

Can buildings criticize? Wasn't the modernist housing project a collective criticism of untenable living conditions? Can embassies convey differentiated, critical messages to both home and host countries? Can architects embody explicit criticism in their buildings at all? If so, how? The architectural critiques collected in this volume demonstrate the spectrum of effective possibilities for Built Criticism.

Prominent architectural practices discussed their critical stances at the International Conference on Architectural Criticism 2023 at Tongji University in Shanghai. There, even the choice of building materials was shown to be an explicit critique of existing conventions. A series of case studies explored the debate between tradition and modernity to reveal different results: sometimes a futile struggle against unstoppable progress, sometimes a subversive success against autocratic ideas of family. The collection of incisive analyses in this third volume in the series of CICA International Conferences broadens a field of knowledge that is still insufficiently explored.

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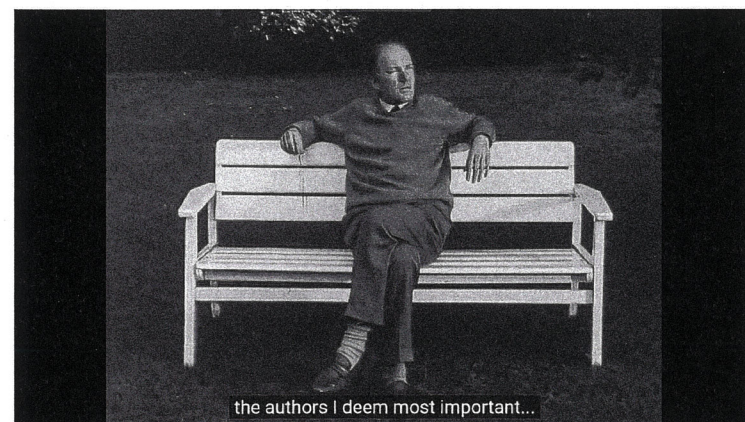
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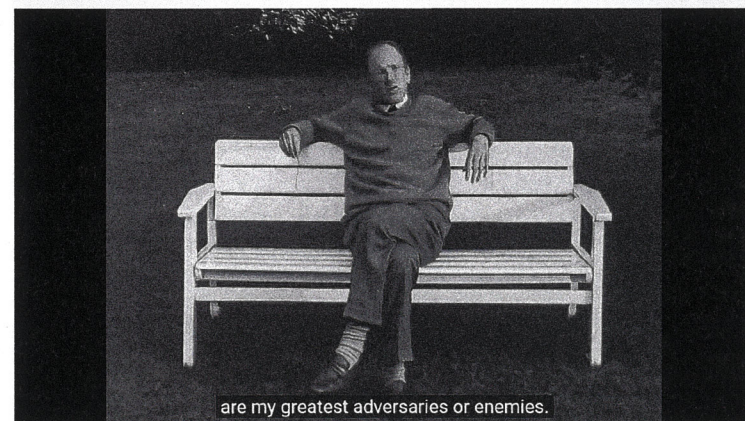
Early Paradigms

Going the Opposite Way: Giorgio Grassi and the Anxiety of Influence

Ricardo Leitão



the authors I deem most important...



are my greatest adversaries or enemies.

fig. 1
Double frame of Thomas Bernhard's monologue in the film *Drei Tage*.
© Ferry Radax, 1970.

Giorgio Grassi belongs to a select group of architects who write and draw with equal determination, displaying rigorous consistency in developing theoretical discourse. His critical engagement implies a doubled effort to interpret the vicissitudes of his time—a period which he does not recognize himself as belonging to—prompting him to boldly take positions to their extremes and, often in a hyperbolic way, firmly pointing in *the opposite direction*.

“Going the Opposite Way” not only tries to clarify Grassi’s critique of his contemporaries but also delves into the crucial influence of his “Alte Meister” in shaping his critical perspective.

On the Idea of Criticism

“A critical spirit is the great achievement of the modern age. Our civilization was founded on the idea of criticism: nothing is sacred or untouchable, except the freedom to think. Thinking that rejects criticism, especially self-criticism, is not thinking. Without criticism, that is without rigor or experimentation, there is no science; without it there is no art or literature. I would even say that without it there is no healthy society. Today, creation and criticism are one and the same thing. The history of modern literature, from Cervantes to Joyce, is the history of criticism converted into creation. Criticism of society and of language, criticism of values and of gods, criticism of power and of ideas. A writer is not the servant of the church, the state, the party, the homeland, the people or social morality, as he or she is a servant of language. But writers only really serve it when they raise suspicions about it: modern literature is above all criticism of language. . . . Criticism of language and criticism of reality are part of the same search.”

