

Empowering Students

Self-management experiences in Italian schools of architecture at the end of the 1960s..

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Abstract

Since the 1950s, students at the Italian faculties of architecture have been demanding a renewal of their schools requesting new courses, professors and teaching methods. They demand a less academic approach and closer to the reality of a fast growing country, booming industrialization and big urban problems. The energy and intensity of the debate, together with the dynamics of students' participation, anticipate in many aspects a breaking point in architectural training and, consequently, in architectural practice.

This article intercepts this long vindication between 1967 and 1971, the culmination of the crisis and the moment when architecture students occupy their schools beginning an unprecedented process of experimentation and self-management. Tired of the lack of real solutions, either political or academic, exhausted by the effort of dialoguing without obtaining results from the usual methods of pressure, students begin a movement which takes control of structures, subject matters and teaching staff of the schools, showing the tenacity and strength of a movement capable of assuming a political role typical of the dynamics of the country's transformation. Due to the radicality of their initiatives, the experience of the architecture faculties of Milan and Venice takes on particular relevance for the purposes of this article.

***“The possibility of inserting oneself in a process of small reforms and patronizing concessions is not at stake, but rather the future configuration of the Italian University, the emergence of a new awareness of moral and civil responsibilities of culture. Students cannot continue to be considered a passive element in the process of cultural acquisition: they must assume their responsibilities understanding the contradictions of reality, intervening it consciously in order to modify it”.*⁽¹⁾**

One of the most significant topics of the long debate about teaching at Italian schools of architecture⁽²⁾, a process that goes from the postwar time until the 1970s is, undoubtedly, the period of experimentation and self-management led by students from those schools between 1967 and 1972. This period, which is the peak of a persistent crisis, is a product of the incapacity of political and academic authorities to find a proper solution to university problems. It is also the result of the progressive politicization of debate and an exacerbated dissonance between the various components of each faculty. The series of practices of didactic experimentation that emerge in this period form a particular and original scenario which shows, on the one hand, the strong will of the students to take control of their future and, on the other, an organizing capacity that led them to become the new protagonists of the country's political life.

The debate about the teaching of architecture acquired a particular intensity since the mid 1950s. As a spontaneous center of generational confrontation, the faculty seems a reflection of a mutating society, incorporating all the conditions and contradictions that this implies. At the basis of the discussion is the transformation of an academic and elitist school, into an open faculty, ready to respond to the demands of a fast growing society and more industrialized all the time. The shift towards a large faculty⁽³⁾ inevitably demands rethinking the issues and methodological and cognitive instruments needed for the new task facing future architects and, thus, restating didactic methods for the acquisition of such instruments. At the same time, the confrontation of ideas, markedly generational, generates a power struggle: the idea is to maintain or destroy an authoritarian system ruled by the academe and teaching groups more interested in keeping their own position than risking a necessary transformation.

In general terms, it is possible to identify two important periods within the debate, both marked by student demonstrations and occupation of universities⁽⁴⁾. At the first stage, indications and discussions are centered on the faculty's own problems and discipline: demands are for a greater concentration of the curriculum and a reduction of the number of examinations; there

are discussions about the need to update courses and study programs and for more communication between teachers and students. However, the urgency to debate about the relationship between architecture and public effort (product of the emergence of a collective awareness that projects on architecture a role of great responsibility on the dynamics of transforming and overcoming existing social problems – transformation of the city, shortage of public buildings, the need for social dwellings, and so on), associated to what seems, above all to the students, a lack of will from the authority, causes positions to become harder. The exchange of ideas about the faculty spreads towards the problems of society, to “an awareness” of being the vehicle by means of which processes of speculation and exploitation take place; of being part of a production and consumption process, subject to a capitalist society⁽⁵⁾. Thus, the act of “passing on” a particular view of architecture and of the profession, which is inherent to the teaching process, corresponds, more and more frequently, to a very often passionate will, of support and spreading of certain views of society.

Regarding the Project and study of the city, the students demand a less academic approach and closer to reality. The format of the courses, never discussed until now, appears distant and abstract for a student who, aware of the strong processes of transformation of the economic, political and social reality of the country, feels the need to acquire a direct knowledge from which to form his education, in an autonomous way.

The law project submitted on 7 March

1968 offers the official starting point for the experimentation process⁽⁶⁾. Generated as an inter-party initiative, through the dying legislative period and after a series of failures to promote a university reform at parliamentary level⁽⁷⁾, the “Regulations for didactic and scientific experimentation at the University”, give a kind of mea culpa from someone who has not been able to offer “a reformative intervention, necessary for the introduction of modifications to the clearly inadequate order for the quantitative and qualitative demands of our higher education studies”⁽⁸⁾. The proposal intends to save a moment of institutional crisis by means of a successive reform, defining a transitory period devoted to “fervent experimentation”, in which the various university components “may directly study and experiment new forms for the organization of studies”⁽⁹⁾.

