

Reviews

Elena Ippoliti

Il disegno per Gaetano Rapisardi. Progetti per Siracusa tra cronache e storia

Franco Angeli

Milano 2020

321 pp.

ISBN 9788-88-917-8942-6

The architectures 'forgotten' in the drawer, as Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani stated in his 1982 volume, *La realtà dell'immagine. Disegni di architettura nel ventesimo secolo*, are those representations which, without being debased by compromises, give back the idea of architecture in its highest vision, ideational and projectual purity. Basically, they are drawings express the 'sign' value, a term with multiple meanings including 'demonstrate' and 'designate', as a linguistic and poetic system of the architectural design. Elena Ippoliti, in her book *Il disegno per Gaetano Rapisardi. Progetti per Siracusa tra cronache e storia*, not only tells a possible history, or better said the possible architectural events of a city, but offers the reader both new interpretation keys and potential research horizons. In fact, the volume can absolutely abandon the reader to imaginative spatial situations (desirable for those dealing with a political vision of the city). Furthermore, the book offers scholars constituent elements to investigate the History of Representation fields gathering modes and techniques but above all the thermometer of ideas pertaining to a historical context and, in this case, the professional condition of those who, like Gaetano Rapisardi, operated in the field overshadowed by Marcello Piacentini. The author lucidly circumscribes Rapisardi's field of action in 'his' Syracuse investigating the architect's projects proposed for his native city in a remoteness condition. Therefore these

projects weren't polluted by the professional relationships he had in Rome, his adopted city. At that time Rapisardi was, like many others, an 'emigrant' who left Sicily to train elsewhere, at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence. However, Gaetano Rapisardi works 'all round' in Italy, above all by taking part in numerous design competitions, many of which he won together with his brother Ernesto. He turned his attention to design in Rome, Bari, Udine, Naples, Campobasso, Milan, Gallipoli, Reggio Calabria, Messina and even Syracuse, where he designed one of the city's most important buildings, the Pantheon dei Caduti siracusani. The Sicilian architect's workload was therefore very wide and the well-preserved archive contains a countless number of project drawings, letters and other documents. It would have been a difficult task to attempt to write a complete work on Rapisardi's activities and this would certainly have led more to a compilation/divulgative study rather than a massive volume on the subject of Drawing. There is, however, a precise reason for limiting this book to the study of the projects for Syracuse, which is "a long-considered choice that seemed the only possible way to achieve the main objective of the volume: to approach the 'drawings by' and the 'drawings for' Gaetano Rapisardi. An objective that, in the space of a book, only such a decisive cut would have made it possible to achieve" [p. 14].



The structure of the book is very clear; six chapters define the core of the volume and each of them, with the exception of the third chapter on architectural competitions in Syracuse, investigates a specific project in great detail, but always with precise references either to the urban contexts in which they would have been built or to works of a similar type. The first chapter, *I Monumenti ai Caduti della Grande Guerra*, indicates to the reader the scope of the volume contents as well as the quantity of the graphic corpus produced by Rapisardi. The author begins with the paragraph on the cult of victims, rightly referring to the cultural debate of the time on this issue in which "the controversies surrounding the erection of monuments to the victims, which have an immediate national reverberation, highlight two main critical points: the first is related to local interests that prevent a serene assessment of the projects quality; the second, of a more general order, is connected to the need to renew the architectural language and in particular the monumental one. It is therefore no coincidence that the magazine *Architettura e arti decorative*, founded in 1921 by the Associazione Artistica tra i Cultori di Architettura, dealt assiduously with the subject from the very first issues" [p. 20].

But there is more.

Elena Ippoliti, in her pointedly approach to the theme, provides the reader with an exhaustive graphic examination of projects relating to the War Memorial monuments. Her furnish the chapter with representations by Limongelli, Del Debbio, Fasolo, Aschieri, Sandri and Sottsass to indicate the thermometer of the debate and, in the case of the Monument to Costanzo Ciano at Montenero di Livorno, letting the designers, Arturo Dazzi and Rapisardi speak

through the project report in a continuous cross-reference between history and representation.

