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REVIEWED BY MARCO FRASCARI

INTERPRETING THE RENAISSANCE

PRINCES, CITIES, ARCHITECTS (originally *Ricerca del Rinascimento*, 1992)
by **Manfredo Tafuri**

Foreword by K. Michael Hays
New Haven: Yale University Press, in association with the Harvard University
Graduate School of Design, 2006

Manfredo Tafuri's Last Book

Manfredo Tafuri (Rome 1935-Venice 1994) was an architect of histories who exercised his profession by putting on paper the multifaceted and connected unfolding of the processes (*res gestae*) and narrations (*historia rerum gestarum*) of architecture. Published two years before his premature death, *Ricerca del Rinascimento* researches Renaissance topics but is also a search for a definition of the Renaissance. It has just been translated into English as *Interpreting the Renaissance: Princes, Cities, Architects*. Announced about eleven years ago in issue 28 of the architectural journal *Assemblage*, this translation finally offers the last collection of Tafuri's consummate explorations of architecture to a larger audience.

Interpreting the Renaissance is a compilation of architectural studies illustrative of Tafuri's solid practice of philological analysis. Philology for Tafuri is more than a retelling of the history of "words": it is a method for tackling the irreducible meaning of architectural language and literature and for locating the critical points at which

harmony and development collapse in the architectural organism. In his retelling, Tafuri knows how to navigate deftly the deep and perilous waters of social, religious, and cultural historical sources. For instance, in discussing the Sack of Rome and its consequence on patronage and building practice in the city, Tafuri steers from the Ciceronianus of Erasmus to the image of a heavenly Jerusalem and the Solomonic temple evoked by Alberto Pio da Carpi to the sophisticated knowledge of both Vitruvius and Alberti and the application of their precepts as presented in the *Commentaria Urbana* written by Raffaele Maffei.

These exercises present the narratives told by one of the few architectural storytellers able to work out philosophical thoughts embodied in architectural projects while simultaneously remaining a careful philologist of architectural events. Tafuri's philosophical novels stimulate alternative readings and conclusions to both older interpretations as well as those that Tafuri himself has advocated.

Book Review

The intentional and forceful elimination of disciplinary confines is what makes the banquet of stories in this book demanding on the reader but also unusually rewarding when he or she sees the Vitruvian ideals enacted in Tafuri's manner of knowing history. In the first book of his architectural treatise, as he prescribes the fields of architectural education, Vitruvius says "historias complures noverit" (Vitruvius 1, 1, 3). The line is generally translated as "knowing history." However, the Latin participle, "noverit" does not denote merely "to know," but also to retell events innovatively, to develop a novel account by carefully working through an interfacing of memory and historical imagination. The storytelling takes place within architectural thinking and should be understood as distinct from thinking about architecture. In telling his stories from inside architectural thoughts, Tafuri rejects Rudolf Wittkower's influential model (the "scientism" of Renaissance architectural theory) of forming judgments about architecture. In the initial chapter devoted to a search for paradigms, Tafuri states, with slight irony, "It is clear that Wittkower's requires some correction" (17).

Tafuri's position among historians of architecture is unique. Open-minded, daring, and passionate, he makes innovative and productive use of literature from the recent and distant past as when his recounting of the "New Rome" combines Carroll William Westfall and Cola di Rienzo in acts of historical imagination that illuminate both the subjects and historical process. By using his multifaceted method, Tafuri confronts old problems and magisterially establishes new points of view and often new solutions to abiding historical-critical problems, solutions that challenge codified older interpretations.

Employing a sharp eye for reading drawings and delighting in up-to-date sources and bibliographies, Tafuri is much like the humanists, princes, and architects that he studies, for whom required knowledge included theology, literature, art, engineering, drafting, calligraphy, and a recovery of the classical world. Confirmation of how Tafuri thinks from within architecture is given most clearly in the drawings that he had made for the recon-

structions of edifices and urban contexts presented in his narratives. In the English translation, the editor has lost a great opportunity, especially considering the time that has passed from the original printing and the graphic sophistication of the Yale publication. Together with printing the public "in bella" illustrations produced with the straightedge by a trusted draftsman for the Italian publication, the editor should have also made available to readers the ink freehand drawings, the "brutte," prepared by Tafuri.¹ The brutte are beautiful works of architecture in their own right. For instance one of the drawing in brutta for the reconstruction of Antonio of Sangallo the Younger's design for *San Giovanni dei Fiorentini* shows perspectival views together with a transversal section and a notation that has Sangallo's calligraphic flavor: "Etrusco l = h" (Etruscan length = height). This Tafuri notation is a piece of evidence (a Carlo Ginzburg "clue"²) transformed into a rhetorical proof that underlies Tafuri's argument for the Etruscan nature of the design, an argument developed in a subchapter, "The Etruscan Temple of Antonio of Sangallo the Younger."