Actually, some self-management experiences had already begun a few months before. In fact, it is possible to establish a certain encouragement from the authority or, at least, a tolerant attitude towards this type of initiatives since the end of the “university occupations” of the period 1966-1967. Likewise, it is important to state that the occupations and strikes of the various faculties, prior to the period of experimentation and self-management, do not mean a complete interruption of the formative activity. One of the intrinsic characteristics of the demonstrations at architecture schools is the creation of parallel activities to the official ones with the double objective of publicizing the occupation and supplying, in a propositive way,

the didactic failure of the school. An example of this is the week organized by students of the Polytechnic of Milan, in the Winter of 1962, in which the “active strike” contains a program that includes lectures, meetings, debate sessions, a trip to Florence to listen to Le Corbusier and a workshop on social centers.

The whole of these experiences, whether authorized by law such as the previous ones, constitute, for the purposes of this essay, an enormous unprecedented didactic and research laboratory, for its comprehensiveness as well as its duration.

Students’ active role and didactic experiences will increase and will spread to the various architecture faculties in all the Italian territory. However, from the point of view of a proposal and counter-reform process, and because of the radicalism of its initiatives, the experiences of the faculties of architecture of Milan and Venice between 1967 and 1971 are particularly relevant for the purposes of this essay.

A first record of the official experiment processes can be found in the long document approved by the General Assembly of students of the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia (IUAV), in July 1967. The document⁽¹⁰⁾ is a demonstration of the still existing relationship between the student movement and the teaching staff at the Institute and, at the same time, a testimony of the tensions between them. In view of the decree that will authorize the experiment, the students promote a series of categorical and definite resolutions where they state that “it is essential only a declaration

about the problems [of the school] from the teaching staff and those present, to continue to consider them as interlocutors⁽¹¹⁾. Tired of promises that just intend “momentarily to silence conflicting voices”, Venetian student organizations decide to impose on the teaching staff and the authorities, a number of minimum conditions so that the experimentation process can start. From the political point of view, the students of Venice are looking for conditions which will make possible the specific application of the experiment in a “political and administrative dimension that will allow collective control of the running of the school”⁽¹²⁾. In order to achieve this objective, students request the utmost transparency, that is, the “publication” of information about every operating aspect of the IUAV (documents, outcomes, programs and audits, deliberations and decisions of assemblies, trade union news, and so on). In an attitude on the brink of obsession, students demand “knowledge of every moment of every activity”, a scenario which will only be possible by the creation of a “permanent technical secretariat, with appropriate staff, space and funds”⁽¹³⁾.

Beyond the transparency linked to organizational and administrative decisions, access to information, understood in a wide sense, becomes a fundamental part of the ideal structure of a faculty consistent with the model of an open, democratic and horizontal society: for the students, having access to information on the faculty management means breaking authority barriers, eliminating the power system

inside the university system. At the same time, and understood as the center for information collection, elaboration and transmission (regarding disciplinary as well as political and organizational aspects), the document center allows the faculty to shift towards organization forms based on cultural autonomy, becoming the nuclear center of a faculty focused on research: materials are used by students who research in an autonomous way and not under pre-established precepts. Information such as education and the possibility of self-management of knowledge through open and collective documentation centers is a recurrent theme of alternative didactic proposals which are also created outside university centers, becoming relevant tools in the re-definition of architectural practice⁽¹⁴⁾.

A few months later, in a number of documents signed by the assembly related to the occupation of February-March 1968, the students of the Milan Faculty, similarly imbued with a feeling of frustration and disbelief in front of a real possibility of an effective university reform, confirm their definite independence from academic institutions, setting the basis for a period of didactic experimentation and self-management at the Faculty. On 16th February 1968⁽¹⁵⁾ the break occurs:

“By means of the January-March 1967 occupation, the Architecture Students Movement disavowed the Faculty Council, forcing the Ministry to accept a compromise. The Student Movement now proceeds to the necessary dismantling of university institutions (study plans, examination system, organisms of the administrative and

teaching management, the whole of the Faculty of Architecture), replacing them by self-management and self-government of the university components (students, teaching staff, researchers) and by a new, experimental and non institutional work program.”⁽¹⁶⁾

Once the general rule of the operation has been established, by means of which every participating teacher guarantees the success of the whole experiment and assumes his or her own responsibility in a “possible open conflict with the Polytechnic”, the bases for a first experimentation period which begins on 20th February 1968 are established. In Milan, the experimentation premises are based on four demands: create an alternative to the form “of cultural organization [...] counter proposing non-authoritarian nor coercive work and training conditions”⁽¹⁷⁾ with the purpose of creating a new mass didactic; introducing the beginning of training through research; producing a research program framework; and supporting the organic training of full time research professors.