—Octavio Paz, *Pasión crítica*

In the words of Alfonso Berardinelli, *criticism* is like the endocrine system: “it’s not every visible, but when it isn’t working properly, all the other systems suffer; they become deformed, put on weight, shrink, lose balance . . .”¹ And we would even argue that the end of criticism is a deadly condition for the body of any discipline. Berardinelli points out that “in the past criticism was usually born out of a theory, and that theory was Marxism,”² although in general terms criticism of ideology descends from satire, which in a way announced it historically after the Enlightenment.

keywords:

Giorgio Grassi, Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze, “Alte Meister,” Harold Bloom, influence, tradition

¹ Alfonso Berardinelli, “The Problem with Today’s Culture is that it Doesn’t Tolerate the Existence of Criticism,” interview by António Guerreiro, *Electra*, no. 20 (2023), 19.

² Alfonso Berardinelli, “Problem with Today’s Culture,” 22.

Regarding Giorgio Grassi's architecture, Kenneth Frampton situates it within the boundaries of a possible dichotomy between two equally established neo-Marxist critical positions: on the one hand, Theodor Adorno's negative dialectic, "in which the autonomy of committed art is such that there cannot be any kind of reconciliation between the logical discipline of the architecture and the emotive propensities of the general public,"³ and, on the other hand, the anti-vanguardist social accessibility of traditional culture, as initially formulated by György Lukács concerning literary *realism*, which is of particular relevance in the following analysis. This is an essential clue for considering and understanding a hypothetical side that Grassi would probably take in the notorious "Debate on Expressionism"⁴ between 1935 and 1940.

In fact, in the text entitled "It Is All about Realism!",⁵ György Lukács frames an idea of progress in literature precisely against the superficial immediacy that he detects in avant-garde movements. Drawing on Hegel's thought, Lukács even suggests a possible correspondence between *immediacy* and *abstraction*, warning that through immediacy, only abstract thought can emerge. This sentence could also be part of the text "Questions about Architecture and Realism,"⁶ in which Grassi characterizes the architecture of expressionism as a marginal and pictorial experience that does not distinguish between the *nostalgic* gaze and the *evocative* one. For him, unlike the uncritical immediacy of the nostalgic eye, the evocative gaze has the advantage of observing historical experience as a *shareable corpus*, recognizing its repetitive moments and looking to it to confirm his own solutions.

Throughout his extensive writing, Grassi often uses Lukács's evocation of architectural "adequacy"⁷ to pursue his obsession with the need for architecture to confront itself and avoid becoming something increasingly removed from life—a *dead language*.

Thus, Grassi can be seen as an architect who struggled all his life against a distorted idea of expression promulgated by the masquerade and the misuse of language. This fight is perhaps the point that binds him to Thomas Bernhard (*fig. 1*), an Austrian writer Grassi confesses to admiring and whose excessive, honest, and disarming criticism he admits genuinely encourages his work. Bernhard is an essential member of the spiritual family Grassi chose early on, a brilliant point of orientation in a larger constellation that would include, outside the architectural spectrum, figures such as Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Robert Bresson, and Arturo Martini.

Grassi and Bernhard both hold an unshakeable belief in an almost extinct language that is losing meaning in a world speeding towards the abyss. Furthermore, this accelerated and indulgent pace of decline is one of the significant objects of their critical engagement, which implies a doubled effort to interpret the vicissitudes of their time—a period which they do not recognize themselves as belonging to—prompting them to take positions to their extremes and, often in a hyperbolic way, firmly pointing in the *opposite direction*. Somewhat like Bertolt Brecht's economy of means and attachment to elementary questions, both Bernhard and Grassi could never be recruited for any humanist rhetoric since they are closely united by their feelings of repulsion towards a generalized mediocrity and are capable of refusing, most of the time cynically and brutally, the superfluous and the condescending. Their attitude is analogous to Brechtian theater,⁸ and follows a principle of lapidary radicalism, which can exclude any passive spectator they never intended to please.

³ Kenneth Frampton, "Giorgio Grassi a Firenze," in *La Nuova Sede della Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze di Giorgio Grassi* (Florence: Scala Group, 2009), 29.

⁴ Regarding this polemic, in *Realismo Materialismo Utopia—Uma polémica 1935–1940*, João Barrento clarifies that it was not just a closed and sterile academic discussion. *German expressionism* arose from the historical conditions created by the growing threat of fascism. It clarified positions that had been clashing in the process of consolidating Marxist aesthetic theory, particularly regarding the formulation of a theory of realism and the social and political function of literature and art.

