

# Stylistic Guises:

## That All Rationalists Be One

by Luigi Ferrara

**T**he tendency in an era of ever-changing social structure, communicative overload in all forms of media, and rapidly evolving and decaying environments, is to oppose the constant flux through attempts at stability. The prevalent social forces will attempt to reinforce their positions, and will set up the apparatus to accomplish their aims. Allied with this phenomenon is the part of human psychology which requires unities that are palatable, be they

political, social or aesthetic. Elements of society begin to align, whether consciously or inadvertently. These alignments or trends have created a form of historical criticism and analysis whose basis lies not in documentation and critical revelation, but rather in the discernment of categorizable epochs of time.

These epochs are passed off to the public in a simplistic and highly digesti-

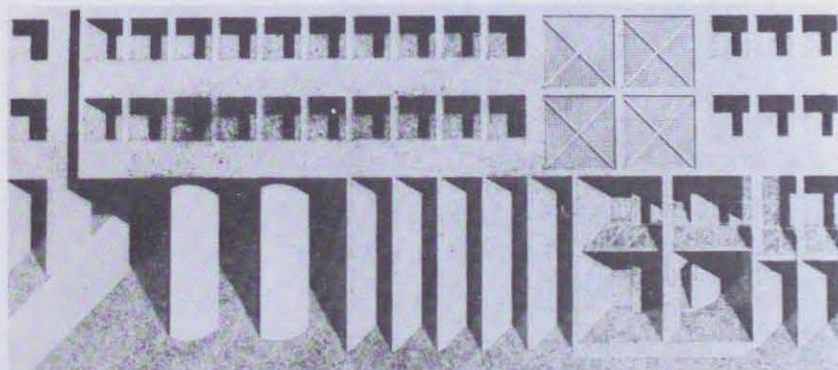
ble form which reveals very little about a period except its very existence as a category in the eyes of historians. When this process of historical analysis is taken up in specific fields such as the subject of architecture, the revelations become even more limited and any sense of truth is further distorted.

The problem can be seen as one of generalizations. However, seeing it this way invokes the problem itself. Generalizations are not a problem *per se*. They are in fact extremely helpful in eliciting truths about a larger segment of the population than the individual. The problem concerns itself more with the improper use of generalizations, and the excessive conclusiveness of most scholarly writing.

The methods with which architectural historians have simplified and yet distorted their accounts of history is by stylistic classification. For the most part, critics and historians have viewed the building stock of our world and have grouped it into categories derived from aesthetic and chronological coherence. This method of ordering was never introduced or qualified as just one particular method. Instead, it propagated a view of the built world through eyes only, a perspective we still suffer from. And yet if one asks oneself what architecture is, aesthetics would hardly be the answer, though it might figure in it. Recently there have been trends to oppose this method of historiography by analyzing the built world from alternate standpoints. These efforts however remain sparse and like the previous method do not emphasize the particularity of their simplistic interpretations of our environment.

In this article I am combatting stylistic classification by examining one of the established stylistic categories — Rationalism — from three particular viewpoints, hoping to reveal its unfounded basis as a stylistic category. These three reference points form one possible way of understanding architecture. They are: sensorial evocation through form and place creation, political influence of the built product as used or intended, and social structure implied.

In beginning this analysis it may be helpful to work in reverse chronologically. The present day Rationalist movement came to the fore in the late Seventies, though its roots go back much further. In Italy, the most prominent exponents are Giorgio Grassi, Carlo Aymonino, and Aldo Rossi. The work of the latter two architects has been frequently published together because of their collaboration on particular projects and because of a supposed shared viewpoint. However, an analysis of their work from the three standpoints previously iterated reveals fundamental differences.



Rational Architecture, AMA, 1978

Rossi — Gallaterese housing, Milan.



Rational Architecture, AMA, 1978

Aymonino — Gallaterese housing, Milan.



If one looks at the housing complex at the Gallaterese in Milano, executed between 1967-1973, where the work of both architects stand side by side, one can begin to read the differences. Ayminino's building is a collection of separate individual units of varying size and character. The forms, the materials, and the spaces accentuate this, marking the place of the individual in the collective. The public spaces are exalted through strong forms like the cylinders of the stairs, the amphitheatre, and the bridges. There is an effort to make each architectural element read separately and yet fit into the harmony of the whole.

Rossi however, has created a long drawn out white structure with a rhetorical colonnade at its base and continuous fenestration on both sides. Viewing the building from a distance, one cannot understand where one unit ends and another begins, or if any of the units are different from one another. This structure's sensoral evocation asks for a sublimation of the individual to the collective. It is akin to speculative housing in this denial of individuality but it is also representative of a totalitarian marxist ethic, both philosophies which demand unusually unified societies.

From these buildings one can see that though a unified constructional stylistic aesthetic exists, there is a fundamental rift between the building that is expressed sensorally and formally.

