

# 10: CONSTRUCTING NEW CONTINUITIES

## Constructing New Continuities in a Post-War World Luca Molinari

**Conventionally, the positions between the generations of modern architects within CIAM are depicted as oppositional. Ernesto Rogers was famously attacked by the younger architects of Team 10 at the last CIAM conference in Otterlo in 1959, for his design of the Torre Velasca in Milan. Yet, on closer inspection, Luca Molinari concludes that both Bakema and Rogers were involved in a project of constructing continuities between the pre-war and post-war avant-gardes as well as between the historic city center and the modernist project through the concept of authenticity.**



BBPR (Gian Luigi Banfi, Lodovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso, Enrico Peressutti and Ernesto Rogers)  
Torre Velasca, Milan 1957–1960

After the end of the Second World War, facing the terrible destruction of a whole continent, modernist architects had to confront a fundamental choice: to take the lessons of the avant-garde as something to be used without compromise, or to find an alternative way to build a different dialogue between context and modernity.

In countries like Italy and Holland, some of the most representative of the modern movement worked to find continuity between the glorious avant-garde experiences

of the thirties and a redefinition of the relationship with the social and the traditional environment.

If we look today to the post-war research and theoretical works of two very different actors like Jaap Bakema and Ernesto Nathan Rogers, we find a significant point of convergence: an obsessive idea of continuity between the lessons of the modernist avant-garde – seen as a new tradition for national architecture in the fifties – and an idea of architecture not as a style but as an open process to develop and to consider critically.

Both authors tried to define a vision of modern architecture as a tool that was able to serve post-war democracy after six years of chaos and destruction. Rogers and Bakema believed in a form of modern architecture that could represent the problematic humanity and fragility of contemporary society, giving form to a third way between Marxism and capitalism. In the late forties, Rogers developed the idea of the ‘house of man’ (*la casa dell'uomo*) which considered the necessity for a neo-humanism in modern architecture; meanwhile Bakema appropriated the term ‘open society’ to represent the new social panorama which could be supported by the propagators of the modernist avant-garde.

An attempt to define the most relevant relations and exchange with Italy brings us immediately to the CIAM network and to the figure of Ernesto Nathan Rogers. We know that Bakema attended all the CIAM congresses from 1947 in Bridgwater, and his essay on the relationship between people and things was published in the Italian edition of the book *The Heart of the City* in 1954.<sup>(1)</sup>

In his essay, which was part of his contribution to the eighth CIAM congress in Hoddesdon, Bakema introduced a cultural provocation about the idea of the ‘core’ and sociability. Describing Gunnar Asplund’s cemetery in Stockholm and a Finnish sauna, the Dutch designer reflected on the complexity of the idea of the ‘core’ and on its social fluidity against the modernist vision of the mechanization of everyday life.

“There are moments in life when the separation between man and things disappears; in this moment we discover the miracle of the relationship between man and the things. This is the real moment of the heart: the moment when we realize the richness of life which is the product of an action through full collaboration.”<sup>(2)</sup>

Reflecting on the condition of the ‘heart’ in the contemporary town Bakema confronted it with the medieval Dutch city where you could live in ‘harmony’ with your work

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and the whole community. But according to him this condition “has been destroyed by the modern technique”<sup>(3)</sup> and by capitalism where things and the possession of objects became more important than the relationship between man and what he owned.

In the same book, the essay by Rogers follows Bakema’s contribution reflecting on the heart of the city and the necessity for a humanistic vision of the contemporary city. Both the essays were supported by the idea that modern architecture should be a real tool of social improvement in post-war society and as a positive instrument for democracy. Both the texts moved from a critical vision of modern architecture seen as a movement that should find inside its own history and qualities the instrument for a deep transformation.

In the same year, in issue number 202 of *Casabella-continuità* we find the first significant presence of Bakema in Italy. The core of the magazine is characterized by a long review of the book *The Heart of the City* by the Italian philosopher Enzo Paci, one of the main representatives of the emerging field of phenomenology in the 1950s.<sup>(4)</sup>

Paci gives a long positive commentary to the Dutch designer’s essay considering his text the right way to read the city as a full ‘organic and relational process’. And after a few lines of the text Paci reflects on Rogers’ contribution to the idea of functionalism seen through a dialectic perspective and an anti-dogmatic methodology, which refuses any form of formalism: “The functionalism method screened through a concrete and realistic vision of the historical process could help a synthesis between old and new. The concept of functionality could be placed in a non-mechanical process.”<sup>(5)</sup> Paci attempts to define an open urban methodology which allows for the design of the heart of the city which relates the specific qualities of the place and not defined by a rigid mechanic grid.

