

A files

Afiles

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A Note on the Display Initials

In the late 1950s an American manufacturer called the Burroughs Corporation worked with the Federal Reserve Bank to develop the E13B type font – a tiny set of numbers printed in magnetic ink at the bottom of a cheque, readable by automatic sorters. 'Where once the cheque was used merely to transfer funds from one account to another, it will soon become the chief vehicle for transmitting *all* the vital information required throughout an entire banking or accounting system', stated the Burroughs Corporation in its 1959 address to shareholders.

Discussing the font in the December 1960 issue of the *Architectural Association Journal (AAJ)* devoted to his work, the painter and type designer Edward Wright dryly noted that 'the Romans would have found some of our typefaces which are derived from their own alphabet quite incomprehensible'. And yet while E13B was in production, Wright himself had been participating in the communication of something similarly unfathomable – a font for Alison and Peter Smithson's House of the Future, shown in the 1956 *Daily Mail* Ideal Home exhibition. This house, however, was no home, nor even an architectural project, but a simulation, projecting 20 years forward into a life where housework was automated and technology completely integrated. In the harshly lit reality of the Olympia Exhibition Centre, this future was also entirely hand-made, built of plywood and plaster. Wright contributed to these same artisanal qualities in his own hand-drawn typeface projected onto the facade. The letters are slabby yet seductive, hi-tech yet kitsch.

The display letters in this issue, drawn as ever by Adrien Vasquez from the John Morgan studio (and appearing in a short homily to Wright by architect Theo Crosby and in the essay by Salomon Frausto) are a remaking of Wright's design. Like his letterface, Wright himself displayed certain incongruities. A South American born in Liverpool, he was packed off to public school before studying architecture at the Bartlett and typography under George Adams. Like his friend Crosby, Wright's life straddled hemispheres and was 'full of contradictions', wrote Brian Housden in his *AAJ* profile. 'It seems to be that the world appears to him full of opposites and these can only be contained in something as tortuous as a labyrinth' – or as enigmatic as the future.

The Hero of Doubt

Roberta Marcaccio



*Fumatore
con filtro*

F.N.R.

Vittorio Gregotti has often spoken of his mentor Ernesto Nathan Rogers as the man ‘who taught two generations of Italian architects how to read and write’. However troubled architectural education might have been after the Second World War, Italian architects were hardly illiterate, but what Gregotti is celebrating more is the fact that Rogers opened up Italy’s provincial architectural culture, both by exposing it to a wider ambit of international debate and by stimulating a dialogue with other cultures and disciplines – history, philosophy, poetry, geography, literature and politics. Rogers maintained a familiarity with each of these realms, which he displayed through his mastery of the available media at the time – he exploited exhibitions, international conferences, broadcasting and, most crucially, publications, as demonstrated by his prominent role as editor of *Casabella*, which over the course of his decade-long tenure became the principal record of his influence in Italy and beyond.

Rogers shifted mainstream discourse. Challenging the break from history espoused by his contemporaries, for whom the modern movement was some kind of epic phenomenon divorced from the past and exempt from criticism, he used his involvement in the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM), his collaborative practice with BBPR and his parallel careers in teaching and writing to broadcast his highly controversial ideas of *continuità* (historical continuity) and *preesistenze ambientali* (existing environmental factors). Now largely neglected by historians, his work was picked up by many of those who went on to shape postmodern discourse on either side of the Atlantic. Rogers’ ideas, in this sense, can be credited with laying the groundwork for Aldo Rossi’s approach to the study of European cities; Vittorio Gregotti’s speculations on the disciplinary ‘territory of architecture’; Charles Moore’s ironic historicism and Robert Venturi’s creative understanding of history and the everyday environment, even if Rogers himself was not entirely convinced by some of these developments.

In addition to the historical references manifest in his own work, what confirmed Rogers as the forefather of these new approaches was the way in which his charismatic personality embodied all the ‘complexities and contradictions’ that had started to emerge in the postwar period. Part academic, part avant-garde artist, more of a militant practitioner than an ivory-tower intellectual, Rogers’ tumultuous but worldly upbringing taught him to shift between contradictory roles and identities while cultivating a striking variety of interests – from architecture to art, film and photography, through to philosophy, sociology and politics. A natural curiosity for other disciplines would underpin his life’s work.

The story of Rogers’ identity is one of a struggle to synthesise a multitude of geographical, political and cultural influences. Born in 1909 in Trieste – then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire – Ernesto was Jewish and shared British and Italian nationality. His mother was Ida Manni and his father, Romeo Rogers, a fiercely intellectual insurance broker. His name – you might think it a kind of premonition – was a tribute to Ernesto Nathan: the distinguished Anglo-Italian Jewish intellectual and politician who, as mayor of Rome from 1907, promoted the city’s first general plan to regulate rampant real-estate speculation. Later in his life, Rogers’ closest collaborators would refer to him affectionately as the ‘Austrian man’: born in the Trieste of Italo Svevo, Sigmund Freud, James Joyce (a family friend) and Umberto Saba, he brought to Milan – where he eventually

settled – a *mitteleuropean* philosophical and literary culture. Rogers’ childhood and early adolescence were unsettled, with the family continually having to relocate for his father’s work. After leaving Trieste in 1914, and before moving to Rome, they lived in Milan and Zurich – where Ernesto attended primary school and learned to speak German perfectly. Returning to Milan in 1921, as a teenage pupil at the Liceo Parini, he befriended two of his future colleagues, Gianluigi Banfi and Lodovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso. In contrast to his friends, however, he had doubts about becoming an architect because he thought he had no talent for technical drawing – a complex that would haunt him for the rest of his life. Belgiojoso’s father, himself an architect, managed to convince him that the profession required a broader range of skills, and the friends went on to study together at the Politecnico di Milano, where they encountered their future associate Enrico Peressutti.