In dealing with the Rapisardi brothers' project for the Monumento ai Caduti di Messina, which in the archives consists of "only three preparatory drawings and a quick sketch drawn on a piece of glossy paper; used for a different purpose" [p. 47], the author succeeds in telling the events of the competition with extreme skill through the jury's report and the correspondence between Enrico Calandra and Marcello Piacentini regarding certain aspects of the two designers' delivery timing of the designs. The digital reconstruction and the correct perspective insertion of it in the project site, with the background of Antonio Zanca's palazzo del Municipio, give the reader an image of a 'possible' Messina, of what it would have been if the project had been realised.

The author's 'reconstructive' operation not only triggers imaginative procedures but also specifies how the aid of the digital model can, on the one hand, assist the History of architecture and, on the other, its primary role at the moment in which archive drawings, especially those of architecture that has never been built, take on body and three-dimensional form, legitimising their existence.

The chapter's iconography is completed by a number of extraordinary drawings by Ernesto and Gaetano Rapisardi regarding the projects for Messina in the blocks identified in the Master Plan by engineer Luigi Borzi, director of the municipal technical office. These representations, executed with great mastery and refinement, lead to two reflections. The first is that the architects' attention was directed more to the 'skin' of the building rather than to its distributional system, and the sec-

ond concerns the preference for one method of representation rather than another. In the latter case, the large production of drawings in orthogonal projection, treated in pencil and charcoal with the use of shadows, testify to a consolidated way of representation on the part of the Syracuse architect. Elena Ippoliti writes: "The drawings, dated between 1928 and 1929, although barely subsequent to the previous ones, testify to a language which, having abandoned the archetypes of historicist eclecticism, tries to identify formal solutions capable of reinterpreting tradition in a modern and monumental key: giant orders, theories of statues, high reliefs, coats of arms, inscriptions. A language that the Rapisardi brothers show they know how to control without any hesitation through the practice of drawing that goes as far as the true-to-life outlines of the most minute details" [p. 56].

In the second chapter devoted to the events surrounding the design of the Pantheon dei Caduti siracusani, Elena Ippoliti captivates the reader like a writer in a novel. All the difficulties involved in the construction of the building are dealt with in a compelling discourse, interspersed with the words of the protagonists and the correspondence, which retraces with chronological precision all the stages leading to the building of the monument, inaugurated on 13 August 1937. The extraordinary accompanying iconographic apparatus assists the story, which without it would be 'mutilated', demonstrating how the relationship between text and image is predominant in the volume and that the history of architecture is also the history of architectural representation. The following chapters on the architectural competitions in Syracuse, the projects for the area of the Tempio di Apollo and piazza Archimede, the pa-

lazzo Comunale and the palazzo di Giustizia are dealt with by the author with the same methodological rigour and always with a continuous commentary on Rapisardi's drawing on the projects tackled. The author writes about a representation of the project for the area of the Tempio di Apollo: "A drawing that must therefore be considered little more than a very personal sketch by Gaetano Rapisardi, where the very few signs on the plan document his vi-

sion: the volume of the building is delineated by hatching the perimeter of the ground connection only, an incisive red mark highlights the new alignments, while a green crayon is used to fill in the widely enlarged spaces, barely hinting at a possible green layout. In the same paper cut-out, a quick perspective sketch in the lower right prefigures the solution not only in terms of its volume but also in its main compositional and architectural lines" [p. 191].

All in all, a volume that is certainly useful for taking stock of the progress of research in the History of Representation and an indispensable book for the History of architecture, which can find in it both correct information and indispensable elements for a more exhaustive and well-founded evaluation of the variety and richness of modern architecture in Sicily.

Francesco Maggio

Author

Francesco Maggio, Department of Architecture, University of Palermo, francesco.maggio@unipa.it