

10. Catalyzing Energies and Ideas. Alberto Seassaro's Role at the Inception of the Degree Course in *Industrial Design* at Politecnico di Milano

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There are moments that mark important institutional evolutions. Long-latent problems find an outlet thanks to a set of convergences and opportunities capable of arriving at a synthesis. Thus studies, theories, social and subjective demands precipitate into a solution, as in a chemical reaction that gives rise to a new product. These sudden changes are almost always linked to figures able to catalyze energies and ideas: the function of the leader, like that of the entrepreneur with the capacity to innovate, in Schumpeter's sense. The ability to bring to bear upon the order of things new organizational and technological processes.

As I set about writing this contribution, Schumpeter came back to mind not by chance. He reminded me of a conference held in Rome in the early 1980s, at the CNR, promoted by the *Gruppo Produzione Edilizia* [Building Production Group], which brought together professors of *Tecnologia dell'Architettura* [Technology of Architecture] and some of *Composizione Architettonica* [Architectural composition] from different faculties. What had united us, for a decade already, was a different approach, set against a revived academicism, to analyze the complex-

ity of the design process in its phases, with the various actors, the regulatory context, the productive organization, and technical innovations, in the economic perspective of building cycles and of the issues of the construction site.

The CNR had recognized this grouping of ours, which annually submitted funding requests for coordinated research projects. Funding that enabled us to promote seminars, meetings, and conferences such as the one in Rome.

During the conference, reports were given on the progress of the various research projects, which also presented different interfaces with construction firms, institutions, and sector bodies. Of those two days of proceedings, the contributions of the various colleagues fade with the passing years, while Alberto Seassaro's intervention still stands out in my memory.

Alberto Seassaro addressed the theme of technological innovation, not so much with reference to the processes then under way, but in general and projective terms, invoking Schumpeter's thought, to most, I think, unknown. A genuine paper, articulated and in-depth, which left us astonished, because we had had no inkling of these studies of his, anything but rote, nor had he made any mention of them to us Milanese when we met to coordinate teaching and research activity.

In that paper of his, which I hope has not been lost, Alberto Seassaro intuited that shortly thereafter technological innovation would determine a sudden leap beyond the already advanced methods of building production and design, evolving toward an entirely new scenario. This entailed overcoming codified logics and methodologies, opening up to the pragmatic and experimental culture of design. Stated today, it may sound obvious; we technologists were indeed familiar with the Anglo-Saxon *component approach*, yet we were entrenched in the economism and workerism of our late 1960s ideological references. Our strength, but also our limit. Alberto Seassaro said that we needed to go beyond, that the added value incorporated in the new products arriving on site was radically changing the conception and the modes of the design and construction of architecture.

By those mental associations that trace back to our lived experience, as I write I make another leap back in time that saw Alberto Seassaro and me as protagonists, on the occasion of the *Venice Ar-*

chitecture Biennale of 1980, directed by Paolo Portoghesi. The program included the two exhibitions *La presenza del passato, Venezia e lo spazio scenico* [The Presence of the Past, Venice and the Scenic Space] and the work of our Gruppo Produzione Edilizia entitled *Lavorare in architettura* [Working in Architecture], of which Portoghesi entrusted me with the direction. A sort of laboratory, a countertrend to the spectacular *Via Novissima* [The Newest Street] of brash, short-lived Postmodernism, which allowed us to document our ideas in various seminars, meetings, debates.

On that occasion I had the idea, mindful of my youthful cinephile passion, to propose to RAI a film with the same title, namely *Lavorare in architettura* [Working in Architecture]. I drafted a meticulous script, *ironclad*, as the jargon had it, with the locations, the figures to interview, the texts of the voice-overs. It was accepted, and a full-scale crew was made available for the shooting. A feature-length film of more than an hour, it aired in prime time on Rai 3, watched by many because on the other networks they were discussing election results.

I had envisaged a figure that would function as a binding element among the scenes, the interviews, and the contexts that documented the different approaches to the design and construction of architecture, against the backdrop of the social dynamics that would give rise to the reformist process of the 1980s, with urban planning and public building at the center of politics. I had thought of an actor, but I immediately discarded the idea because Alberto Seassaro was the right person, he did not need to get into character and his lanky figure of a modern cowboy suited it well. I handed him the script with few words. He accepted immediately. Punctually he was on set, for the off-the-cuff interviews and present in the various moments in which the narration unfolded. Then, with Paolo Luciani, we proceeded to the editing and to the sound commentary.