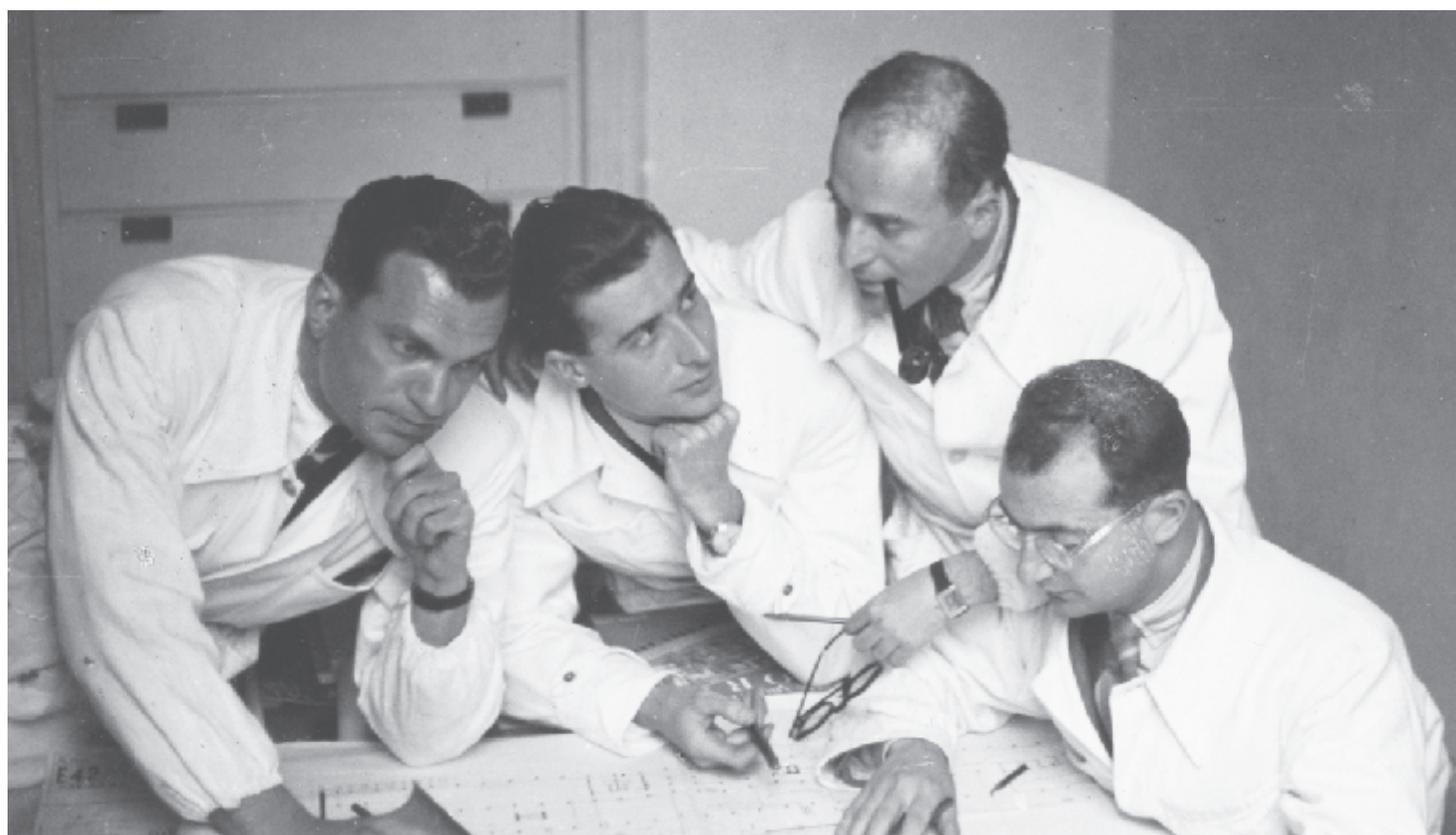
In the culturally rich atmosphere of Milan the young Rogers developed a vivid interest in the figurative arts, becoming enamoured with futurism. At the same time he was attracted to the popular national rhetoric of fascist corporatism – something that is not particularly surprising, even in light of his Jewish origins. In the early years of the regime many Italian Jews served as government ministers, among them Mussolini’s glamorous and influential mistress Margherita Sarfatti, the ‘dictator of culture’. Sarfatti helped Mussolini to forge (and exploit) a surprisingly polyvocal intellectual climate by promoting a lively debate about the nature of ‘fascist art’ and the role it could play, alongside history, in shaping the identity of a nation that had only been unified in 1861.

This was the climate that would first shape Rogers’ reflections as a modern architect concerned with historical memory, and the particular appeal of the fascist idea of history as a malleable material that could be used to give definition to a still-fluid national identity. Through his life Rogers sought to negate the anomalies of his own identity – his erratic youth, dual nationality, alleged homosexuality and Jewish origins – explicitly rejecting any obstacle (and there were quite a few) to his self-identification with the culture he inhabited. In his twenties, for instance, Rogers decided to formally renounce his British citizenship and to ‘naturalise’ once and for all as an Italian citizen, much to his father’s quiet consternation. He even proved reluctant to learn the language of his Anglo-Saxon forebears, as we gather from a beseeching letter from his art teacher, the painter Anselmo Bucci: ‘I beg you not to get lost in the *alti adagi* but to go to England. In the meantime, you must learn English... Learn it immediately. I already have the address of a teacher, a rather mature Irish lady whom I shall seduce (I will introduce you afterwards).’

Ignoring Bucci’s advice, Rogers would refuse to learn English until he was in his thirties, concentrating instead on the task of developing a ‘common tongue’ with his associates. Rogers’ final thesis at the politecnico was accompanied by an introduction written ‘with eight hands’. In it, Banfi, Belgiojoso, Peressutti and Rogers professed their committed association, declaring that:

we believe it is not enough for an architect to build; we also feel the need to speak, to express through the synthesis of our work not just the contingencies of life but the thought and character of the present era... And because speaking calls for a language intelligible to most people, we have agreed, together, to seek the high road through the labyrinth of art. We are less concerned with the individual personality than we are with the

Previous: Ernesto Nathan Rogers, self-portrait, ‘Smoking with filter’, c 1965
 © Archivio Marina Peressutti
 Opposite: BBPR in the studio, via Borgonuovo, Milan
 (Ernesto Nathan Rogers, with pipe)
 © gta Archives / ETH Zurich, Alfred Roth Papers



P.S.

