ERASMUS EFFECT Italian Architects Abroad
Exodus

Pippo Ciorra, *curator of the exhibition*

In 2012 Phaidon published a monumental atlas entitled *Twentieth-Century World Architecture*, which includes 790 of the most important buildings in the century of the Modern. It is an oversized book, almost 30 inches tall, weighing 20 lbs., capable of standing upright on its own. Despite this, the over 800 pages of short entries and other information do not include any historical-critical essays. Actually, the book contains no essays at all, substituting them instead with a series of splendid maps most of which devoted to a study of how architects have moved and how their ideas have spread from one part of the world to the other. The chance to go or "be summoned" to export one's knowledge to a place that's different from one's native country, the book seems to be saying, has always been a prerogative inherent to the nature of the architect himself who, unsurprisingly, like artists from ancient times, often includes the name of the city of provenance as an element of identification. And these relentless movements have had a very strong impact on places and cities. In the twentieth century, however, this tendency has grown exponentially. Whereas until the nineteenth century the chief reasons for the journey in fact seemed to be the sum of the architect's yearning to learn and his or her artistic and professional success, in the "short twentieth century" many different reasons were added to this: political, economic, religious, academic, aesthetic. Suffice it to consider the *incalculable* importance of the parallel migrations of a large mass of Central European architects and *modern architecture* toward the United States starting in the early 1930s. The first such architects mainly moved for political and racial reasons (in many cases in order to survive); the second reason was imported by Philip Johnson for reasons related to both aesthetics and the market. The combination of the two events (originally less connected than we might have imagined them to be) is transformed into a phenomenon of huge impact on the history of culture and space, especially because the European architects went to America not just to build things, but also to teach, thereby radically transforming the new world's academic geometry.

In Italy, we cannot speak of a true and proper exodus of architects caused by the rise to power of Fascism. There are, of course, some striking cases of migration due to racial and ideological reasons – suffice it to recall Bruno Zevi's life-story – but the complicated and ambiguous relationships between the regime and modern architects were what actually caused Italian Modernists to seek a compromise with Fascism to the very end. But that's another story and another exhibition. What we need to look at within this context is the fact that the centrifugal effect of the lacerations between politics and culture in the period between the two World Wars produced their effects on Italy's architecture and on people's lives from the start of the war and not before. Some of the heroes of Italian Modernism died in battle or in concentration camps. Others began a period of political maturation that pushed them to leave the country after the war was over, figures such as Bardi, Garatti, Gottardi and Soleri himself. Others still left the country to embark on academic careers and other fields. In the 1960s, the problem did not arise because Italy was a country going through a full economic boom, and, at the same time, one of the most interesting scenarios of the international architectural community, a place people were happy to come to and that no one wanted to escape from. But the picture changed soon enough, let's say between Rossi's Triennial in 1973 and Portoghesi's 1980 Biennale, and not for the better. So we come to the last phase, that of Piano and Fuksas, who understood how communication and technology allowed them a sort of mediated migration, or rather, that discreet form of ubiquity that we're getting so accustomed to nowadays: they moved many of their activities to France, but they did not abandon Italy altogether, being ready to re-import their "successes" as soon as they had been consolidated to the homeland. And this indeed duly took place.

With these introductory words, which are also reflected in some of the very important presences in the exhibition and that have been painstakingly articulated in some of the essays included in this catalogue, we come to a national architectural landscape that is closer to us, and to a series of situations, projects, stories, problems that represent the core business of this reasoning on the trend of Italian architects to expatriate. In particular, we can attempt to put forward a rather crude synthesis and state that, over the last four decades, three factors have greatly encouraged Italian architects to leave their home country. First and foremost, the political and cultural crisis of architecture in this country; secondly, the spread of the Erasmus Project and academic exchange programs in general; and thirdly, the economic and financial crisis. The first and third factors may be considered negative, while the second factor – notwithstanding heretical anti-Europeans and staunch chauvinists – is undoubtedly positive. Let's try to analyze and understand the effects of these three phenomena on the two topics that MAXXI Architecture cares about most: the state of national architectural culture and the overall sphere of the rapport between architecture and society.

Let's start from the first theme: the difficulty Italian architects have in reacting to the crisis of the "historical project" of the 1960s, that is to say, the not quite complete success of a cultural program that closely linked the realization of several exemplary projects of architecture and urban studies to a project of national political evolution towards a form of mature Socialism. Like many other subjects in the country, in the 1960s Italian architects seemed to be prey to a particular form of evolutionism/historicism of a fatalist nature. Fascism had been followed by democracy, and in particular Christian Democracy; Christian Democracy was followed by the Center-Left (in its fiftieth year now); and this was followed by the increasing spread of Left-wing administrations hegemonized by the Italian Communist Party. At this point it seemed inevitable to think of a form of *natural* political evolution that would fully include architecture in the country's *welfare* provision. As we well know, this didn't work out, so instead of a social democracy we found ourselves with the so-called "historical compromise" and everything that came in its wake. But this too is the theme of another dedicated exhibition. Suffice it to remember, however, that the above-cited years, between the 1973 Triennial and the 1980 Biennale, were also the years of terrorism in Italy, with all that it (also) meant in respect to the management of national public space. In other words, most learned Italian architects fell into a sort of mild (or rather "designed") depression, particularly owing to the sudden disappearance of a kind of ideal public patronage, the surrogate for a prodigious, liberating and progressivist principle. And not particularly demanding in their assessment of the results they achieved. However, some of them reacted differently and, I beg you to forgive my brevity, they turned to the "markets" in which democracy and social democracy followed more pragmatic and efficient tracks, where architecture was a liberal profession and not a profession of ideological faith, as it is in France or Germany. This was the flow that pushed Piano and Fuksas toward Paris, in both cases on the back of their ability to win competitions (for Piano it meant Beaubourg!).