⁵ This essay by Lukács was originally published in *Das Wort* (Moscow) 3, no. 6 (1938), under the title "Es geht um den Realismus."

⁶ This text was originally published under the title "Architekturprobleme und Realismus" in the "Realismus in der Architektur" issue of *Architese* in 1976. Our reading was based on the Portuguese version in the anthology *Escritos Escolhidos, 1965–2015*, translation, notes, and introduction by José Miguel Rodrigues (Porto: Edições Afrontamento and Fundação Instituto Arquitecto José Marques da Silva, 2018).

⁷ In several of his writings, Grassi often returns to an aphorism from Lukács's *Aesthetics*: "Architecture creates a real and adequate space, intended to evoke adequacy visually."

⁸ Brechtian theater adopts the attitude of questioning everything until no certainties are left standing, with the clear ambition of bringing to the surface everything that is most difficult and *uncomfortable*. Bertolt Brecht realized that the best way to be *inconvenient* in a decadent society is to be lapidary to the point of radicalism. The radical experience of his plays becomes didactic, posing elementary questions in the most unpredictable ways, plundering tradition to the extent of plagiarism to create original works.

Alte Meister or the Anxiety of Influence

"The masters of the modern movement reached implicitly for the values of tradition. Thanks to them, later generations could learn more explicitly the concept of 'Continuità,' either because they recognized them as fathers (and starting from their work, they are developing unexplored themes) or because by investigating the genealogy of these 'fathers' they could understand multiple family relationships along the winding and dramatic process that is history."

—Ernesto N. Rogers, *Esperienza dell'architettura*

In *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*,⁹ Harold Bloom argues that "poetic history is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence."¹⁰ In the sequel, *A Map of Misreading*,¹¹ the literary critic combines the ideas of "influence and criticism," emphasizing that "all poetry necessarily becomes verse-criticism, just as all criticism becomes prose-poetry."¹² Bloom suggests that one of the functions of criticism is to make the work of a good poet more challenging to accomplish, as only the overcoming of genuine difficulties can result in poems entirely suited to a time as consciously belated as ours.

T. S. Eliot's aphorism "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal" underscores the intrinsic indebtedness of creative acts to precursors. Bloom's proposition involves crafting a narrative for extraordinary "thefts," offering a unique approach to critical reading. The potential in what he terms "misprision" reveals diverse facets of any author's thinking, enabling readers to gather dispersed fragments and rearrange them, akin to a Warburgian atlas, according to new creative logic.

The same can be applied as a critical tool and serve as a valuable analytical instrument within architectural discourse. The act of appropriation, frequently observed in creative processes, does not merely involve replicating the work of predecessors. Instead, it can involve fighting against some of their ideas to suit our context and experiences. As architects engage in this ongoing dialogue (or discussion) with the past, it is crucial to recognize that architectural history can represent a gradual accumulation and intermingling of solutions—an enduring cycle of revisiting and renewing responses to lasting challenges spanning generations. In this regard, a broader *image of thought* can be circumscribed that also allows thinking in *constellations*: history transformed into an infinite repository of solutions; a tool for the persistent renewal of answers to perennial problems. In essence, history becomes a container of ideas available for cyclical movements of reappropriation, thereby paraphrasing and re-signifying Bloom's notion that the history of architecture is *also* indistinguishable from the influence between architects.

In the theory imagined by Bloom, there is a particular interest in the strength implicit in concepts such as *misreading* and *swerving* as ideas capable of establishing a critical *modus operandi* in the face of any influence.

One of the six revisionary ratios explored in his poetic theory is called *kenosis*, and it focuses on the possibility of operating critically in *opposition* to a preceding influence: the subversion or emptying of a precursor can greatly reinforce *the new poem*. Bloom presents this revisionary ratio as a critical act in which a strong poet empties and attempts to dissolve a precursor, highlighting this action as a defense mechanism. Bloom goes on to explain that according to Freud, "the purpose of any defense mechanism is to prevent danger."¹³

⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

¹⁰ Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 5.

¹¹ Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

¹² From Harold Bloom's perspective, the critic has to push the fatal encouragement that prevents any poet from forgetting the weight of their inheritance. As Bloom conceives it, influence means that "there are no texts, but only relationships between texts. These relationships depend upon a critical act, a misreading or misprision, that one poet performs upon another, and that does not differ in kind from the necessary critical acts performed by every strong reader upon every text he encounters. The influence-relation governs reading as it governs writing, and reading is therefore a miswriting just as writing is a misreading" (Bloom, *Map of Misreading*, 3).

¹³ Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 89. As we will see later in this essay, the idea of creating under a potential threat or danger makes particular sense in Grassi's case.

