

ARMANDO DAL FABBRO*

PROLEGOMENA FOR A LIVING ARCHITECTURE

PROLEGOMENA DO ŻYWEJ ARCHITEKTURY

Abstract

Can rational and intuitive be considered two sides of the same coin? If they coexist in the design process, what do they refer to and what do they stand out for? What kind of relationship can be established between the act of prefiguring the work and of putting it into operation, according to procedures and techniques that are coherent and necessary for its construction? The value of an architectural project is shown by its being a continuous search for expression of art, even if, as we know, architecture also has a social function and plays a civil role. The universal meanings and the cultural reference context, which have always been the heritage of the architectural project, are increasingly taking on a secondary value. Issues and concepts such as: tradition, memory, modernity, invention and location seem to have lost any research prerogative at the expense of the meaning and use attributed to the architectural and urban composition in the overall design process.

Keywords: architectural composition, rational architecture, expression of art, the universal meanings

Streszczenie

Czy racjonalność i intuicję można uznać za dwie strony tej samej monety? Jeśli współlistnieją one w procesie projektowania, do czego się odnoszą się i czym wyróżniają? Jakiego rodzaju związek można ustalić między akcją wstępną pracy a jej faktycznym uruchomieniem, zgodnie z procedurami i technikami, które są spójne i konieczne dla jej konstrukcji? Wartość projektu architektonicznego przejawia się w ciągłym poszukiwaniu ekspresji sztuki, nawet jeśli, jak wiemy, architektura pełni także funkcje społeczne i obywatelskie. Uniwersalne znaczenia i kontekst odniesienia kulturowego, które zawsze były dziedzictwem projektu architektonicznego, coraz częściej przybierają wartość drugorzędną. Wydaje się, że problemy i koncepcje, takie jak: tradycja, pamięć, nowoczesność, inwencja i lokalizacja, utraciły jakiegokolwiek prerogatywy badawcze kosztem znaczenia i zastosowania przypisywanego kompozycji architektonicznej i urbanistycznej w ogólnym procesie projektowania.

Słowa kluczowe: kompozycja architektoniczna, architektura racjonalna, ekspresja sztuki, znaczenia uniwersalne

* Full Prof. Arch. Armando Dal Fabbro, Università IUAV di Venezia.

*Rational Architecture is not an aesthetic or moral vision, a way of living, but the only systematic response to the problems posed by reality*¹.

The problems posed by the reality Rossi spoke of, with reference to rational architecture, include those of a pragmatic order that mainly lie in the sphere of the functional and technical. It is no coincidence that the quotation is from the introduction to a 1974 work by Hans Schmidt (regarded by many as the theorist of Socialist architecture) and that it comprises the political and social sense that these themes had, and how much ideological value was attributed to technique and technological innovation in the fields of architecture and urban planning.

Today, technique reigns supreme in the teaching of architecture and scientific research seems to have become entrenched in increasingly specialized horizons which undermine the universal meanings and cultural contexts of reference that have always been the heritage of architectural design. Themes and concepts such as: tradition, memory, modernity, and invention seem to have lost any research prerogative to the detriment of the meaning and use attributed to architectural composition in the overall design process.

In presenting the book *Invention of tradition. The experience of architecture*, Carlo Magnani highlighted certain stages of these aspects. For example, he stated that the invention of tradition is a critical exercise that is anything but consolatory, capable of interpreting reality, and reminded us that (...) *the comparison with modernity (...) is unavoidable for a discipline like architecture which has so often made the conception of modern a paradigm of collocation of sense, at times slipping into that of style*².

If we look at the contemporary work of Frank O. Gehry, for example, I do not believe that it is only the fruit of an arbitrary or intuitive process, or, worse, the gamble of a gestural character (Jean-Louis Cohen, who is editing a complete edition of his works, said that to study the projects he had looked at several thousand drawings, between sketches done by hand, detailed drawings, solutions and constructional details, etc.). A fact that disputes the recurring idea, the cliché, of Gehry's architecture being one without rules. Just as I believe that even in a highly rational work like the *Casa del Fascio* in Como by G. Terragni (the manifesto of Italian rationalist architecture) if we study it carefully and measure it with the eye of the architect, we can discover imperfections, transgressions, insights, certain oversights that undermine its superior rationality and creative rigour – without in any way decrying its value as a work of art, however. The examples could continue with Le Corbusier's *Villa Savoye* of 1929 or Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona pavilion again from 1929, but also with the works of great artists from Marcel Duchamp with his *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (1915–23), to Jackson Pollock with his *All-over* paintings from the Fifties, etc.

