

San Rocco is Dead. Long Live San Rocco

Nicolò Ornaghi

On Wednesday, June 26, 2019, a farewell event was held at the Triennale, in Milan, for the celebrated architecture magazine *San Rocco*, which had passed away prematurely –the initial plan was for 20 issues to be published– with the 15th issue dedicated, fittingly, to the theme of ‘Death’. *San Rocco* was, at a global level, one of the most successful publishing experiences of the last 20 years in the field of architecture. A magazine printed in 3,000 copies, almost always sold out. A kind of publishing miracle for an independent magazine, produced in Italy and dedicated to the autonomy of architecture, a discipline notoriously in a tragic condition, at least in this country.

A group of editors in their thirties and forties, in 2010, created an editorial success story capable of influencing a long slumbering European and international architectural scene in a debate that considered only a few disciplinary

topics and that largely excluded history, preferring originality and invention. *San Rocco*, on the other hand, deals mainly with –or rather, dealt mainly with– the history of architecture, in the conviction that there can be no authentic progress without solid foundations and that these foundations can only rest on the notions that the past provides and from which it is possible to draw extensively. *San Rocco*, in essence, looked to the past.

So far, nothing different from an academic, even rather conservative, journal. *San Rocco*'s stroke of genius was to make such topics attractive.

It should, therefore, be made clear that *San Rocco* was not a magazine as we have, or at least I have, been accustomed to considering architecture trade publications where, usually, after a good half of the volume devoted to ceramic tile advertisements, more or less ugly furniture,

This article was written upon invitation to frame the topic, not submitted to anonymous review, published under the editorial director's responsibility.

Fig. 1. INNOCENCE, San Rocco #0, Summer 2010, cover.

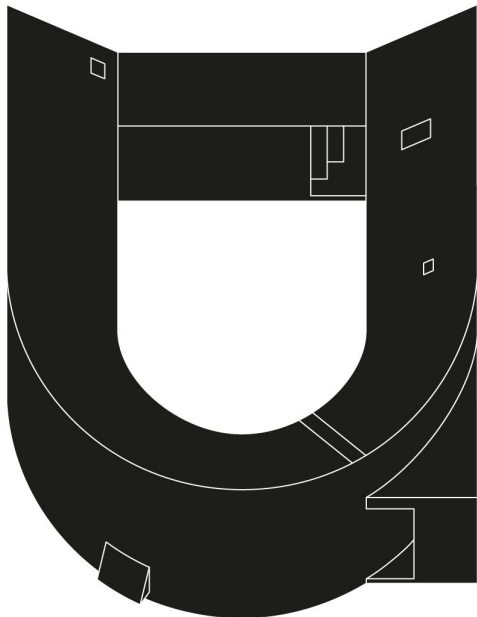


Fig. 2. ISLANDS, San Rocco #1, Winter 2010, cover.

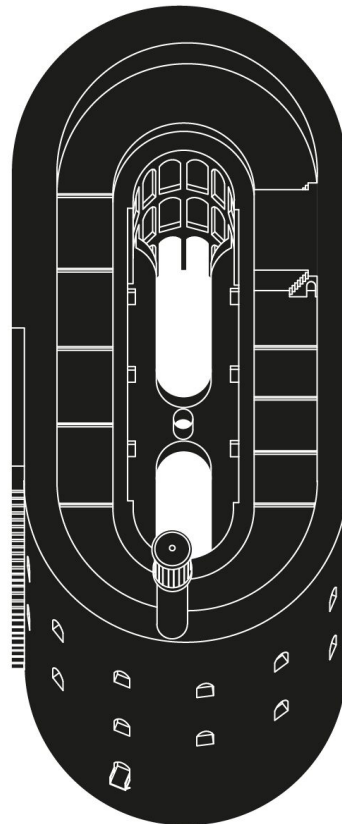
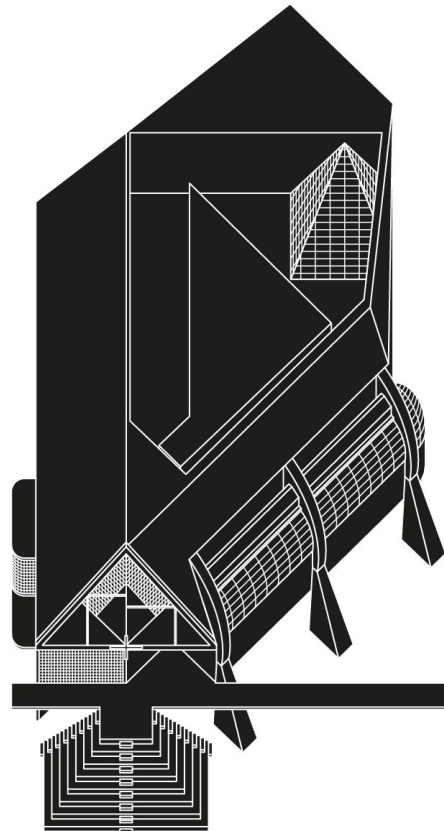


