

LATIN LESSONS

Do people look down their noses at you when you tell them you're an architect? Would you like to be invited to take up the mayorship of your town? Do you seek fame, honour and recognition? Italian architects know what it's all about. Richard Burdett scales the heights of Roman society.

A RECENT visit to Rome confirmed the significant role that architecture plays in the Italian cultural scene.

By British standards there is a vast architectural community in the city, with 6,000 professionals and nearly 12,000 architectural students registered at Rome's state university. The sheer size and the overall high educational level of the Roman architectural community ensures an intensive level of cultural activity which partly compensates for the limited professional opportunities available to the younger generation of architects.

Following the educational reforms brought about by the 1968 student riots, universities in Italy have opened their gates to a much larger student population. Architecture has proved to be one of the most popular departments which, throughout all Italian universities, still attracts many students who wish to work within the field — spanning graphics, furniture design and urban planning.

In Italy architects have long been associated with political culture. Many of the university demonstrations and demands for educational reform originated in the architecture departments which, in the early

1970s, held a radical left-wing political stance.

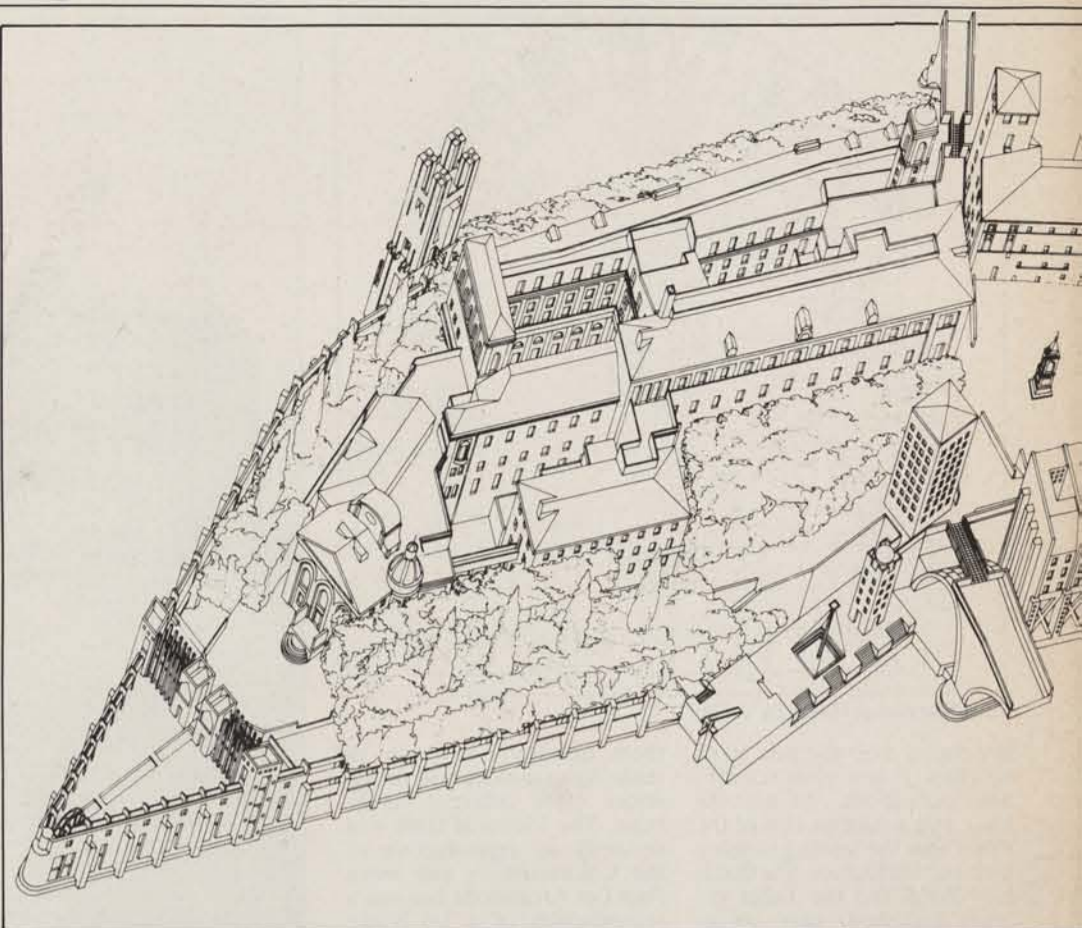
Since then, university life has generally become depoliticised but the link between architecture and politics is still strong, or at least explicit. In Rome three well-known architects hold positions of great responsibility within the city's left-wing local administration, a coalition of socialists and communists.

