

The Architecture of Ticino "Tendenza" – a case of the past?
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Most of the pioneers of the architecture movement in Ticino who have helped to establish Switzerland internationally as „architecture landscape“ in the 70ies, have studied at ETH in Zürich.

Three decades later an individual, who had observed the emergence of the „ticino architects“ with great interest from abroad, wonders how it could happen, that some of these former „architectural revolutionaries“ could be associated with „strange architectural ideas“ on centrally located locations in towns.

Written by Jörg Kühn

One of the most beautiful towns in Ticino, which is, without doubt, Locarno, is on the verge to 21st century. In order to assess the spatial urban strategies and architectural activities of the town it seems necessary to review the complex and changing history of the Ticino region, if only at a glance.

The Region south of the central alps was traditionally considered to be rather poor and only peripheral to the great north-south routes crossing the alps. Progress in the fields of socio-politics and artful planning occurred in various urban centres and their respective urban areas. Curiously the Ticino region made important contributions to Europe's advances in architecture and planning as early as the 18th century. Aristocrats from St. Petersburg down to Italy employed the exceptional design talent of the Ticino professionals, who where then still called master builders and who delivered true ‚baukunst‘ upon request.

The Ticino region was discovered as target for migration as late as this century. It was then when unlimited destruction of the grand landscape has begun, which unfortunately still continues today, if only to a slightly lesser extent. The first migrants, mainly intellectuals in artists and cultural colonies, were using the terrain as playground on the search of alternative lifestyles. They accepted the given local particularities; at most they adhered to the romanticised ‚heimat‘-style.

As part of their intellectual luggage one can suspect influences related to the avant-garde of the Netherlands and Germany of the early 20ies. These influences, however, did not become evident at first. Perhaps due to the mild climate emigrants from the north of the alps move to the ticino during the following years. Not only do they bring in money, they also import architectural styles which are paired with diffuse ideas of the mediterrenians and which result in a curious mix, which prevails in most parts.

Architecture which is influenced by Italy and which is called ‚Italiana‘, often closely linked to the architecture of fascism, and the Ticino ‚Heimat-style‘ with roots in Germany, as well as swiss-german ‚Vertrauens-architecture‘ seem to be opponents without prospects for reconciliation.

There is no evidence of respecting historic pattern of growth or the historic context. Heinz Rommer writes in the exhibition catalogue „On the state of Architecture in Ticino“, ETH Zurich, 1975: The knowledge, „that an intelligent reception of the formal heritage of architectural history, including the immediate past, has no detrimental effect on the originality of a building,

and that originality is rather founded on the informed and creative relation to historic material...“, has not found majorities yet.

C. and R. Tami, E. + A. Cavadini, Tita Caloni and Alberto Camenzind, to name but a few, took the challenging route of a new beginning. Without doubt they were influenced by classic modernism and the „Zürich school“, yet they were determined to emphasize on their cultural origins and the rooting in Ticino.

The final breakthrough occurred in the middle of the 70ies. A group of young architects with rather different approaches towards design but united by a common vision and by statements which resemble manifestos are assembled around Mario Botta, Luigi Snozzi, Aurelio Galfetti, Livio Vacchini, Mario Campi, Flora Ruchat and others and are referred to as the "Tendenza" movement.

The exhibition „Tendencies – Emerging Architecture in Ticino“ by Martin Steinemann and Thomas Proga (ETH Zürich, 1975) presented these ideas which impress by their rigorous realisation rather than by novelty in their blue exhibition catalogue. The ‚blue book‘ advances to an obligatory ‚bible‘ and renders the Ticino to become a destination not only for young architects. Particularly in Germany of the 60ies and 70ies the process of abandoning sterile ‚box-architecture‘ is on its height. The general view, that post war architecture is in good tradition of the Bauhaus movement, which was interrupted by the war, is declared a pervasion of classic modernism.

In the Ticino region a whole generation of students and young architects discovers a seamless and stringent line of ideas based on the 20ies and combined with the cultural heritage of a region in a playful manner. Surveys of the logic principles of building construction and building form which was developed by anonymous master builders are made in remote alpine villages like ‚Corippo‘ in ‚Valle Verzasca‘.

