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Relational spaces in Architecture, Aesthetics and Education.

The Italian neo avant-garde architecture and the case of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

1. Introduction

In the *Reggio Emilia Approach*, an internationally known pedagogical approach to early childhood education (Edwards & Gandini, 2018), spaces are considered “constituent elements of the formation of thought” (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 116), and the learning environment “takes on the role of one of the main and necessary educators” (Cavallini, Quinti, Rabotti & Tedeschi, 2017). The environment, in particular, is considered the third educator (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007), right after teachers and families. An element still not underlined in the scientific literature regards the origin, in the Reggio Emilia approach, of the importance given to the environment, intended as a relational space and its close relationship with aesthetic reflections promoted by relevant exponents of Italian neo avant-garde architecture.

As stated by Carla Rinaldi, direct collaborator of Loris Malaguzzi and president of the Reggio Children Foundation, the architect Tullio Zini has been “a great source of inspiration for the concept of environment and the aesthetics of the environment developed in Reggio Emilia” (Rinaldi, 2009, p. 61). At the same time, the architect and scholar Andrea Branzi played a central role in Reggio Children’s *metaproject* dedicated to the development of environments for young children (Zini & Ceppi, 1998). A relevant fact is that in April 1967, both Tullio Zini and Andrea Branzi were the protagonists, together with other young members of the architectural avant-garde, radical groups Superstudio and Archizoom¹, in an exhibition called “Superarchitettura”, organized in Modena at the main Municipal Gallery (Mello, 2017). The exhibition aimed to “propose the most relevant themes of the architectural culture of the 1960s through the projects of a group of young architects” (Branzi *et*

¹ The exhibition involved Andrea Branzi, Carlo Chiappi, Gilberto Corretti, Paolo Deganello, Claudio Greppi, Massimo Morozzi, Adolfo Natalini, Ali Navai, Marta Scarelli, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Tullio Zini.

al., 1968). On that occasion, in addition to the projects, the group presented a *Manifesto* that declared the ideas that inspired their work. In the *Manifesto*, the group stated, provocatively, “*Superarchitettura* is the architecture of the superproduction, of the overconsumerism, of the superinduction to consumerism, of the supermarket² (...)” (Branzi *et al.*, 1968). As explained by Toraldo Di Francia, one of the most relevant exponents of Superstudio, it was a provocation aimed at investigating the “mind and language through the stoss, or creative shock, which Benjamin indicated as the prime function of art³” (Toraldo Di Francia, 2019). The fact that Toraldo Di Francia refers to Benjamin’s reflection on creative shock to define the *poetics* of Superstudio is particularly interesting, considering what Benjamin wrote in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin, 1935). In chapter 15, he stated “Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art whose reception is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction⁴” (Benjamin, 2006, p.39). The exponents of Superstudio, on the contrary, wanted architecture to become something closer to what Benjamin saw in Dadaism, with a shock effect (*Impuls*), a movement (*Bewegung*) in the mind of the viewer. Moreover, Toraldo di Francia added that the radical avant-garde intended to transform “the compositional techniques of Dada to new use and engage in cultural nomadism by intermixing disciplines and favoring ambiguity over unity of language” (Toraldo Di Francia, 2019).

2. Loris Malaguzzi and the exponents of Neo Avant-garde architecture

In these quotes a relevant element emerges, underlined in the scientific literature on the Italian Neo Avant-garde (Moroni, Somigli & Chirumbolo, 2010): the several “affinities between the theoretical research of Superstudio and the interdisciplinary theoretical debate that took place in the Italian Neo Avant-garde” (Chiesa, 2010, p. 285). Furthermore, Gloria Bianchino (2006), in her introduction to the Branzi’s book on the project “No-stop city” and Radical Architecture, underlined how the aesthetic debate on Land Art and *Arte Povera* influenced the research of Italian

² “La Superarchitettura è l’architettura della superproduzione, del superconsumo, della superinduzione al consumo, del supermarket, (...)”

