

Impressions of Milan – Principles of a Modern City

The EXPO 2015 has once again focused the world's attention on Milan, already a world city of commerce, fashion and design. This event is also an opportunity to reflect on the modern Italian city of which Milan is an exceptional example. In the exhibition Innessi/Grafting at the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale curator Cino Zucchi presented Milan as a “laboratory of modernity”, highlighting a series of territorial transformations that have changed the urban structure of Milan over the last 100 years. Its urban mutations and architectural manifestations were generated within an experimental field constituted by multiple forces of social and political change, economic interests, and artistic movements. Today, Milan confronts its inhabitants and visitors with a variety of architectural forms. However, it seems that these different elements are not without relations to broader systems that can be traced in the urban configuration. This text will sketch some of these situations that can be detected in the urban core of Milan.

A set of forces

As an important link between northern and southern Europe, Milan had become the leading economic center of Italy by the end of the 19th century. At that time, a first master plan was developed to address the problems associated with population growth, the city's expansion, and its transformation into a modern metropolis. This plan, dated 1884, was drawn up by the municipal engineer Cesare Beruto, “later reworked by a commission headed by rubber manufacturer Giovanni Battista Pirelli,” and finally “approved in 1889.”¹ Essential and dominant principles of the plan were the concentric expansion of the city – circumscribed by a new ring road – and the insertion of straight axes into the “tangle of ancient streets” – leading to the city's monuments. But in addition “the Pirelli Commission altered the plan [...] to create greater opportunities for profit” through land speculation.² In the early 20th century, a number of major Italian industries built new factories outside the boundaries of the historic city, while the center of Milan“ became the domain of the city's financial and commercial institutions.”³

The increasing industrialization and urbanization of Milan was accompanied by tensions within the population, some of which erupted in violent class struggles. In the turbulent post-World War I reconstruction period, Benito Mussolini co-founded the Fascist movement in Milan and led the later formed National Fascist Party to national power in 1922. Because of its symbolic importance to the Fascist movement, the city became the iconic site of Fascist rule in Italy and a center of Fascist administration and propaganda activity. For 20 years, the National Fascist Party was determined to impose its vision of a new order on the urban fabric of Milan. But despite its centralizing tendencies, the authoritarian regime was still challenged by a “range of opinions and priorities” and by the fact

1 Maulsby, Lucy: *Fascism, Architecture, and the Claiming of Modern Milan, 1922-1943*. University of Toronto Press, 2014, pp. 18-21.

2 Ibid., p. 20.

3 Ibid., p. 23.

that “local narratives often took precedence over national ones,” which “affected individual architectural and urban projects”.⁴ Moreover, despite their idealization of the rural community, the Fascists had to deal with a solidly developed and dynamic urban complex.

Part of this involvement was Cesare Albertini's Master Plan of 1934. The plan essentially reflected the political position of the party; the close ties between the party and its supporters from the emerging middle classes and the economic elite who feared the socialist revolution. Albertini's plan “helped to establish a structure of growth in which the urban core would become the exclusive domain of the middle and upper classes and the institutions they operated and patronized.”⁵ The plan forced “low-prestige institutions” out of the center to make way for the implementation of the major institutions “of the modern (and capitalist) city.” Land speculation “was intended to help offset the cost inherent in [Albertini's] proposal.” “Large mixed-used buildings – with shops and services on the ground floor and residences above (for the anticipated wealthy patrons) – and office buildings” began to dominate the renewal of the city center.⁶ At the same time, Fascist organizations were eager to occupy prominent locations in the city, such as corner blocks of intersections or properties along the city's main arteries, in order to demonstrate their presence through architectural signs and built propaganda. In addition to new monumental buildings such as the *Palazzo del Popolo d'Italia*, which housed the political newspaper and the official party organ of the same name, it was the *case del fascio* – the local party headquarters – that apparently embodied the presence of fascism. Serving as a point of contact between the population and party officials, Fascist houses were designed with specific typological characteristics, such as prominent towers to emphasize the party's claim to power and well-placed balconies for addressing the crowd.

