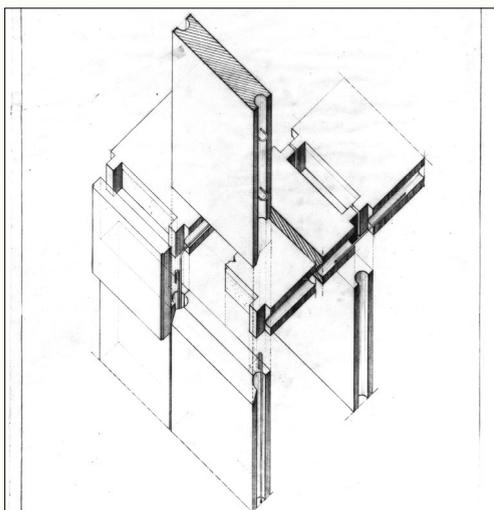
The possibility of obtaining different outcomes starting from basic components that can be aggregated in different ways – what in more recent times has become the myth of personalization – is here charged with ethical values oriented toward the idea of *casa-fai-da-te* [DIY house], of democratizing the quality of inhabiting. In this generation of architects there is also an underlying political wager: to insinuate themselves – as design technicians – into the meshes of industry, orienting its strategies. In Seassaro's later writings one reads the disillusionment of this hope [12](#) [13](#) [14](#) [15](#).

The culmination of his brief yet intense professional activity is the project carried out for ENEA with the architect Gianni Scudo. It is an *Edificio per uffici e laboratori di tecnologie energetiche appropriate* [Office and Laboratory Building for Appropriate Energy Technologies] in Ispra (completed in 1987), of which we provide below two short excerpts of commentary [16](#) [17](#) [18](#).

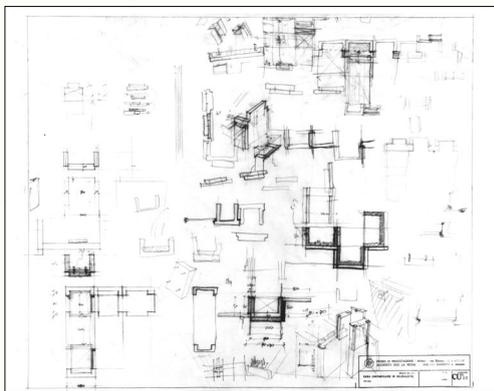
**Of very recent construction is the new building in Ispra that houses several laboratories of the Department of Alternative Sources and Energy Saving; the project is particularly interesting in the way elements of passive solar technology have been perfectly integrated into the architecture: in particular, for this building a 'solar chimney wall' was conceived, industrially producible, for which**



12. Ugo La Pietra e Alberto Seassaro, schizzi di progetto per Casa unifamiliare in Silicalcite.  
[Document →](#)



14. Ugo La Pietra e Alberto Seassaro, schizzi di progetto (assonometria strutturale) per Casa unifamiliare in Silicalcite.  
[Document →](#)



13. Ugo La Pietra e Alberto Seassaro, schizzi di progetto per Casa unifamiliare in Silicalcite.  
[Document →](#)



15. Produzioni del Gruppo Montecatini Edison per l'Edilizia.  
[Document →](#)



16. Gianni Scudo e Alberto Seassaro, Fotografia dell'Edificio per uffici e laboratori di tecnologie energetiche appropriate, a Ispra. Dettaglio finestre.  
[Document →](#)



17. Gianni Scudo e Alberto Seassaro, Fotografia dell'Edificio per uffici e laboratori di tecnologie energetiche appropriate, a Ispra. Policromie strutturali.  
[Document →](#)



18. Gianni Scudo e Alberto Seassaro, Fotografia dell'Edificio per uffici e laboratori di tecnologie energetiche appropriate, a Ispra. Facciata esterna.  
[Document →](#)

ENEA obtained a patent requested by national industries operating in the building-envelope sector. (Umberto Colombo, *Architettura ed energia. Sette edifici per l'ENEA*, 1987, p. 9)