Fig. 3. FUCK CONCEPTS! CONTEXT!, San Rocco #4, Summer 2012, cover.



Fig. 4. SCARY ARCHITECTS, San Rocco #5, Fall 2012, cover.



miraculously efficient fixtures, and cladding of all kinds, contemporary projects are presented according to the taste of the editor(s) and, in the best of cases, some in-depth discussion of retrofitting or restoration of architecture of the past. The editorials are almost never of interest and the subject of architecture is treated in a purely performative manner; that is, you look at the photos, maybe read the text, and decide whether you like it or not. The End.

San Rocco reversed this trend, in full controversy (all too explicit) with the magazines that made up the panorama of the early 2000s –which were, moreover, the same as they were 30 to 40 years earlier– and focused on the ideas of the editors, who started each issue with a theme they had anticipated in the previous issue with a detailed call for papers. *San Rocco* promoted ideas and a vision of the discipline in open contrast with the architectural themes fashionable in the early 2000s, sometimes downright delusional.

On the one hand, therefore, *San Rocco* opened participation to a potentially endless *parterre* of content, very precisely addressed while avoiding the annoying academic ‘please elaborate’ that often pervades publications of this kind, and which allows you to write, under a keyword as generic as it is useless, for example ‘isolated house,’ any corollary of thoughts, difficult to integrate *ex post facto*.

The result was a cohesive organism, like the thematic issues that the editors proposed from time to time. As it is not appropriate to list here the specific contents and topics covered, I thus refer to the website, still in operation, which plays the role of an archival and historical memory role of the journal. There was also to have been a second life of the magazine, a sort of 2nd five years plan of which a trace, at least up to now, remains only in the website.

Obviously, as is normal, the subjects of the issues corresponded to the interests and imagination of the editors, who were, moreover, several, while sharing the idea, also not without a certain idealism, that architecture is a collective matter and therefore discussing architecture can only be done as a group, collectively. All this, of course, generated multiple interests, and a multiplicity of themes ranging from Richter to Sangallo, from Sottsass to Rothko, and from SOM to the first OMAs.

In my opinion, the most interesting feature of *San Rocco* is the fact that this polyphony of potentially cacophonous content was actually properly orchestrated and produced

a certain totally unexpected coherence and linearity, which was certainly part of the magazine’s success.

Other tools for the magazine’s success were mainly provided by a mixture of unusual prose (at least it was unusual for an architecture magazine), and extremely rigorous graphic and photographic apparatus: on the one hand, a writing style, anything but academic, was proposed, deliberately casual to the point of, at times, excess. On the other, there was a focus on an extremely classical relationship between text and images, excluding diagrams, infographics and other visual apparatuses. *San Rocco* was classically composed of text, images, and drawings.

This complex mixture of elements made the magazine a particularly refined editorial product, meticulous in its details, very complicated to edit and produce, very expensive to print and therefore very unprofitable, as indeed most quality editorial products are.

San Rocco has undoubtedly had a great merit, namely to bring together the most interesting architects of a generation, the ones that in 2010 were 30 to 45 years old, in a single container, presenting them somehow as a unified whole. I am referring to architects who are also very different from each other, from 2A+P to Atelier Kempe Thill, from Kuehn Malvezzi to Piovene Fabi, from Bauküh to Salottobuono, from OFFICE KGDVS to 51N4E, who in this operation found a collective expression capable of being recognized and mutually recognizable. For my generation, that is, the generation after theirs, it was a great relief, because finally, in architecture, there was something going on, which could actually be touched and not just seen in *archdaily* in the decadent expressions of the various fourth-generation students of Koolhaas or Gehry, if not directly witnessing the late production of the aforementioned masters as if it were the only thing happening. *San Rocco*, in this sense, showed that with willpower, a little money and good ideas things can be done, you just have to be persistent enough.