I have recounted these antecedents because, among the many I could recall, they seem to me emblematic of a particularly strong-willed personality that marked the process of educational renewal set in motion in the 1980s and that would lead to redefining the degree courses of the Faculty of Architecture in Milan, with repercussions in other faculties as well. The reference is in particular to the Degree Course in *Industrial Design* and then to the new Faculty.

The establishment of the Degree Course in *Industrial Design* represented, at Politecnico di Milano, at the end of the last century, a renewal equal in importance to the establishment in 1932 of the Faculty of Architecture. An educational and research initiative capable of engaging the Faculties of Architecture and Engineering in a shared project, overcoming long-standing diffidences.

The principal author was, without doubt, Alberto Seassaro.

With a common education in the area of *Architectural Composition*, and newly graduated, Alberto Seassaro and I shared a disposition to delve into *Architectural Technology*, setting to work in the following decade to establish an Institute, of which in 1979 I assumed the directorship.

Pupils of Rogers, Belgiojoso, and Albini, we attained our chairs in Milan following our challenges to an *ancien régime* of teaching reluctant to take account of the fresh wind of the first center-left, with urban planning at the center of the political debate. Architecture, too, was swept up in it, and we, with youthful boldness, radicalized the opposition to a profession uncritical toward real-estate speculation.

A protest that then flowed into the tensions of the 1970s, with the suspension of Portoghesi and of our *Maestri*, followed by ours, of about 15 appointed lecturers.

After the reinstatement of all the suspended faculty, we technologists had moved away from the extreme positions of rejecting the project as a compromising act and had placed ourselves in a critical stance toward a resurfacing academicism, supporting an approach to design that started from the structural aspects of the building process and from an autonomous role with respect to the ancillary function to *Architectural Composition* previously performed by the propaedeutic teachings of *Constructive Elements*. We underscored the term *edilizia* [construction] to mark the distance from an idealist position, expressed by Benedetto Croce in *Aesthetica in nuce*, of a hierarchy between architecture and building. A path that would lead, precisely, to the establishment first of the Institute of Technology and immediately afterward, in 1980, of the Department of Programming, Production, and Building Design (PPPE).

An initiative capable of catalyzing multiple interdisciplinary interests. In this direction Alberto Seassaro distinguished himself by an uncommon breadth of vision with the curatorship, in 1979, of *Storia e*

struttura del settore edilizio. In Italia dal dopoguerra ad oggi [History and Structure of the Building Sector. In Italy from the Postwar to Today], with contributions from the faculty who in 1980 would converge into the PPPE Department – the first technology-area department in Italy. Alberto Seassaro and I drafted the programmatic document, shared by Marco Zanuso and then presented by him, with authority, to the scrutiny of the University Commission for subsequent ministerial approval.

I was then elected Director of the Department for six years, during which we strengthened our ranks with the appointment of Tomás Maldonado from DAMS in Bologna and Achille Castiglioni from Turin. The success of the initiative, which brought together some sixty faculty and assistants, led Eduardo Vittoria, a member of the *Consiglio Nazionale Universitario* [National University Council, CUN] and a friend of Zanuso as well through their shared Olivetti experience, to urge me to promote a Specialization Course in *Industrial Design*.

The professional and productive *milieu* of Milan was fertile for such an initiative, yet not easy to secure ministerial approval for unless adequately structured. A post-graduate Specialization Course, therefore, reserved for a small number of students who could gain access only after an entrance examination. An option, then, elitist and narrow, yet which, in Vittoria's view, would have made it possible to open a breach within the faculties of Architecture against the stubborn resistance to broader disciplinary innovations.

Vittoria's vision, mindful of his American experience, brought to light the limits of the courses in *Furnishing* and *Interior Architecture*, increasingly distant from the culture of designing objects for everyday use. Thus in Milan, with Carlo De Carli having shifted toward positions closer to architectural design with the theory of *Spazio primario* [Primary Space], and the marginal role of Alberto Rosselli – who later died prematurely – who, by contrast, had a clear sense of the Anglo-American conception of design. Relations with the capillary manufacturing base of furniture production in Brianza within the educational context had also withered, and the *Triennale*, born from that productive reality, had by then set off on other paths.

The design of furniture elements had now become the province of professional practice, in a lucrative market rapidly expanding to meet

new needs and changing habits and lifestyles, with no educational provision capable of training future designers.

