

PRIDE IN MODESTY

Pride in Modesty: Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy (Michelangelo Sabatino, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010, 336 pp., \$72.95)

Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean: Vernacular Dialogues and Contested Identities (Jean-François Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatino, Oxon: Routledge, 2010, 320 pp., \$53.95)

by Richard Ingersoll



DO IDEAS IN ARCHITECTURE TRICKLE DOWN FROM THE genius of elite models and intellectually inspired canons, or do they filter up from another type of genius, the popular practice of building that adapts to the materials and meteorological conditions of a region? Michelangelo Sabatino in his book *Pride in Modesty* takes the latter position, examining the discussions among Italian architects concerning tradition and modernity over the last two centuries. His research makes a strong case that the Italian interest in what today is referred to as “vernacular architecture” set the parameters for its entry into general theoretical discussions. One need only consider the event that popularized the concept: Bernard Rudofsky’s *Architecture without Architects* exhibition and catalogue at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1964, whose ideas were clearly derived from the Austrian emigré’s participation in Italian cultural discussions of the 1930s.

Sabatino’s admirable study traces the interest in popular buildings as it mingled with the birth of Ital-

ian nationalism and the discourse of modernism. While the connections of vernacular buildings to famous modern architects such as Giovanni Michelucci and Giancarlo de Carlo are well known, the multifarious precedents and simultaneities explored in the book come as a rich surprise. The late nineteenth century passion for folk culture served the mandate to establish a national identity for recently unified Italy and led to a new appreciation of humble sources of design and decoration among Italian architects, including Beaux-Arts practitioners such as Marcello Piacentini. Sabatino carefully examines the

texts and exhibitions that cultivated a new understanding of folk architecture as a source of inspiration. The movement came to a climax during the 1930s as the modernist contingent of Italian architects, under the rubric of “rationalism,” argued for the undecorated pri-

mary forms of spontaneous or “rural” buildings.

The formal results led art critic Lionello Venturi to coin the expression “pride in modesty” in 1933 to summarize this Spartan return to folk traditions.

The sole disappointment in Sabatino’s otherwise superb book is its limited attention to the formal and theoretical underpinnings of Casa Malaparte, the unquestionable masterpiece related to these Italian cultural discussions. While he goes on at length about the importance of the island of Capri as a cauldron of intellectual activity, following lesser-known characters such as Edwin Cerio, Sabatino neglects to examine in detail the folk origins of Casa Malaparte and instead suggests its dubious connections to Futurism. The red walls of the house rise from the rocky cliffs as a pure parallelepiped, similar to the unadorned volumes in southern Italian hill towns. The interior has a single grand salon, a rustic but purely modern space, with enormous picture windows. A kitchen area serves one end, and a suite of bedrooms for Malaparte and “la favorita” occupy the other, overlooking the sea. But then again perhaps Casa Malaparte is too eccentric, and too elitist, to serve as a suitable example.

As an intellectual history, Sabatino’s book provides a truly original and well-rounded survey of vernacular architecture in which one can position tangents from the most conservative to the most radical—from the academic culture of Piacentini and Armando Brasini, who dipped into folk motifs to instill a sense of deep Mediterranean roots to their works, to Giuseppe Pagano, the leading rationalist spokesperson whose interest in folk building was for its essentialism, rather than its iconic signifiers. Italian architects at both extremes drew inspiration from the anonymous “rural” structures, as they preferred to call them. More

problematic were the Futurists, the first truly avant-garde artists, who in theory despised everything that suggested a revival of the past but who, out of ahistorical pragmatism, admired simple rural structures. In the background were the pompous constructions of official Fascist culture, which inflated the scale of classical architecture. (Many Italian architects nonetheless considered classical architecture as a sort of synthesis of the great vernacular past, eagerly mixing the casual placement of rural elements with the clear symmetry and volume of temples.) The modernist contingent on the left pursued the idea of modesty but had few commissions. After the fall of Fascism, many of the Italian modernists, such as Libera and Ignazio Gardella, went on to produce the self-consciously ordinary structures of Neorealism in an effort to use modern techniques while maintaining the scale and social relations of folk buildings.

The study of regionalism and folk buildings invariably leads to controversial political interpretations. Recourse to folk traditions or regionalism tends to accompany the most conservative developments in society. In other European contexts, particularly Germany, the interest in regional types contributed to the bigotry and racism of the Nazi regime. In colonial North Africa, it became a means of compensating for the weight of imperial oppression. Many cases contemporaneous to the story told in Sabatino’s book are documented in *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean*, a volume of essays that he and Jean-François Lejeune co-edited. Here one finds fascinating parallels to the Italian interest in folk building. Kai Gutschow on Paul Schultze-Naumburg’s promotion of Heimatsstil, which based Nazi Germany culture in traditional rural society, or Sheila Crane on Ferdinand Pouillon’s works in Algiers offer particularly astute insights into the political use of the discourse of folk buildings. The volume also contains Andrea Bocco Guarneri’s illuminating essay on Rudofsky that probes how his contact with the Mediterranean environment and his collaboration with architects such as Gio Ponti and Luigi Cosenza at Capri and Naples inaugurated his appreciation of an “architecture without architects.” In their introductory essay, Lejeune and Sabatino claim that the simple buildings of the Mediterranean led to the profound reflections on form by Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, Erich Mendelsohn, and scores of other influential modernists. They also do justice here to the importance of Casa Malaparte as a manifestation of the “neo-Pythagorism” inspired by the vernacular structures on the shores of the Mediterranean.

Rural and anonymous traditions that survive today tend to be found in the sad situations of shantytowns. This should remind us that “vernacular” usually meant the architecture of the poor and thus represented a mode of class conflict. Sabatino concludes: “Rather than ignore the vestiges of an agrarian world threatened by dissolution in the wake of industrialization, Italian architects sought new forms of creative dialogue with the ordinary things of the city and the countryside. In so doing they created an architectural modernity of resistance.” While the historical circumstances have greatly changed, and the new criterion of sustainability now has higher priority in the reconsideration of vernacular buildings, the message of “pride in modesty” still rings true today.