

Corso del Popolo in Terni: An Interpretative Hypothesis for the Contemporary Urban Design

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ABSTRACT

This work is grounded on the idea that the approach to the urban design should require a preordained cultural choice of interpretative paradigm of reality, allowing a selection of the significant values to be determined for the project itself.

The proposed subject concerns a particular interpretation, theoretical as much as practical, provided by Mario Ridolfi and Volfango Frankl in the post-war reconstruction of the city of Terni, midway between the forties and sixties in the last century, through that which would define 500 meters Urbanism.

Such a definition, used afterwards by the same authors in the discussion of their town planning experience, sounds like a phenomenological manifesto which identifies the physical and cultural dimension in which the urban design could significantly express a precise idea of a city.

Also of great interest is the authors cultural matrix, which dates back to the work of the masters C.Sitte, G.Giovannoni, M.Piacentini, according to whom the theoretical observation on the city aesthetic is inextricably linked to its etymological nature of sensitive perception of the quality of the space, of its volumetric realisation and of its foundation upon History through the continuity with tradition.

The paradigmatic example of this cultural position can be considered the **Plan for Corso del Popolo**, where the design consideration, developed along a forty years path, leaves the principles of architecture and those of town planning in an organic and unitary way, through the contextual realisation, on the part of Ridolfi and Frankl, of formidable architectures, as with the Franconi and the Pallotta Houses, and of the town planning tool subject to the rules and normative regulations of the planning.

The research case, therefore, consistent with its interest in redefining a field of validity, aesthetic and ethical together, in the modern day construction of the city, is proposed as a tool of knowledge of reality and of its structure in terms of its possible planning hermeneutics.

KEYWORDS:

Urban Design, Reconstruction, Contemporary City, Architecture, Realism, Tradition, History

1 INTRODUCTION

This case study examines the construction ex-novo of an entire road, intended as a piece of great urban architecture which seeks both to deal with and to formulate a hypothesis for the planning relationship with the existing's footprint and the value of the architectural sign, within the dialectic juxtaposition of modernity and tradition¹.

This planning interpretation is loaded with a complex value system of an aesthetic and symbolic nature, where the outcome constructed in the planning concept is both a material and immaterial fact, in which the road is intended "... as a living thing, not as the geometric result of the meeting of a technician's traced alignments. A road is a spiritual and moral actuality: it has its own character, its own features, its own function...".²

The historic events of Corso del Popolo therefore serve to illustrate the theme of the road as a primary part of the construction process of a city, in as much as it is also a functional element of the infrastructure and urban architecture³.

In fact, in opposition to the rue corridor model, extreme synthesis of modernist simplification, Ridolfi and Frankl propose a road designed as part of a city: solid, articulated and interspersed with images and memory ⁴.

If one considers the two boundary conditions of building a road: firstly when the road itself is intended as a collective diachronic process, multi-faceted and layered through the contribution of a choral project, and secondly when it is constructed in a single intervention, one will see how the nature of Corso del Popolo is inclusive of cross influences.

As a matter of fact, this great urban architecture can be interpreted as a summary of Ridolfi's paradigm of making a city – a laboratory where the two cultural experiences of urban and architectural design are compared in a concise dialogue full of cross-references and overlapping entities – just according to the proposed alternative methodology represented by 500 meters Urbanism.

From this perspective, the city is seen as an organism made up of recognisable parts, in which one can find the congruous dimension where the architectural project can express a significant value in the construction of a city. A dimension that is linked to an anthropologic parameter, or rather, linked to the capacity to perceive the space and thus to be able to control it through architectural compositional techniques.

Following on from that idea, this work materializes as an analysis of the planning evolution and the significance that is attributed to the road, a reflection on its character and the architectural language with regard to contemporary needs, through the study of direct, documentary, and architectural sources and their critical reinterpretation.

¹ As shown by Bernardo Secchi in Neri, Viganò (1990): *"the composition... "note for note"... of a city raises important problems: confronting fragment, even if it is conceptualised as an "analytical incident"; confronting traces of the past with their permanence and persistence, with their mutation of meaning: the confrontation between one and the multiple on the one hand, and on the other that of the historicity of the project"*.