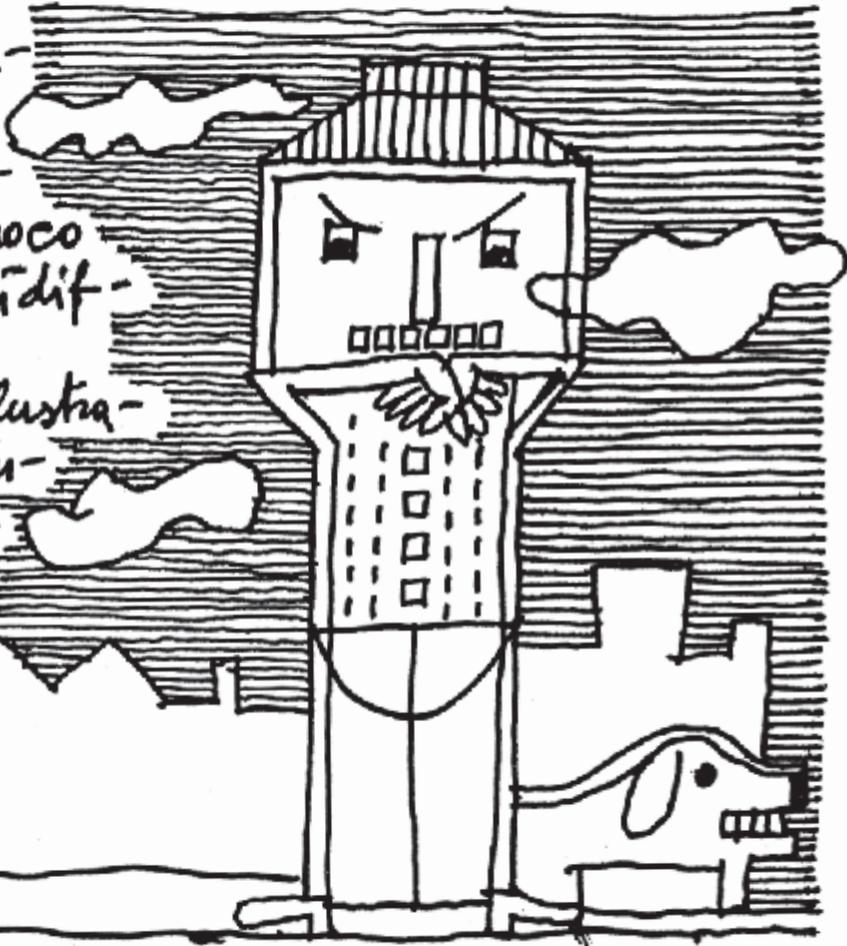
Nel 1960, con i figli piccoli a Mi-
lano, mandavo loro un "giornalino",
illustrato. Nel 1° numero ricordavo
loro il gioco, inventato a Roma, "que-
sta casa è bella, quest'altra è una schi-
fezza"; li invitavo a continuare in Mi-

lano, ma-
gari con
si gratta-
cchi; gioco
molto più dif-
ficile.

Come illustra-
zione sem-
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Torre
Vela-
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a con-
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della

sua
alta riconoscibilità formale; un attri-
buto non tanto facile o scontato nella
produzione architettonica italiana di
questi decenni. Ciao



C.A.I.

personality of the work ... if we wish to avoid regressing into a dangerous Babel, then it is time for the words of individuals to join together in a living, common tongue.

BBPR were inspired by the anti-individualistic and collaborative spirit of fascism, and by polemical practices such as Gruppo 7 (Figini, Frette, Larco, Libera, Pollini, Rava and Terragni), formed in 1926 when the seven were discontented recent graduates. With significant anonymity, Gruppo 7 embraced Walter Gropius' philosophy of 'teamwork' and defined their position as 'rationalism'. As they made clear, this was not a 'pure rationalism', of the kind that was then being pursued throughout Europe, but rather one that preserved a 'classical substratum' and responded to the 'spirit (not the forms, which is quite different) of [Italian] tradition'.

Faithful to the same principles, Banfi, Belgiojoso, Peressutti and Rogers founded BBPR – pointedly, an equally weighted acronym of their names – upon graduating in 1932. But Rogers' otherness was not so easily camouflaged. He confessed, 'while BBPR will always have a precise sound, the R is bound to wander solitary and lost', as if there remained, inscribed in the sound of their initials, an intrinsic disparity of histories, destinies and skills. Still insecure about his role as an architect, Rogers found comfort in renouncing individual creativity. Belgiojoso remembers how Rogers' complex played out in the studio: 'Sometimes, while working, he would imagine a shape that he wanted to propose and would try to express himself by gesticulating, moulding an imaginary architectural model with his hands. Aurel [Peressutti] tended to get very frustrated when this happened, and would put a pencil in Ernesto's hands, forcing him to express himself by drawing rather than talking.'

The eclectic structure of the iconic Torre Velasca in Milan is a perfect example of the design method shaped by these internal dynamics, a tortuous process of repeated interrogation and collaborative reworking they called *dubbio metodologico* (systematic doubt). At each stage the four different voices of the associates would inform and reform aspects of the project – as demonstrated by the multiple 'in progress' variations of the design, moving from a sleek and functional tower in steel and glass towards the heavier concrete mass that would 'culturally summarise' Milan's layered historical context, inventing, as Manfredo Tafuri has observed in his *Theories and History of Architecture*, 'a Milan that does not exist (or exists only as ineffable atmosphere)'. The tower's vertical columns evoked the ribbing of the neighbouring Duomo, the pitched roof with protruding vertical stacks resembled domestic chimneys, while the muddy colours of its surfaces referred to the tonalities of old Milan. Built on a contained lot, so as to detach itself from the surrounding buildings, it compensates for its reduced footprint with its impressive height, with the floor plates widening towards the top, reaching out to the edges of the site. This solution increased the market value of the residential units at the top; the narrower part below was reserved for offices. The fact that the Torre Velasca did not conform to planning regulations was evidently not a problem. BBPR were deeply embedded within the wealthy Milanese bourgeoisie, and powerful enough to sway the decision of the authorities.