With these objectives in mind, a teaching program is organized from the research proposals submitted by teachers and participants. The proposals, once analyzed and approved by the students, are subdivided into formative, specific, instrumental and professional qualification research. Research of a formative character is the one that shows that “it takes on the characteristics of comprehensive training and the necessary clarity when dealing with architectural facts.” Among these are the proposals formed

around Maurice Cerasi and Cesare Pellegrini, Vittorio Gregotti, Guido Canella, Aldo Rossi, Biagio Garzena, Piero Bottoni, Giuseppe Campos Venuti and Giancarlo De Carlo. Some of the accepted proposals are those presented by Carlo De Carli, Maria Bottero and Alberto Resio, which have been classified as specific researches, a definition that indicates that the proposals are not at a "level to ensure a comprehensive didactic training." Instrumental researches, in turn, are allocated to Carlo Santi, Giancarlo Ciullini, Giuseppe Ciribini and Alberto Rosselli. Laboratories of professional qualification are allotted to Marco Zanuso, Franco Albini, Alberico Belgioioso, Gino Pollini, Giuseppe Gentili and Vittoriano Viganó. Research on specific thematic areas is the focus of the proposals of Paolo Portoghesi and Silvano Tintori (historical research), Stefano Cordeschi (graphical restitution) and Guido Martinotti (studies about the city and reference to sociological research).

Additionally, there is a series of ex-cathedra lectures which have been organized, to be given at the faculty by professors Albini, Bottoni, Campos Venuti, Canella, Cerasi, De Carli, Garzena, Gregotti, Rossi and Zanuso. It is specified that the ex-cathedra lessons "must not consist in the transfer of notions" but rather be a progress report on current research. Other complementary didactic interventions around "operating areas" are entrusted to various professors. Lessons on the problems of the history of architecture are given by Paolo Portoghesi who, as a member of the teaching staff, continues

to be the Dean. Courses on technical-scientific matters are a particular case, since they can no longer be programmed due to the "inavailability" of professors of those disciplines. These subjects are, therefore, entrusted to teachers who are in charge of each research program.

Selection criteria for the research proposals are based on the rejection of partialised and stagnated matters (subjects like Decoration or Art and Gardens, still present in the study plans, are rejected) and on the incorporation of new contents which "coincide with the mechanisms of occupation and best use of the territory, the production of architectural artifacts and the operation of urban institutions"⁽¹⁸⁾. Application of the research principle is based on the concept of the existing propedeutics, by which first "you learn to draw a capital, next the column and then the church"⁽¹⁹⁾. In the didactic framework proposal there is a calendar containing assessment and discussion seminars from March to October. Working hours include ex-cathedra lectures every morning from Monday to Friday and research group work every afternoon from Tuesday to Friday. It is planned to have a weekly assembly on Monday evenings as well as some additional operative coordination. History classes are programmed to be done on Saturday morning. The faculty is open until midnight by explicit agreement of the parties.

The teaching activity organized by the students and formulated as described above, is set on a series of fundamental criteria. The first one aims at destroying the professional concept of faculty so as to avoid the "degeneration of the faculty

towards a professionalizing school"⁽²⁰⁾. The organization of the established work with its focus on research has, therefore, the objective of weakening the hegemonic character of a type of teaching addressed towards a purely professional project (the project or workshop laboratory) and is, thus, at the service of the capital power system. A second principle fosters the development of the formative experience itself, above all with regards to theoretical and ideological positions, and the liberalization of scientific and cultural budgets. Regarding this, it is promoted the multiplication of posts and methods. Finally, the aim is to abolish the system of examinations and prerequisites in favor of an open discussion seminar integrating students' activities related to their performance throughout the year.