1. Prefiguration, idea, design

Consequently, the question of the rational and intuitive in architecture should be placed on a different plane. We should shift onto another level of investigation, which has nothing

¹ A. Rossi, *H. Schmidt, Contributi all'architettura*, Franco Angeli, Milan 1974, p. 11.

² C. Magnani, *Tradizione/Invenzione/Architettura*, Il Poligrafo, Padua 2017, p. 13.

to do with aesthetic, linguistic or stylistic aspects, as indeed Aldo Rossi and Carlo Magnani have reminded us. On the plane of real conception, architectural design tries to provide concrete answers to civilian needs and, starting precisely from this preliminary basis, expresses the rational dimension of human existence.

Instead, there are those who maintain that the themes and meanings of tradition have to do with the empathetic, personal dimension of the individual, and that therefore artistic invention can be the result of an *ancestral* process, in some cases even unintentionally. For example, Luciano Semerani maintains that in artistic research, especially from the historical avant-garde onwards, the same forms may have the capacity to manifest “regardless of the artist’s intentions.” Semerani continues by reaffirming that (...) *in time, the achievements of the 20th-century avant-garde (...) were given two different interpretations by the artists themselves. The first being metaphysical, i.e. spiritual, the second physiological, born with the study of perceptual phenomena. I favour a synthesis of the two. It is most likely the continuous flow of the relationships between the archaic and evolved areas of the brain, within languages that do not have signs similar to those of the alphabet, arranged into words and organized with grammar and syntax, that constitute the specific nature of the various arts*³.

2. Science or Art

*Science decomposes space into place and time; art reassembles place and time into space*⁴. For those who deem architecture a continuity of the historical process, the proceeding within the discipline coincides to a return: *The original legitimates and confirms the new (...) the origin is never crystallized in a text, does not form a binding language: to resonate, it tackles the times, is transformed, offering resistance only to unfounded news*⁵. *We all know that in art there is no progress (in reality, progress is only in the individual...)*⁶. This concept was certainly adopted by Max Weber’s thesis contained in his book “Intellectual Work as a Profession” published in 1919, in which it is stated that “Scientific activity is inserted during progress. And, vice versa, no progress – in this sense – is implemented in the field of art. (...) A work of art that is truly “complete” is never surpassed, never ages; the individual can personally assign a meaning of a different value; but nobody will ever be able to say of a work that is really “complete” in an artistic sense that it has been “surpassed” by another, even though it too is complete⁷. The same concept is to be found in Thomas S. Eliot when he said that *[the poet] must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same*⁸. However, the comparison that concerns us is another and is based on architecture’s ability to build a process of synthesis between the moment of conception and its realization: between the rational and the empathetic. *It is in*

³ L. Semerani, *La tradizione ancestrale e l'accidentalità dell'invenzione*, Il Poligrafo, Padua 2017, pp. 47–48.