Though insecure as a designer, Rogers nonetheless emerged as a leader within BBPR, relying on his strengths – his prominent editorial roles, and his talent with words – to define the practice's direction and profile. For example, in a number of articles on the Velasca published in *Casabella*, he placed emphasis on the *dubbio metodologico*,

the design process through which the tower had gradually acquired its characteristic physiognomy. Built in reinforced concrete using the most contemporary industrial materials, the tower also had to fit into a historically sensitive urban area by 'absorbing' and reinterpreting the formal repertoire of its surroundings – its *preesistenze ambientali*. In this way Rogers deliberately used the project to call into question the idea that the outward appearance of a building could be regarded as a faithful indicator of its modernity. And in taking the visual out of the equation, he reminded his contemporaries that modernism was not so much a 'style' as a way of designing in accordance with industrial materials and modern methods.

The idea of looking beyond the external experience of a building was something that Rogers had started to appreciate during his time at the Politecnico di Milano, studying under the guidance of figures like Ambrogio Annoni and Piero Portaluppi. Annoni's history course, rather than aiming at a purely stylistic reading of past architectures, proposed an investigation of the aesthetic and constructive reasons of buildings. An essay that Rogers wrote for this course is illustrated with a series of Wölfflin-inspired photographic juxtapositions. The images were cut out from books that he owned and assembled in rudimentary collages – even as a student, it seems, Rogers refused to analyse architecture through the sketch. Through these images he began to display a distinctive editorial approach as well as a certain freedom in juxtaposing past and present.

In those same years, between 1930 and 1932, and in parallel to his studies, Rogers published about 30 articles in *Le arti plastiche* – a magazine of art criticism edited by Vincenzo Costantini. Rogers mainly reported on art exhibitions in Milan, but he also wrote on architectural themes, and particularly on the work of Le Corbusier, Taut, Van de Velde and Perret. The reflections on contemporary architecture published in *Le arti plastiche* had overlaps with the essay Rogers wrote for Annoni's course, both clearly expressing ideas that would flourish in his later writings, fuelled by the febrile atmosphere of the 1930s. The ambiguity of the fascist regime's cultural agenda allowed room for multiple competing images of the state, sparking inflammatory debates that played out in contemporary magazines like *Casabella*, then edited by Edoardo Persico and Giuseppe Pagano, or Giò Ponti's *Domus*, both of them published in Milan; or Marcello Piacentini's *L'Architettura*, the official mouthpiece of the state architects' syndicate in Rome; or *Quadrante*, edited by Pietro Maria Bardi and Massimo Bontempelli, with a base in both Milan and Rome. With varying degrees of tolerance, all of these journals encouraged the expression of different points of view, spanning from the classicism of Piero Portaluppi through the refined Milanese *novacentisti* (twentieth-centuryists), to the futurists and the 'avant-garde' rationalism of Adalberto Libera or Giuseppe Terragni. These contrasting voices would coalesce to define a uniquely Italian strand of modernity – mercurial and continuously in crisis.

Through his writing, Rogers thrived in this scene and, together with his associates, he became affiliated with its principal actors, starting with the circle around P M Bardi, a distinguished writer, art critic and gallery owner whose connections would give Rogers entry to the wider international networks of CIAM. Bardi was an early adopter of the argument that modern architecture could serve the fascist regime's pursuit of rapid industrialisation and modernisation, as

Carlo Aymonino,
Torre Velasca,
from *Zodiac* 3, 1960

attested by his articles for the Milanese paper *L'Ambrosiano* in 1930. The co-founder, with Bardi, of *Quadrante* – the novelist and playwright Massimo Bontempelli – was a key supporter of the fascist regime. In the three years of its existence, from 1933 to 1936, *Quadrante* would galvanise contemporary Italian culture, politicising architecture and transforming its practice in interwar Italy. Militant, and fiercely intellectual, the journal managed to draw Italian politicians, practitioners, academics and patrons into a cohesive movement that advanced the cause of modern architecture, adapting its principles to Italian culture while simultaneously promoting Italian modernism to the rest of Europe (and to South America, where Bardi would flee with his wife Lina Bo after the Second World War). The *Quadrante* circle used a variety of means to stimulate cultural debate, staging exhibitions at Bardi's Galleria d'Arte di Roma and the Galleria del Milione in Milan, attending international congresses (every Italian delegate to CIAM was active in the journal), inviting figures such as Le Corbusier to give lectures, building temporary installations at national expositions and participating in official and professional boards. Giuseppe Bottai – who was at various times the Minister of Corporations, Minister of Education and Governor of Rome – was a supporter of the journal – while the industrialist Adriano Olivetti (one of rationalism's key patrons) frequently argued in *Quadrante's* pages in favour of the corporate development of fascist politics, and BBPR and Gruppo 7, among others, published urban plans based on those principles.

Years later, reflecting on the rather dubious start to his career within *Quadrante's* circle, Rogers would write: 'We based ourselves on a syllogism which went roughly like this: fascism is a revolution, modern architecture is revolutionary, therefore it must be the architecture of fascism.' In 1938 Rogers got a sudden wake-up call, with the enactment of the racial purity laws. He was obliged to disassociate himself from all work at the studio and was banned from publishing under his own name. His diary – 'Lettere di Ernesto a Ernesto e viceversa' (Dear Ernesto) – stands as a poignant record of his inner turmoil during this period. A few years later, in 1941, Giuseppe Pagano, then editor of *Domus* and *Casabella*, courageously offered Rogers a public platform, while keeping his identity secret. A column in *Domus*, 'Confessioni di un Anonimo del xx secolo' (Confessions of an Anonymous Man of the Twentieth Century), allowed Rogers to take sardonic (if not explicitly political) swipes at the distortion of fascism's progressive ideals. These veiled critiques would be short-lived, however. After only nine instalments, his name was leaked to the authorities and the series had to stop.

Belgiojoso relates that after the proclamation of the racial purity laws Rogers wandered the streets of Milan, evidently shattered, and predicting an apocalyptic end, not just for himself but for Jews and for the nation as a whole – a striking reaction, given his measured nature and his obstinate determination to stay in the country. He would only leave in 1943, urged by his friends to flee to Switzerland. But this was in no sense an idle retreat, because during his exile he strengthened ties with the international set, including Sigfried Giedion and Max Bill, and began to teach theory of architecture and urbanism in the Italian section of the University of Lausanne, where courses were taught to and by the growing community of fugitive intellectuals. Among the expatriates were prominent political figures like Luigi Einaudi and Amintore Fanfani, as well as the entrepreneur Adriano Olivetti, all of whom would play

major roles in Italy's postwar reconstruction. These first teaching positions, along with the 'Dear Ernesto' letters and his column for *Domus*, are significant in that they mark the emergence of a more singular voice, evolving from the 'common tongue' that Rogers had established with his partners at BBPR, and clearly oriented towards the international scene.