Renato Nicolini, a controversial communist architectural historian, is in charge of all cultural activities which take place in the capital (the equivalent of a regional arts council); Rossi Doria is responsible for tourism; and Carlo Aymonino, one of the great masters of contemporary Italian architecture, heads the prestigious committee for the historic centre of Rome. It should also be noted that, until recently, Giulio Carlo Argan, an architectural and artistic critic of international repute, was the mayor of Rome.

Architectural issues are therefore of more than parochial professional interest. Apart from potentially involving an audience of nearly 20,000 "specialists" in Rome alone, architecture features significantly in the lives of Italians.

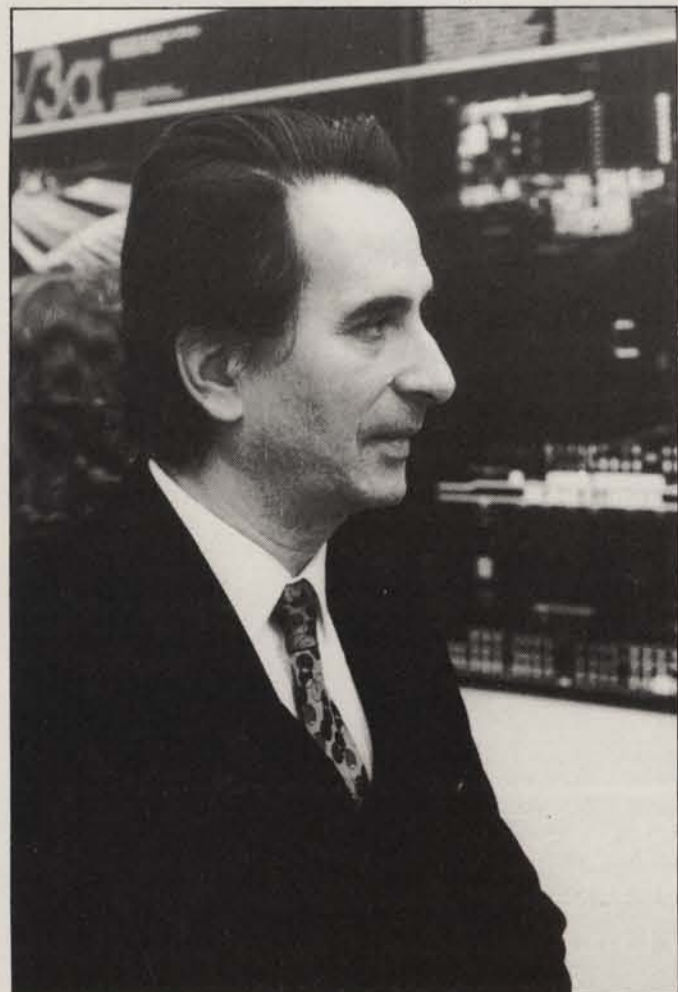
Recently, the architect and

historian Paolo Portoghesi — Italy's leading post-modernist — was made overall director of the Venice Biennale, the most prestigious cultural event in Italy. His election had more to