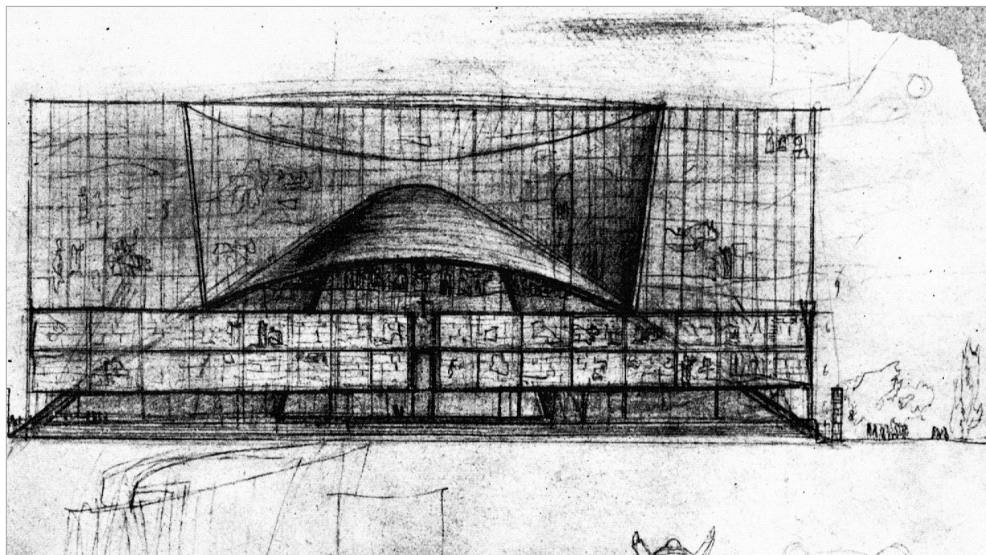
⁴ F. Carnelutti, *Arte figurativa e arte astratta*, Sansoni Editore, Florence 1955, p. 9.

⁵ M. Tafuri, *Venezia e il rinascimento*, Einaudi, Turin 1985, p. 22.

⁶ F. Carena, 1955, p. 21–22

⁷ M. Weber, *Intellectual Work as a Profession*, 1948, pp.17–18.

⁸ T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood; Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, 1921.



Ill. 1. G. Terragni, Design of Cathedral, 1943

*the impetus of synthesis that the miracle of art is celebrated*⁹. In other words *To be translated into practice the design needs ideas that solve problems in the light of the project; in turn, the ideas that they resolve need ideas that are acquainted with and organize knowledge into concepts, into abstract categories. The aim of the project is to unify the particularity of the elements that compose it into a vision of the whole*¹⁰.

It is worth lingering for a moment more on two concepts that arouse my curiosity in the fact of not being complementary: that of Prefiguration and Idea. Eugenio Battisti preceded the moment of the idea with “prefiguration” and proposed a clear distinction. “There is,” said Battisti, “in treatises, especially Renaissance ones, a clear distinction between architectural prefiguration and idea.” He identified two opposing moments: prefiguration “born from stresses whether internal or external, memorized, plays on spontaneous or free or unusual associations, gives rise to a wide range of the possible”. These are solicitations of an intuitive kind. The idea, on the other hand, is “a moment of censorship, of counting, coordination, made according to rational categories or ones deemed as such, whose ultimate goal is the normalization of the result.” In short, according to Battisti, *great architecture realizes, despite the difficulties, the informal of prefiguration, while construction works exclusively on typology, constrained by economic facts, by the alleged generalized requests of the users, by rules of every kind, but especially by a paralysing form of censorship, (...), by cursory geometrization*¹¹.

⁹ F. Cernelutti, *Arte figurativa e arte astratta*, Sansoni Editore, Florence 1955, p. 8.

¹⁰ G. Zagrebelsky, *Fondata sulla cultura*, Einaudi, Turin 2014, p. 100.

¹¹ E. Battisti, *Intorno all'architettura*, Jaca Book, Milan 2009, pp.165–166.

The substantial criticism of the theorization of the city is evident, seen as it is merely as a concentrated “geometry and market” – suffice to think, for example, of our urbanized territories, regulated by laws that belong to the worlds of academic performance and production, rather than being an expression of design prefigurations capable of recognizing and dominating the contradictions and conflicts – that have mistaken the meaning and nature of the city itself, polluting it definitively¹².

Anyway, as Battisti further suggested: *opposition between prefiguration and idea can be mediated in various ways, both by natural impressions and cultural experiences. The ancients related that painting was born from an attempt to reproduce the shadow of a living person, from an almost spontaneous series of signs, subsequently enriched with colours and chiaroscuro, and constructed in accordance with modules, proportions, and perspective. This can also be seen in one of the strictest constructors of forms, namely, Piero della Francesca, who, however, fitted it halfway between geometric rigour and an almost Flemish emotional sensuality and naturalistic reference*¹³.