Some architects work from multiple, unrelated *references* that appear more or less randomly on their desks. Giorgio Grassi is not one of those architects. We can read his work in the light of an idea of *influence* that we would like to stress, above all because Grassi is an architect who does not hide his influences in the same way that he does not hide the problems that these influences place in his path and with which he necessarily has to deal.

In "Alte Meister,"¹⁴ the Italian architect sets out to write about some individuals whom he has consistently observed with "admiration and instinctive sympathy, albeit always from a distance, as if they belonged to another world."¹⁵ This provides a crucial insight into how influence operates in his work. As he indicates, this "other world" sharply distinguishes between the influence of two types of masters he identifies: the new ones (whom we choose) and the old ones (who impose themselves on us). Grassi cautions that his text will not primarily focus on the works of Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Heinrich Tessenow, or Ludwig Hilberseimer—masters he personally selected. Instead, he directs attention towards voices from an ancient and distant world, to masters who were not chosen by us yet stand before us inevitably and with a profound impact, much like their buildings, imposing their presence and serving as exemplary models.

Initially, Grassi suggests that, in a broader sense, all his work entails a continual *confrontation* with those works that he believes offer comprehensive solutions to the problems he frequently encounters in his projects. His approach to architectures and architects, whom he collectively calls "Old Masters," indicates that if a similar question was addressed and resolved definitively in the past, we must carefully examine and scrutinize those models, recognizing that nothing can be replicated exactly in the same manner. The new conditions inherent in each case strongly affirm Bloom's perspective on influence. He argues that reading the past, even when subjected to misinterpretation, becomes a crucial tool for poets striving for imaginative freedom and liberation from historical lateness.

It is not certain that Grassi would fully agree with Bloom on this point, especially because he declares that he does not see his architecture as art, at least not the *ars poetica* on which Bloom is focused. However, Grassi ought to be seen as one point in a larger constellation of architects who are associated with the idea of architecture anchored in the notion of *Baukunst*¹⁶—despite its "*Costruzione Logica*"¹⁷—since one of his primary influences is the author of the famous *De Re Aedificatoria* (*On the Art of Building in Ten Books*).¹⁸

The permanent confrontation with Leon Battista Alberti—whom Grassi considers one of the most challenging masters, if not the most—coincides with the apparent conflict he has with himself. When Grassi states that Alberti's treatise is nothing more than a coherent way to put his entire life as an architect into perspective, it reflects his earnest desire. Grassi confesses that he cannot discuss his master's work without intertwining his own experiences and the ideals he has consistently pursued for himself and his work. This acknowledgment underscores his genuine aspiration to comprehend Alberti's legacy through a lens shaped by his own professional and personal journey.

The pact with the Old Masters—a loyal, stable, and lasting pact—that Grassi defends is nothing more than the character of *generality* that establishes the common thread between his architecture and Alberti's, and between Alberti's and the figure of the Roman architect who appears to be their main point of reference.

The intense bond between theory and practice, that is, between what they write and what they build, is absolutely crucial in the elaboration in which they both engage, reappropriating a certain historical experience from which a system had developed

¹⁴ Giorgio Grassi, *Escritos Escolhidos, 1965-2015*, translation, notes, and introduction by José Miguel Rodrigues (Porto: Edições Afrontamento and Fundação Instituto Arquitecto José Marques da Silva, 2018).

¹⁵ Grassi, *Escritos Escolhidos*, 473 (translation by the author).

¹⁶ Kenneth Frampton places Grassi in the sphere of *Baukunst*, within a genealogy of architects such as Heinrich Tessenow and Adolf Loos, precisely on the threshold between two poles: on the one hand, European vernacular architecture without author and time, the so-called analogue architecture, and, on the other, the romantically classical paradigms of the German Enlightenment. An important nuance should be added to the term, particularly dear to Giorgio Grassi—*Stadtbaukunst* or "the architecture of the city."

¹⁷ *La Costruzione Logica dell'Architettura* was published in 1967 by Giorgio Grassi with the intention of establishing a rational framework based on the requirement of generality that would address a theory of design in architecture. One of its aims was to establish a genealogy of rationalism, clarifying the methodical significance and theoretical value of some of its architectural examples.

¹⁸ Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

that was both *constructive* and *compositive* and extending it through successive improvements.

In the example of Alberti, Grassi sees what he considers to be an audacious architect capable of assuming the risk and responsibility of taking architecture backwards, then returning to the point where he believes it had achieved its greatest results, thus recovering the common thread where those results had been lost.