The second phase of this story has a more institutional, and optimistic side than the first one, as it concerns the effects of the spread of the Erasmus Project in European universities and, going by other names, in universities outside of Europe.

The Erasmus project, as everyone knows, is an exchange program for students and professors between European faculties financed by EU funds. It was set up in 1987 and until the present-day it has been increasingly successful in terms of numbers and cultural effects, enabling students from our faculties (in this particular case, in architecture, urban studies and design) to spend a period of time studying in another country. Only recently has the Erasmus Project begun to suffer its first crisis, for two main reasons. The first of these is financial, because the European countries located closest to the Mediterranean, whose students are the most Erasmus-addicted of all the participants, are the ones that have had the greatest difficulty in contributing the necessary funds to the Europeans coffers. The second is instead cultural because, vice versa, (especially) students from more northern parts of Europe are becoming more attracted to the idea of having an experience in the developing countries or in the Far East, rather than in Rome, Madrid or Paris.

In brief, Erasmus in its own way reflects the "growth crisis" that has been gripping the whole Community project, but I don't think that this can undermine the importance and the effectiveness of the principle. Exchange programs are fast becoming global, they will find other ways of being funded, and they will continue to have a very positive effect on the students' education.

What has the success of the Erasmus program meant for Italian architecture?

The impression is that its impact has been progressive and ever-growing. Starting from the mid-1980s, while Italian architecture was already going through one of its typically difficult and inward-looking phases, the students most interested in learning were leaving en masse for what were the new havens of global architecture: the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Germany. They returned from their experiences very much projected toward modalities for conveying and producing knowledge that were far more open and innovative than the ones they generally found in our schools. Practically speaking, for a long time the biggest contribution to research and innovation in our faculties came from students. These students soon realized that, maybe, they could stay on at the school they had gone to on the Erasmus program, to finish their studies or write up their theses and, hopefully, later put together a group with people of the same age from other countries and try to open up a professional practice that, as compared with Italy, would not just have had a higher chance of economic success ,but would also have offered the parallel opportunity of practicing the trade without having to give up one's expressive ambitions, and therefore be able to design *up-to-date*, recognizable and well-made architectures.

Many of the architects present at this exhibition come from this group and from this generation, including cases that have strikingly turned emigration into a factor upholding cultural diversity in respect to the national scene – suffice it to consider the stories of Benedetta Tagliabue, Elisabetta Terragni, and so on.

The Erasmus Project has influenced people's lives and architectural styles, but it has also influenced the life and history of institutions.

In 1988 the Europan was founded, a competitive program reserved for European architects below the age of 40 that became the banner and frontier-free showcase for the generation in question.

In 1994 a very important university reform was put into effect in Italy that transformed architectural courses into *labs* where students could work in steady contact with their teachers, no more than 50 students could be assigned to each professor – when I was a student there were 1,200 of us enrolled in Composition III, but to date not all the Italian schools have complied with such limitations –, and it introduced the semester system. In other words, as people would say back then: "Erasmus brings Italy closer to Europe."

So we come to the new millennium and the phase in which the emigration of architects loses some of its aesthetic and political connotations in order to be englobed in the mass phenomenon of the "brain drain." One goes or stays abroad mainly because the amount of space in Italy for a dignified and minimally satisfying profession has shrunk, because the market for design and opportunities moves fast in the world – in most cases from West to East – and it must be followed without delay. Despite this, both the growing number of Italians who are well-established as independent architects abroad and the hordes of those who go work for foreign firms still represent a huge potential for this country.

This exhibition, which affords a great deal of space to the latter generation, was conceived not just in order to reconstruct the historical landscape of that migration and to reveal the internal, cultural and economic causes that have led it to such excessive dimensions. What we especially want to remind everyone is that these architects are part of our professional and disciplinary community, that the feedback they can give to the country in terms of knowledge, technology and innovation is precious, that we will have to work hard to be able to create the conditions for their possible return, at least for some of them, but also and above all to put those who are still here in the position of being able to produce at the same level of quality as their fellow expat architects. There are many other problems and contributing causes that influence these phenomena that we don't have the space or time to deal with now. Let's mention just two issues, though, a positive and a negative one. The first of these is the crucial contribution offered by the new technologies to architects who intend to unshackle their professional activity from geographical and administrative constraints. The second is the overly high number of architects present in Italy. In this catalogue, we have discussed the former in relation to *cloud architecture*, and the latter has been the topic of discussion on many occasions and it would be unfortunate to have to go back to it now.

Let us then just emphasize the themes that seem to be the most important, and present, in order to back up our hypotheses, the work and stories of about sixty architects who are already quite well-known, promising Italian professionals, scholars and researchers who have decided to move abroad.