profiles

Paolo Portoghesi

Paolo Portoghesi was born in 1931. He graduated in 1957 from the University of Rome, where he taught History of Criticism from 1962 to 1966. He was full professor of History of Architecture at the Politecnico of Milan, where he was also dean from 1968 to 1976. Since 1982 he has taught at the University of Rome as full professor. Various institutions have awarded him prizes for his work as a historian as well as an architect. He is a member of the Accademy of S. Luca since 1975, president of the Biennale of Venice since 1983 and has directed the Biennale's architectural section from 1979 to 1982. Among his many books are: G. Guarini (1956); Borromini nella Cultura Europea (1964); Roma Barocca (1968); B. Vittone (1967); Infanzia delle Macchine (1968); Dizionario Enciclopedico di Architettura e Urbanistica (1969); V. Horta (1969); Roma del Rinascimento (1971); Le Iniziazioni dell'Architettura Moderna (1974); Dopo l'Architettura Moderna (1974); Leggere l'Architettura (1981); l'Angelo della Storia (1982) and Postmodern (1982).

In collaboration with Giovanna Massobrio he has also written: Album del Liberty (1975); La Seggiola di Vienna (1975); Album degli Anni Venti (1976); Album degli Anni Cinquanta (1977); Album degli Anni Trenta (1978) and La Donna Liberty (1983).

He has been editor of the section on architecture of the Journals: «Marcantè», «Itaca» and «Controspazio». He is currently the editor of «Eupalino». He has also been editor of several book series. Various monographs have been published on his architectural work: C. Norberg Schulz, Alla Ricerca dell'Architettura Perduta (1975); Italo Musa, Disegni di Paolo Portoghesi (1977); Francesco Moschini, Paolo Portoghesi (1979) and Giancarlo Priori, Simpatia delle Cose (1982). A special issue of A+U journal (May 1977) illustrates his works.

«In the last twenty years, when the illusions nourishing the researches of the Modern Movement of the early twentieth century in the west vanished—namely the illusion that a change in architecture was sufficient to transform society, useful to avoid revolution or even to substitute its architecture was brought back to the bosom of history».

In this statement written as an introduction to some of his drawings, Paolo Portoghesi, recalling Brecht’s «In Praise of Doubt», expresses his doubts within the architectural debate occurring around the end of the 1970s.

In those years, Portoghesi was concluding his period of research and collaboration with Vittorio Gigliotti, which had produced works of remarkable architectural value. His theories were presented in his autobiographic book, «Le Iniziazioni dell'architettura Moderna», and in the monograph by Norberg Schulz, «Alla ricerca dell'Architettura Perduta». Through these and his design work, Portoghesi was clarifying the fundamental elements of his architecture, mainly place and history. «Place» and «History» have always been the main axis of Portoghesi’s research. Though for a certain period of time, defined by him of «prohibition», these elements remained in the background, lacking the connotations and acknowledgment which they consequently received from many contemporary critics.
Mosque of Rome. Plan and section
This architecture of doubts has played a fundamental role in the architectural debate, for it has laid the basis of what was to be called rediscovered architecture. In Portoghesi’s later design activity, architecture is seen no more in a simple relation to history or place, but constitutes their continuity, after a conscious process of assimilation of their cultural essence. An interesting part of Portoghesi’s activities, around the mid 1970s, are the works designed for Moslem countries. We present here, «The International Airport for Khartum» and «The Islamic Cultural Center and Mosque in Rome».

Of the air terminal, Portoghesi writes: «A modern airport is above all a place to be used tangentially or to be crossed by a series of flows». This statement reflects the concerns of the designers, who refer to a model which could respond both to obvious functional requirements and to the psychological needs of travellers in their period of permanence in the building, a model transforming a «machine» into place. It was fundamental to Portoghesi and Gigliotti to resolve the problem of the two «conditions» under which a person on earth and a person cast into space finds himself. These conditions have been resolved, as Portoghesi writes, by attributing to the building «a function similar to that performed by a decompression room on a person who has been under different atmospheric pressure for a long time». Another consideration is based on characteristics inherent to air transport which bridges long distances in a time so brief that no land transport can equal. Therefore airport users need to regain a stable relationship with the earth or be prepared for detachment.

To comprehend this approach, one has to refer to Portoghesi’s theories of the notion of «field» and «place» of the years around the 1970. These theories started from scientific elaborations and led to the formulation of space as a system of places, generated by fields interacting and influencing each other. In the airport of Khartum, the following factors were chosen to give an architectural configuration to its space:

From the morphological point of view, three poles with their corresponding fields were taken into consideration. Each field generates concentric circles and is materialised in «something» defined, namely the structures of the international airport, those of the national one, and the highways and access to the two airports.

The three series of concentric circles are emblematic of the basic instrument for the functioning of the

Mosque of Rome. View of the model
Verdun Centre at Beirut. Perspective and ground plan
Sketches
airport: the radar and its luminous signals which appear on the monitor.

Another issue is the place. Khartum rises at the meeting point of the White and Blue Nile rivers. The airport almost 30 kilometres from the city, reflects the spirit of the place, inherent in the Nile’s landscape. The links between the environmental and architectural images have suggested the curvilinear structure of the project, visible to the arriving travellers, but above all to those leaving.

Another consideration for the adoption of circular morphological poles lies in the possibilities they offer in the case of a growing structure. Each pole can grow towards a direction independent of the requirements and expansions of the others. The structural flexibility of each building, however, does not throw the composition out of balance, maintaining the entirety of the figurative image. In essence, Portoghesi writes, «travellers are urged continuously to experience diversified spaces». The most immediate reference for this architecture of passages, made of compression and expansion, is «the natural scenery of a lagoon with its channels and openings where the channels join to depart in a continuous narrative process». The «Mosque of Rome» with its «Islamic Cultural Center», about which many polemics were expressed through the press, neighbourhood committees, and TAR, is a project which looks for a dialogue between two different cultures, which nevertheless have fundamental architectural archetypes in common: the column, the free-standing arch, the conflict between centrality and modularity, and, from an urban point of view, the street.

In this project the street is conceived as a mediating element, which creates correspondence between interior and exterior, private and public. This «promenade architecturale» allows an exchange between the Center and the neighbourhood, a «long-shot» appropriation of the city. Columns and arches are used differently in the two cultures. In the Mosque, a synthesis has been attempted. The pure lines of force and tension are crossed by the element of light, as «water flowing through open hands».

Portoghesi, Gigliotti and Moussawi have resolved the conflict between centrality and modularity through a synthesis of the two typologies. The Mosque the forms of which recall the mosque of Cordova and other examples of the Islamic tradition, is conceived for the Moslem citizens who will use it. Therefore, it creates a «new» form within the Genius Loci «constituted by the city of Rome». «Though we know» Portoghesi writes quoting Borromini, «that inventing new things one cannot receive the fruit of one’s labours but late...».

Giancarlo Priori

1 Regional Administrative Court: tribunale amministrativo Regionale