² Piacentini (1941)

³ This idea, in response to the loss of sense and identity of the contemporary urban space, would link to the European urban culture of the 19th and first half of the 20th century, in which it is possible to recognize the idea of architecture's discipline as a permanent value for the construction of the urban organization.

⁴ With regard to the role of author's memory in the design process, it is interesting how Enrico Valeriani affirms in his paper "Le scatole cinesi: Aforisma sull'urbanistica" in Valeriani, Cellini, D'Amato (1979) *"...when memory means oneself's experience inventory and intention for the future"*.

2 PROLOGUE

The site of Corso del Popolo is situated in the Southern part of the ancient core of Terni and extends along the direction North-South, in parallel to the ancient *cardo maximus* of via Roma, from the city center to the river Nera.

At the beginning of the 20th Century this area was mainly occupied by plots with few buildings onto it, gardens, inner street Figure 1.



Figure 1: the city centre with the profile of the new road

The idea of opening a new road to connect the city centre to the new Southern part of the city, beyond the river Nera, is part of a cultural climate in state of ferment, in which the developing-set in instances of functionalism, which aim to modernise and regenerate the inherited urban structure, and those of an aesthetic-symbolic nature, fuelled by the rapid rise of fascist culture.

The construction of this new road, in the first place called via Littoria, is therefore proposed on a fertile and problematic ground as a sort of evolution of the theme, linked to the specific nature of the urban structure of Terni, in relation to which it represents the most modern and highly original variation.

With their planning studies, in fact, Ridolfi and Frankl offer a critical interpretation of modernity in juxtaposition with tradition, which does not alter the historic character of the city. In these terms, they have provided a hypothesis for the reconstruction of a lost identity, just where wartime destruction produced the deepest scars Figure 2.



Figure 2: views of the most significant realisations by Ridolfi and his Studio: his idea of modernity stands in closer but critical dialogue with the historical monuments

Hence derives the primary theme of the coordinated relationship between the urban historical structure and the regeneration and expansion's strategy based on the recognition of the authentic values of tradition and of those of continuity with it.

Specifically, this realistic method is expressed through the metric survey of the architectural organization and of its component parts as a necessary act of knowledge of the existing patrimony that is aimed at the reinterpretation of spatial, dimensional and proportional models⁵.

Furthermore, since this moment we can recognize the hypothesis of a city planned in perspective, with the sense of a profound sensibility in building the urban space, connecting to the ancient and most meaningful roots of the Mediterranean classicism⁶.

3 CORSO DEL POPOLO. THE EVOLUTION OF AN IDEA

The initial reflections on the subject are summarized in the compilation of the **Reconstruction Plan** (approved by Ministerial Decree LL.PP n.692 of the 24th March 1949) in a way that can be interpreted as a canvas where the different planning operations, which the damages of wartime had made so pressing, are organically spread.

In the **Reconstruction Plan**, strongly influenced by the regulation of the Town Plan in force at that time, the road is essentially conceived in its geometric and abstract dimension, structured using a uniform rectilinear route, with a slight widening towards *Palazzo Spada*.

The pre-existing urban fabric was cut indifferently respect its structure, in correspondence to the gardens and minor roads at the back of Via Roma, leading up to the new Roman bridge on the River Nera.

The architectural organization developed facades of uniform height of 23 metres with low-ground porticos. It is modulated by means of partially cross-sectional paths, which partly trace pre-existing ones, and are partly new gaps in the modern road system distribution.

In the following years with growing intensity, the Studio focussed its own project efforts on the research of an appropriate solution to the reality of the new urban composition, undertaking a series of detailed studies that were developed in the two versions of the **1957 Variation to the Reconstruction Plan for the Corso del Popolo zone and the adjacent area**⁷.

⁵ Talking about his own education, Frankl explains, in Cellini F., D'Amato C. (2005), the origin of his fascination for History: *"I saw with envy and great admiration the structures of historical centres: from when I was a little boy enchanted by the Medieval... I put all of my strength of spirit into understanding our city conglomerations, the disorder; I wanted at least to see glimmers of solution for our times"*.

⁶ Such an aesthetic approach to the urban phenomenon can be compared with K.A.Doxiadis's method used in describing the ancient Greek settlement's ratio.

