Luigi Snozzi on Livio Vacchini, architecture and the city

Interview conducted by Mateusz Zaluska, Ernest Babyn, Nicola Navone
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On 25 May 2015 the architects Mateusz Zaluska and Ernest Babyn, then students at the Academy of Architecture of Mendrisio-USI, recorded an interview with Luigi Snozzi on his close ties of work and friendship with Livio Vacchini, to prepare research papers presented in the course taught by Nicola Navone. Today we are able to present that interview, previously unpublished.

Ticino4580: How did you develop your idea of the city?

LS: When we started working, the figure of reference in Ticino was Frank Lloyd Wright. Several architects had taken him as their model, and I started in the same way myself. I followed Wright for the first few years, until I met Vacchini. When I started working as an architect, I understood next to nothing. I had studied at the ETH Zurich, a very poor school. Vacchini and I spent ten years working to forget what they had instilled in us. Then came the school of architecture in Venice, with Muratori, Rossi, Aymonino and Tafuri. That was a fundamental period, which helped determine our idea of the city.

Ticino4580: So why did you abandon the Organicist approach?

LS: I can't say why. At some point Le Corbusier fascinated me, the stringent logic of his projects, the intellectual reflection crystallised in a work. And since then I've not been tempted to retrace my steps.

Ticino4580: Who did you discuss things with? What topics did you talk about?

LS: We used to talk things over among ourselves, and when I say "we" I mean Galfetti, Vacchini, later on Botta and then also Gianola. We discussed them among friends, without any claim to develop a theory. There's a lot of talk now about the "Ticino School", but it never existed. We were friends, each of us practised on our own account, but we always shared projects and worked with each other. An important figure was Peppo Brivio, a true master. I made a number of trips to Italy with him and I worked for him as a student at the ETH Zurich. I used to study the way he composed volumes by interlocking them. One day I challenged him, telling him that I'd be able to interlock some circular volumes. He didn't believe it, and I told him that if I succeeded, I would leave. That was the source of my project for the residential tower in the seventh semester at ETH Zurich. But it annoyed Brivio and put an end to relations between us.

Ticino4580: And what did you and the others read?

LS: I read Max Frisch, and then Karl Marx. You just had to read Marx...

Ticino4580: Your political militancy is known. But what was Vacchini's position?

LS: Vacchini was never interested in politics. He was very middle class and accepted this position. He liked the life of the bourgeoisie. He used to start work at eight o'clock and then knock off at noon. He would put down his pencil at one second before midday, then start again at two and finish at six in the afternoon. Then he would go home, sit in an armchair, watch television or do other things. But I never saw him draw a line outside the working hours he set himself.

Ticino4580: He came from a middle-class family…

LS: Yes, his father was a pharmacist.

Ticino4580: And you didn't?

LS: On the contrary, my father was a vet, so my people were middle class. But I've always been militant in politics. At least for the first twenty years I was openly committed to politics. Vacchini said he wasn't bothered about politics, but in the end he, too, was interested in his own way.

Ticino4580: Do you mean that he didn't take up explicit positions?

LS: No, never. He used to get angry at me, because my political positions lost us a lot of work. The municipalities, cantons and banks no longer sent us commissions.

Ticino4580: How did you form your political consciousness?

LS: Through friends, like Pietro Martinelli, a civil engineer and founder of the Autonomous Socialist Party, which split off to the left of the Ticinese Socialist Party. I was active in it.

Ticino4580: Could you tell us about this experience?

LS: The socialist movement has always been quite strong in Switzerland, except that the Ticinese socialists were very much more to the left and closer to communism than socialism. Because the Swiss Socialist Party had become bourgeois, and this provoked our reaction. I was active in the Autonomous Socialist Party for twenty years, including on the practical level. Then I lost interest in politics, I gave it all up.

Ticino4580: In terms of architecture, meaning on the level of the project, do you think that political issues had some influence?

LS: No, it didn't affect anything. It was a different field of research, another world completely. There's no direct connection between politics and architecture.

Ticino4580: Let's go back to your relationship with Vacchini. Did you have two different visions of the city?

LS: We had two very different positions, because I always saw things in relation to the city, while Vacchini denied comparison with the context. His argument was that it's the architectural work that builds the context. Whenever he published a project, he only drew the plan of his building, ignoring everything else around it. I pointed this out to him and he replied: "Have you ever seen a drawing by Borromini that shows the context? No. Because it's Borromini who creates the context." All the same, if you look closely, the context is also present in Vacchini's work. But he used to deny it, he denied it resolutely.

Ticino4580: Why?

LS: That was his position. And he was an unusual sort of person. In primary school and high school, he was considered hopeless, a dunce. After finishing his studies at the ETH in Zurich, he went off to the north to look at works by Aalto, Lewerentz and Jacobsen. When he came back, I suggested he work with me. I found that Vacchini made observations that no one else did, he saw things no one else saw, and this was just what interested me: his way of interpreting things. But he shrugged off the suggestion saying, "What can I offer you? They think I'm an idiot." That was Vacchini, at the beginning. So he started working practically on his own, and he developed his own theories.

Ticino4580: Vacchini wanted to keep his independence, against everyone and everything.