It becomes important, as well as necessary, to reconsider the reality of our deeds – where everything is governed by deductive logical thought, a product of rules, principles and geometry – in the light of how designs were born and carried out, which on the contrary, contain aspects of unexpected or intuitive invention – Paul Valéry would say “introducing the unexpected and undetermined into the drama of creation” – demolishing its rules, which are the basis of every deep and genuine creative experience¹⁴.

3. The sense of the city as a work of art

In an essay of many years ago, G. C. Argan likened the sense of the city in the unconscious experience of every inhabitant to the paintings of Jackson Pollock from the 1950s.

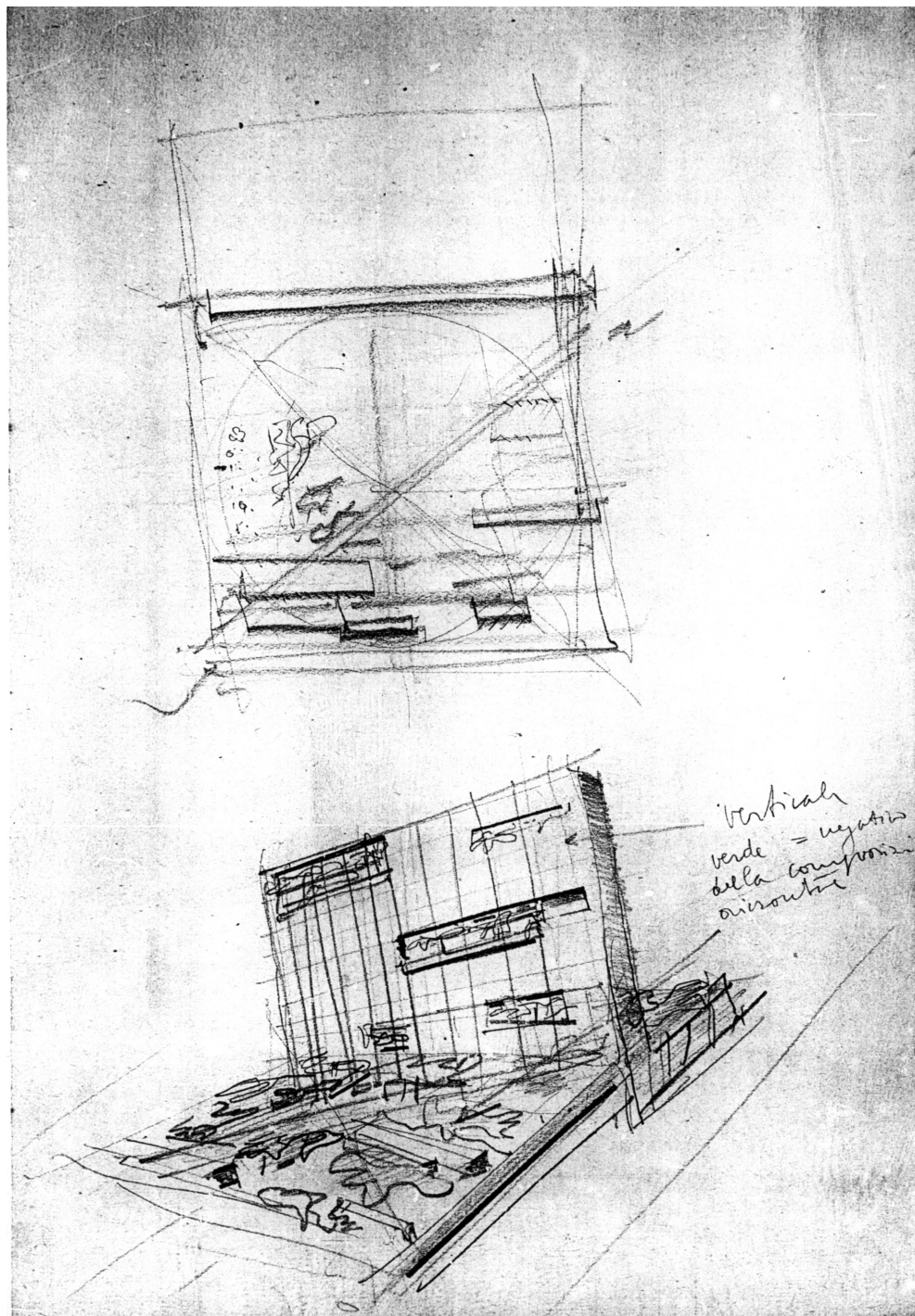
In an essay entitled “The Visual Space of the City” Argan spoke paradoxically of Pollock’s painting and action painting as an unplanned action in a society where everything is planned. For Argan, Pollock’s paintings corresponded to “(...) an immense map formed of lines and coloured dots, an impossible snarl of signs, apparently arbitrary traces, tortuous tangled filaments that intersect a thousand times, stop, begin again, and after strange twists and turns return to their starting point. (...) In his agitated tangles of signs he manages to imprison everything which in reality is in motion: the vibration of the light, the iridescence of waterfalls, (...) the waves of the sea, even the confused, eager, unnecessary travels of the people within the labyrinth of the city.” “(...) if we re-examine it,” continues Argan, “with attention we discover that there is nothing gratuitous or purely random: the tangle of signs, carefully observed, will reveal a certain order, a recurrence of rhythm, a measure of distances, a dominant colouring, a space, ultimately.” Like the space of Pollock’s painting, the space of the inner city has a background rhythm that is constant but infinitely varied (...) ¹⁵