⁷ The main difference between the first draft (the 4th of March) and the definitive version (the 15th of September) regards the interpretation of the Franconi's block, in the crux of Piazza Spada's Southeastern front. It is firstly defined as a whole traditional block, which is shaped according to the direction of pre-existing routes, with its

This Plan defines the paradigm of the urban planning model intended as *500 meters Urbanism* due to its character of being so close to the physical dimensions of the architecture of the city plan, and tending towards a synthesis between the planning process and the three-dimensional control of urban space. This is also achieved through the formulation of precise building regulations.

This is how a kind of grammatical code of architectural forms was created, through the recognition and choice as significant parts of those elements (figurative as much as syntactic) which were borrowed from the traditional city, and whose union brings writing about the contemporary city within a choral discourse.

Since the first project draft of the 4th March 1947, the supporting framework is defined and the structural invariants of the layout as well as its particular technique are identified. The Plan is designed in an artisan and cultivated manner, with great attention to the architectural details and, above all, in respect of a normative system, indispensable in guaranteeing effective coordination between town-planning and the executive architecture scale.

Within such a particular method, the prevalent character is the design thus intended not as a two-dimensional scheme but as a three-dimensional prefiguration of specific spatial qualities linked to the culture and to the sensibility of the architects, and to the will of representation and to give new meaning to the post-war urban condition.

From the architectural point of view, the layout confirms the road route, whose abstract primordial rigidity is balanced by the re-proposal of calibrated and systematic misalignments of the road fronts, and likewise for a measured variation of height and character of the buildings.

The whole composition is projected toward a common quality, a harmony of those architectural elements such as porch, open gallery with velarium, crowning et al., replicated by imagining a singular arrangement of every building from its surroundings. In this way a new urban front is juxtaposed to the pre-existing urban fabric according to a principle of conformity with roads.

From the *rue corridor* of positivist matrix, it is thus replaced the idea of a city road, sharing the inevitable irregularities typical of the historical city itself, dissonances within a rational arrangement. In addition, the careful definition of the building types allows to recreate a varied and articulated environment, complex in its allusive correspondence to the traces of a recent past, now made inaccessible by the peremptory nature of war.

Underlying all this, Ridolfi highlights in the Plan's technical specifications⁸ that "*the road...will assume a more urban character, it will represent a sequence of more events, whose most important lies among Palazzo Spada and S.Salvatore's Church, with their conclusion in Piazza del Popolo*". Furthermore, the elaboration of the building code is strongly oriented in a projectual tone: through a cyclic course of simplification and abstraction, the reflection regarding the architectural themes which professional practice constantly faced, screened from the various contingencies is chosen as the matrix of new Plan regulations. Indeed building standards establish a direct influence on the growing urban image through precise relations between land density, building type and architectural language corresponding to it in order to prefigure a particular urban landscape.

In particular, for building the new architectural face of the city, the facade is conceived not as a neutral two-dimensional plane, but as a sort of three-dimensional device articulated in basement porch, facade as figurative framework in which project the internal distributive logic, open-galleried and crowned with a pitched roof. The ground floor porch plays the role of fitting together the private and urban space of the building, with the flooring defining a system of containment for all buildings whilst simultaneously echoing the dynamics of the misalignments of the building volumes. The crowning affects the construction of the urban landscape, by characterizing itself in respect to the perceptual parameter in terms of type, materials, proportions and visual relationship with the surroundings Figure 3.

own compositional hierarchy; while then it is divided into three individual buildings, which create a new characteristic tension together with the surrounding architectures.

⁸ archival source: Fondo Ridolfi Frankl Malagricci, Accademia di San Luca, LXXIII CD.118