Another purported present day Rationalist is Leon Krier who, though declared politically aligned with types like Rossi,<sup>1</sup> reveals in his work another tendency altogether. Firstly, though Krier's drawn forms resemble Rossi's, when built they would be very different in character. Rossi in his usage of materials continues to employ industrial processes and the means of Capital. Krier instead, decries them and refuses to build, arguing for a return to craftsmanship. This alone places him and Rossi in two varying political and social standpoints. A connection with Aymonino is even more tenuous. How these men have come to be grouped as Rationalists point to the inappropriateness of stylistic classification.

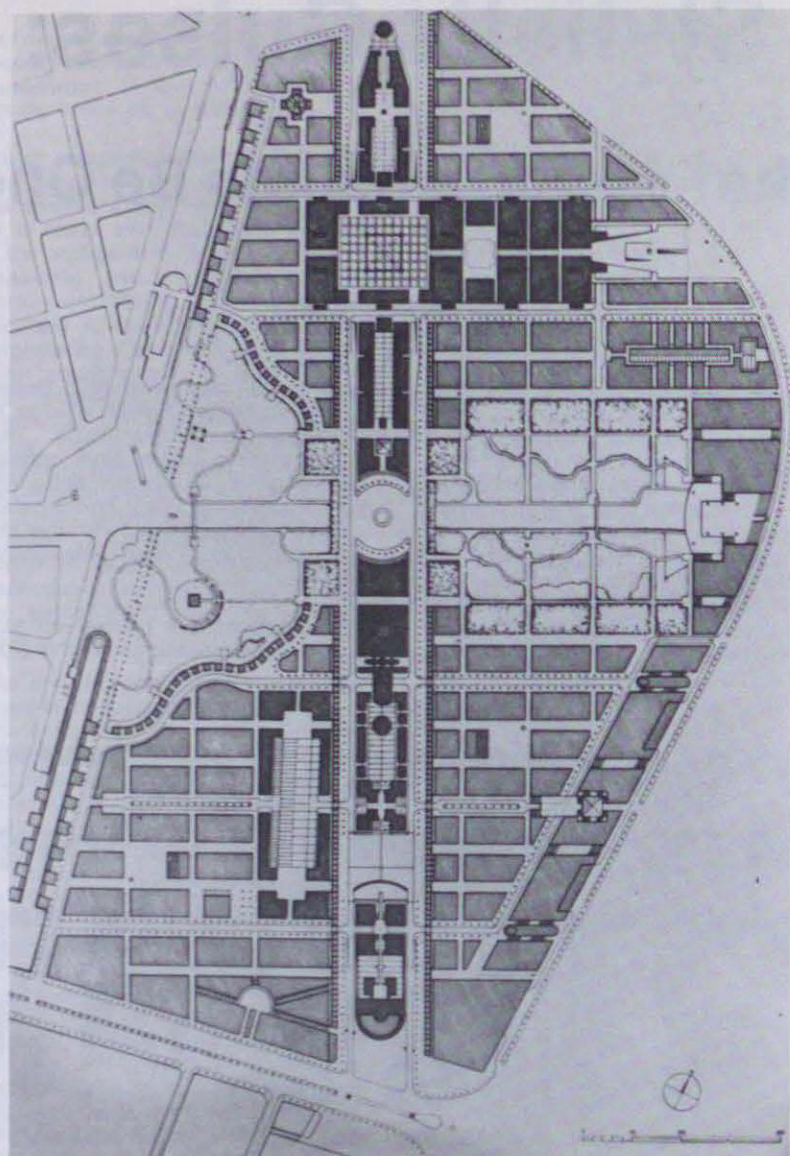
Krier's brand of marxism which harkens to a society of *petit-bourgeois* craftsman and to *petit-bourgeois* scale (whether he admits it or not) is really a rather gallant plea for democracy as it is experienced at a small and manageable scale. The 'marxist' theoretical stance is often thwarted in Krier's drawn work where his own designs for towns, like the La Villette competition entry, take on an incredible aristocratic melancholy. The organizational methods and the constructional forms of urban planning and architec-

ture in more despotic areas are pursued by Krier without substantial modification to push them into line with his own ideological concerns. That such a singular figure as Krier be lumped into the Rationalist movement (by himself or critics) reveals the very pitfalls of the stylistic system in coming to grips with understanding movements within architecture.

Taking the present day Rationalist movement and comparing it to the movement in the Twenties and Thirties as it existed in Italy and as initiated by Group 7 and not the Milanese 900<sup>2</sup> raises even more discrepancies that point to the fundamental inaccuracies

and confusions of stylistic classification. That such diverse and contradictory figures in Italian architecture such as Terragni, Ridolfi, Albini, and Piacentini have come to be known under the guise of Rationalism, further emphasizes the point. A chart comparing these architects from the three standpoints may shed light on the dissimilarities between them and the new Rationalist as well. (See table)

From this chart one can begin to see how different these architects are in relation to each other, and yet if one were to create a chart which included only aesthetic preoccupations and tendencies, their work would begin to



Krier — La Villette (plan and traffic layout).