¹² M. Cacciari, *La Città*, Pazzini editore, Villa Verucchio, 2004.

¹³ E. Battisti, *Intorno all’architettura*, Jaca Book, Milan 2009, p.168

¹⁴ P. Valéry, *The Magic Hunting*, 1985, p. 188.

¹⁵ G. C. Argan, *Lo spazio visivo della città*, Sansoni Editore, Florence 1971, pp. 168–170.



III. 2. G. Terragni's sketch UVI, 1938

The image of the “vast unknown”, with which the poet Walt Whitman elicited the American landscape, recurs overwhelmingly in Pollock’s paintings. The experience of Pollock’s *All-over* paintings was greeted (in the Fifties) as the most striking innovation of pictorial space after the Analytical Cubism paintings of Picasso and Braque from the first decade of the 20th century. Today, comparing these paintings with an Ordnance Survey map or a photogrammetric plan of an urban area, they evoke our urbanized territory very well, a territory that is contradictory and standardized, a landscape that seems increasingly *constructed* and progressively less *designed*.

4. The *secundum artem* road of architecture

From what has been said so far, it is obvious that there is a single concept of the architectural art which responds *in toto* either to the canons of the rational or to the experience of intuition, while neither of the two choices, taken individually, can ensure predictable outcomes. These are phenomena that belong to the world of creativity, of invention, of the sublime and desire: they are capable of becoming “alchemical blends”¹⁶ that transform a work into a work of art. They are born from experience, attitudes, ways and practices which, once employed, will not contradict one another, but penetrate deeply and affect the artistic action and therefore the work and the creator.

*So, it is not only from a glut of anger, fear, or sexual desire that a work is born. Nor from the very elegance of the game. It is the whole mind that lets the work find itself. But at the same time, it is a great comfort to understand that only with the formal revolutions of the 20th century has there been the opportunity to discover the necessity to found innovation on the terrain of our ancestral traditions. And also to discover, in the experience of others, and also in our own if we happen to be creators, that the magic of successful work, invention, and also innovation, those real and profound ones, initially insuperable, were accidental*¹⁷.

At this point, were we to indicate examples explaining what I have been saying and, interested as I am in the projects of Italian rationalism between the two world wars, I believe that this “poetic” aspect can be found above all in the last works by Giuseppe Terragni.

I am referring to two projects in particular, that of the Unione Vetraria Italiana (The UVI Pavilion of 1939), supplied for the E42, the universal expo that was supposed to take place in Rome in 1942, and a project for a cathedral (1943), the final work conceived by Terragni before his sudden death. I believe that in these two projects, of which only some sketches remain – graphic fragments of a thought that increasingly fled the ideological barriers of traditional and ideological rationalism – it is possible to glimpse those prefigurations mentioned by Battisti that asserted expressiveness, sensitivity, and compositional freedom.