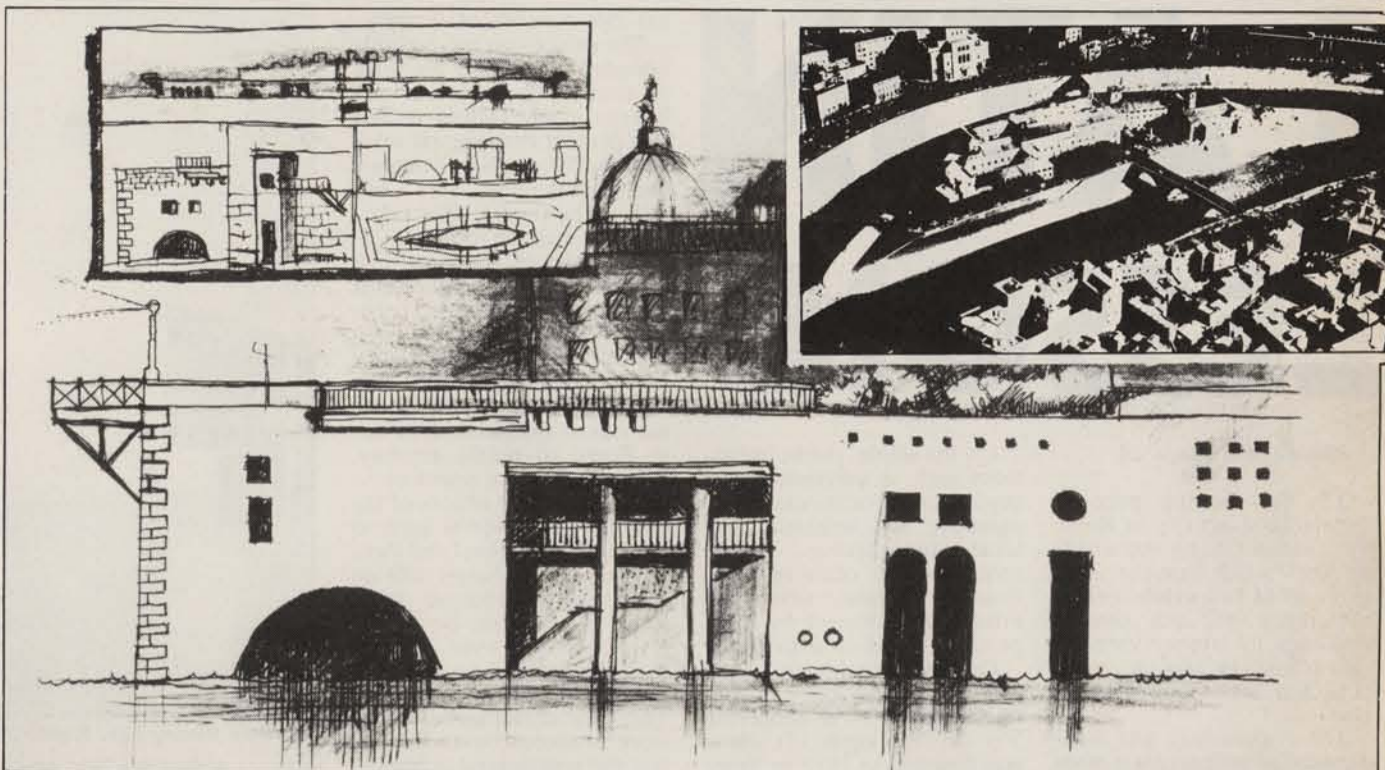
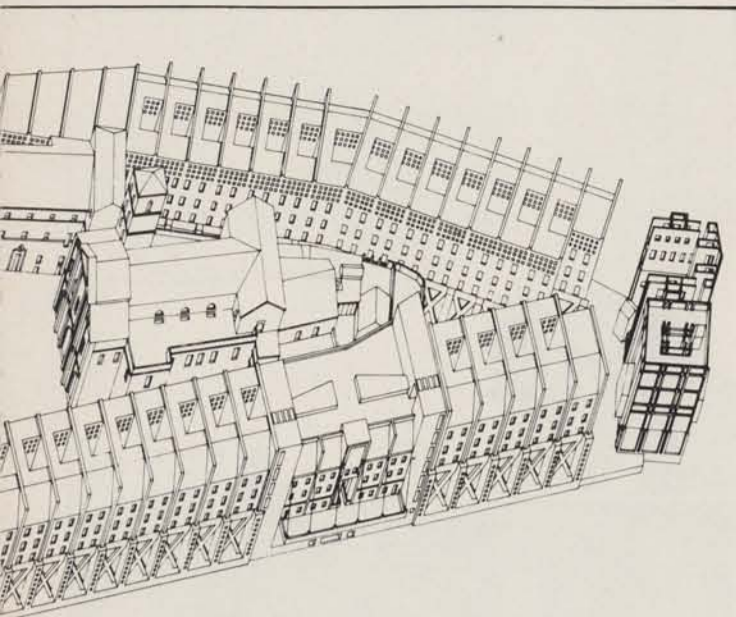
Franco Purini's scheme for the Isola Tiberina, 1983.