Tafuri's role in the philological narration of architecture is unique, and this publication is a clear confirmation of his distinctive historiographic position and his ability to form significant re-creations of architectural events. The collection of essays had been conceived directly under the aegis of historian Carlo Ginzburg's microhistories (the study of the past on a very small scale) and clues method (paradigma indiziario), but microhistories and the search of clues had in all probability begun with the set told by Tafuri in a previous publication, *Venice and the Renaissance*. *Interpreting the Renaissance* includes a foreword by K. Michael Hays and a lengthy Translator's Preface preceding a Preface by Tafuri that positions the work within the deliberations and considerations by which he has always practiced his métier. By using a sottovoce declaration in footnote (n. 8), he establishes a direct link with the group of theses outlined in *Theories and History of Architecture*, 1979 (the Italian edition was published during the prophetic year of 1968).

The first chapter, Tafuri's real entryway into the book, is a thorough presentation identifying the parallelism between the historiographic storytelling criteria and the historical processes that are then masterfully pursued in the collation composing the main text. Illuminated by the Novella del grasso Legnaiuolo, a story of one of Brunelleschi's elaborated ruses, Tafuri's first chapter is a vestibule within which takes place a precise examination of his operative paradigms: microhistories and searches for clues. This vestibule is not a transitional room, but a place of a commentary on several cautionary and causal transactions that are necessary to identify the propensity and efficacy of the proposed methods in the subsequent searches and researches. The basic concern resonating in this chapter, "Research of Paradigms: Project, Truth, Artifice," one that echoes in the six topical chapters, is the singling out and justifying of procedures that extend the range of analyzable evidence that becomes rhetorical proof. Tafuri aims not only to stimulate but also to convince, not only to interpret but also to verify. Produced within the boundaries of an Aristotelian "retorike techne," Tafuri's writing is centrally concerned with "proof" and evidence.³

Tafuri's philological narrations set architectural history's conditional autonomy: a practice distinct from architecture but fundamentally contingent upon architectural knowledge in all its forms, from tectonics to graphic expressions. Tafuri's language does not refer to a non-linguistic, "real" world, since, for him, the entire separation between human history and the architectural world is an unjustified abstraction.

The six topical essays are linked by an ostensible artifice: the dealings and interactions among the parts of a triad composed of a prince or patron, the city, and the architect in Italy and, in one essay, in Spain. The second chapter focuses on the Rome of Nicholas V and Alberti; the third chapter on combination of stories involving Laurentian Florence, Leo X's Rome, and Venice and Milan; the fourth on the facade of *San Lorenzo* in Florence, the construction of *San Giovanni dei Fiorentini* in Rome, and the history of *San Marco* in Florence;

the fifth on the effects of the Sack of 1527 on Rome; the sixth on Charles V's palace at Granada; and the seventh on Sansovino's domestic architecture in Venice. No other writer of such standing in the field of Renaissance architecture has dealt so resourcefully and eruditely with such a wide range of topics.

The design of the publication is very good. Much better, in fact, than the original Italian edition. However, on the front of the dust jacket, instead of Antonio Labacco's version of Antonio Sangallo's facade of *San Giovanni dei Fiorentini*, I would have preferred the image put on the Einaudi dust jacket: the recto of the medal cast by Matteo de' Pasti representing Arberti's Flying Eye above the Latin Motto "quid tum," "What next?" The exclamatory tension embodied in the expletive is the essential constituent in any definition of Tafuri's unclassifiable approach, rooted as it is in epistemological issues and ethical tensions—more admired than understood or emulated. □

NOTES

1. Saved by the architect Demus Dalpozzo, one of the draftsmen used by Tafuri, the autograph drawings had been shown in an exhibition at the *Hotel de Gallifer*, Paris, March 22 through April 10, 1995; a small bilingual publication records the event: Questo: *Disegni e studi di Manfredo Tafuri per la ricostruzione di edifice e contesti urbani rinascimentali*, Anna Bedon, Guido Beltrami, Howard Burns, eds. (Vicenza: Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio, 1995).
2. Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm," in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, tr. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1992), pp. 96 – 125
3. In an introductory blurb before the Preface of the Italian publication of his essays for "The Menahem Stern Jerusalem Lectures," Ginzburg explains the power of such ambiguity. Carlo Ginzburg, *Rapporti di Forza: storia, retorica, prova* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2000), 11.