Around Italy now

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The objective of this issue of WA is to stimulate and increase awareness on several points of view that are emerging in Italy today, confronting the specifics and similarities of practicing architecture, here and elsewhere, in the open dynamic of the geographical and cultural exchange. It's not an instantaneous shot of Italy today but, rather, a shared report of what is happening there.

satellite photo. Italy, landscapes


satellite photo. Italy, lightscapes

the 20 architects here presented work out from different cultural places and positions, sometime quite opposite, but we identity them in any case as italian architects. Why?

What do we mean with this identification? More generally, what is meant by Italian architecture today? Is it what Italian architects practice (wherever they are in the world) or simply what is practiced in Italy (by whomever)? What expectations are we projecting, what consistencies are we looking for? What makes us consider research projects which are very different from each other, such as those shown in this exhibit, as Italian architecture? What do they have in common? Is it just the geographical distribution, the nationality of the author, the historical period, the language, or a marketing effect? And how is ownership defined? Who takes credit for this? Who decides? To ask oneself which are the Italian architectures of today and who are the Italian architects of today means to constantly interrogate oneself on the Italian society for which this architecture should be the result. Here, also, we can direct the same questions that are posed to the architecture: does a contemporary *Italian* society exist? How should it be spoken about? What are its characteristics? It is urgent, therefore, to question the validity of architecture and its role today, in disagreement between an often estranged consideration of its own, constantly changing disciplinary rules and a civil society that finds it hard to become and to acknowledge itself as a reference of merit and as the final recipient.

In my opinion, it's fundamental to ask oneself about these points and the reasons and significance behind the possible responses, attempting to go beyond definitions which are becoming more and more stereotyped and are set around a few key words and demurgical neologisms (-isms, net, virtual, and merrily on and on) which would appear to encompass everything when, instead, they cover only a persistent, hopeless or forgotten context which is forever ready to emerge.

Italy. 8.100 Commons
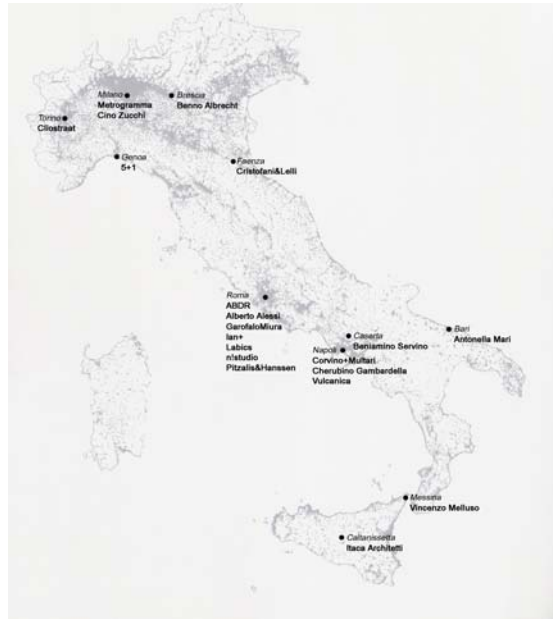
Italy. 20 selected architects

Box 1. Around Italy now

General Data
- 301.245 Km2   land surface
- 57.844.000   Population
- 20   Regions
- 95   Provinces
- 8.100   Commons

Building Sector
In Italy there are in total 1.600.000 Universitary students. Between them:
- 76.000 Architecture students
- 12.000 Civil Engineers students

The numbers of abilitated professionals in the main building sector are:
- 118.000 Architects (this is the 29.3 % of all european architects)
- 131.000 Civil Engeneers
- 92.000 Geometer (figure with just High school level)

That means there are in Italy ca. 340.000 professionals abilitated to build. That means ca. 1 *builder* each 165 inhabitants.

Discussing architecture *all'italiana* means, therefore, to seek, denote, or project qualitative specifics.
A consideration on the "Italian-ness" of Italian architecture can bring significant mechanisms of attribution and visible identity to light that are used for communicating and taking possession of reality today. What contribution about feasibility and considerations can Italian architecture bring to the modern discussion on the subject? I would like to propose four first possible (paradoxical?) replies.

1. A characteristic of Italian architecture today appears to be the difficulty to practice it. This is viewed as a negative aspect, and certainly it is such. But which other virtues can it take on? Almost, but not all the architectural projects presented in this show have been built. Architecture has to *want* to be built in order to be architecture but it doesn't *necessarily* have to be built in order to be considered so. Significantly, the 20 architects in this issue are not part of just one generation, but they all share the same possibilities: the architects can't escape their place and time.   It is exactly because the working formalities in Italy today are often the same for a thirty-year old as they are for a fifty-year old that a first contribution to reflect upon emerges: architecture is neither youthful or aged, but it has only good or bad architectural characteristics.

2. Another contribution can come from a further obstacle: rapport with the lengthy planning process. It is often said that Italian architecture is born post-humously, meaning the drawn-out duration of the deciding process and its achievement. Couldn't it, then, absurdly become a positive point that permits a rapport with building the architecture that goes beyond the mere production of goods from illustrated magazines?   After all, this is what has implicitly been thought for many decades by the politicians and Italian administrators: architecture as a means of communication is not on the par with other contemporary media, precisely because of this procedural characteristic that impedes it from being followed in real time. Therefore, Italian

politics has pushed it aside and, instead. has invested in television programs and temporary events with higher, immediate visibility and less long-term responsibilities (in case anything were to go wrong).

3. Further difficulty is born out of the detachment from and lack of communication with the customer, the exception being with those "superior patrons". It is the terrain, in which many of the exhibited architects find themselves working, both on a public and private level: the architect, and more often the architecture, are not the themes of discussion of the building. In fact, it is quite to the contrary. Once again, this can become a fertile background for thinking liberally about the architecture outside of the diagrams and predetermined mechanisms, without the anxiety imposed by eclectic recognition, as long as it is *signed* by the Star System and by the winking flirtation of speculative professionalism.

4. The final difficulty that I would like to underline here is tied to the rapport between architecture and the context, intended as ecosystem: the refined answers of bio-architecture, the high- and low-tech architectures, are difficult to achieve in Italy. Why? On the one hand, perhaps it is, because of management problems, on the other perhaps it is due to social refusal, almost *a priori,* that gives way to an often forgotten aspect when discussing environmental compatibility: this must also be read in cultural terms. As such, certain forms and achievements require a large dose of social energy to be accepted to render them needlessly extravagant in terms of local compatibility. Read this way, the ecosystem is once again turned into a complex fact, esthetic in the fullest sense and not just tied to scientific and technologically measurable values.

In my opinion, we are dealing, therefore, with becoming more aware, and reflecting and acting upon what we actually have around us, the social, political, cultural and geographical context in which we work each time, trying to change it and improving upon it, avoiding formal, superficial changes to the facades which uselessly attempt to, more or less, correct what is found elsewhere. On the other hand, architecture is practiced in and out of a given place, and it is from that position that something of merit can be expressed, differently and elsewhere as well.

So, this issue of WA is structurated as a promenade around Italy, from the North to the South, from Turin to Caltanissetta, from Faenza to Caserta or Bari, from Rome to Brescia or Milan, from Naples to Genoa, searching for positions in architecture that could open a window on the necessary incoherent complexity of the nowadays italian architectural building and builders.