³ To deepen the concept of shock in Benjamin’s theory, which does not correspond to the general goal that art in his opinion should have, please refer to Shiff (1992).

⁴ “Die Architektur bot von jeher den Prototyp eines Kunstwerks, dessen Rezeption in der Zerstreuung und durch das Kollektivum erfolgt. Die Gesetze ihrer Rezeption sind die lehrreichsten” (Benjamin, 2003, p. 40).

avant-garde architecture, in particular in the exploration of “the freedom of movement and the conditioning relationship between nature and objects” (Bianchino, 2006, p. 136). In his comments on the most original and radical elements of Archizoom, Andrea Branzi explicitly mentioned the fact that the content of “political avant-gardes overlapped with those of artistic avant-gardes” (Branzi, 2006, p. 144).

To gain a better understanding of the role played by avant-garde architecture in the development of the Reggio Emilia Approach, it is necessary to underline the importance of the influence that the artistic avant-garde had on the Reggio *pedagogista* Loris Malaguzzi. In fact, the poetics of the Neo Avant-garde greatly influenced not only his understanding and interpretation of art and aesthetics, but also played a part in the role he attributed to art and expressive languages in early childhood education (Manera, 2019). This element is related to the fact that he directly collaborated with relevant exponents of *Gruppo 63*, like Giorgio Celli and Corrado Costa (Hoyuelos Planillo, 2020). At the same time, the architect Tullio Zini had amicable relationships with artists connected to *Gruppo 63*, such as Franco Guerzoni and Nino Squarza, who wrote the introduction to the first catalogue of the Reggio Emilia Approach (Squarza, 1981). In this regard, the relationship between Loris Malaguzzi and Tullio Zini seems to be particularly relevant. Their collaboration began not long after Zini’s participation in the Superstudio exhibition organized in Modena in 1967. In fact, in the late 1960s, the Municipality of Modena asked them (Tullio Zini and Loris Malaguzzi) to design early childhood centers (Municipality of Modena, 1970; 1972). In 1970, Malaguzzi involved Tullio Zini and the artist Nino Squarza in a project dedicated to the Pre-school Diana, built that same year and notoriously identified as the most advanced school in the world for early childhood by the American magazine Newsweek, in 1991 (Cagliari *et al.*, 2016, p.371). On the one hand, Zini and Squarza “contributed some innovative ideas for the initial project by the architect Millo on indoor and outdoor spaces” (Vecchi, 2010, p. 84). For example, the construction of the *Arcobaleno* infant-toddler center offered opportunities to discuss and realize architectural solutions in direct “dialogue with the avant-garde” (Vecchi, 1998, p. 129). On the other hand, Zini designed many furnishings for the school and, for the area planned as the atelier, as underlined by the atelierista³ at the Diana school Veà Vecchi, he designed “a very beautiful, partly transparent wall, highly contemporary and attuned to aesthetic research in the ‘*radical movements*’ in architecture during those years” (Vecchi, 2010, p.83).

³ The atelierista is an educator with an artistic background, whose work is aimed to sustain children’s exploration of expressive languages.

In 1972, relevant projects realized by Superstudio and Archizoom were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Moma), as part of a major exhibition on Italian design entitled *The New Domestic Landscape* (Ambasz, 1972). The exhibition brought attention to the range of Italian avant-garde concepts and gave international relevance to Italian Radical Architecture movements (Rossi, 2014).

3. The preschools of Reggio Emilia and the aesthetic research of Italian Neo Avant-garde architecture

As underlined in the first paragraph, the aesthetic research of avant-garde architecture aimed “to suggest complexity as a central category of change and to assume the multiplicity of languages and behaviours as a positive element” (Torald Di Francia, 2019). If the goal of the *radical movements* was to underline the importance of the multiplicity of languages, they also aimed to develop a theory of complexity. It is interesting to note that in the same period Malaguzzi developed the theory of the hundred languages of children⁶ (Malaguzzi, 1990). A relevant aspect is the fact that Malaguzzi’s research on pedagogical innovation was not only in dialogue, but even strongly influenced by the aesthetic research of neo avant-garde art and architecture.