Sharing Vittoria's stance; I therefore set about initiating the not uncomplicated procedure for a Specialization Course, and, in the Council of Full Professors of the Department, I proposed a commission coordinated by Zanuso with Maldonado and Castiglioni. After a reasonable time, Zanuso reported to me the difficulties encountered owing to colleagues' limited willingness to structure the proposal. Therefore, the initiative did not go forward.

But the issue remained topical. It was being discussed and, toward the end of the 1980s, the idea emerged of resuming the initiative in order to provide an outlet for a demand for education that, in the Milanese context, had found a response in various private schools, some quite successful, instead considering – in a favorable phase of revision of the educational regulations – the opportunity to promote a Degree Course in *Industrial Design*. A hypothesis that was by no means a given and anything but easy. We often discussed it with Alberto Seassaro, together with Valerio Di Battista and Antonio Scocciarro.

The matrix could only lie in the cultural orientation of the PPPE Department, with a pragmatic and interdisciplinary bent, open to the Anglo-Saxon culture of design.

At the beginning of the 1990s, we then decided that it was necessary to commit ourselves directly. At a dinner among the four of us, with Alberto as cook in his attic flat overlooking the rooftops of Corso Garibaldi, we discussed late into the night who among us should take on the task of dedicating themselves to that difficult project; we agreed it should be Seassaro, also because of his familiarity with designers and artists, and his important early projects in partnership with Ugo La Pietra.

Alberto Seassaro did not immediately declare himself available, not hiding from the difficulties and the considerable commitment that all this would entail. A couple of months went by, during which, whenever we saw him, we pressed him. Reflective, he was ripening his decision. Shortly thereafter, he accepted.

A familiar attitude. His contribution to the development of departmental initiatives was marked by periods in which his presence was latent, followed by an engaging activism in teaching and research. At those times he would galvanize others, with organizational systema-

ticity and an uncommon knowledge of institutional mechanisms – another facet of his creative personality.

This double register was certainly at the basis of an initiative that was nothing short of incredible, in a context reluctant to innovation. Probably only Seassaro could have succeeded in involving so many faculty from other disciplinary areas at Politecnico di Milano, cultural figures, and professionals outside the academic world.

Therefore, in 1993 the Degree Course in *Industrial Design* was launched, followed by the Department and the Faculty. A path that would then be taken up by other Italian universities.

As I set about bringing this note to a close, where objective facts intertwine with personal memories, I ask myself whether this is the best way to contribute to a text whose aim is to delineate the figure of a faculty member who played a significant role, as often happens in scientific communities.

Over time I have increasingly attached value to testimonies and to episodes apparently marginal, in order to cast proper light on the relation between known facts and the motivations that prompted them.

All the more so for Alberto Seassaro, who wrote little, unlike the often bulimic academic output. He did not have the time for it, an anomaly in that world so often devoted to piling up titles in an ivory tower. It was clear to him that every hypothesis and theory that nourishes research needs to be put into action, so as to be transmitted and to change the state of things and to produce a genuine advancement of knowledge. All the more so in university education, which ought to be attuned to the real needs and demands of society. The points of arrival of his thought therefore had to translate into tangible facts in the evolution of educational frameworks and in the organization of the university structure. In my *Lettera a un aspirante architetto* [Letter to an aspiring architect], (2021) – with a generous preface by Paolo Portoghesi that goes back to the moments of those renewals experienced with Alberto – and in other writings of mine, I delve into the context in which the initiatives of which Seassaro was a protagonist were generated. In the epigraph I cited a thought by Kader Abdolah:

When you are young you do not realize that, in fact, the paths of your life are already traced, and that you simply have to fol-

low them. Some manage to follow them to the end, others stop halfway, and still others are driven away from them. (Schiaffonati, 2021)

Alberto Seassaro followed his path to the very end, devoted to a project that proved capable of catalyzing energies, of growing over time by structuring itself and adapting to change. As institutions ought to do in order to meet social needs and demands.

One last consideration I wish to add. More than once I have asked myself what our relationship was, and how it was shaped; what our mutual acquaintance truly consisted in. We had common academic paths, in episodes shared over more than half a century. Our friendship was different from what is commonly meant by that word. Not intimate, as if there were some impediment. We travelled together; with our families we shared holiday houses; convivial occasions and meetings were frequent. Yet there was always a certain reserve between us, more explicable on my part than on Alberto Seassaro's, given his openness to relationships. Never a quarrel, nor any disagreement on how to pursue and bring shared projects to completion; exchanges of opinion were frequent, yet without any waste of words, without going round in circles, but coming straight to the crux of matters. Respect, which characterized our relationship.

References

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