In the same issue of *Casabella-continuità*, a few pages later, Van den Broek en Bakema’s Lijnbaan project in Rotterdam is featured. The article, written by the young Italian critic Gentili Tedeschi, considers the project as one of the most interesting modern urban solutions in the heart of the city. But the most significant element here is the thematic relationship with another key argument in the magazine, which is the idea of the strong continuity between pre- and post-war modern architecture culture. Gentili Tedeschi writes: “the work is of great importance because it explains very well the permanent element in the contemporary design process. In other words what interested us is the historical authenticity of the project.”<sup>(6)</sup>

The author tries to define a set of figures from Dutch modern architecture who explored the notion of ‘monotony’, first by the Amsterdam School, then by De Stijl, and then by the Rotterdam School in the late thirties. The work of Van den Broek and Bakema is then analyzed in this spectrum of Dutch avant-gardes, and their urban vision is considered an elegant and sober interpretation of the concept of monotony, which became the focus for a challenging urban design process.



Van den Broek en Bakema,  
Lijnbaan shopping centre,  
Rotterdam, 1949–1953

Since the first issue of *Casabella*, edited by Rogers in the late spring 1953 when he subtitled it ‘continuità’ (continuity), we can recognize a conscious design of the magazine as an ideological tool able to critically define the position of modern architecture in the post-war western panorama through a problematic balance between traditions, history, and modernity. This cultural position, which we could consider as a form of ‘ideology of continuity’, was embedded in the conceptual design of the magazine and the criteria of selection for every single item that was published.<sup>(7)</sup>

In the same issue again, Ernesto Rogers clearly defines his personal vision of the word ‘tradition’ by writing an editorial titled ‘Responsibility of the tradition’ where, on the one hand, he tries to contrast what he defines as ‘modern formalism’ with other forms of stylistic approach in architecture. And on the other hand he affirms the necessity of a dynamic and open vision of tradition seen as a product of “continuity in the permanent exchange of relationships,

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and without any form of crystallization.” Tradition is seen as the result of two forces: a vertical one related to the resistant and permanent character of the place, and a horizontal one due to the fluid and dynamic relationship between people.

Contemporaneously Rogers considered the magazine he edited as a powerful, ideological tool within the modernist environment and CIAM through the definition of a tradition of the modern movement within national contexts connecting avant-garde experiences with post-war production. The main goal of Rogers was to focus on the open and non-stylistic character of modernist architecture culture, focusing on a line of continuity with the singular cultural contexts and with everyday life.



Considering the research on Rogers’ ‘continuity’ theme we could see how the position of the Van den Broek en Bakema office can be interpreted similarly as a cultural attitude, with their works in strong continuity with the experiences of the Dutch avant-garde.

When Van den Broek en Bakema were invited to show their work in Italy in the early sixties, in the exhibition ‘Open Society’, their material showed a clear visual continuity between the production of the office opened in the 1920s by Brinkman, later Brinkman and Van der Vlugt, and followed by Brinkman and Van den Broek, and finally by the firm of Van den Broek and Bakema, suggesting a formal and cultural relationship between the various experiences.

At the same time, the title of the exhibition and most of the cultural reflections carried out in the early fifties by Bakema reflects another significant Italian experience with the ‘Comunità’ (Community) of Adriano Olivetti, showing an urgency for an alternative social vision in western modern architecture.<sup>(9)</sup>

But, one of the most significant Italian relations was probably the meeting with Giancarlo De Carlo and the CIAM-Team 10 experience.<sup>(9)</sup> The modernist network brought Bakema to meet De Carlo, who, at the time, was a young influential protagonist of Italian modernist culture, member of the board of Casabella-continuità, and a representative of the new generation in the post-war CIAM. The first time De Carlo met Bakema was at the CIAM meeting in La Sarraz in 1955 where Team 10 would take progressively more ground and presence. Since that moment, and at all of the subsequent Team 10 meetings, the relationship between De Carlo and the Dutch architect had been continuous.