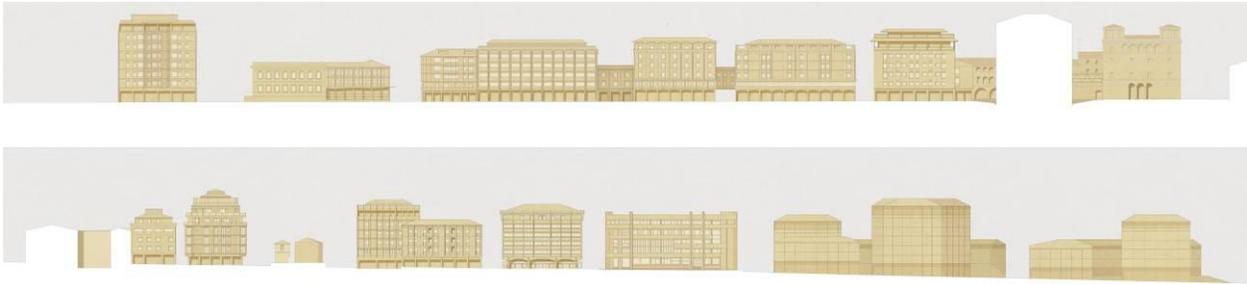


Figure 2: Corso del Popolo's facades: a modern reinterpretation of the traditional architectural language

To the definition of the architectural character of the each building matches a rigorous research on how building types correspond to a preordained logic of aggregation within the urban space.

The urban system so defined in the latest version polarises itself in correspondence with the current *Piazza Ridolfi* in the North, with the theme of the traumatic emptiness of the urban fabric destroyed by bombing, and in the ex-hospital area of the South, that is instead affected only by a partial hypothesis of new builds up until the 1980s Figure 4.

The planning proposals for these two areas, which have developed in rather different ways and times, define the physical and logical limits of the *Corso del Popolo* project.

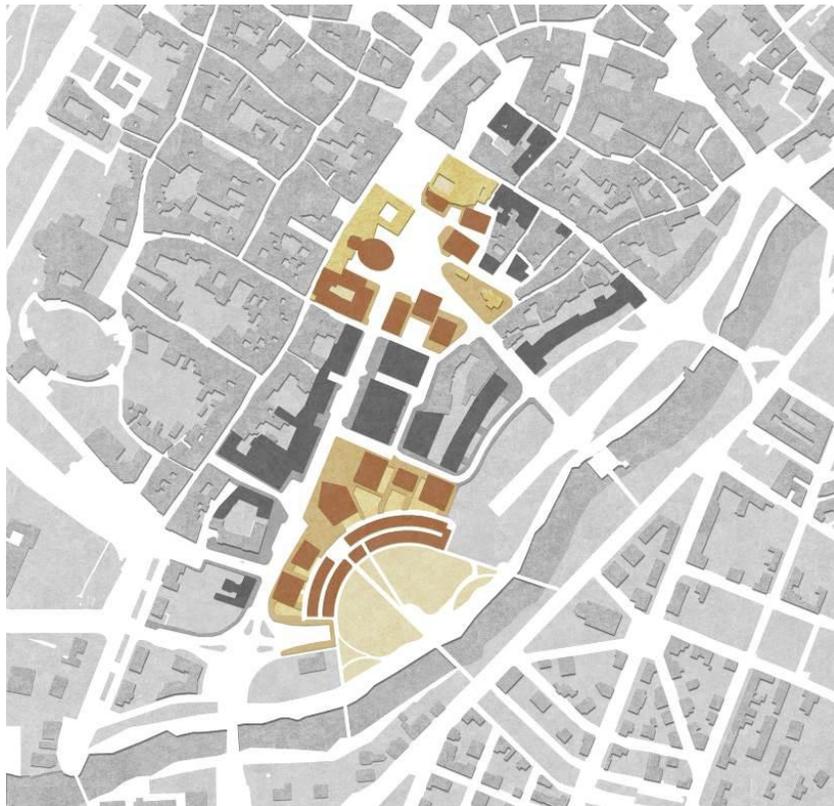


Figure 4: Critical map of the site: Piazza Ridolfi (on the top) and the Crescent (below)

On one hand *Piazza Ridolfi* (Figure 5) represents the expressive accumulation site of Ridolfi's work in Terni, constructed through the dialogue between his most important architectures and the monuments which symbolize Ternian civic identity: *Palazzo Spada* and the *Tempietto del Sole*.



Figure 5: aerial view that shows the relationship between the historical urban fabric and the post war buildings⁹

The direction of the whole is expressed according to a coordinated principle that defines a space constructed not by a compact urban fabric but with strong architectural individuals standing in tension with each other, through subtle stereometric and material correspondences.

What is immediately apparent is that the project of the empty spaces assumes, in one of the most symbolic areas of the city centre, a crucial significance as a space of relation and catalysing element of aesthetic correspondence with the built spaces.