The presumed difficult relationship between Alberti and his contemporaries can be seen here from Grassi's reading.¹⁹ The naive and sometimes rudimentary appropriation of the forms of Roman architecture by certain of Alberti's contemporaries—the so-called archaeologism—is seen as a target of his treatise, which includes direct advice to the architect unable to avoid "frivolity, obstinacy, ostentation, or presumption,"²⁰ as if the claimed superficiality of some of his colleagues were here serving as an example not to be followed.

In *De Re Aedificatoria*, Giorgio Grassi finds "a handbook for good construction—an extraordinarily up-to-date manual (or outdated, depending on your point of view), that is, despite its age, an incredibly modern manual if you think that it is also the only one that could still be proposed today in the face of the embarrassing spectacle that is being inflicted on contemporary architecture."²¹

His project for the New Headquarters of the Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze is an outstanding example of Grassi's ambition to confront both Alberti and the Roman architecture that the author of *De Re Aedificatoria* had tried to revive, particularly in terms of construction methods and its way of organizing the complex system that we call *city*, thereby putting the Albertian lessons to the test and simultaneously weaving a subliminal critique of the architecture of his own time.

Architecture and Opposition

The project of Cassa di Risparmio in Florence

It is curious that one of the most notable works of Grassi—who was presumed to be ideologically linked to the left—is the headquarters of one of Italy's oldest and most important banking institutions. Criticism indeed might begin exactly from this point, possibly echoing extreme Bernhadian irony and gradually developing from within.

The project for the New Headquarters of the Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze (fig. 2), the competition for which Grassi won in 2004, is based—albeit not solely—on his absolute necessity to settle scores with both Leon Krier's 1994 master plan (fig. 3) for that area of Florence and "the unpredictable object suffering from irresistible gigantism"²² of Leonardo Ricci's Palace of Justice. The Florentine project highlights the way Grassi's buildings are inscribed in an *opposite idea of the city*—and, by extension, *society*—entering itself in a second phase²³ of his work that seems to us to corroborate Carlos Martí Arís's interpretation when he argues that "the projects, by assuming the primordial role in the cognitive process, start to then feed the critical reflection that, in turn, reaffirms the project work itself."²⁴ Thus, it can also be seen as a project he envisioned as an opportunity to make a direct critique of his time, aligning himself closely with the masters who all, at one point or another, undertook similar endeavors, persistently defending the integrity of their buildings. The Shell Building by J. J. P. Oud (fig. 4) is the critical reference followed by Grassi, who openly declared that his Florentine project is, at least for him, the equivalent of Oud's controversial *palazzo*.²⁵ Both buildings are associated with capital-related companies, adopting a language that is, at least in their eyes, misunderstood by critics, mixing traces of classicism and modernism, and evoking a sense of lost monumentality. In addition, both are the consequence of the need to express a state of intolerance through a gesture of freedom. By commending

¹⁹ Regarding Alberti and his contemporaries, Grassi establishes a fundamental difference between the approaches to Roman ruins. On the one hand, Alberti designs by putting some already consolidated typologies to the test, critically reflecting on ways of building, whenever possible, and avoiding the attraction of the archaeological approach; on the other, there is the vision of some artists who, having been amazed by the extraordinary Roman ruins, returned to their studios excited by the idea of simply copying them, imagining fanciful ways of completing them without worrying too much about why.

²⁰ Alberti, *Art of Building*, 315.

²¹ "Projectar racionalmente (o sapateiro e o arquitecto)," in Giorgio Grassi, *Leon Battista Alberti e a Arquitectura Romana*, translation, notes, and introduction by José Miguel Rodrigues (Porto: Edições Afrontamento and Fundação Instituto Arquitecto José Marques da Silva, 2015), 121 (translation by the author).

²² "Uma ideia de arquitectura, um modo de trabalhar e o seu porquê" (2012), in Grassi, *Escritos Escolhidos*, 598 (translation by the author).

²³ In Giorgio Grassi's work, Carlos Martí Arís identifies two distinct phases in the relationship between writings and projects. The first phase spans approximately from 1960 to 1980, during which the projects served as experimental validations of theories established and affirmed in his writings. Subsequently, a second phase emerges wherein the projects become sources that feed theoretical reflections.

²⁴ Carlos Martí Arís, "Los maestros difíciles," in *Arquitectura, lengua muerta y otros escritos*, ed. Giorgio Grassi (Barcelona: Ediciones del Serbal, 2003), 9 (translation by the author).