A sign



Paolo Portoghesi, new president of the Venice Biennale 1983-87. (Photo: Julian Wontner.)

Italian style



Pasquali, Passeri, Pinna, Porzio: scheme for the Isola Tiberina, 1983.

Inset: Aerial view of the Isola Tiberina, Rome.

do with his allegiance to the socialist party than to his undisputed reputation as a critic and designer. Significantly, the appointment of the directors for the different sectors — art,

architecture, theatre, and film — reflects the entire breadth of the Italian political spectrum: Aldo Rossi, an "independent" communist, is to head the architectural section for the

next four years. This will undoubtedly bring about an interesting confrontation between Portoghesi's baroque post-modern preferences and Rossi's rationalist tendencies.

Such explicit political involvement would be frowned upon in more Calvinist northern climates, but in Italy the political importance of cultural and artistic activities has a long and well-established history. This can be seen to span from the "panem et circenses" policy of the Ancient Romans (who supplied "bread and circuses" to keep the populace happy, a primitive form of dole-plus-cultural-centres); through Mussolini's dramatic interventions on the traditional urban surface of Rome (to re-create the grandeur of the capital of a newly-founded empire); up to the more recent events organised by the local authorities, such as open-air concerts and all-night film shows in the Circus Maximus, plans for the conversion of the Colosseum into an opera house and a controversial scheme to excavate and partially redevelop a chunk of the historic centre of Rome.

This latter project is the focus of attention for both the national and international press in so far as it raises a number of fundamental issues

regarding the future use patterns of traditional city centres and the limitations of conservation policies. The plan proposes the excavation of a large thoroughfare, constructed by Mussolini in the 1920s near the Colosseum, and its transformation into an archaeological park with a number of new public buildings and activities.

An awareness of architectural issues is ensured by regular contributions by well-known architectural critics, such as Bruno Zevi or Portoghesi, to prestigious national newspapers and radio programmes. The general standing of the architect as a professional in Italy allows him or her to act as a respected commentator on a wide range of social and cultural issues. Architecture is seen as a social art whose political implications are relevant and important to the development of the cultural debate in Italy.

Specialist publications are rich in variety and provide wide coverage of architectural issues, in Italy and abroad, with many competent translations of foreign texts. The much larger market than the UK allows the publishers to increase their range and maintain relatively low prices for high quality publications.

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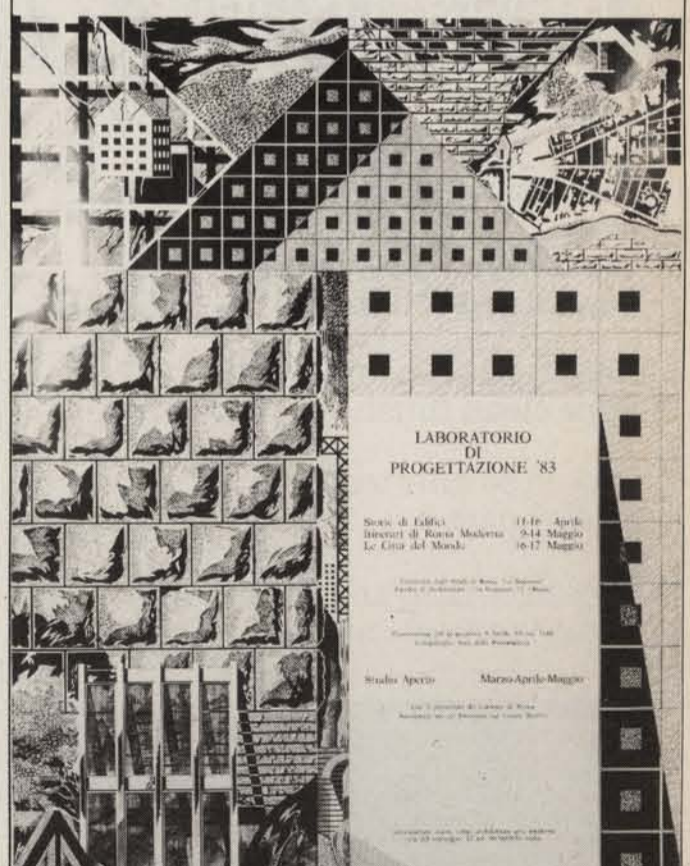
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Poster by Franco Purini for "Design Laboratory 1983" organised by the AAM Cooperative.