While Rogers was sheltering in Switzerland, BBPR became involved with the anti-fascist movement and both Banfi and Belgiojoso were deported to the Nazi concentration camp at Gusen. Banfi, tragically, did not survive. After liberation, Rogers returned to Milan to reconvene with Peressutti and Belgiojoso, ready to give new life to BBPR and to Italian architecture. The associates were among the founding members of the Movimento Studi Architettura (MSA) – devoted to the propagation of CIAM principles in Italy – and the Casa della Cultura, which sought to further the cause of freedom and justice through a dialogue between disciplines – between artists, journalists, doctors, philosophers, engineers, scientists and politicians. Meetings of the Casa della Cultura drew some of the most important figures in European culture, among them Alberto Moravia, Sibilla Aleramo, Jean-Paul Sartre, György Lukács, Henri Lefebvre, Bertolt Brecht and Jürgen Habermas.

This convergence of interests was already a distinctive trait of Milanese culture during the fascist years, in the circles gathered around *Quadrante*, *Domus* and *Casabella*. In the years following the Second World War, as Umberto Eco noted, architects, urban planners, designers and editors came together as 'the critics and interpreters of an industrial bourgeoisie with a radical-socialist inclination, trying on the one hand to master the problems of science, technology and industrial production, and on the other to modernise Italian visual culture'.

In this context, Rogers was able to move seamlessly between the activities at the MSA and the Casa della Cultura, between writing, teaching and practice, constantly fusing politics, philosophy and culture. When he took on the directorship of *Domus* in 1946, then, it was something of a strategic move, allowing him to position himself in the postwar political debate. The declared aim of *Domus* had always been to revitalise architecture, interiors, industrial production and the decorative arts in keeping with both the culture and the climate of Italy, and without overlooking topics of interest to women – stereotypically: the art of homemaking, gardening and cooking. Since its founding in 1928, *Domus* had waged a war of words on strict functionalism, with Ponti and his neoclassicist colleagues arguing that houses were not 'machines for living', as Le Corbusier called them, but rather sanctuaries of stylish beauty and refined comfort that provided 'the setting for Italian life'. **During his brief tenure, Rogers reasserted this domestic theme by adding the strapline 'La casa dell'uomo' ('The house of man'),** but he also gave *Domus* a new look, embraced new cultural trends and sought out the collaboration of intellectuals and writers such as Elio Vittorini and Alberto Moravia. He also used *Domus* to expose Italian culture to international debates, while at the same time arguing against the reduction of modernism to a mere 'international style' – one that was erasing history and context and increasingly in the service of speculators.

The polemical tradition of architectural criticism in Italy – first established with *Quadrante* and Pagano's and Persico's contributions to *Casabella* and *Domus* – continued unabated after the war. In the Rome-based journal *Il Mondo*, founded by Mario Pannunzio in 1949,

Torre Velasca foregrounded by the campanile of the Church of San Gottardo, Milan, 1950
© Monica Pidgeon / RIBA Collections





texts by the likes of Leonardo Benevolo and Ludovico Quaroni would appear alongside contributions by the archaeologist Antonio Cederna, who ignited a bitter, passionate political battle against the real-estate speculators who were wrecking historic city centres. If Cederna's polemics raised awareness of issues of quality – or the lack of it – in postwar reconstruction, his attitude towards modern architecture was intransigent. He argued that the modern city had to develop alongside, and not above or inside, the historic one. This clearly set him at odds not just with Rogers, whom he called an 'invasive playmaker' (*regista invadente*), but with the Roman critic Bruno Zevi, who was using the pages of *Metron* and *Architettura* to argue against the preservationists who would turn the historic city into a museum. Meanwhile, Luigi Moretti added further fuel to the fire with his articles in *Spazio*, which were countered by Paolo Portoghesi with *Controspazio* in the 1960s. Giancarlo De Carlo would follow in turn with *Spazio e Società*, which often featured articles by Team X members. And while all this was going on, the work of Manfredo Tafuri was establishing a substantive distinction between criticism and the history of architecture, so inaugurating a period of specialisation that undermined hopes for a unitary vision and caused the polemical impetus of Italian publications to dissipate.

In his first editorial for *Domus* in 1946, and in line with the Milanese tradition of criticism, Rogers' newly found individual voice emerged clearly as he questioned the role that a magazine could play in the desolate context of postwar Italy. 'Words too are construction material, and even a magazine can aspire to that status', he resolved, and went on to consider the problem of reconstruction from a number of perspectives – economic, social, technical, cultural and ideological. Assigning the verb 'building' both a literal and metaphorical sense, he put the need to provide shelter for a homeless population on the same plane as the more metaphysical problem of mending Italy's social fabric by forming 'a taste, a technique and a morality'. The interiors he published in *Domus* in these years reflected practical solutions, such as the use of standardised, mass-produced furniture or prefabricated construction elements, but they also projected the vision of an ideal home, combining tradition with modernity. Photographs in *Domus* would often depict eighteenth-century furnishings next to items made in tubular steel, and would always include books, everyday objects and other tokens of human habitation. In this humanistic editorial line, and particularly Rogers' strategic use of writing, he revived a tradition of combining architecture and literature at the highest level, using one to support the other – a tradition embodied by Alberti, the historical model that Rogers continuously referred to. Years later, Rogers would clarify: 'I am no philosopher or literary-man, I am an architect who reads literature (and the poets) and writes, but who essentially designs and proves himself on the construction site.' And yet behind his usual self-deprecatory tone, Rogers maintained a firm belief that intellectual enquiry and historical consciousness constitute the foundations of artistic and professional practice, the load-bearing material for any architect's work.