[...] The engineering laboratory in Ispra is in fact a sequence of experimental structures, each with its own specific prototype value, skilfully assembled into a deliberately discontinuous whole; the firm that managed the executive design [...] went through many variants, recording in advance the impact of the technological research located here, concerning various forms of heat production from solar sources; envelope and systems are no longer distinguishable, indeed, in one part of the building the systems directly form the building shell, with unusual geometric effects marked by festive polychromy. (Leonardo Benevolo, *Architettura ed energia. Sette edifici per l'ENEA*, 1987, p. 13)

## 4.4 *Morfemi*

In parallel with his studies and professional and university activities, starting in the early 1960s he conducted research and artistic-aesthetological experimentation on the *relationship between Arts and Sciences*, moving within the cultural context of FAST, the *Federazione delle Associazioni Scientifiche e Tecniche* [Federation of Scientific and Technical Associations] in Milan, with Silvio Ceccato, and of the *Colloqui di Verucchio* [Verucchio Colloquia] on *Experimental Aesthetics* led by Giulio Carlo Argan.

Alberto Seassaro's experiences as architect, interior designer, and designer are inseparable from his artistic experiences. And those same artistic practices are not easily classifiable within the world of artistic experimentation if they are separated from his studies and his interests in architecture.

It is, after all, within his course of study at the Faculty of Architecture that research leads him to methodological-design elaborations on the processes of form-constitution, crossing the disciplinary fences of individual design domains and culminating, with the degree thesis carried out with Ugo La Pietra, in the concept of *synesthesia among the arts*.

The modality of operating by design, conducting at the same time theoretical research and experimentation on form within the unified domain of the visual arts – finds its most authentic moment in *Morfemi* [Morphemes], *Progressioni morfologiche* [Morphological Progressions], and *Morfo-ambienti luminosi* [Lighting Morph-Environments], experimental-aesthetic artifacts and installations that Alberto Seassaro created and exhibited in group and solo shows, with presentations and critical essays by Gillo Dorfles, Lucio Amelio, Ettore Sottsass Jr., Tommaso Trini, Germano Celant, Francesco Vincitorio, Emilio Garroni, Silvio Ceccato, Umbro Apollonio, and Enzo Frateili. Among these: winner of the 1st Piero Manzoni Prize (Soncino, 1962); solo show at Galleria Blu (Milan, 1963); solo show at Galleria Flaviana (Locarno, 1966); solo show at Studio 2B (Bergamo, 1965); solo show at Modern Art Agency (Naples, 1966); solo show at Galleria Arte Oggi (Pescara, 1967); solo show at Galleria Visualità (Milan, 1968) [19](#); and at national and international art surveys, including: *Nuove tecniche d'immagine* [New Image Techniques] (San Martino, 1967); *Al di là della pittura* [Beyond Painting] (San Benedetto del Tronto, 1968); *Nuove tendenze* [New Tendencies] (Ferrara, 1969); the 1969 *Biennale di Venezia* [Venice Biennale] curated by Giacomo Manzù (Venice, 1969); *Documenta – A Quinquennial Contemporary Art Exhibition* (Kassel, 1970) [20](#) [21](#) [22](#).