Giancarlo De Carlo,  
Collegio del Colle, Urbino,  
1962–1966

The urban methodology of Bakema – focusing on the idea of open society and on the continuous, fluid exchange between people, things, and functions – finds an echo in the work of De Carlo as we can clearly see in the design process applied to the colleges for the new university campus of Urbino, which he designed in the sixties and seventies. At the Team 10 meeting in Berlin in 1965, De Carlo presented his project for the ‘Collegio del Colle’ student dormitories in Urbino where the axonometric schemes interpret the idea of connective spaces as new communitarian places for the students as well as fundamental elements of visual connection between the new modern architecture and the pre-existing context.<sup>(10)</sup> In this project De Carlo tried to merge the cultural experience of the ‘continuità’ with the Team 10 discussion on urban mega-structures.

In the seventies the influence of Team 10 and, most of all, of Dutch structuralism became more evident. The urban plan

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for Rimini presented by De Carlo in Berlin in 1973 shows clearly the attempt of the Italian designer to introduce a set of functional elements that could be overlapped to demolish the rigid zoning system of the former master plan of the city. De Carlo introduced a new conceptual grid, which could introduce greenery and housing complexes close to the historical center, as well as reform the traffic system separating the pedestrian flows from vehicular traffic. The experiences of Dutch structuralism as we can see in the Terneuzen Town Hall by Van den Broek and Bakema or in the Centraal Beheer in Apeldoorn by Herman Hertzberger, which was presented at the Team 10 meeting in Rotterdam in 1974, and the architectural work of De Carlo in the late seventies, for example in the later work for the College and the Faculty of Law in Urbino, or the Faculty of Engineering in Pavia shows an interesting expression of mutual exchanges and influences.

Ultimately, the idea of an 'open society' applied to Italian urbanism was a failure because of a political and cultural lack within local administrations unable to consider De Carlo's approach as a real alternative to the more conventional tools of urban planning. Generally speaking, the Italian welfare system failed to produce architectural models that could be widely applied and the experience of De Carlo looked too idealistic and open to be implemented, as it happened with most of the progressive modern architecture in Italy.



Ernesto Rogers and Jaap Bakema at the Otterlo CIAM congress, 1959

Bakema, Rogers, and De Carlo were influential thinkers and communicators, able to introduce a different language to explain the role of modern architecture in European society. But what we can still consider interesting today is the

attempt to define a critical, but necessary, line of continuity between the avant-garde of the 1920s and 30s and the post-war national experiences of reconstruction, trying to define an architectural identity based on an open methodology instead of a stylistic approach. In an age based on fast consumption of everyday experiences, what could be the value of a term like 'continuity' today?

After decades of crises of modernity, usually framed as a problem of growth, what we can salvage from these stories above is a humanistic and open vision of architecture devoted to a fragile idea of democracy and the intuition that the tradition of the modern movement can still be considered as a field of critical reflection for our future endeavours.

1. J.B. Bakema, *Rapporti tra uomini e cose*, in, (ed.) E.N. Rogers, J.L. Sert, J. Tyrwhitt, *'Il cuore della città: per una vita più umana della comunità'*, Ulrico Hoepli ed., Milan, 1954, pp. 67–69
2. *Ibid.*, p. 67
3. *Ibid.*, p. 68
4. Enzo Paci, *Il cuore della città*, in, *Casabella-continuità*, n. 202, August–September 1954, vii-x
5. *Ibid.*, p. ix
6. Eugenio Gentili, *Storicità di un'architettura*, in, *Op.Cit.*, *Casabella-continuità*, xi
7. See: Luca Molinari, *Continuità: a response to identity crises. Ernesto Nathan Rogers and Italian architecture culture after 1945*, TU Delft, 2008, pp. 169–230
8. See: (ed.) Carlo Olmo, *Costruire la città dell'uomo. Adriano Olivetti e l'urbanistica*, Ed. di Comunità, Torino, 2001
9. See: (ed.) Max Risselada, Dirk van den Heuvel, *Team 10. 1953–1981. In search of a Utopia of the present*, NAI, Rotterdam, 2005
10. Luca Molinari, *The spirits of architecture. Team 10 and the case of Urbino*, in, *Ibidem*, pp. 299–306