Since the 1930s, a new type of building, the skyscraper, has transformed urban life and the image of Milan. It was also the skyscrapers – the *torri* or *grattacieli* – that not only contributed to Milan's metropolitan character, but also evoked notions of a futuristic city. In his text *Meaning and Vision in Looking to the Future: The Skyscraper in Milan* Scott Budzynski explains how these vertical structures created an imaginative space that found its expression in movies such as Michelangelo Antonioni's film *La Notte* from 1961. Budzynski goes on to speak of “a type of architectural Narcissus of the modern city.” It “entails a fixation [of the high-rise city] on its own reflection,” which appears in the shiny facades of its buildings.⁷ But the reflections in the facade of the *Grattacielo Pirelli* in the opening scene of Antonioni's *La Notte* not only show a modern city in its genesis. They also reflect its fractures and heterogeneities; the recurrent discontinuity between the city's elements, between individual architectural objects, and between their surroundings and intervening spaces. This is still evident, for example in Milan's old business district *Centro Direzionale*, which was built between the central railway station and the *Porta Garibaldi* railway station in the 1950s and 1960s. Here, the

4 Ibid., p. 8.

5 Ibid., p. 35.

6 Ibid., p. 35-36.

7 Budzynski, Scott: *Meaning and Vision in Looking to the Future: The Skyscraper in Milan*. In: *STUDIO Architecture and Urbanism Magazine*, Issue 3, ICON, 2012.

massive structure of the *Torre Servizi Tecnici Comunali*, built in 1966, sits surrealistically next to a rural field that separates the *Centro Direzionale* from the new business district *Porta Nuova*.



Fig. 1: Torre Servizi Tecnici Comunali far opposite the Bosco Verticale by Boeri Studio and in the background the Unicredit Tower, Italy's highest skyscraper.
Photograph: Daniel Grünkranz.

Sometimes a site is defined by a series of buildings that date from different decades but were designed by a single architect's office over time. Such a group of buildings can reflect a specific architectural evolution that contributes to the characteristics of Milan. It concerns the rivalry between the Novecento movement and the architectural rationalism that took place in the period between the two world wars. This antagonism involved some of the local architectural elite such as Giovanni Muzio (1893-1982), Gio Ponti (1891-1979) or Giuseppe Terragni (1904-1943) and the Gruppo 7. The Novecento movement tended to be conservative and rejected the European architectural avant-garde. Its revolutionary paragons belonged to the 19th century, and it hid modern indicators behind classicist tendencies or a plastic traditionalism. The Rationalists, on the other hand, were committed to a modern reformulation of architecture. The Novecento movement was absorbed into the nationalist alliance created by Mussolini. But even rationalist architects like Terragni developed an ambivalent mental relationship between the architectural *razionalismo* and the socio-political *fascismo* as both tendencies were perceived as the relevant revolutions of that time. Rationalist involvement with fascist rule later became the subject of controversial debates, in which Terragni was sometimes presented as a tragic figure who was finally shattered when confronted with the falsehoods of fascism and the consequences of militarism.⁸ During the interwar period, many representatives of the Novecento movement were gradually influenced by rationalism. This also led to the creation of a kind of Milanese style, a local architectural variant of the International Style, which became particularly noticeable shortly after the Second World War.⁹

8 Cf. Zevi, Bruno: *Giuseppe Terragni*. Triangle Architectural Publ., 1989.

9 Berizzi, Carlo: *Architectural Guide Milan. Buildings and Projects since 1919*. DOM Publishers, 2015, p. 15.

A series of impacts are responsible for the shaping of Milan's urban configuration and architectural structures. Beyond this dynamic, the following paragraphs will try to unveil some principles of the system that is the built environment of Milan. More precisely, I will speak about three types of situations. The first is the principle of juxtaposition. It involves a local conglomerate of different buildings – often developed over time and representing a range of styles – that constitute specific situations. The second principle is that of a timeline. This is the arrangement of a series of buildings from different periods in a specific and definite urban situation. The third principle is that of urban networks. This refers to the relationships between structures that go beyond local formations to create larger systems within the urban fabric. All three principles can be understood as autonomous, but they also have the tendency to overlap in the creation of a specific situation.