True to this idea, when he became editor of *Casabella* in 1953 he promised to dedicate the magazine 'to the polemic surrounding vital topics', once again affirming that 'one builds no less with passionate discussion and the honest exchange of opinions as with tangible materials'. His first act as editor was to rename the magazine *Casabella-continuità*. Through the simple appending of the

word 'continuity' – an act clearly not without provocative intent – Rogers completely transformed the journal and helped to trigger a momentous shift in architectural research, which turned away from abstract expressionism and the question of new towns to focus on the problem of the war-torn fabric of historic city centres. *Preesistenza ambientale*, the metaphysical term Rogers used to identify this problem, would from that moment on haunt Italian architectural discourse, resonating well beyond the Alps. The banner 'continuity' was an exhortation to 'understand the modern movement as a "continuous revolution", by which is meant a continuous growth of the principle of adherence to the mutable contents of life'. As Rogers stated in his first *Casabella* editorial, 'continuity means historical consciousness, that is the true essence of tradition'. This layered idea of 'continuity' is manifest across several strands of Rogers' work as editor – in the way he built on the efforts of Pagano, who transformed the original *Casa Bella* into a critical journal; in the consistency of his approach towards the various creative disciplines, from painting to film, sculpture and philosophy; in his references to pre-war Italian rationalism, rescuing it from the taint of fascism, and to early European modernism, restoring the connections to its historical precedents.

Rogers' continuity was also a pragmatic response to the political situation in Italy. To address the severe housing crisis, the government had created the Gestione INA-Casa, a programme that diverted money from welfare provision into social housing, in the process largely defining the face of Italian architecture in the 1950s. The legal basis for the programme was the Piano Fanfani of 1949 – a seven-year plan for reconstruction drawn up by Amintore Fanfani, who had been in exile with Rogers in Switzerland. In addition to specific design recommendations, the plan implicitly criticised the monotony of modernist rationalisation and standardisation, calling instead for an urbanism that evoked spontaneity and 'genuineness'. It also had the explicit objective of boosting the economy. By deliberately keeping construction at a preindustrial, strictly manual level, it allowed for the 'absorption' of unskilled workers who had remained unemployed after the war.

As Giulio-Carlo Argan remarked (in the exhibition catalogue of the 1952 RIBA exhibition 'Italian Architecture'), 'problems of form have always played an extremely important part in Italian culture... Just as political conditions have mandated that questions of ethics are often presented in the guise of aesthetic issues, so in Italy the modern movement's stylistic problems have always taken precedence over ideological concerns.' In this sense Roman *neorealismo* and Milanese 'continuity' emerged as answers to the Piano Fanfani. *Neorealismo* was a direct emanation of its politics. The term extended beyond the domain of cinema and literature, coming to describe an architectural movement based on an informal and picturesque organisation of the plan and on the use of traditional materials for detailing, as exemplified by the Tiburtino complex in Rome (1954). In a context of austerity, *neorealismo* choreographed a populist, regressive utopia. Its *ex-novo*, pseudo-rural vernacular was intended to appear as the product of layers of historic sedimentation – a sop to residents who had relocated to the city from Italy's depopulating countryside. Milanese 'continuity', on the other hand, was an attempt to find a middle ground between modernist con-

structive principles and a formal expression that could 'dialogue' with the masses by means of historical references and quotations.

Ernesto Nathan Rogers,
untitled, c 1960
© Archivio Studio BBPR

Rogers used his talents as an editor to encourage his young collaborators at *Casabella* (De Carlo, Rossi, Gregotti, Aulenti and Grassi, among others) to study historical figures whose work challenged the canonical reading of architectural modernity (such as Loos, Perret, Van de Velde, Behrens, Antonelli and the architecture of the French Enlightenment). However, this attempt to incorporate history and regional traditions into modernism met with great resistance, particularly when some of his collaborators started to pursue their own subjective and introspective investigations using discrete fragments freely selected from the whole repertoire of architectural history – a shift that in some ways echoed the one that took place in film around the same time, as the work of formerly neorealist directors like Fellini and Antonioni took on a more existentialist and oneiric tone. Needless to say, some prominent figures in architecture took exception to this development, accusing Rogers of betraying modernism and contributing to an ‘infantile regression’ to historical references and eclectic forms of composition.

In the wake of this criticism, Rogers’ role as an educator would also come under attack. Italian institutions had always been wary of his pedagogical methods, on account of his tendency to integrate political and historical references. Another black mark was his reluctance to deliver certainties: in lectures he would frequently tell his students ‘I’d like to open new horizons ... and let you move towards them with your own forces. These are limits that not even the Great Masters of modernism can surpass.’ Before gaining some level of acceptance at home, he would first have to teach at many prestigious institutions abroad – in Lausanne, Geneva, London and at Harvard, where Walter Gropius proposed to make him his successor as dean of the GSD. It was only in 1952 that Rogers joined the faculty of the Politecnico di Milano, inheriting the course on the ‘stylistic characteristics of architecture’ that had once been the preserve of his own teacher, Ambrogio Annoni. He would have to wait until 1964 to become a full professor.

Rogers had developed a teaching approach alongside Gropius through their association at the CIAM conferences, beginning with Bergamo in 1949. Working together with Jane Drew on the CIAM Educational Commission, they had devised a pedagogy based on dialectics, teamwork, international exchange and dialogue between disciplines. The commission invited CIAM members to open their ateliers to students, to broaden their practical and technical experience. Notably, they also argued for the need to study the history of architecture, not in isolation but in direct relation to the immediate problems of design practice. It was here, however, that their opinions diverged. Gropius argued that ‘history classes should be studied in later years, rather than the first, to avoid imitation and intimidation’. Rogers found this demand ironic, ‘coming from people like Gropius (and other masters) who, despite knowing history very well, were not intimidated by it and did not feel compelled to imitate, but rather found it contributed substantially to their progressive ideas. Why deprive the young of a necessary element for their formation?’

To introduce younger generations to the discourses of the CIAM congresses, the commission headed by Gropius and Rogers also assembled a global faculty and established a CIAM Summer School. The first session took place at the Architectural Association in 1949, with Rogers as an invited juror. That same year he was appointed as a visiting tutor at the AA, a school whose vitality and seemingly unstructured set up simultaneously fascinated and upset him. What Rogers

absorbed from his encounter with the ‘orchestra of students and the chorus of the AA’ was a certain pre-existing climate of dissent. For him these were ‘the most rebellious, the most obstinate and pretentious students’: the ‘We do not agree’ clan, he affectionately called them.