In the projects of Mario Botta (Houses in Cadenazzo, Riva San Vitale), Aurelio Galfetti (House Rotalinti, Bellinzona) and Luigi Snozzi (House Bianchetti, Locarno Monti) one discovers the principle of transformed form, however they are closely related to the surroundings. These are places where tradition and modernism encounter and complement each other. This, however, is not achieved by a mere adoption of zeitgeist, but as the result of a new view on city and landscape which rejects „restrictive protection and so called theories of mimicry and mimesis“ (L. Snozzi, Design Motivations 1975).

Considering the architectural and urban development in Locarno during the last view years one has to wonder where all these theories have gone. Do the current urban changes represent the vision for a new city? In Locarno, so it seems, the sensibility for scale, the sense of proportion, has been lost in many cases. Hence in recent years a series of planning mistakes have troubled the city. Upon completion of the careful refurbishment of the ‚kursaal‘ by architect Vittorio Pedrocchi of Locarno, a competent colleague also in relation to historic buildings , (e.g. Casa Rusca, with E. + P. Moro), the frontage of the building was compromised by a strange assembly of steel and glass container. Since 1995 this addition ‚squared-practical-good‘ may serve as spatial view point to the extension of Piazza Grande on Largo Zorzi.

High-Tech in Locarno? Pedway systems of multi-storey car parks built of high-end materials based on the vocabulary of post-modernism adorn the fringes of the city. Even if not everything should be made of beton brut, the material of choice of the 'young wild ones' of the 70ies had a stronger quality. Exclusive materials also for the envelope, or should one say 'cladding'?, of the post office a few yards from Piazza Grande. The building replacing the old post office integrates well into the existing urban fabric with regards to its size and proportion, however it represents an architectural language which seems to be from another planet.

Esperanto in Locarno? Luigi Snozzi has remained faithful to his roots contrary to many others of the movement. It is him who explores new ways to interpret contexts in the town of Monte Carasso over a period of years without losing sight to the visions of then, as a person who rejects "the link of consumerist, utilitarianist and efficient view of contemporary society on current design " (Snozzi, 1975)".

The gateway to the city if approached from Ascona has recently become a tunnel which is open to the sky, a new example of swiss achievements in engineering. The retaining wall by Aurelio Galfetti is nearly 400m long and paired with a sound barrier on the opposite side, the autostrada of four lanes in between. This structure is in line with the recent tradition of infrastructure construction in Switzerland which seeks to create links to the remotest valleys by means of excessively using concrete. All this according to the motto: the client first.

The cumulative point of this impressive structure is the 'mega-rotunda' of 118m in diameter, which would serve well a city as big as New York.

Hyper-metropolis Locarno? Students of the Faculty of Architecture of Milano Polytechnic already practice 'piazza design' for a place which traditionally welcomes arriving visitors. A justification however, seems to be secondary for their proposals. At least a "Centro congressuale-commerciale" with all associated consequences is required for the site. A "Città Vecchio" (historic centre) inevitably fails to resist such ludicrous ideas. It is devalued to become an addition of Disneyland style. A castello Visconti in the proximity to the site is degraded to a Lego brick in terms of scale. What seems to be a trial in the inexperienced hands of young academics is deemed to be realised by their professional colleagues in a ruthless manner in Locarno if there are no critics who will stop this gigantism in order to seek alternatives for this damaged urban quarter.

The last chapter in the drama on building in Ticino could be read by the public in an article themed "La Regione Ticino" in 1997. The construction of a base station for the mountain cable-car in Orselina and the mountain top station in Cardoda. Architect Mario Botta, who has risen to the leading architects of the world, envisages a luminous sign high above the city. Light houses have their roots on the coast where they guide the ships. In Orselina this urban marker will rather blow the lights out of the urban landmark "Madonna del Sasso", and this not only during the night. Furthermore it seems strange in this 'light' that the acknowledged building of architects Peppo Brivio and Rene Pedrazzi, dated 1952 would have to make way for the new project. This should be regarded as opportunity for architect and politicians to reconsider this approach. Or would we be unconcerned if the testimony of the 'Tendenza'- architecture of great merit – which already are featured in books on history in architecture, are flattened in forty years time?

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