One of the most striking elements that defines the Reggio Emilia Approach is that the design of the educational spaces is considered as “a metaphor of knowledge, an image of how we know and learn” (Rinaldi, 2010, p. 98). Furthermore, symbolic and expressive languages are considered aspects that sustain the emergence of aesthetic perception in terms of “a cognitive strategy⁷, (...), a perceptive modality that informs the quality of the architectural space” (Cavallini, Quinti, Rabotti & Tedeschi, 2017, p.1). The research on the aesthetic quality of educational environments developed in the ‘70s led to the design, realized with Tullio Zini’s collaboration, of new concepts and environments, such as the mini-atelier⁸ and the *piazza* (square) of the schools, meaning the concep-

⁶ The “hundred languages” is a metaphor that underlines the multiplicity of symbolic systems used by children to communicate and create an image of the world (Rinaldi, 2009).

⁷ The relationship – in the aesthetic experience – between cognition and emotions was analyzed by the American philosopher Nelson Goodman, who influenced the Reggio Pedagogist (Malaguzzi, 1993) and affirmed that in such experience, “the emotions function cognitively” (Goodman 1968: 248). For a deeper analysis of Goodman’s reflection on the aesthetic experience and his impact on education, please refer to Contini (2019).

⁸ In the Reggio Emilia Approach, Ateliers are spaces present in each municipal infant-toddler center, dedicated to “promoting free artistic, manipulation and construction activities” (Lorenzi & Canovi, 2020, p. 99) and to the development of the “expressive

tualization of the central hall as a place dedicated to communication and dialogue. Malaguzzi's interest in the relationship between education and environment had already emerged in the early '60s. In fact, in 1963 he gave a speech at a symposium dedicated to the "Relationship between Psychology and Education", where he affirmed the existence of "inter-individual influences and reciprocal reactions between children and the environment they live in" (Malaguzzi, 1963, p. 77). In the '70s, as underlined in scientific literature, the attention to aesthetics became a central and visible aspect of the physical environment of Reggio preschools (Moss, 2016, p. 161). The attention paid in those years to the theme of the learning environment emerges in a 1975 speech by Malaguzzi, given at a regional conference dedicated to the promotion of preschools for social education. In his speech he stated that, in educational experience, "the environments represent an integral part and play a decisive role in the co-existence, coherency and intensity of response to the requests by children to be and to do" (Malaguzzi, 1975a, p. 237). Moreover, in the same year, he wrote an article dedicated to the theme of preschool interior design, in which he stated that furnishings should sustain vitality and creativity and support a "free and happy education for human beings" (Malaguzzi, 1975b, p. 14).

The relevance of Nino Squarza and, in particular, Tullio Zini in the development of the aesthetic and architectural concepts that defined the Preschools of Reggio Emilia also emerges from the fact that they were involved, in the late '70s, in research on the physical environment of schools (Rinaldi, Tromellini & Spaggiari, 1978). Furthermore, in 1981 Malaguzzi organized an exhibition dedicated to the themes of perception and education, entitled "If the Eye leaps over the wall" (Malaguzzi *et al.*, 1981). The same year, the exhibition catalogue was published, and Gruppo 63's Giorgio Celli and Nino Squarza wrote the introductions. In his brief introduction to the catalog, Squarza wrote that the research carried out for the exhibition aimed to develop an interdisciplinary approach to education, based on the dialogue between the scientific and the aesthetic approaches (Squarza, 1981, p. 3). In 1984, the second edition of the exhibition catalogue was published. In this edition, both Malaguzzi and Andrea Branzi, founder and member of the avant-garde group *Archizoom*, wrote a chapter dedicated to the relevance of the spaces in education. Branzi argued that children find themselves living in a "continuous and artificial space (...) where experiences occur in the manner of a total immersion in a continuous fluid" (Branzi, 1984, p. 35). In this quote, Branzi connects

languages of children and adults as part of the complex process of knowledge building" (Giudici & Cagliari, 2018, p. 1467).