So successful was Rogers’ stay at the AA that the then principal, Robert Furneaux Jordan, made an informal ‘exchange’ agreement with him, whereby the other BBPR partners would come in turn to the AA as visiting teachers, while a succession of AA students would spend a term based at BBPR’s Milan studio – a sort of ad-hoc proto-Erasmus exchange. And indeed, by the early 1950s, Rogers’ connections made BBPR’s studio – much like his own house in Via Bigli – the Italian base for foreign architects linked to the international CIAM circuit. It was not uncommon to enter the door of Via dei Chiostri 2 and find personalities such as Aalto, Gropius, Le Corbusier, Neutra, Maldonado, Kaufmann Jr, Giedion, Rudofsky or Roth; the studio was also regularly visited by artists like Calder, Fontana and Steinberg, or by entrepreneurs such as Olivetti, writers like Eugenio Montale, philosophers like Enzo Paci and the circle around the journal *aut aut*, the Italian laboratory of phenomenology (to which Rogers himself was a frequent contributor).

All the subsequent editions of the CIAM Summer School, between 1952 and 1957, were held at the IUAV in Venice under the direction of Rogers, Franco Albini, Ignazio Gardella and Giuseppe Samonà. The initiative had an important impact in Italy, its emphasis on research, regional planning and student–faculty collaboration contrasting sharply with the traditional, style-based methods of Italian academia. Its host school, IUAV would change its curriculum and to some extent become the new Milanese school, attracting Rogers and other BBPR partners, as well as members of the CIAM and the MSA.

Rogers’ presence was one of the elements that prepared the ground in both Milan and Venice for the student turmoil of the late 1960s, partly because his approach to education combined the study of architecture with an extended exploration of the city, art, literature, philosophy, cinema, sociology, urban geography and, above all, politics; but also because he embodied a certain polemical stance. ‘One needs to have architecture in one’s guts’, he would tell his students. In an era of rampant rationalism, that must have sounded like quite a provocation. Nor did he shy away from confrontation, even at the cost of straining his professional relationships. We can see this in his staunch defence of the Torre Velasca at the eleventh – and, not coincidentally, the last – meeting of CIAM at Otterlo in 1959, and in the fierce dispute over ‘Neoliberty’ waged by Rogers and Reyner Banham in the pages of *Casabella* and *The Architectural Review*.

Though the term ‘Neoliberty’ was first coined by Paolo Portoghesi in 1958, the argument had begun some time before, with the publication in *Casabella* 215 (April/May 1957) of an article by Aldo Rossi on liberty and some historically charged works of the Turinese architects Roberto Gabetti and Aimaro Isola. Rogers’ editorials viewed the work of his young collaborators through a critical lens, but that was not enough for Banham, who in 1959 accused the whole contemporary Italian scene of a ‘retreat from modern architecture’. Banham reserved his most acerbic remarks for the ‘excessive, indulgent’ Milanese, who reminded him, he said, of the destitute couple

in de Sica’s film *Miracolo a Milano*; before food or shelter, they wanted a crystal chandelier. Rather than bringing about aesthetic and social

Alexander Calder,
Ernesto R, 1952
© Alberico Belgioioso



31 Maggio 1952

"Ernesto R."
- Calder

renewal, the Milanese had changed little ‘beyond the detailing and some amelioration of space standards’. In response to this attack Rogers sarcastically labelled Banham the ‘keeper of the Frigidaire’, mocking his fondness for new domestic appliances and his blind faith in technology. Though Banham did read Italian, Rogers suggested he had failed to interpret it correctly – his language skills not being adequate to the task – and invited him instead ‘to make a direct reading of Ruskin, who was a great Englishman, without bothering with lame interpretations of Marinetti’ and other contemporary manifestations of Italian culture.

In the same Neoliberty exchange Banham labelled Rogers the ‘hero-figure of European architecture in the late 1940s and early 1950s’. For Banham this was the ultimate rebuke, dismissing Rogers as out of step with his time and with the cultural revolution brought about by mechanisation, which had ‘permanently altered the nature of domestic life and architecture’. Banham’s choice of words illustrates how Rogers’ arguments had been misconstrued by the English-speaking world. In a radical break from the established modernist discourse, Rogers understood ‘progress’ as a state of constant crisis and interrogation (much like the Italian intellectual climate of the 1930s), with different voices negotiating a variety of positions to enrich modernist discourse and move it forward. At the time, the British still clung to a much more Whiggish view, of a clear, unchecked line of progress through time.

The debate continued at the Otterlo CIAM in 1959, where Rogers gave a presentation on BBPR’s Torre Velasca, justifying the building’s eclectic structure as the outcome of functional and technical considerations on the one hand, and of a historical analysis of the *preesistenza ambientali* on the other. The backlash was violent, though hardly unexpected. Rogers was attacked by Team X members Jaap Bakema and Peter Smithson, who declared that the Velasca was a formalistic exercise and a dangerous model for imitation. To these accusations Rogers famously replied: ‘There is one main difficulty that I see and that is that you think in English.’ And yet the irony, of course, was that Rogers himself was not averse to thinking in English – by his own admission, his favoured concepts of tradition and *preesistenza ambientali* were indebted to the work of the poet T S Eliot, for whom ‘The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but also of its presence.’ But his Anglo-Saxon interrogators remained unconvinced, and the confrontation at Otterlo exposed the irreconcilable differences between the English and the Italian contingent. Rogers’ vision of modernism as ‘a truly international language sprung from mutual understanding’ – the words are from his inaugural editorial for *Casabella* in 1954 – now appeared fundamentally out of reach.