LATIN LESSONS

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The fast-moving pace of architectural activity in Rome was exemplified by two weeks in April which saw the inauguration of two exhibitions, a conference on 20th century buildings in Rome, visits to offices and the announcement of a new architectural magazine.

The organisation and management of such events is often placed in the hands of groups of young, motivated architects and critics. In some cases these groups form "cultural cooperatives" which rely on membership fees (about £5 for sponsorship).

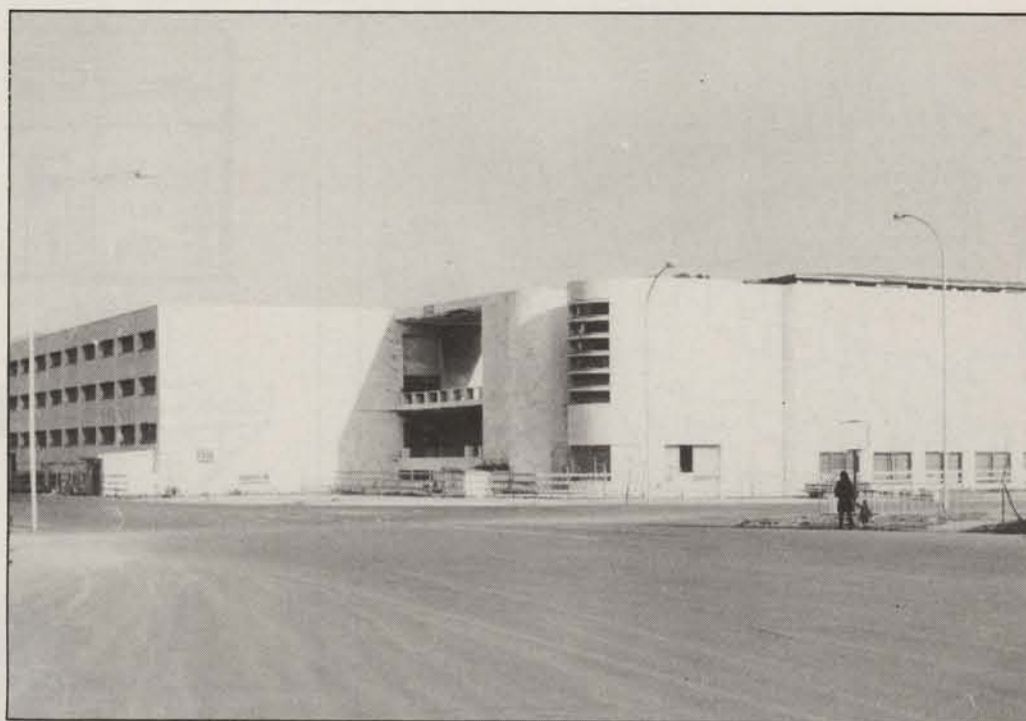
On the whole, public institutions such as universities and professional bodies are unimaginative and lethargic. The local administration, on the other hand, is often ready to finance activities which are effectively managed by independent bodies or individuals.