Despite the magazine’s critical success, it is well known that no one has ever read a whole issue from beginning to end. If proof of this were needed, in the presentation at the *Triennale* referred to in the opening paragraph, which was a kind of collective funeral rite, this was emphasized several times, almost even with a certain smugness. Not even the editors of the magazine themselves, except perhaps a few unfortunate ones who had the thankless task of selecting the call for papers submissions, read all the issues in their entirety.

Fig. 5. COLLABORATIONS, San Rocco #6, Spring 2013, cover.



Fig. 6. INDIFFERENCE, San Rocco #7, Summer 2013, cover.

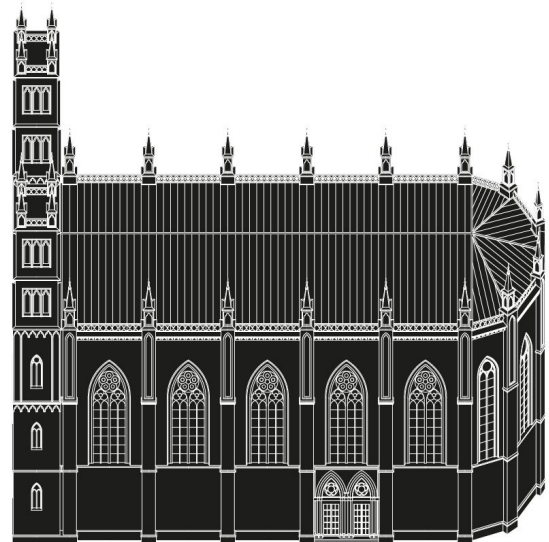


Fig. 7. WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE PRIMITIVE HUT, San Rocco #8, Winter 2013, cover.

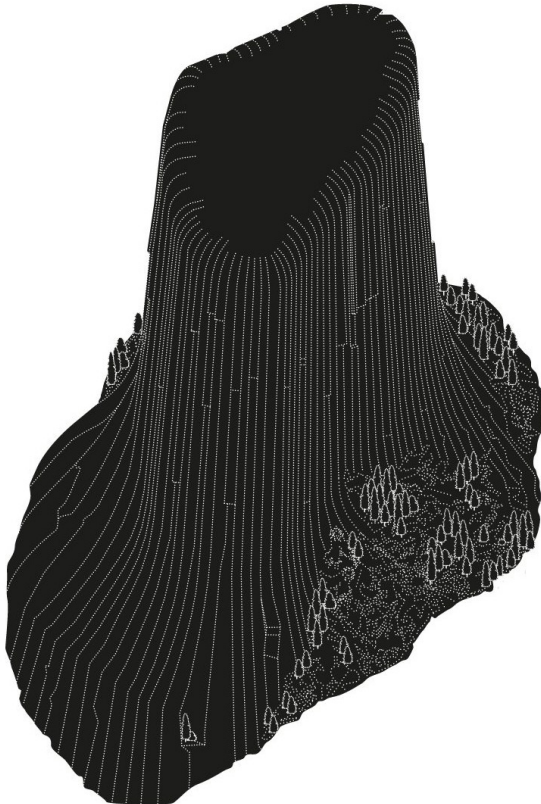


Fig. 8. ECOLOGY, San Rocco #10, Winter 2014, cover.

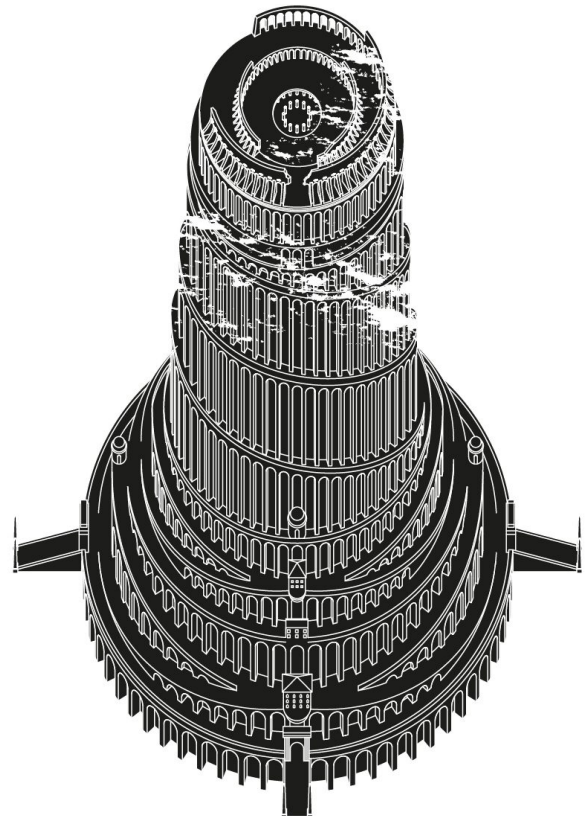


Fig. 9. PURE BEAUTY, San Rocco #13, Spring 2017, cover.