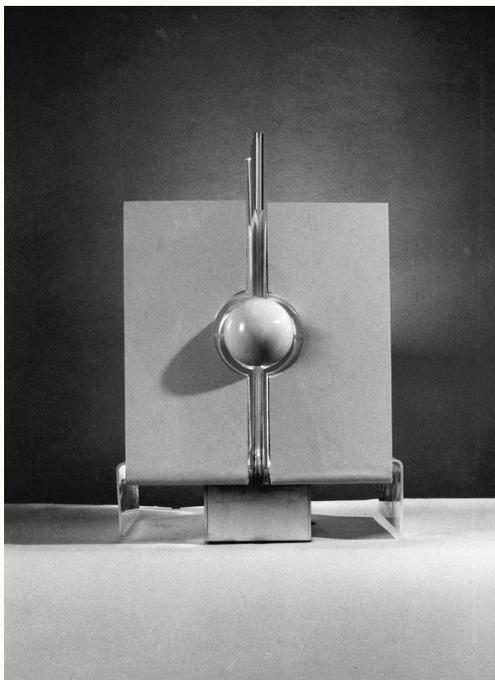
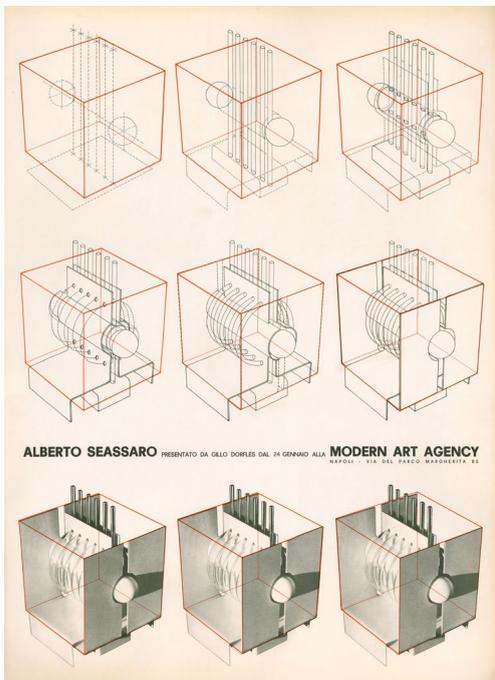
19. Cartolina della mostra *Micro 33*, Galleria Visualità.  
[Document →](#)



What are the *Morfemi*? Objects? Sculptures? Small architectures? Experimental models? Perceptual study models? Process prototypes? «Moments of passage or pause in a research process», as Ettore Sottsass once called them?

It seems natural to say that *Morfemi* can indeed be considered research exercises on basic modular elements that, within the project, transform through addition, subtraction, translation, permutation, and slippage of surfaces. A kind of basic design of morphological research.

**[...] it seems to me that these white-and-red 'things' by Seassaro are the results – or perhaps only the visible and tangible moments of pause and passage – of a work of 'research' (as one says today), and therefore these things can be placed only in the category of 'research' and in none of the traditional categories with which things are classified in order to be rid of them. It is not right to say**



20. Manifesto della mostra *Alberto Seassaro*.  
Presentato da Gillo Dorfles alla Modern Art  
Agency.  
[Document →](#)



21. Alberto Seassaro, *Morfema*.  
[Document →](#)



22. Alberto Seassaro, *Ritratto con Morfemi*.  
[Document →](#)

that they are sculptures, and it is not right to say that they are architectures, nor happenings, nor gift-objects, nor souvenirs: they are what remains clinging along the banks of research [23](#). (Ettore Sottsass, 1968, *Made In. Bollettino della Modern Art Agency*, January-February 1969a)

[...] *i Morfemi* are spatial models that 'fix', by concretizing them into tangible forms, the outcomes of a basic research activity on the theory and methodology of architectural design, usable in processes of understanding the logics of formal constitution and in activities of transformative experimentation [24](#). (Alberto Seassaro, 1968, *Made In. Bollettino della Modern Art Agency*, January-February 1969a)

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



24. *Made In. Bollettino della Modern Art Agency*,  
gennaio-febbraio 1969.  
[Document](#) →



In the *Morfemi* one already discerns Alberto Seassaro's interest in light, its nature and the transformations it can bring to the perception of form. In the *Morfemi* light becomes the *completion* of the object, an element of morphological transformation that occurs through the object's infinite projections in space, continuously changing as the incidence of the light source changes. It is no coincidence that each morpheme was photographed by the author in multiple sequences precisely to convey, beyond its material concreteness, the opening to a transient virtual three-dimensionality. In the morpheme, light, working through arithmetic subtractions and additions, compositions and decompositions, solids and voids, positives and negatives, depths and emergences, can generate complex algebraic variations.

The *Morfemi* stand as the starting point of a path of inquiry into the cultures of light that is later fulfilled in the creation of artistic and environmental artifacts. At the same time, they constitute a testing ground for theories whose development we find in various publications from those years (Seassaro, 1966; Seassaro, 1968; Seassaro, 1969b; Seassaro, 1969c) [25](#) [26](#).



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