²⁵ On this controversy, see the lecture presented by Grassi on May 19, 1970, at the Facoltà di Architettura del Politecnico di Milano, fully transcribed under the title "Arquitectura e Racionalismo," in Grassi, *Escritos Escolhidos*, 59.



fig. 2
"Neighborhood relations" between
the Cassa di Risparmio by Grassi
and the Palace of Justice by Ricci.
© Luca Bosco.

fig. 3
Grassi's site plan of the Cassa di
Risparmio di Firenze. Giorgio Grassi,
2004–8. © Fondo Giorgio Grassi –
Fondazione MAXXI, Roma.

fig. 4
View of the principal facade of
the Shell Building, The Hague,
Netherlands. J. J. P. Oud, c.1946.
© Collection CCA – Canadian Centre
for Architecture, Montreal.



fig. 5
View of the Palazzo Rucellai from
Via del Purgatorio, Florence. Leon
Battista Alberti, c.1446–51.
© Luca Bosco.

Oud's bravery and conviction, Grassi appears to formulate his own critique based on a simple, almost ethical question: What truly defines the character of a building?

He provides the answer himself, clarifying that "the character of a building is not determined by a form liberated from any connection or precedent but precisely the opposite."²⁶

The final form emerges from what is termed the character of a building, integral to its complete expression as an architectural object serving a collective urban ideal. In this context, the enduring subliminal influence of Leon Battista Alberti is undeniable, particularly from the example of the Palazzo Rucellai (fig. 5). It should be noted that the Palazzo Rucellai corresponds to a new prototype of a city palace and, along with the Sant'Andrea in Mantua, is considered by Grassi to be the most interesting of all Alberti's projects since it is one of the most detailed. However, this architectural experiment is not entirely successful for two reasons: firstly, contrary to what would be expected for a prototype model, the project's context is highly complex, full of constraints in the configuration of the urban plot where it is located; secondly, because it tries to solve this intricate equation by making it dependent on the design of its facade, which has the unbridled ambition of freeing the model of the Florentine palace from a series of formal restrictions. Even so, the starting point of Grassi's building goes back to an idea of Florentine tradition refined by Alberti's *palazzo*, as both buildings are committed to redesigning their respective urban surroundings and aim to express a construction principle (figs. 6–7). Without any reverential awe, Grassi points towards the old Florence, literally in the opposite sense to the new buildings in that sprawling and, at least for him, unrecognizable part of the city known as Novoli.

The project of the New Headquarters of the Cassa di Risparmio is founded on principles that could only have been approached by precisely departing from the constraints of the city imposed by Krier's plan, which Grassi openly criticized—"a building open to the public and obliged to be divided into several buildings to satisfy an equally extravagant idea of a garden city."²⁷ However, Grassi ultimately followed the "Spinelli Variant" associated with Krier, but poetically subverted it. He exposed and

²⁶ "O carácter dos edifícios" (lecture given upon the inauguration of the 2003/4 academic year at the Facoltà d'Architettura Civile del Politecnico di Milano, December 4, 2003), published in *Casabella* 722 (May 2004), in Grassi, *Escritos Escritos*, 511 (translation by the author).

²⁷ "Uma ideia de arquitectura, um modo de trabalhar e o seu porquê," 591 (translation by the author).



emphasized what he considered to be its incongruities, viewing them precisely as the primary expressive theme of the large brick building surrounding a green courtyard (fig. 8). An example of this is the obliquely cut facades and the violent interruption of moldings and cornices in the volumes' breaks that have enriched the relationships established within the composition and which, like some examples of Roman ruins pointed out by Grassi, are gutted to the point of revealing the secrets of their constructive apparatus (fig. 9).

The critique gains further clarity when confronted with opponents such as Ricci's building—the complete antithesis of Grassi's proposal. It is crucial to emphasize that Grassi's building exerts an even greater impact when situated next to this "nuisance neighbor." Their stark contrast underscores the significance of Grassi's project, as their discordance is so evident that both structures verge on caricatures of themselves: a paradox as the best way to combat another paradox, perhaps.

Grassi is perfectly aware of this. He is aware of it from the moment he realizes that he has to measure his extremely banal cardboard scale mock-up against the super-sophisticated models of the other participants in this competition.²⁸ It is with particular enthusiasm that he quotes the passage by Alberti criticizing impeccably finished, elegant, and shiny representational models,²⁹ placing himself in favor of Alberti's predilection for models without frills and without the possibility of misleading.

When Grassi writes that "the model of a city does not always prescribe but adapts until it sometimes becomes a parody of itself,"³⁰ he is fully conscious of what his own expressive choices can mean. The result is an architectural artifact comprising a tripartite continuous body with distinct internal and external faces extending along the entire perimeter of the area: a sort of miniature city aspiring to align with the Florentine architectural tradition. The building's two faces—one clad in brick and the other in sandstone (figs. 10–11)—contribute to the idea of a logical and hierarchical construction that creates a genuine Albertian civil facade. In the case of Palazzo Rucellai, Alberti abruptly interrupts the cladding of its facade, aiming to show the

fig. 6
Detail of the public seat designed by Alberti for the facade of the Palazzo Rucellai. © Luca Bosco.

fig. 7
View of the public loggia of the Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze. © Luca Bosco.

