

Riccardo Dalisi '71-'74. Il Rione Traiano di Napoli e la partecipazione come progetto¹

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Curated by Circolo del Design. Director: Sara Fortunati. Curator: Luca Beatrice, assisted by Giorgia Achillarre. Art Direction and Graphic Design: FIONDA. Exhibition project and production coordinator: Marilivia Minnici.

Dana Vais

PhD, Professor, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania
dana.vais@arch.utcluj.ro

This is a small exhibition about a project carried out at the margins of the profession by a not-so-well-known architect. And yet it offers a glimpse into an important movement in postwar Italian Architecture: Radical Design, a critical avantgarde that articulated an opposition to modernism and to the newly developed consumerist society.

Riccardo Dalisi (1931-2022) was the only important figure of this movement – which emerged in Florence in the 1960s and was mostly developed in Northern Italy – who was based in Naples. He passed away this year and this is his first posthumous exhibition. (Fig. 1) The exhibition was curated by the team of the *Circolo del Design* in Torino, an independent cultural center dedicated to contemporary design. It focused on a particular work at the beginning of Dalisi's radical career, a project that he developed for three years in a poor neighborhood of Naples, Rione Traiano, in the early 1970s.

This project marked for him the turn towards a kind of practice that was also labelled as the participationism of *Arte Povera*. Feeling uncomfortable in the world of current architectural design, after 1968 Dalisi put aside his regular practice and tried to revolutionize the way of making architecture, by experimenting group design, freeing practice from what he thought to be only demagogic theorizations, rejecting industrial modernity and reconsidering the value of handwork and craftsmanship. As he continued to teach, he engaged his students in this new venture of a research that addressed design with an open and spontaneous methodology, with the purpose of releasing the participants' pure creativity. Working with the poorest communities, with children and elderly people, he proposed such notions as collective imagination and unpredictable architecture.

In Rione Traiano, Dalisi reconsidered the project as an instrument of raising the collective awareness, stimulating involvement in the neighborhood, and eventually activating social change. He defined the term "animation" (*animazione*) to describe these neighborhood activities, which he documented photographically and in a diary, published later as a small volume called *Architettura d'Animazione*. He encouraged local children to spontaneously design furniture and architectural elements with ordinary materials like wood, string and wire, together with his students at the Faculty of Architecture in Naples, who acted as "animators." (Fig. 2) He remarked that neighborhood children were more creative than his architecture students, simply because they had not been submitted to an inhibiting formative system.

In an article in *L'Espresso* in 1975 dedicated to this project,² article that was itself displayed in the exhibition, Bruno Zevi called Dalisi a *scugnizzo* (an agitated boy, in Neapolitan dialect). Dalisi considered himself a poet, but his project of animation had indeed a certain quality of "agitation" in its antagonism towards the established ways of doing architecture. His opposition was raised against modern architecture in principle, but also specifically against the "tendenza razionale" that

1 Riccardo Dalisi 1971-1974. The Traiano District of Naples and Participation as Project.

2 Bruno Zevi, "Lo scugnizzo si fa l'asilo," *L'Espresso*, 25 June 1975, 77.

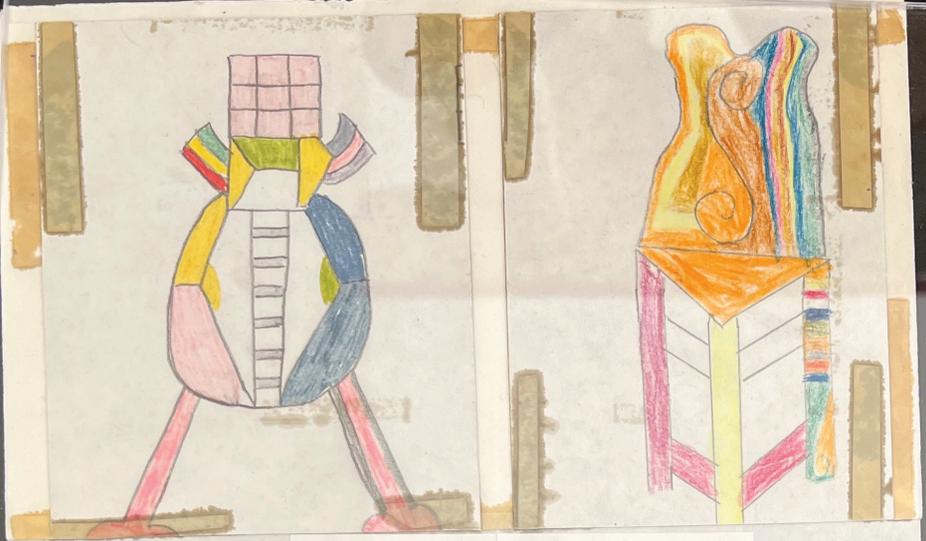


Aldo Rossi developed in Milano at the time, and against “the cultural colonization of the Nord over the South.” Zevi cited Dalisi saying that “architecture cannot renew itself by autonomous force; it needs to ‘commit suicide’ by opening itself up to the environment like never before.” Zevi also listed a few “slogans invented by Riccardo Dalisi”: “objects without projects,” “spatial fabulation,” “the function of the approximation in the universe of precision” and, most striking, “guerilla architecture” – *architettura de guerriglia*.