The juxtaposition principle

At the intersection of the *Via della Moscova* and the *Via Filippo Turati*, which creates a small square, there is a complex of buildings with grotesquely historicizing facades. The complex is composed of two building units: a linear one and a courtyard block. The two units are connected by a monumental arch that spans the gate to an internal residential street. This so-called *Ca' Brutta* or the “Ugly House” was designed by the Milanese architect Giovanni Muzio, then a representative of the Novecento style, and built between 1919 and 1922.



Fig. 2: Ca' Brutta, Giovanni Muzio, 1919-1922. Photograph: Daniel Grünkranz.

The building is a testimony of the frictions that occurred within the achievements of modern society after the First World War. The *Ca' Brutta* housed apartments for an emerging middle class. It was built with reinforced concrete, the apartments were technically equipped with heating and water supply systems, and there were elevators and an underground parking lot. While the economic, technical and functional aspects of the building units were progressive, the appearance of the complex culminated in Mannerist eclecticism. The interior of the building is modern, which is contrasted in the facades by the approach to a moderate renewal or a new kind of order based on a

fictitious classicism. However, the principles of the *Ca' Brutta* – the alignment and orientation of solitary buildings towards a private residential street within the urban fabric, the setback of the upper floors from the public street, and the creation of penthouse situations with assigned terraces – can also be found in the nearby residential areas on the *Via della Moscova*, which were built 40 to 50 years after the *Ca' Brutta*.

Opposite the southern end of the *Ca' Brutta* is the imposing *Palazzo Montecatini* – an office building designed by Gio Ponti in the mid-1930s. It is a striking example of the interplay between Novecento tendencies and architectural modernization. In contrast to the *Ca' Brutta*, the building combines a strict classicist order with the principles of rationalist architecture. The internal technical sophistication of this “office-machine”¹⁰ is also reflected, to a certain extent, by the exterior of the building. Its modern appearance is mainly due to the consistent facade layer of windows and marble cladding, the window formats, and the aluminum window frames.



Fig. 3 (left): Palazzo Montecatini, Gio Ponti, 1935-1936. Fig. 4 (right): Secondo Palazzo Montecatini, Gio Ponti, 1947- 1952. Photographs: Daniel Grünkranz.

15 years later, a second *Palazzo Montecatini*, also designed by Ponti, was built next to the older building. Ponti’s design followed similar principles to the first building. However, Ponti further integrated a glazed post-and-beam construction into the main facade of the convex tower unit opposite *Ca' Brutta*, thus contributing to the manifestation of Milan’s architectural Narcissus.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 99.

100 meters north of the *Ca' Brutta*, the *Via Filippo Turati* is flanked by two towers that face further on the *Piazza della Repubblica*. The first of the two *Torre Turati* was designed by Luigi Mattioni and built between 1958 and 1960. The second tower, built in the late 1960s, was a later work of Giovanni Muzio. Muzio's 17-story tower rises above a glazed two-story base that defines the corner of the street and the square. The relief-like long side of the tower follows the street. On the upper floors, the punctuated facade widens. This made it possible to integrate loggias into the narrow edge of the tower, in variation with the window areas, giving Muzio's Tower its individual appearance. Both *Torre Turati* are significantly higher than the adjacent buildings in the street and contribute to the heterogeneous appearance of the short passage of the *Via Filippo Turati*.



Fig. 5: View alongside the *Via Filippo Turati* including the *Ca' Brutta*, the *La Serenissima* building and Luigi Mattioni's *Torre Turati*. Photograph: Daniel Grünkranz.

The situation in the *Via Filippo Turati* is an example of the principle of juxtaposition. It generates locally intense spatial and architectural experiences by including buildings of different scales, periods and styles. But what sounds like a formula for contradiction is rather capable of creating iconic situations that simultaneously contribute to the metropolitan nature of Milan.