Rogers’ dialogue with an English-speaking audience continued to prove difficult. One year after Otterlo he submitted to Harvard’s Belknap Press a collection of essays whose translation he had personally funded. The response from William Warren Smith, a senior editor, was less than encouraging: ‘There are many items which will have to be shortened or eliminated ... eg, there are references to the positions of architects under fascism, which are “old hat” and would be unlikely to interest English-speaking people ... or references to the postwar political scene too parochial to be left in... One chapter is a sentimental lament over a friend and colleague who died in the war and will certainly have to be omitted.’ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the anthology was never published. Rogers’

A selected anthology of the writings of Ernesto Nathan Rogers, *The Hero of Doubt*, will be published by the AA in 2018

international reputation continued to decline, hastened in 1965 by a changing of the editorial guard at *Casabella* and the ascendancy of a new generation of architects, including Rossi, Grassi, Semerani, Polesello and Tentori. His loss of this editorial role coincided with the onset of a prolonged illness that would deeply impair his professional life, and tragically completely deprived him of his voice for a number of years before his premature death in 1969.

More than a decade earlier, a characteristically self-deprecatory Rogers had lamented to his friend Luciano Semerani, ‘I’m nearly 50 years old and I’ve achieved nothing: I don’t own a house, I don’t have a family, or a position within a university, I haven’t realised any major works or published a book yet.’ Things would soon change. Within a couple of years he had completed a building that would dominate European architectural discourse. While remaining central to that discourse in Italy through his editorship of *Casabella-continuità*, he would also enjoy a succession of academic appointments at some of the world’s most prominent schools and publish his first book with Einaudi. Soon afterwards, after 20 years of drifting from one hotel to another, he would even set up a beautiful apartment for himself in Milan’s Brera neighbourhood, most favoured by Stendhal, an author Rogers particularly cherished.

One must therefore always judge the extent of Rogers’ achievements – and particularly his literary efforts – against the parallel extent of his own self-doubt. A master of understatement throughout his career, he shied away from the pomposity of titles such as ‘historian’ or ‘theoretician’, refusing to fix his words in a treatise or compose a systematic narrative of the history of the modern movement. He chose instead the editorial, the lecture, the journal article or the epistolary exchange to give voice to his reflections. These traces, samples and sound-bites, dispersed in notes, periodicals and the memories of his interlocutors, have only been selected and recomposed in books on a handful of occasions: ‘Esperienza dell’architettura’ (1958), ‘Gli elementi del fenomeno architettonico’ (printed for a university course in 1961) and ‘Editoriali di architettura’ (1968), and posthumously in Luca Molinari’s *Lettere di Ernesto a Ernesto e viceversa* and Serena Maffioletti’s *Architettura, misura e grandezza dell’uomo* (2010). For this reason Rogers has largely been neglected by historians, who have taken his self-deprecatory attitude too literally, somehow allowing him to camouflage his heroic effort to ‘humanise’ the work of the great modernist masters and open them up for contemporary criticism and debate.

Fifty years after Ernesto Nathan Rogers’ death, after the dust has settled on the polemics that undermined his reputation towards the end of his many careers, it is time to look anew at this complex and controversial figure. It goes without saying that the act of translation brings with it certain objective difficulties, which are tied not only to the nature of the languages in question, but also to Rogers’ complex relationship with English culture, which throughout his life was something both irreconcilably alien and suffocatingly familiar. Of course, at the same time there is an obvious irony to the idea of ‘reading’ Rogers’ voice in English, an unnatural form for him, whereas his Italian always ‘flowed fresh, precise, clear, immediate’ and with ‘such a firm unity between thought and expression that the two could not be told apart’, as he wrote in the 1940s. Now we are forcing Rogers to change language and face what he termed ‘the sound barrier of difficult words’, but only so that his voice, and his doubts, will be able to reverberate and reach new audiences.

Contributors

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Nigel Coates is an architect, designer and teacher. He graduated from the AA in 1974 and ran a unit at the school for a decade from 1978, out of which emerged the NATO (Narrative Architecture Today) group. In 1985 he formed Branson Coates Architecture with Doug Branson, with whom he completed a number of projects, including a series of cafes in Japan, an extension to the Geffrye Museum in London and the National Centre for Popular Music in Sheffield. From 1995 to 2011 he was professor and head of department at the Royal College of Art. Since 2006 he has worked through his own studio, producing multiple furniture and lighting designs and contributing installations to various galleries, museums and biennales. He is the author of *Guide to Ecstacy* (2003) and *Narrative Architecture* (2012).

Theo Crosby (1925–1994) was an architect, editor, writer and curator. Born in South Africa, he moved to London in 1947, where he worked for Frey, Drew & Partners. In the 1950s, parallel to running his own practice, he was the technical editor of *Architectural Design*, the creative driving force behind the 1956 ‘This is Tomorrow’ exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery and editor and designer of the magazine *Uppercase*. In the 1960s he organised and designed the British pavilion at the 1964 Milan Triennale, and headed the design office of Taylor Woodrow on a proposal for the new Euston Station. In the 1970s he co-founded the design firm Pentagram, and in the last decades of his life he acted as an architectural advisor to the Prince of Wales, was appointed professor of architecture and design at the RCA, and was fundamental to the building of the Globe Theatre. His many publications include *Architecture: City Sense* (1965) and *The Necessary Monument* (1970).

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Roberta Marcaccio teaches history and theory of architecture at the AA and leads a design think tank at the London School of Architecture. Alongside her teaching activities she also works for the London-based studio DSDHA, overseeing the practice’s research and communication. Her writings have featured in *Real Estates* (2014), *Erasmus Effect* (2014) and *Milano Architettura* (2015) and she is currently working with AA Publications on an English anthology of the writings of Ernesto Nathan Rogers, which will be published in 2018.

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Shin Takamatsu established his architectural firm in Kyoto in 1980 and almost immediately attracted a worldwide reputation through a succession of mechanistic, idiosyncratic buildings, including the kimono workshop Origin and the dental clinics Ark and Pharaoh. Drawings of these projects, in what would soon be identified as his signature graphite style, were exhibited at the AA in 1986 with an accompanying published folio, *The Killing Moon*. Since then, Takamatsu has completed numerous cultural, commercial and residential projects in Japan, Taiwan and China, and is professor emeritus at his alma mater, Kyoto University.

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Francesco Zuddas is senior lecturer in architecture at Anglia Ruskin University. He studied at the University of Cagliari and the AA, where he also taught architecture and urbanism. He is currently writing a book on the project of universities in Italy in the 1970s, based on his PhD research.