

LOOKING FOR THE MEANING OF NUMBER ONE

The serenity of Livio Vacchini's Architecture.

By Stefan Davidovici
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Livio Vacchini, one of the masters of Ticino & Swiss contemporary architecture, died at 74 at the beginning of April. He was a wonderful person, looked a bit like George Moustaki with his white beard, very modest and human unlike many other 'starchitects'. Quiet and tranquil, he was not a man of many words. His works, ranging from the 60s to 2007, express a very essential architecture with a kind of minimalist look that actually goes very far beyond the simple minimalism.

Ticino and Switzerland.

His native land was not for him the motherland of high quality contemporary architecture that foreign architects admire – but rather a hard place, deeply

entrenched in conservatism and suspicion towards everything new or simply different. The high quality of Ticino's modern architecture originated, for him, from the power of first direct contact of a closed, peasant, poor mountain society with the language and principles of contemporary architecture, many years after the rest of Europe.

Drawings.

There is no breath-taking trick in Vacchini's works – just an amazing sense of serenity and simplicity. You can feel it in the actual buildings as well as in his drawings, incredibly clean black and white diagrams, full of understanding and meaning. It may hardly be a better school of architecture than a visit to Locarno with his drawings at hand.

They were not like this from the beginning. It is with his own house (built 1991-92) in Costa Tenero that both two-dimensional drawings and the actual building clean themselves from any unnecessary detail to arrive at their concise, essential expression. The drawings express the building in the way an ideogram expresses a complex word. The break with the past projects is so clear that you are not surprised to see that Masiero's monograph notices shortly that the little house 'is the result of seven years of intensive research and traumatic professional crisis'.

Evolution.

For a 70 years old Vacchini all his projects were one and the same project, just developing itself, acquiring new clarity with each reincarnation, slipping from one function to another. Sometimes this evolution is apparent, like in the succession Posta Locarno - Nice City Hall - Ferriera Locarno that sees the transformation of the same extroverted structural system. Sometimes the same theme passes through a succession of scales and conditions, resulting in a surprising diversity – as with the house in Costa Tenero, entwined as structural principle, materials and use of natural light to the much bigger Losone Gymnasium. Like in music the same theme gets reinterpreted again and again in a different way, always the same, always new.

An urban sight.

There is always a deep understanding of the urban environment in Vacchini's projects. They tend to 'answer with great precision to their context, not trying to integrate into, but rather creating with it a happy and radical contrast' (1).

The Nice City Hall, a deeply beautiful –and lost- competition project, uses the power of a public building to transform a disorganized, bland area into a real center of civic life, and enforces an axis destined to turn an indistinct zone, far from the sea, into a fully integrated part of the city.

The Belinzona Piazza del Sole is a won competition project where a long evolution – probably accompanied by a serious fight against the whole town – managed to transform, step by step, the project of a simple underground parking into a piazza. Like on Slawomir Mrozek's double theater stage (2), where the public storming a stage discovers beyond the curtain nothing but another public, the piazza is a stage where the imposing Castle's rock and the city meet and mirror each other.

A classic architecture.

In the Losone Gymnasium, Vacchini's undisputed chef d'oeuvre, the simple program becomes the reason for a solar meditation on the Greek temple.

During a Milan lecture in 2001, Vacchini and Snozzi were kindly remembering their summer escapes in the Mediterranean space in their young years; the image they conveyed was that of a free, seaside, hippie-era version of Corbusier's 'Journey to the East'.

The influence of classic architecture is obvious through Vacchini's work. It is the opposite of neoclassical architecture that takes from the language of the ancients only shapes and superficial expressions. Vacchini, like Louis Kahn, understands, applies and reinterprets the very principles of classic architecture. The way buildings interact with light, the rhythm and simplicity of his projects all originate in the sunny Magna Grecia.

Structure.

Carefully, step by step, through a years-long process, Vacchini transcends the distinction between façade and structure. He reverses their traditional roles, uniting them into an indivisible, organic whole, defying gravity, concentrating all the loads on interior cores, leaving interiors free to develop in their own way, elegantly expressing the diminishing load diagrams to create wide, flying spans. His buildings are the structure. They are, simply, courageous and sincere.

Reality.

Vacchini's works are real. Unlike many famous buildings his works don't give, after few years, the feeling of abstract idea badly turned into a leaking, rusting reality; his works are based on a deep, imaginative understanding of construction techniques but never subordinated to it.

Don't fall to passing fashion, look further, his buildings say.

Quietly, of course.

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Notes:

the title paraphrases Roberto Masiero in 'Before and after the classical', the introduction to 'Livio Vacchini, works and projects', Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 1999

1 - Luigi Snozzi, 'L'occasione perduta della città di Nizza', *Archi*, no.6 - December 2001

2 - Slawomir Mrozek, 'Fuga in Sud', Bucharest 1970