As for another example: Walking along the *Corso Italia* from the north, past the richly decorated houses of the bourgeoisie, one passes a slender section of a building that cuts through the blocks of houses and into the space of the street like a white blade. It is part of an office and residential complex designed by Luigi Moretti in the early 1950s. The building complex is not only striking for its unusual layout, it also contributes to an iconic situation. This situation is created by the juxtaposition of Moretti's building and the neighboring Art Nouveau buildings, but also by the monumental *Torre Velasca*, which stands in the background but becomes part of a broader urban system of iconic meaning. This meaning is also represented in the countless photographs taken from the site. The reproductions of these photographs can be found, for example, on historical postcards or in contemporary architectural guides.



Fig. 6 (left). Uffici e abitazioni Corso Italia, historical picture post card (http://www.postalesinventadas.com/2010_06_01_archive.html). Fig. 7 (right): Uffici e abitazioni Corso Italia in 2015. Photograph: Daniel Grünkranz.

The timeline principle

The urban fabric of Milan frequently features spots that are characterized by architectural plurality which occurs locally but which is arranged within larger urban alignments or networks. Local urban systems can take on the character of an apparent timeline or time spectrum, in terms of how a particular situation of urban planning is chronically constituted by a series of buildings. One of the most important landmarks of the city center is the *Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II*, a roofed shopping mall designed by Giuseppe Mengoni and built between 1865 and 1877 as an expression of Milan's bourgeois culture of the late 19th century. Its main passageway connects two important squares: to the north *Piazza della Scala*, and to the south *Piazza del Duomo*, whose current shape was also designed by Mengoni. Walking from north to south, the end of the line of sight through the Galleria is dominated by a modern tower, the so-called Martini Tower, designed in 1953 by Luigi Mattioni. It is only at the southern end of the Galleria, stepping through the triumphal arch onto the Piazza del Duomo, that the full extent of local urban planning and the principle of the timeline becomes apparent.

From the *Galleria*, the axis crosses the largesquare (with the ancient cathedral on the left) to a palazzo that again frames Mattioni's tower. The two-part *Palazzo dell'Arengario* flanks the southern end of the *Piazza del Duomo*. Its Novecento-oriented design is the result of a competition held in 1937 to complete the architectural framework of the square. The building was part of the Fascist building program. Equipped with a balcony and a perron, the building on the left would have served Mussolini as a stage for political rallies.



Fig. 8: North-south passage of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II. Photograph: Daniel Grünkranz.



Fig. 9: Palazzo dell'Arengario. Photograph: Daniel Grünkranz.

However, the events of the Second World War interrupted the construction works and the war-damaged building was finally completed in 1956. From the palazzo, the axis continues to *Piazza Armando Diaz* and ends with Mattioni's tower. This situation reflects a chronic chain of reactions to urban situations: Mengoni planned the north-south passage through the *Galleria* as a reaction to the strict east-west orientation of the cathedral, connecting the cathedral square to the surrounding. Half a century later, the architects of the *Palazzo dell'Arengario* (Enrico Agostino Griffini, Pier Giulio Magistretti, Giovanni Muzio, Piero Portaluppi) created an analogy to the main southern opening of

the *Galleria* on the opposite side of the square. By dividing the palazzo into two buildings, they both framed and extended the axis. And Mattioni, with his tower, was able to occupy the most prominent place of the axis, its end, subtly giving the impression that everything was built to frame and lead to the tower, the last element of the timeline.

Urban Networks

In principle, we speak of urban networks when distinct structures are related to a broader system beyond local formations. These systems effectively contribute to the shaping of the city and have an impact on the personal experience of the city. Residents continuously generate their own networks by the way they take possession of the city; by the way they put places and buildings into particular relationships through actions and movements, while others are neglected. But urban networks can influence the spatial order (in which activities unfold) in such a way that they are able to generate something like a collective memory. These networks are often created by the monuments and landmarks of a city, as well as by the routes that connect these elements.