the field of education with a typical theme of aesthetic reflections developed by avant-garde architects, meaning the idea of the relational space, the environment considered as an enabler of connections and relationships. Furthermore, in his chapter, Branzi quoted Lyotard's reflections on the artificiality of the "post-modern condition" (Lyotard, 1979), which had been published in Italy in 1984⁹, the same year as the catalogue. Finally, in order to describe how the element of artificiality was reflected in the school environment, he used the metaphor of the aquarium to represent the condition of children. He wrote, in fact, that children lived in "an aquarium full of information (...). From his/her earliest years, a child must find an environment in which s/he can develop capacities for bodily perception and active elaboration of reality" (Branzi, 1984, p. 35). In his chapter, Malaguzzi quoted Branzi's metaphor and wrote "it has been said that the environment should act as a kind of aquarium, which reflects the ideas and attitudes of the people who live in it" (Malaguzzi, 1984, p. 27). Furthermore, he developed the idea that children had a "right to the environment", meaning the possibility to access complex and rich spaces, a kind of education which "can be realized only when the environment is a fully participating element" (*ibid.*, p. 26).

4. The metaproject on aesthetic qualities and relational signs in environments for young children

In the following years, Malaguzzi developed an ecological and constructivist theory of children's development, based on the idea that "the child-environment interaction is conditioned by interconnections, (...) and these interconnections are decisive as specific educational events" (Malaguzzi, 1985, p.317). Drawing on Bateson's idea of aesthetics, intended as an element "responsive to the pattern which connects" (Bateson, 1979¹⁰, p. 9), and on his ecological theory, which referred to a unifying connection between individuals and their environment, Malaguzzi further developed a systemic idea of learning environments, made up of elements aimed to facilitate inter-relations between disciplinary forms (Malaguzzi, 1989). In Malaguzzi's writings, after 1985,

⁹ Lyotard, J.F. (1984). *La condizione postmoderna*, Feltrinelli, Milano. Some months later, Lyotard published an article dedicated to the Sublime and the Avant-garde (Lyotard, 1984). In the paper, he argued that Burke's and Kant's aesthetics of the sublime "outlined a world of possibilities for artistic experiments in which the avant-gardes would later trace out their path" (Lyotard, 1984). For a philosophical critique of Lyotard's assumption, please see Crowther (1989).

¹⁰ Published in Italy in 1984. Bateson, G. (1984). *Mente e Natura*, Milano: Adelphi.

“the philosophies of Gregory Bateson and Edgar Morin are among the most frequently quoted” (Moss, 2016, p.288). This element seems to be particularly relevant for the further development of the research on environments carried out in Reggio. In the 90’s, the architect and designer Michele Zini, scholar and collaborator of Andrea Branzi and son of Tullio Zini, developed a project dedicated to young children’s learning environments that involved the Municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia and the Domus Academy. Commenting the origin of the project, Zini stated that the idea of working on a project about designing environments for children came from “some empathies that suggested this encounter: we were reading the same authors: Edgar Morin, Gregory Bateson (..)” (Zini, M. 2010, p. 95).

Andrea Branzi took part in the research, named *Metaproject for an environment for young children*, together with a group of people who worked in different fields, such as art, design, architecture and pedagogy. Giulio Ceppi and Michele Zini coordinated the progress of the project, as research shifted from the problem of building structures “to creating artificial ecosystems made up of furniture, symbols, colors, materials, lights, smells and sounds” (Zini, M. 2010, p.97). In these words, some of the main issues brought up by the exponents of the architectural neo avant-garde emerge, such as artificiality and the characteristics of the ecosystems. Nevertheless, as underlined by Tullio Zini in a comment dedicated to the research project, the environmental qualities of inhabiting a space, such as light, sound, color and materials “have gradually become more widespread, but back in 1989, when we began working on this type of project, they were not so common” (Zini, T. 2010, p. 103). During the project, the research group defined various concepts and design tools which were collected and published in 1998 (Ceppi & Zini, 1998). In their presentation of “Relationship”, the second concept discussed in the book, Ceppi and Zini wrote that the development of an architectural project “produces relational signs and aesthetic qualities¹¹” (*ibid.*, p. 12). The idea of a relational space refers to the relationships that an environment enables, as well as the information that can be activated within a space. Furthermore, in the relational space, “the aesthetic quality depends on the quality of the connections, the aesthetics of links” (*Ibid.*, p. 12).

