

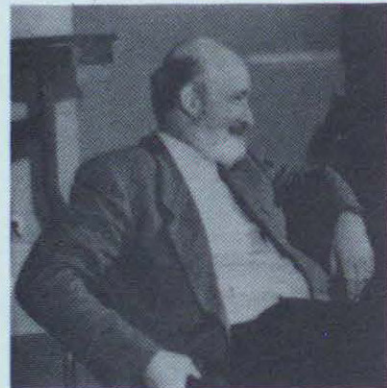
# An Interview with Vittorio Gregotti

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Vittorio Gregotti is an architect practicing in Venice. He is currently an editor of *Casabella* and was a former member of the executive council of *Lotus*. He teaches a design course at the School of Architecture in Venice.

Vittorio Gregotti was interviewed in Milan for *THE FIFTH COLUMN* by Katherine Dolgy. The interview was conducted in Italian and the transcript was translated by Walt Sandulli and Luigi Ferrara.

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**TFC :** In a recent article for *Casabella*, you refer to "my generation and particularly the *Casabella* group of the fifties that must be attributed with the guilt and the merits for the reanimation of a discussion with regards to the importance of Loos and the lack of the same for Gropius." You say that "from that moment Loos' critical fortune has not stopped growing." This is interesting in the power that it infers for the journalist in architecture. What exactly is the extent of that power in your opinion?

**Vittorio Gregotti :** I think that in the case of Loos there has been, especially in Italy, a certain type of positive opinion in recent years that is due to two fundamental facts. The first is that my generation was the first to begin to reflect, to think about the modern movement no longer as being a unified entity, but rather as something which basically was composed of many different, independent ideas. And that maybe it was interesting to understand what happened in the twenties and thirties, more than just analysing what were the similarities between diverse ideas of that period.

We also wanted to analyse what separated these ideas and to understand from that, the diverse components of what became known as the modern movement. One of the principal components of that movement was the thinking of Loos, and that which in Loos' work expressed the ideas of other architects active in those years who were related with the mod-

ern movement, in its classic definition - relations of a complex, not a simple nature. For this reason, in 1958 we dedicated several issues of *Casabella* to the problem of Loos and the reasons why this strange person was part of the modern movement, not only as a precursor, but as a person who contributed in an original and diverse way to the formation of a modern way of thinking.

From that moment on, the fortune of Loos in Italy, and also abroad, was very important, very large. It was understood that even if Loos was not utilizing the classical instruments of the language of modernity, he managed nonetheless to keep alive the important concept that there was a link between the traditions and history of architecture in general, and specifically of architecture to its particular locus. In this sense, we think that the fortune of Loos is justified, even though, as I said in my article, we certainly are not able to consider him as a great architect. There were many architects that had much more talent. But no one else has had the capacity to keep alive this particular and original concept of modernity.

**TFC :** What do you feel had the most influence on the *Casabella* group of the fifties and the architectural theory and criticism that was to come from them?

**Gregotti :** I think there always develops, when something begins to fade away, a certain thirst that cannot be quenched.



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In our case, we needed to develop historical perspectives because history and criticism were not very secure. There was not much left of a modern movement to which we could refer, but we started to criticize, and from this criticism came the need to think theoretically - not only to reflect on history and theory, but also to use these as instruments in design.

**TFC :** And the *Casabella* group of the eighties, of which you are a distinct member, has what role to play in the current architectural discussion?

**Gregotti :** I think that the position of *Casabella* in the eighties has two important functions. The first is to correct a general tendency in the practice of architecture overindulgent in images and inattentive to the ideas of construction. When I say *inattentive to the ideas of construction*, I don't want to want to sound as if I'm talking about an architecture of technology. Technology is something which interests few people today. Architecture is no longer a technical miracle, but I should say that there is a tradition in the profession that should be preserved; that is, a sense of the substantiality of the materials which one works with. This is the first aspect of architecture that *Casabella* strives to sustain.

The second is that which I would like to refer to as *the contextual aspect*. That is, the basic condition that we find ourselves in today, especially in Europe. I believe that here I should make mention to the fact that *Casabella* is fundamentally a European magazine which does not concern itself, for example, with the very important problems of places like the third world, where the specific conditions of working are tied to regional traditions and history. We are always confronted with the problems that are around us - and context has an importance that we must take into account. When we act, we can no longer maintain the idea that architecture is the problem

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of constructing an isolated object, an abstract model, but rather of constructing a very substantial object that has an important relationship with what existed before it - necessary relationships that grow from the context and are not just stylistic relationships, of course, but ones which suggest, which permit the new intervention to have a particular relationship with what existed beforehand. This relationship becomes the fundamental element in the construction of architecture. This is the position of *Casabella*.

**TFC :** What do you feel is the relationship between *Casabella* and other architectural magazines, for example *Domus* or *Abitare*?

**Gregotti :** We have in *Domus* an example of a position exactly opposite to ours. This is not to say that we don't believe that *Domus* is an excellent commercial magazine, because it has many great qualities. It is a magazine that has always had the tradition of being in vogue; that is to say, a magazine that follows taste and which changes gradually, not only in architecture, but also in art, furniture, etcetera. Furthermore, the director of *Domus* has taken a position with regard to architecture, comparatively speaking, that is radically different from ours. This is a position which maintains that architecture must find an audience or community, and along with that, represents a lifestyle linked to the populace, to the ideal of the banal, to what people are in actuality. Whereas we are a more moralistic magazine who would like to think of what people should be like and not only of what they are. This is why we are a different type of magazine.