The 19th century Beruti plan revised some of these networks by introducing a new hierarchy of routes in the city. As for the Fascist reconstruction of Milan, the “use of architecture and urban planning as means of transforming Italian society [...] not only gave the city a fundamental new aspect but also changed the way residents moved through its streets, altered the kinds of activities that took place in its public spaces, and disrupted the traditional hierarchy of the urban core.”¹¹ The Fascists introduced their own landmarks and constituted new urban networks, first of all through the regional headquarters of the Fascist Party, which were placed in prominent places, on the main arteries or crossroads of the city, in order to increase the impact on the different population groups. “*Case del fascio* served as an expedient means of communicating fascism’s political success and [...] they represent a crucial component of the party’s effort to intensify its influence among the general population [...]”¹²

In the early years, the Fascist Party and its neighborhood groups often occupied quarters in existing buildings, adapting them for administrative and representational use. Over time, the Fascists developed a program regarding the characteristics that the *Case del Fascio* should have. Key buildings such as Terragni's Fascist headquarters in Como, as well as “the top entries from the 1932 competition for a 'typical' *casa del fascio*”, which was won by the later highly seminal architectural firm BBPR, contributed to an architectural offensive to build a series of new local headquarters throughout the city.¹³ As a result, “these buildings served as backdrop for the party’s ritual activities [...]. Shared architectural features – such as towers and balconies – were a consequence of party leader’s efforts to centralize control of the building process and of an emerging agreement about what the architectural character of *case del fascio* should be.”¹⁴ Architectural rationalist tendencies

11 Mulsby, 2014, p. 11.

12 Ibid., p. 109.

13 Ibid., p. 106-109.

14 Ibid., p. 110.

responded “the need for familiar and unpretentious buildings to be designed as identifiable civic symbols, as town halls and churches had been in the past.”¹⁵



Fig. 10: Casa del Fascio by the Fabio Filzi group near to Milan Central Station with a glimpse of the Grattacielo Pirelli in the background. Photograph: Daniel Grünkranz.

The Fascist houses are immersed in a network role through the organizational structure that the party established through these houses throughout the city. In addition, features such as the balcony or the prominent tower associated the individual buildings and locations “with neighborhood groups throughout the city”.¹⁶ Elements of this network formed by the fascist houses can still be perceived today, but the importance of this network diminished with the fall of the fascist regime. It was replaced by other networks of the modern city. In Milan, such a system is prominently constituted by the incorporation of high-rise buildings. For example: The two *Torre Turati* at the end of *Via Filippo Turati* contribute to the principle of juxtaposition. But while the towers may appear as an alien element in the context of the local neighborhood because of their dimensions, they are immediately part of a larger urban alignment. On the one hand, the two towers on the south side of *Piazza della Repubblica* correspond to the *Torre Breda* (1950-1955) on the other side of the square. Each tower marks the passage of the axis coming from the central station and crossing the square. On the other hand, when viewed from the direction of the Central Station, the towers effectively create a succession of gates, with the *Torre Turati* finally leading directly into the district.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 126.



Fig. 11: Situation constituted by the Torre Breda and the two Torre Turati seen from the north. Photograph: Daniel Grünkranz.

The constant addition of skyscrapers, office and residential towers, to the texture of the city creates an increasingly complex network through the interrelationships between the towers and between the towers and the city itself. By virtue of their size, the skyscrapers are repeatedly immersed in visual relationships and integrated into different perceptual contexts. The network of squares and streets, consisting of different directional grids and intersecting diagonals, captures the skyscrapers again and again like a spider's web.



Fig. 12: View from Via della Moscova towards the Unicredit Tower, completed in 2012. Photograph: Daniel Grünkranz.



Fig. 13: View of one of the towers of the Solaria e Aria tower complex, completed in 2014. Photograph: Daniel Grünkranz.



Fig. 14: The Torre Servizi Tecnici Comunali seen from one of the streets in the Garibaldi district. Photograph: Daniel Grünkranz.

Closing remarks

This text is a response to the confrontation with different urban settings and architectural forms that appear in Milan. It analyzes the structure of some of the urban principles of Milan, such as juxtaposition, timeline, or urban networks, based on situations that are perceptible in the urban core of Milan. The experiences of the city are traced back to some of its inherent systems, while some of the districts of the city are still undergoing renewal or constant change.