If the drawings for the UVI Pavilion express a geometric-figurative research geared to re-discovering the unity of the architectural work in a single gesture – the most effective image

¹⁶ L. Semerani, *La tradizione ancestrale e l'accidentalità dell'invenzione*, Il Poligrafo, Padua 2017, p. 48.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 50.



III. 3. Jackson Pollock at work

to describe this procedure can be found in the book by Mario Labò on Terragni in which we read: *The evolution of Terragni was originally triggered by the esprit de géométrie, proceeded from a rigid symmetry to a rigorous lack of symmetry, from static quadratism to a clastic and dynamic rectangularism; a yearning for those profondes combinaisons du régulier et de l'irrégulier (...)¹⁸*— and, vice versa, the totality of the architectonic body, expressed in the disassembly and recomposition of figures within the labile spatial limits between an interior and exterior, in the volumetric rhythms – virtually devoid of depth – of the full and the empty, in an extreme attempt to combine the semantic value of the work with ideas of transparency, abstraction, and purely figurative art.

An architecture of poetry, as the last project that Terragni began to devise a few days before his death would become, but so much more intense and lyrical. The Cathedral project, from the few sketches that have come down to us, is a further plastic transfiguration of abstract rationalism. A dramatically and paradoxically unattainable project, but where, already in those few sketches, everything is complete.

In his last project, Terragni summarized a large part of the iconographic patterns he used in previous years¹⁹. A project that is presented in its bareness of matter and form, summarizing all the forms of architecture. Deliberately detached from the more mannerist forms of “standard” rational architecture, we can glimpse the horizon of a new vision (with more futuristic than rationalist traits, Sant’Elia-style). In my opinion, this is a revolutionary project, the anticipator of research that would develop in the post-war period, especially in the field of reinforced concrete structures, and the architecture of ribs and thin vaults (thinking of the works of P. L. Nervi, G. Michelucci, G. Pizzetti, S. Musmeci, and so on).

Several elements make Terragni’s last project up to date and many elements today make us lament lyrical rationalism and this is not simply because of the formal results, but because of the strong desire behind it. (...) The last cathedral is a work of poetry. Today, in a national architecture that lives off prosaic works, respectable maybe, but still prosaic, this last project of Terragni reiterates with calm pride the necessity for works of poetry: works devoid of contents, but since they are poetic, capable of embracing many, while always remaining free from them²⁰.

These two projects have much in common; they are the sign of a promise and a hope for a future architecture that does not wish to shake itself free from the past but pursues it in the images of the architect’s vexed mind, unfortunately close to the end at this point.