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I do not think *Abitare* can be compared with us because it is a magazine that has different objectives. This can be seen in the way in which it positions itself in the magazine market; that is, it is not a magazine for specialists, but rather for a larger audience that has an interest in the problems of interior design.

**TFC :** And what is the relationship between *Casabella* and *Lotus*?

**Gregotti :** I have been for a long time one of the directors of *Lotus*, and as a result of this *Lotus* had a long period in which we tried to express the same philosophy as in *Casabella*. In the last two years, while I have been occupying myself with *Casabella*, *Lotus* has paid more attention than *Casabella* to the problems of history and those problems concerning certain themes bound up with literature, memory and other problems of this dimension. However, I certainly believe that *Lotus* is an excellent and important architectural magazine,



one that is very interesting, and one in which you can find discussions concerning, as we say, larger and more important issues.

**TFC :** There has been a lot of discussion lately on the inadequacy of the Italian architectural teaching situation. Giorgio Cucci describes its problems at length in *Casabella*. Both Leon and Rob Krier have described it to *THE FIFTH COLUMN*. Leon Krier said, "My brother has now two hundred and fifty students in Italy. Some professors have a thousand students. It is completely meaningless and the outcome is tragic." He refers to this as "industrial education." What is your experience in this regard teaching at the School of Architecture in Venice?

**Gregotti :** Certainly this is always something that makes foreigners wonder. In my design course in Venice, I currently have three hundred and forty students, a number that would be completely crazy for an American or German university. Well, I think it is necessary to discuss many different elements when considering this question of quantity. The first is that the number of people in Italy who go to the university is due, above all, to the problem of youth unemployment. This youth unemployment that causes the universities to be packed, is a result, on the whole, on the fact that there are not many possibilities for work. This produces a tendency among many to prolong the waiting period before working by attending university. This is a very negative fact - a fact that is bound up in the economic problems that we hope will straighten themselves out.

The second aspect is that in Italy, like the rest of Europe, there was, in 1968, a great push towards general education, and from this arose the idea of attending university not to obtain a profession but to be more educated, to have a greater quantity of general information. A profession was something that came later. I think that this was a mistake, not in an ideological sense, but in the sense that no society, especially Italian society, can permit themselves the luxury of a service such as general university education.

As concerns quantity, I have said this before and I will say it again; there is undoubtedly a certain limit at which it becomes very difficult to work, especially in something like design, in which a personal rapport is as important as teaching. I think, however, having had some experience in American, German and Swiss universities, that a certain quantity of students is important. This need not be too few, because when there are only ten or twelve students the capacity for interaction between students diminishes. This does not mean that one should have our number, which is an absurd number. But, I think that a certain minimum number of students is very important for constructing an environment of collective learning.

**TFC :** Is there a student whose work has had an exceptional effect on you?

**Gregotti :** Yes, certainly. I must give a small explanation here. The school at Venice has nearly all of Italy's most important architects: Gino Valle, Aldo Rossi, myself, and the historian Manfredo Tafuri. There are some strong personalities and this creates, in a certain sense, some groups of students following the various professors in diverse ways. I personally have the habit of taking some of my pupils and working with them. Many of my pupils work in my studio in Venice; others in my studio in Milan. Some have become assistants and work with me at school. This is an attempt on my part to create a certain *school* based on particular principles, and not on the imitation of certain models. On the whole, I think that is positive because it constructs a system of dialectics between various positions that serve to clarify the debate

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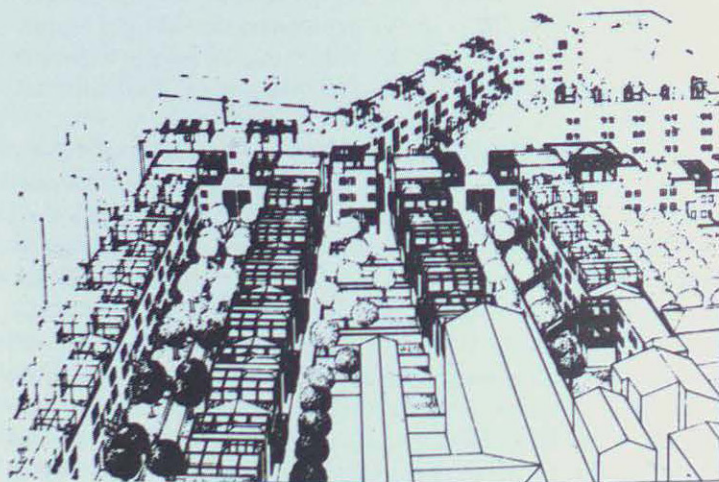
make it better.

**TFC :** What are you currently working on?

**Gregotti :** At this time, I am working on a competition for the Olympic Stadium in Barcelona, for 1992. It is a beautiful competition, in which Stirling, myself, Isozaki, Bofill and Moneo were invited to work on. However, there is one project that I am working on which, in my opinion, is more interesting. I am going to build - here in Italy it is very difficult to build - for the city of Venice, in its historical district, a series of dwellings. I am also working on something interesting in Milan - the reconstruction of a railroad zone in the central part of the city, on the side near the Triennale, which involves a great deal of urban design. All three projects have a scale of great dimension; and in all three projects the principles with which you design cities figure to a great degree.

**TFC :** Do you know of any work that is now taking place in Canada and do you have any opinions on it?

**Gregotti :** No, frankly I do not know enough about the situation to give an opinion. In this I must be sincere. Actually, this is an accusation on my part because Canada needs to express itself more - in the magazines - to have a stronger presence. It is a big nation which has a rather minimal international presence. I think it is very important for you to have a new presence in the general debate, in the international debate.



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