LS: That's it. There are a lot of anecdotes from the time when we worked together. For instance, Vacchini was about to build his house at Ascona, and I proposed designing a working-class neighbourhood, using his home as a prototype. But he insisted, "I don't want worker housing, I want my own house." But I designed a workers' housing estate with his home as the basic cell. The house was laid out on the first floor, around a tiny courtyard, and the size of the band of services was so small that I didn't put a bidet in the bathrooms. When I showed him the project, the first thing he said was: "Where's the bidet?" And that's why we broke up. He left over the bidet in his house. He wasn't easy to get on with, but we did get along for about ten years, working really well together, I still don't know how.

Ticino4580: How did you organise your partnership?

LS: Well, take an example, the matter of drawing. I never saw Vacchini do a single sketch. When he started a job, he'd put a blank sheet of paper in front of him and note down a number of questions, 15-20 questions that arose while thinking over the project we had to do. Then he would go on and think which were least important, which could be incorporated into other questions, progressively whittling down the list until he just had one or two questions. And he based the project on the answers to these questions. Then he liked working with geometry and maths, modules and symmetries. He was one of the first in Ticino and Switzerland to use computerised drawing.

Ticino4580: While you like drawing?

LS: I like drawing, but when I used to work with him, he would take the pencil out of my hand. I couldn't do sketches. We just had to talk, discuss things.

Ticino4580: And yet you, too, believe that every successful project sums up all the possible questions in one...

LS: Yes, I think that too. All my successful works are answers to a single question that embodies all the others.

Ticino4580: And experience has taught you it's an effective method…

LS: An architect's lifetime wouldn't be enough to analyse a given place, never mind analysing a metropolis. When the goal becomes too complex, and it's no longer possible to control all the variables, then we need to reduce, select, circumscribe our attention to the one that really matters. And finally identify a single question. When you visit the site where you have to put up a building, even the smallest plot of land, unless you ask yourself that crucial question, it's better not even to go there. And really I never go and look at a site before planning the project on the orographic data I have. I only visit it after that, because then I know what I have to look at.

Ticino4580: So when do you start your reading of the territory?

LS: Once you've answered the main question, there are various problems that affect a knowledge of the territory. And then you refine your answer as you progress through the work. I used to work with a very fine engineer who's now dead, I'm sorry to say. When I was designing Kalman House, I asked him to do the surveys, because the land had a 100% gradient and I didn't want any surprises. And he replied: "What surveys? I don't do surveys. I understand the land by looking at it from above." And, sure enough, he could interpret the nature of the ground from the trees, the flowers, the vegetation growing there. "If I'm wrong, we'll correct it," he said. But he wasn't wrong, his drawings were utterly precise and we didn't have to make any changes. This was what gave me a passion for fishing. When you're on the lake, in a boat, you have a rod and line. The line sinks into the water and little by little you understand how deep the lake is, whether the lake bed is gravelly or muddy, whether there's algae or currents. From that slender line disappearing into the depths of the lake you know an otherwise unknowable world, not unlike that engineer who observed the plants growing on a plot of land.

Ticino4580: When you do meet with obstacles, what strategy do you adopt?

LS: Obstacles are productive. Without obstacles you couldn't keep going. Vacchini thought the same. He said that whenever we do a project and we realise that it's wrong we have to build it anyway. Because only by pushing on to the end, by accepting the error and drawing a lesson from it, can you take a step forward.

Ticino4580: Could we say this about the Locarno Post Office?

LS: As I see it, the Locarno Post Office is one of Vacchini's most interesting buildings. It contains all his issues and it was an essential step in bringing them out. Without the Locarno Post Office we wouldn't have had Losone Gymnasium.

Ticino4580: What are the projects that you consider exemplary in the way you do architecture?

LS: Kalman House. It provides a frame of reference for all my subsequent houses. The other, perhaps, is Deltametropolis.

Ticino4580: What do you think of Livio Vacchini's project for Piazza del Sole in Bellinzona?

LS: I like it, it's a strong project. Mine was rather romantic. I'd reproduced the built fabric of the historic city, at the foot of the cliff. The historic inner city is a fundamental factor in understanding a place. The present state certainly counts, and what you want to make of it, but reference to the historic city remains essential. And the historic city, compared to the contemporary one, had big advantages, while we aren't capable of building new cities, they're mostly disasters.

Ticino4580: How do you think should we intervene in the blighted urban fabric?

LS: It's a serious problem. As a starting point, I wouldn't demolish anything. All through my life I've never even knocked down a wall. I keep everything, on principle. If you consider it carefully, even in our degraded suburbs there are various elements that enable you to reason and that can be transformed decently. The worst projects in the city, after all, are those of the great architects of today, because they are extraneous bodies aspiring unsuccessfully to become monuments. We live in a time of crisis, but it is precisely in times of crisis that we're compelled to rethink the way we see things. When Mario Botta decided to found the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio, he came and asked my opinion. Today big cities advance and incorporate villages, and Ticino is subject to this pressure in its metropolitan area. My idea was this: a school to investigate a single theme, the way the city advances on villages, which I don't regard in the least as a bad thing. I welcome the city, let's look forward to it with joy in our hearts. If we accept this position, it's clear that the solutions are not those in vogue today, but we have to imagine new approaches, as we did at Monte Carasso. There was no need to go looking for celebrated architects to become international, on the contrary, we had to offer an original approach that would have an international resonance. Anyway, Botta had a different outlook, and nothing was done about it. But the theme remains, and it's a theme that brings new challenges that we have to face up to.