²⁸ The list of architects participating in this competition included names such as Mario Bellini, Foster & Partners, Steven Holl, Kohn Pederson Fox, Fabrizio Rossi Prodi, and Paolo Zermani. The mock-up presented by Grassi was a simple cardboard model with the elevations printed and glued on—a sort of study mock-up, compared with some of his adversaries whose wooden mock-ups had sophisticated mechanisms that allowed lights to be switched on inside.

²⁹ Alberti, *Art of Building*, 34.

³⁰ "Arquitectura e racionalismo" (1970), in Grassi, *Escritos Escogidos*, 67 (translation by the author).



incompleteness of his prototype (figs. 12–13). Likewise, by openly exposing the fractures of his unitary building, Grassi underlines what he believes to be the formalist nature of the constraints imposed on him, hyperbolizing his critique to the point of revealing constructive sections in the side facades with the ambition of being didactic (fig. 14).

This is how an apparently complete stone façade, i.e., apparently complete in all its parts, from any point of view other than the perfectly orthogonal one, reveals that the building is, in reality, a scenarium. In other words, it is the expression of a profound contradiction, unsurpassed from a constructive point of view, and it shows at every point where that continuous building is left over or interrupted, revealing the curtain of brick that lies behind it and that covers all the internal fronts and façades, finally making it apparent at the four vertices of the large quadrilateral, where the stone from one side adjoins that from the other without ever touching, thus leaving the brick behind it exposed³¹ (fig. 15).

The incorporation of the classical cornice (fig. 16)—one of the peculiarities of this building—can perhaps be understood as a rare act of audacity since, when compared with the work of J. J. P. Oud, it could be read in the light of what Grassi himself considers to be the absolute necessity of tackling the problem of ornament in architecture.³² This detail is clearly an allusion to the fact that sometimes it is necessary to take one step backwards to take two steps forwards. And it is precisely here that Grassi comes closer to Oud.

The premises evoked by the Dutch architect in defense of his own building, from which he fiercely criticizes the official line of the modern movement embodied by Walter Gropius, are very clear in the sense that he combines forces and arguments "to once more bestow upon building the halo that stamps it as architecture."³³ Oud further demonstrates this when he writes the following:

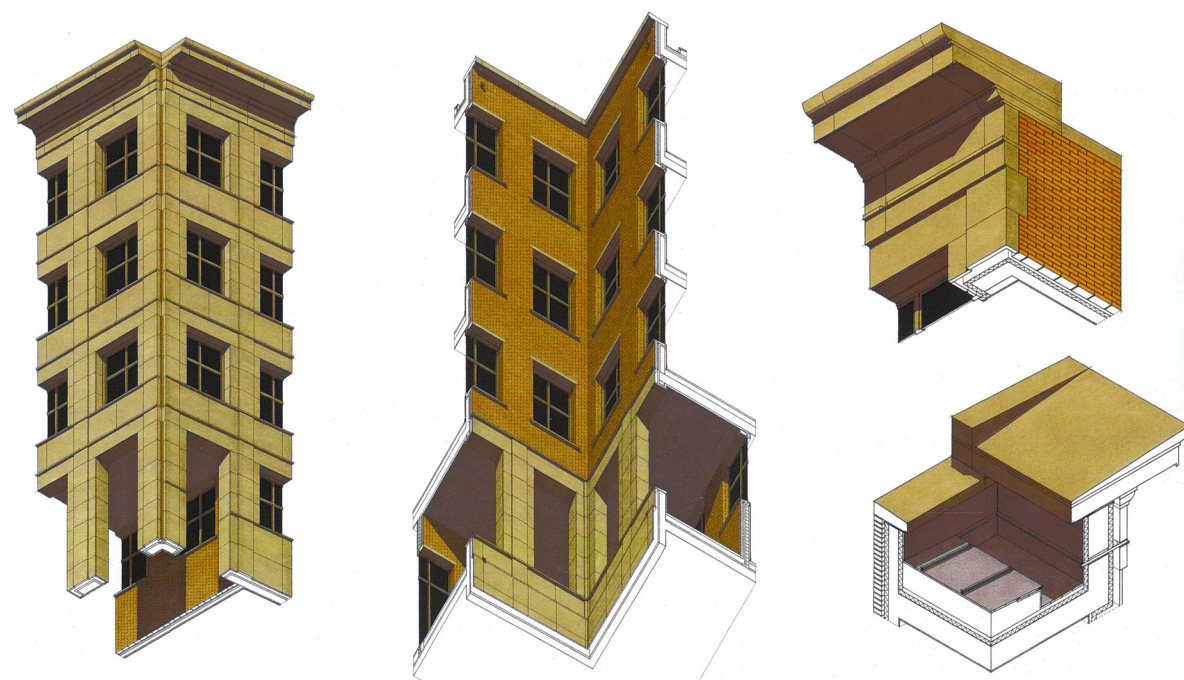
fig. 8
View of the central green courtyard of the Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze. © Luca Bosco.