The third concept presented in the book is *osmosis*, meaning the idea that schools should not be separated from contemporary reality but, instead, should represent a kind of cultural filter, an interpretation, an interface. In particular, the concept of osmosis refers to the idea that

¹¹ With aesthetic qualities, they explicitly referred to Bateson’s definition of aesthetics, already mentioned.

“the characteristic of the space itself, both functional and aesthetic, are as hybrid as those of the city” (*Ibid.*, p. 15). The idea of *osmosis* between the school and the city, from an architectural point of view, is translated “in terms of osmosis with the surrounding aesthetics and culture, as well as in the distribution of the space” (*Ibid.*, p. 40). A further concept presented in the book is *constructiveness*, which refers to an idea of school as a workshop dedicated to “perceiving and constructing reality, for the development of its own “ecology of the artificial” (*Ibid.*, p. 22).

The second section of the book is dedicated to the design tools developed during the project. One of the tools is *lightscares*, and represents an interesting example of constructivist pedagogy using natural light as “a living material that can be manipulated and used by children for producing their own aesthetic configurations” (*Ibid.*, p. 40). On the one hand, children need to freely manipulate the environment but, on the other, the presence of all categories of materials should be part of “a strategy, an aesthetic-cultural point of reference that filters and guides each choice” (*Ibid.*, p. 76). The third part of the book contains a chapter written by Andrea Branzi. In his contribution, entitled *Education and relational space*, Branzi offers a relevant reflection on the differences between “historical avant-garde movements and Malaguzzi’s didactics”. For Branzi, the difference consists in the fact that, compared to the historical avant-garde, “our way of doing design is not characterized by a stylistic code, nor is the didactic way of the Reggio Emilia Preschools characterized by a definable model” (Branzi, 1998, p. 124). Branzi suggests, perhaps, that both the Neo Avant-garde and Malaguzzi’s pedagogical project aimed to avoid pre-defined stylistic codes, in order to exploit new possible connections and relationships. Carla Rinaldi, who participated and gave relevant contributions to the *metaproject*, underlined the conviction that “the aesthetic element acts as a connecting element in and between concepts” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 139). Furthermore, she developed the concept of *shared aesthetics*, which refers to the idea that, in leaning environments, the aesthetic dimension needs to become part of “a pedagogical quality of the scholastic and educational space” (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 60). In his closing remarks, Branzi stated that, in the relational space, “aesthetics is a functional part of the project, just as functional questions are part of the aesthetics” (Branzi, 1998, p. 127). Therefore, in the relational space, the distinction between aesthetics and functional questions disappears, creating a flexible environment in which new links can be activated. In conclusion, it is possible to affirm that Malaguzzi’s relational pedagogy and Branzi’s idea of relational space are not only in dialogue, but were derived and developed from a common cultural background, rooted, at least in part, in the aesthetics of the neo-avant garde.

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Emilia Approach.**

This paper explores the relevant connections existing between the concepts developed by the most relevant Italian neo avant-garde Architecture groups, such as Archizoom or Superstudio, and the concept of environment developed by Loris Malaguzzi. Furthermore, the paper explores the role played by the architects Tullio Zini and Andrea Branzi in the development of the aesthetic of the environment evolved in the Reggio Emilia Approach. Finally, the paper discusses the hypothesis that Malaguzzi's relational pedagogy and Branzi's idea of relational space were not only in direct dialogue, but also share a common cultural background rooted in the aesthetics of the neo-avant garde.

KEYWORDS: Architecture, aesthetics, neo avant-garde, relational space, Reggio Emilia Approach.