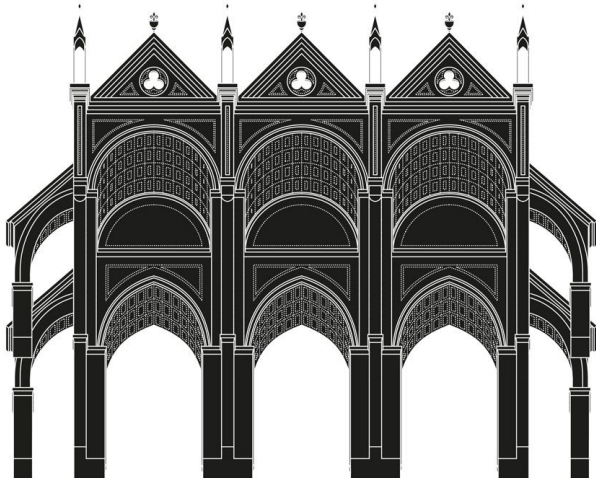
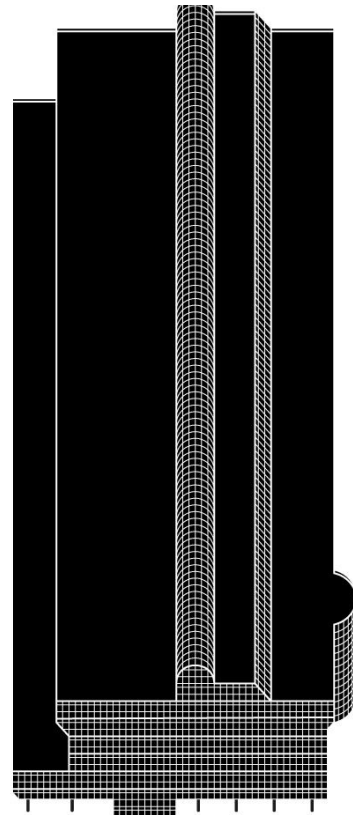


Fig. 10. 66, San Rocco #14, Spring 2018, cover.



Paradoxically, in its attempt to reaffirm the value of theory and writing in architecture, *San Rocco* achieved the opposite effect. The primacy of text over image, as opposed to the flood of images, renders, visions etc., (the main one, among *San Rocco*'s various invectives toward contemporary architectural culture), found in the magazine's fruition its absolute negation. In a very short time, *San Rocco* became a cult object, a fetish for young architects –then called 'sanrocchini'– who, far from reading the (actually, at times, boring) texts, began to repeat the stylistic codes that had made the magazine famous, namely black axonometries with white lines, line drawings, always in black and white, the redrawing of plans and elevations defined by a uniform stylistic code etc. In *San Rocco*, drawing was understood as a form of knowledge, while instead, in the *sanrocchino*'s use of it, drawing was deprived of the noble intention of investigating architecture through its fundamental tools and became a mere stylistic canon, just like, in 2010, when the first issue of the magazine came out, tight indie rocker pants, baggy sweaters and worn-out Clarks or Vans.

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At the end of the day, I think *San Rocco* was a big failure. Not so much for not having closed the cycle (which from some of the bizarre titles and descriptions of the issues to come, mentioned at the end of *San Rocco* 15, I think was perhaps even a good thing) but rather for the ambitions of its authors, which turned out to be tragically out of proportion to their context. In an attempt to reassert the written word, theory, and even architectural history as primary design tools, *San Rocco* found itself owing its celebrity to graphic apparatuses that differed from those criticized only in that they were more elegant and better done. This could have certainly been enough, if it were not for the fact that the magazine's ambition was to be read, not just collected. In this, if ever there was a need, the experience of *San Rocco* once again sanctioned the decline of a discipline where words are less and less important and where the space for critical practice and historical research (the kind done calmly) is more and more limited.

In any case, thank you, *San Rocco*: things used to be worse.