Although the strength and the cultural and teaching innovation of the experimentation period is recognized, as from June 1971 there is a strong repression action coordinated by the Minister of Education, Riccardo Misasi, who is colluded with the maximum Polytechnic authority, Rector Francesco Carassa, in addition to local political forces and a group of teachers who "because of their lack of teaching skills were left out of the experimental process"⁽²¹⁾. At the end of 1971, more for political and cultural reasons than university reasons, the Minister cancelled the teaching posts of eight members of the Faculty Council (Franco Albini, Ludovico Belgioioso, Piero Bottoni, Guido Canella, Carlo De Carli, Aldo Rossi, Paolo Portoghesi (Dean) and Vittoriano Viganó), under the official accusation of "neglecting their duties"

and “actions against the dignity and the honour of a professor”⁽²²⁾. In a succession of events lasting all of 1972 and culminating in March 1973, a technical committee formed by two members of the Faculty Council who had not been expelled and a special commissioner, decrees a number of temporary norms which include cancelling examinations, the revocation of teachers’ appointments or the institution of a fixed number. The force of repression provokes a reaction from the Assembly of Democratic Teachers and of the students’ movement and encourages a number of rejection motions from the Colleges of Architects in different regions and from Deans of other faculties. Finally, the issue will reach Parliament, where, almost a year after the suspension, a group of deputies questions the Minister realizing that the methods set in motion at the Milan Polytechnic are typical of an “antidemocratic praxis” which might easily spread to other situations with the purpose of “intimidation and repression facing renovating forces and initiatives”⁽²³⁾. Members of Parliament request revocation of the measures taken and restitution of democratic normality at the Faculty of Architecture in Milan.

It is difficult to assess the success of the Faculty of Milan experience, because of the lack of records of materials produced during the research and courses designed by the students. The teaching organization based on research and management of a study plan controlled by the students, intended to modify the work process inside the institution, raising the quality of teaching, an objective which “was not reached in its full potentiality because

of the academic authority’s refusal to provide means, teachers and tools, but also due to the limitations of the same democratic forces operating at the school”⁽²⁴⁾. In spite of this, a reflection made six years after the beginning of the self-management process, Paolo Portoghesi declares:

“When the eight teachers were suspended, the Minister of Education declared to the press that the Faculty of Milan had gone beyond the reform presented in Parliament, but, clearly, the Minister was misinformed. It is true that the experimentation, when facing the problems of didactic contents, had gone beyond a law that was limited to establishing new roles and new power relationships among the old university structures; but it is also true that the law implied, by giving the responsibility to a democratic institute, a period of collective elaboration from which the didactic model for a new university should emerge. [...] Concentrating research activity itself on a restricted number of problems and involving teachers of different types of training into these problems, the Faculty of Milan had shaped itself as a sole department or, better said, as a group of interlinked multidisciplinary departments.: By choosing the department as a multidisciplinary structure, it was fighting the perspective of the typical Italian transformism, ready to rename as a department the old institute financially strengthened but with the same cultural ghetto character.”⁽²⁵⁾ 

NOTES

(1) Comunicato degli studenti occupanti (Communication from students in occupation), in NICOLINI, Renato (ed.), “Roma. Agitazione, Situazione, Prospettive” (“Roma. Agitation, Situation, Perspective”), CASABELLA CONTINUITÀ 287, May 1964, page. 44.

(2) Debate about teaching, the school of architecture and the process of student vindication in the Italian faculties is the topic of the doctoral thesis of the author of the present article. See: INSULZA, Francisca: “Studenti, architetti, città: il dibattito sulla scuola di architettura in Italia, tra nuove istanze sociali e rinnovamento degli strumenti per lo studio e il progetto”; (“Students, architects, cities: the debate on the school of architecture in Italy, after new social situations and renewal of tools for study and for the project”) Tutor: Prof. Guido Montanari, Doctoral thesis discussed in June 2009, in the framework of the Dottorato di Ricerca in Storia e Valorizzazione del Patrimonio Architettonico, Urbanistico e Ambientale, (Research Doctorate on the History and Assessment of the Architectural, Urbanistic and Environmental Heritage), Turin Polytechnic.

(3) In 1945, schools of architecture had a record of 3,500 students, a figure which remained stable until the end of the 1950s. From that moment on, the student population will increase constantly to reach 12,000 in the period 1967-68. In the following decade, the number of registered students will increase by 500%. At the university level, the 136.000 students registered in the middle of the 1950s became 190.000 in the academic year 1961-62, and 550.000 in the academic year 1967-68. Despite this growth, the number of professors did not increase in the same proportion, hence, courses which originally had 40 students, then had between 150 and 300. Sources: BENEVOLO, Op.cit.; DE MASI, Domenico: Dentro l’università. Studenti, classi, corporazioni, (Inside the university. Students, classes, corporations), Milan, Franco Angeli ed., 1978.

(4) The first occupation took place in the Winter of 1962-63; the second, in 1967-68. The mobilization of the architecture faculties is outdated regarding the general student agitation 1967, a period coinciding with the protests of humanistic faculties, architecture faculties are relatively calm. Only from 1967-68 onwards, the different parts of the Italian university system will coincide to give origin to a student unrest that, spreading until the end of the 1970s, presents one of the most intense and spread at international level.