To understand this approach, it is also useful to consider all the sketches in which the authors drew human iconic figures on the paper, in order to define the preferential point of view for the aesthetic perception; and, at the same time, for emphasizing the compositional relations among volumes, corners, axis, routes et al.

The *Franconi* and the *Pallotta* houses, together with the planned *Palazzo degli Uffici*, express the urban value of architecture as a material definition of the dialectic between building and construction of a place, according to the method by which, as Nencini (2013) affirms, “*architecture defines and determines open space and, on the other hand, according to a circular motion of return, open space redefines architecture and the city in its own essence and representation*”.

After Ridolfi died in 1984, Frankl continued his work on the definition of the area with the restorations of the historical Palaces *Fabri*, *Fulvi*, *Pierfelici* and *Montani*, which had been completely amputated in their characters by the bombings. The main aspect brought up by this experience is the idea of restoration as a true architectural project, in which pre-existence represents the link between the moment of material knowledge and the reconfiguration of the whole layout within a new organism receptive of modernity demands.

Palazzo Montani, for example, is redesigned in an organic manner in accordance with the new urban character generated by the construction of *Corso del Popolo*, with the new layout of the façade and the introduction of a large monumental staircase as barycentre of the new surrounding composition.

The boundary to the South, on the other hand, represents the final moment of Ternian planning experience. Here, unlike the previous cases, there was the theme of a large empty space devoid of pre-

⁹ Image taken from <http://www.bing.com/maps/>

existing traces, and Frankl deals with it through the English suggestion of a crescent as a framework for a system made up of individual and elementary volumes, connected on a base level by porticos and galleries.

The well-defined architectural complex fully expresses the idea of the inter-scalar dimension of urban design, which assumes as its own all the scales of design, from the territorial to that architectural. The crescent, in fact, determines on the territorial scale the relationship between the historical city and new expansion taking shape as the *hinge* on the fluvial landscape of the Nera; and so a settlement principle is established, with its own rules and internal autonomous logic, with a hierarchy and stratified ratio on varying levels. It structures the development of buildings on an urban scale, not only according to volumetric consistency but also in aspects of details, declining the rational language of reinforced concrete, with that of the existing urban landscape.

On the front of the *Corso* a building of pentagonal layout appears as the propylaeum entrance, and the road ratio has been consolidated through calibrated misalignments that echo to its conclusion. As the architectural principle is confirmed by the construction of volumes, the physical connection between two parts of the city, which has been historically separated by the river, comes definitely built.

4 CONCLUSION

The study of this work aims at reflecting on what could now be considered for urban planning, especially with regard to the primary role as operative tool for transforming our city life.

Ridolfi and Frankl, definitively, conceived the contemporary city as a stratified palimpsest on which they acted as sculptors¹⁰, whose substance consisted of the reality with its immanent History: its actual materials, elements, references, figures and images, all of them to imprint in the new urban vision.

Hence, facing with the complexity of the multi-faceted and often chaotic reality of our cities, a realistic approach is proposed, focusing on the material and spiritual understanding of places and their possible further vocations.

In order to achieve such a result, the authors revealed how necessary is the research and definition of a parameter to compare with the inherited city, albeit conceptualised, that could deal with the inevitable dialectic between the ancient and modern, avoiding the construction of resounding hiatuses.

In response to the actual fragmentation of the urban space due to mere abstract and generic planning strategies, where buildings are often developed in an autistic dialogue with the context, this traditional method could represent a starting point for a more human way of conceiving our built environment.

In these terms, the prefigured space put into perspective and designed with attention to executive detail assumes a profound value of concreteness and realistic adhesion in the context, which, in refusing implicit elusions of abstract formulations of theoretical approaches, reconstructs a meaningful relationship with the living body of the city.

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¹⁰ The metaphor of the sculpture, that expresses effectively his programmatic point of view, is used just by Ridolfi while talking with Paola Venturi, affirms: "...*Actually I have never been an urbanist at all. It was Marcello Piacentini with his assistant Piccinato to teach me Urbanism; and Piacentini was too much architect for being an urbanist; he practised Urbanism as an architect does it, that is like a sculptor of a city*" in Doglio, Venturi (1979)

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