## THE FIFTH COLUMN

### First Readers' Poll

#### THE TEN MOST SIGNIFICANT BUILDINGS IN CANADA ARE:

(Please give name, location and architect, if necessary.)

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

FURTHER INFORMATION AND COMMENTS ABOUT THESE BUILDINGS WILL BE VERY WELCOME AND SHOULD BE SENT TO THE FIFTH COLUMN, EITHER BY DIRECT MAIL OR THROUGH YOUR REGIONAL EDITOR.

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hold much more in common. That an aesthetic stylistic grouping could have such marked differences in other sensoral realms, in political association, and social implication, begins to reveal the complexity of architecture and the inadequate way we have come to deal with writing about the subject.

Perhaps the present oft spoken of crisis in architecture which has been attributed to the failure of the bourgeois

culture, to the influx of new technologies that altered convention, to the loss of tradition and/or ethics, is also a crisis in the way architecture is being perceived and transmitted to the public. Architecture has always been "firmities, commodities, and delight" and the splintering of architecture, by scholarship which emphasizes one of these qualities at the expense of the others, distorts our understandings of architecture, preventing us from realizing that all Rationalists are not alike.

Luigi Ferrara is a student at the School of Architecture at the University of Toronto.

#### Notes

1. *Rational Architecture*, Archives d'Architecture Moderne, Bruxelles, 1978, p.38.
2. Vittorio Gregotti, *New Directions in Italian Architecture*, Brailier, New York, 1968, p.16-17.

#### OLD SCHOOL

Terragni,  
Giuseppe

Ridolfi,  
Mario

Albini,  
Franco

#### SENSORAL

symmetries, asymmetries, space-time  
classicizing, light and air  
Casa del Fascio Nuovocomun Housing

brutal, minimum cost expenditure  
I.N.A. Casa

structural refinement  
of sensual exquisiteness  
Apartment, 6th Triennale

#### POLITICAL

repentant  
fascist  
intellectual

rationalized  
sell-out to Capital

apolitical

fascist

"marxist"

marxist-  
communist

socialist

#### SOCIAL

democratic  
socialism

capitalism

perpetuates  
monied class

state control

petit-bourgeois  
democratic  
artisanal

the sublimation of the  
individual (excepting the  
architect) to the collective

welfare society



New Directions in Italian Architecture, Vittorio Gregotti

Ridolfi — I.N.A. casa Tiburtino quarter.



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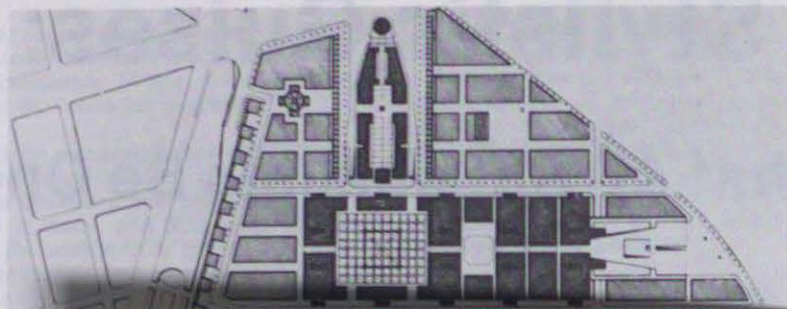
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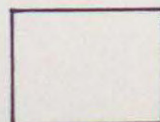
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Krier





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## SENSORAL

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monumental authori-  
tarianism  
Plan for E.U.R.

## POLITICAL

repentant  
fascist  
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sell-out to Capital

apolitical

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## SOCIAL

democratic  
socialism

capitalism

perpetuates  
monied class

state control

## NEW SCHOOL

Krier,  
Leon

Rossi,  
Aldo

Aymonino,  
Carlo

poetic monumentality  
traditional forms, human scale  
La Villette Plan

reductive forms, "pure signs" rhetorical space  
abstraction in sensoral terms  
Gallaterese Housing

asymmetries, material contrast  
collided pure forms in space-time  
Gallaterese Housing

"marxist"

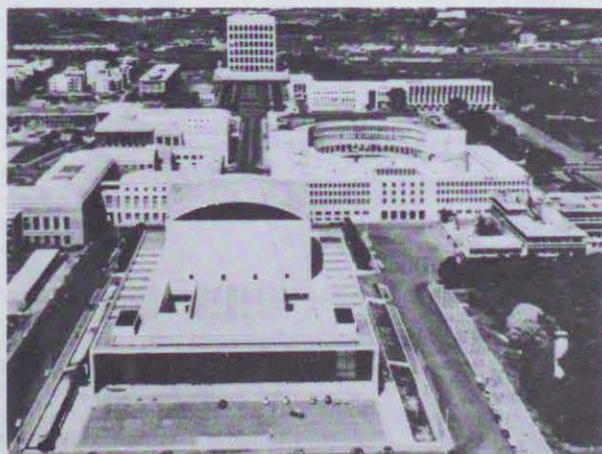
marxist-  
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### Piacentini — E.U.R. '42.

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