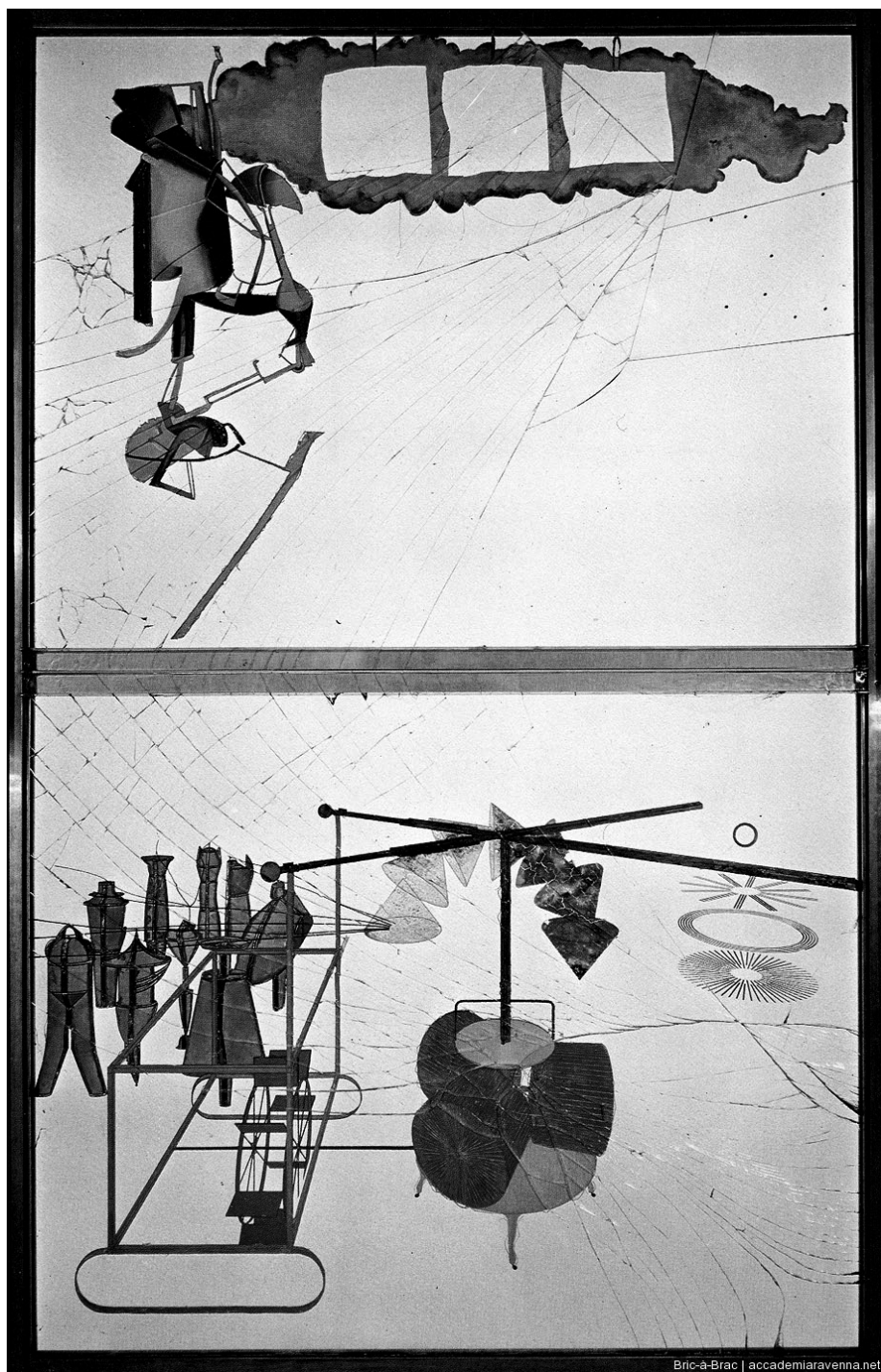
From the drawings of the cathedral we can infer certain clear references. The sketch of the large gesture of the front wall, which is the prelude to an idea of outstanding support for a large pictorial composition, brings forth the great wall-screen of the project for the Palazzo del Littorio, Solution A, as well as the incredibly fragile space frame, which, in the single geometric design that has come down to us, dominates the entire composition of the façade – and, for me, this is not a superstructure resting on top of the entrance building, where some scholars have assumed its positioning²¹, but looming in the background to the composition

¹⁸ M. Labò, *Giuseppe Terragni*, Il Balcone, Milan 1947, p. 24.

¹⁹ V. P. Mosco, *L’ultima Cattedrale*, Sagep editori, Genova 2015, p. 32.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 79.

²¹ V. P. Mosco, *L’ultima Cattedrale*, Sagep editori, Genoa 2015; E. Terragni, *Progetto di Cattedrale 1943*, Electa, Milan 1996.



III. 4. Marcel Duchamp, Big glass, 1915–1923

– as a conclusion of the great paraboloid, a sort of awning with shades, which incorporates the transparencies and figurative resonance of the first sketches for the UVI Pavilion from 1939. Abstract rigour and an anguished sentiment²² express the longing of a thought that is not inward-looking, but the prolegomena for a living architecture.

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²² A. F. Marcianò, *Giuseppe Terragni Opera completa 1925–1943*, Officina, Rome 1987, p. 280.