fig. 9
View of one of the public facades of the Cassa di Risparmio, interrupted according to the guidelines of Krier's plan. © Luca Bosco.

³¹ Grassi, *Leon Battista Alberti e a Architettura Romana*, 50 (translation by the author).

³² For both Oud and Grassi, the problem of ornament in architecture was a critical and decisive factor in defining the language of architecture. The figure of Oud, who had achieved truly incontestable results in the past, and his courage in putting everything on the line again by literally compromising his career from that moment on, represent for Grassi the ultimate example of how this issue should be read again and not ignored in the light of contemporaneity.

³³ Ed Taverne and Dolf Broekhuizen, *J. J. P. Oud's Shell Building: Design and Reception* (Rotterdam: Nai Uitgevers Publishers, 1995), 8.



figs. 10–11
Grassi's details of the internal
and external facades of the
building. © Fondo Giorgio Grassi –
Fondazione MAXXI, Roma.

figs. 12–13
Details of the dissolution of the
facade cladding in the Palazzo
Rucellai. © Luca Bosco.

fig. 14
View of one of the didactic
construction sections of the Cassa
di Risparmio. © Luca Bosco.

fig. 15
View of the open corner detail of the
Cassa di Risparmio. © Luca Bosco.

fig. 16
Grassi's details of the building's
classical cornice. © Fondo Giorgio
Grassi – Fondazione MAXXI, Roma.

The building could perfectly well do without [ornament], but its function is to underline the building's significance. The decorative elements—for example, the balusters of the staircase—do not deform the material or the construction method; on the contrary, they have been modelled on the nature of the material and the construction method. The roof ornament is not just another ornament: it allows light to filter through the gaps. It is designed for that same light, not for the shadow of its frames. The same can be said of the decorative element above the entrance: light and life come into play through the ornament.³⁴

Like Oud's building, Grassi's cornice pursues the idea of ornament for architectural and not merely sculptural purposes and clearly aims to accentuate the unitary and monumental character of the building. Without it, the criticism subjacent to his proposal would not deliver such a violent blow. Still, Grassi admits that he may have given in to overenthusiasm in Cassa di Risparmio by using such an unlikely and—for some—needless element. Nevertheless, it seems logical, as it is ironically sincere, that his expressive choices in this project come close to what he himself considered a potential act of exaggeration regarding the theme of decoration in some of Alberti's Florentine projects, such as Santa Maria Novella or the Rucellai Chapel: Were they a "gesture of impatience"? Or were they "the final unmasking"?³⁵

In fact, and once again ironically, Grassi could not be closer to the Renaissance master when he states that, faced with Florentine decorativism, "Alberti has no other response than negation (the old, practical, always useful and effective rejection),"³⁶ a response that is, above all, a self-exclusion: negation as an opportunity for a confrontation; a form of *Built Criticism* that Alberti (and of course Grassi) consistently applied to his projects.

Biography

Ricardo Leitão (Porto, 1991) is an architect who graduated from Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto (FAUP) in 2015 with time spent at ENSA Paris-Belleville as part of the Erasmus Programme. In 2020, he received a literary grant in poetry from DGLAB (Portuguese Ministry of Culture). Joining FAUP's Architecture PhD program in 2021 with a scholarship from FCT, he explored the potential application of Harold Bloom's literary theory in the field of architecture. Currently, he is a visiting professor at FAUP, teaching History of Modern Architecture, and an integrated researcher at CEAU-FAUP, contributing to the T2P research group. In 2023, along with Rita Furtado, he was the winner of the first edition of the Manuel Graça Dias Award, *dst-Ordem dos Arquitectos* for his first built work, House in Freamunde.

³⁴ Oud quoted by Grassi in the text "Arquitetura e racionalismo," 79 (translation by the author).

³⁵ Grassi, *Leon Battista Alberti e a Architettura Romana*, 91 (translation by the author).

³⁶ Grassi, 171 (translation by the author).