This radicalism was an aspect of the Italian society in general at the time, and one of the obvious intentions of the exhibition was to contextualize Dalisi’s project, by setting it into the larger picture of several momentous events in Italy in the first half of the 1970s. There was a sense of general progress during those years: women gained the right to divorce and legal rights equality (1970 and 1974); Olivetti launched the first portable electric writing machine in the world in 1974; the Vietnam war ended in 1975. But on the other hand, there was also a drift to extremes. This was the time of the birth of radical feminism, and left-wing radicalism in general. Worst of all, this was the time when the Red Brigades begun their series of political kidnappings and killings, inaugurating the “The Years of Lead” (*Anni di Piombo* – what the 1970s and 1980s are called in Italy), two decades of deadly political violence. So, the early 1970s had a sense of ending and distress as well: the 1973 oil crisis brought about economic austerity; there was a deadly cholera epidemic in Naples the same year; and even the production of the popular car model Fiat 500 ended in 1975.

For the world of art and design nevertheless, this was a rather prolific time: in 1972, an exhibition on “Italian Domestic Landscape” was organized by the MOMA in New York, which established Italy, and particularly Milan, as a design center of global status; the exhibition “Conceptual Art, Land Art, Arte Povera” at the *Galleria Civica di Arte Moderna di Torino* in 1970 celebrated these trends as they became mainstream on world stage; performance was embraced as a new artistic language in a series of art shows starting from 1971. Alessandro Mendini declared war on functionalism, putting the symbolic Lassù chair on fire in front of the *Casabella* editorial office in 1974. More and more sophisticated intellectual articulations against capitalist society were developed.

Between 1973 and 1975, together with other architects associated with the *architettura radicale* movement (Archizoom Associati / Andrea Branzi, Gaetano Pesce, Ettore Sottsass, Superstudio,



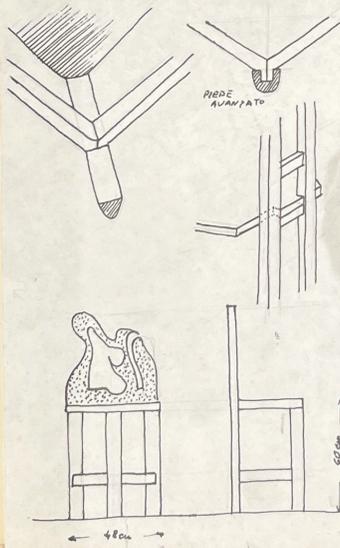
Silvia Betti

Gabriele Claudio

SCUOLA
TRAIANO
animazione del 4-78

bambini 8-9 anni

studenti animatori:
Iovine G. Antida
La Puca Guido



Alessandro Mendini et al.), Dalisi founded “Global Tools,” a counter-school of architecture and design, developing an alternative pedagogy, which tried to replace the formal training in the profession with a “return to life” kind of education. Later he established “The Street University” (*Università della strada*), where a street in Naples, the Rua Catalana, was reconsidered as a traditional lane of craftsmanship with the involvement of his architecture students.

Over the years, Dalisi continued to look for the articulation between architecture, design, art, craftsmanship, academic research and teaching. He pleaded for a design that is free (in many senses: nomad, creative, and un-financialized) and able to transform the life of the neighborhood



for the better. Eventually, he gained recognition in the world of professional establishment, by winning the Golden Compass (*Compasso d'Oro*) Prize – the prestigious Italian design award. Moreover, he won it twice: in 1981 for the re-design of the Neapolitan coffee maker (*caffettiera napoletana*) (Fig. 3), and in 2014 for his research in the social impact of design. In relation to this “golden” official award, in 2009 he proposed the introduction of an alternative: the “Tin Compass” award (*Compasso di Latta*), for research in human ecological de-growth.

Radical Design architects are far from being forgotten today. This year in Milan, Alessandro Mendini was the subject of an exhibition at the ADI Design Museum and Andrea Branzi received a special place for the projection of an autobiographic film in the *Triennale di Milano*. Moreover, the kind of urban “animations” that Riccardo Dalisi developed in Naples neighborhoods in the early 1970s (or “agitations,” to use Zevi’s insinuation) have been echoed by urban activism for many years now. Present-day urban activists develop their participatory projects involving local communities, reviving derelict places, with low-cost materials and un-conventional ways of exercising the architectural profession.

In Romania, this kind of projects are practiced since the mid-2000s (and even institutionally: for instance, the Chamber of Architects organizes the “Street Delivery” projects annually since 2006). Some instances are presented in the dossier of the present *sITA* issue. Studio BASAR (Alex Axinte and Cristian Borcan) are probably the first and most consistent Romanian architecture practice that made a name for itself from such projects of intervention (and like in Rione Traiano, with special attention to children participation); also, Colectiv A (Silviu Medeşan et al.) worked for years in Cluj-Mănăştur, to reanimate a neglected area of the typical “disadvantaged” socialist neighborhood.

These projects of temporary interventions and local communities’ engagement move the professional focus from the production of long-term architectural objects to the potentialities of ephemeral interventions. It is precisely the ephemeral quality of social design interventions that give the soft power to the project as instrument of change: it asks for choice and involvement in relation to space. Building people’s relation to the space they inhabit is the most lasting effect of all.