(5) Movimento Studentesco. “Articolo senza titolo”, (Student Movement. “Article without a title”) in IN n. 9, February-March 1973, pages: 12-19.

(6) Progetto di legge n. 4999, Disposizioni per la sperimentazione didattica e scientifica nelle università, (Law Project n.4999, Instructions for didactic and scientific experimentation at universities), presented on 7 March 1968.

(7) In spite of the consensus about the need to find legislative solutions, between 1963 and 1969 there are

innumerable failed projects. On the other hand, facing the increasing university and school mobilizations, it is possible to observe how the various parties and authorities try just to reduce tensions by suppressing, with isolated amendments, the most refuted current laws. Regarding the specific topic of this article, four law projects are of particularly great interest: the Gui Project, better known as “the 2314”, a failed design and a reason for the strongest student demonstrations; the law proposal Ddl n.4999 of 1968, which includes the “regulations for experimentation”; the DPR n.995 of 1969, done giving special attention to faculties of architecture; and the decree-law Ddl n.910 which in 1969 gives free access to university and the design of study plans.

(8) Progetto di legge n. 4999, Op cit. p.1

(9) Ibid.

(10) The document illustrates the meeting of student spokesmen from Architecture Faculties of Milan, Turin and Venice held a few weeks before, a meeting that concluded with the constitution of a “National Committee for the mobilization of architecture students,” an initiative whose purpose is to represent those students at assemblies of the various branches. See: Progetto di legge (Law project) n. 4999, Op.Cit.

(11) “Documento Assemblea degli studenti dell’IUAV del 21 luglio 1967”(Document of the student Assembly of the IUAV of 21 July 1967), in Movimento Studentesco, Documenti della rivolta universitaria (Student movement; Documents of the university revolt), Laterza, Bari, 2008, page 179.

(12) Ibid.

(13) “Documento Venezia”(“Venice Document), in Movimento Studentesco (Student Movement), Op.Cit., page 182.

(14) The strong development of communication sciences (in Marshall McLuhan’s work, for example),together with more awareness of the role of communication and information, is rapidly transferred to the field of teaching. Thus, it is interesting to analyse how many alternative education projects (Archigram’s work in England or the proposals of Global Tools, to name a few) incorporate, and are even based on, tools that allow for the amplification and division of information.

(15) ALIVERTI, Giovanni; BONFANTI, Sergio, MOLON, Marina (eds.). Libro bianco sulla Facoltà di architettura di Milano: occupazione (White book on the Faculty of Architecture of Milan: occupation) (typewritten), Milan, 1967, Archivio Storico del Politecnico di Milano(Historic Archive of the Polytechnic of Milan); and the documents reproduced in DE CARLO, Op.cit.; and M. Studentesco (Student Movement), Op.cit.

(16) Facoltà di Architettura del Politecnico di Milano, Documento dell’Assemblea dei firmatari (Faculty of Architecture of Milan, Document of the Assembly of signatories),inn DE CARLO, Op.cit., page 88.

(17) Ibid, page 94.

(18) RANIERI, Enzo. “Sin titolo” (Without title), en IN n.9, 1973 (Speciale sulle Facoltà di Architettura nel processo di dequalificazione) (Special on the Faculty of Architecture in the process of disqualification), page 45.

(19) Ibid. Page 45.

(20) Anonymous document, “Esposizione proposizione di ricerca e calendario” (Research proposals and calendar of exhibitions) (17 January, 1968), in ALIVERTI, BONFANTI, MOLON, op.cit., 1967, s.n.p.

(21) PORTOGHESI, Op.cit., Page 8.

(22) Decreto del Ministro della Pubblica Istruzione Misasi (Decree of the Minister of Public Education, Misasi), 27 November 1971, in CONTROSPAZIO, june 1973, page 56.

(23) Seduta antimeridiana del 12 dicembre (Morning sitting of 12 December), 1972, Parliamentary Acts, Chamber of Deputies, VI legislature.

(24) Ibid.

(25) PORTOGHESI, Op.cit., Page 9.

PHOTOS

Page 24, bottom: The text of the banner says:

“For those who overnight: who goes to bed before one must sleep in the classroom of plastic. After, in the one in the atrium below. Prepare the cots until 22 “.

“For those who stop to sing, it is prohibited after 23:30 to stay in the porters. Sing at Classroom V “.

Source of the photographs on pages 20, 24 and 25:

Studio Ghigo. “Diritto d’autori”, edited by Crippa D., Di Prete B., Gerosa P. L. (2002).