One such organisation is the Cooperativa AAM (Architettura Arte Moderna, Via del Vantaggio 12) which was founded in 1979 by Francesco Moschini, a young architectural critic. It is located in small but sophisticated premises near Piazza del Popolo and hosts a very wide range of exhibitions — with a new exhibition every two weeks which

fits into a series of themes.

The exhibitions are not only intended to publicise the work of contemporary Italian and international architects but also present the original work of early 20th century designers such as Sabbatini. The AAM has recently organised, together with the local authority, a series of seminars, lectures and special events which focus on the architectural heritage of 20th century Rome.

The "Design Laboratory 1983" series commenced with the simple idea of opening up a number of architectural offices in Rome to public scrutiny. Eighteen Roman practices — from the austere offices of the established architects such as Quaroni, Portoghesi and Puri to the refreshingly vibrant studios of the younger designers, such as Passi, Beccu and Raimondo — were flooded with a crowd of curious professionals and students. Visitors were treated to a survey of the work produced by each practice and encouraged to browse around and ask questions about past projects and work currently on the drawing boards. These occasions provided a rare insight into the atmosphere and workings of an interesting selection of prac-



Moretti's fencing hall. Right: Detail.

tices — something that could be taken up with success here in London.

A week-long conference held at the university, also organised by the AAM, centred on the presentation and analysis of 15 important build-

ings constructed in Rome between 1920 and 1980. The aim of the conference (Storie di Edifici, a history of buildings) was to reappraise the significance and architectural quality of the Roman school of 20th century architects.

Major architectural historians and critics, from the aggressive Manfredo Tafuri to the suave Portoghesi, presented an informative and enlightening account of the evolution of architecture in Rome in the light of stylistic



Le Corbusier's sketch of the Isola Tiberina.

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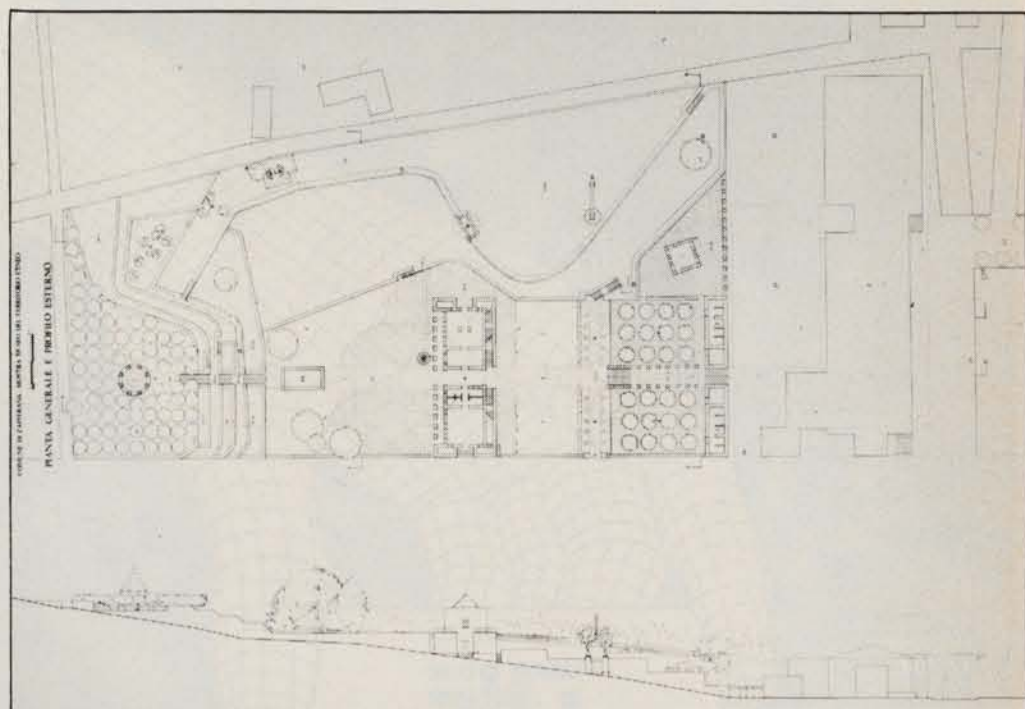
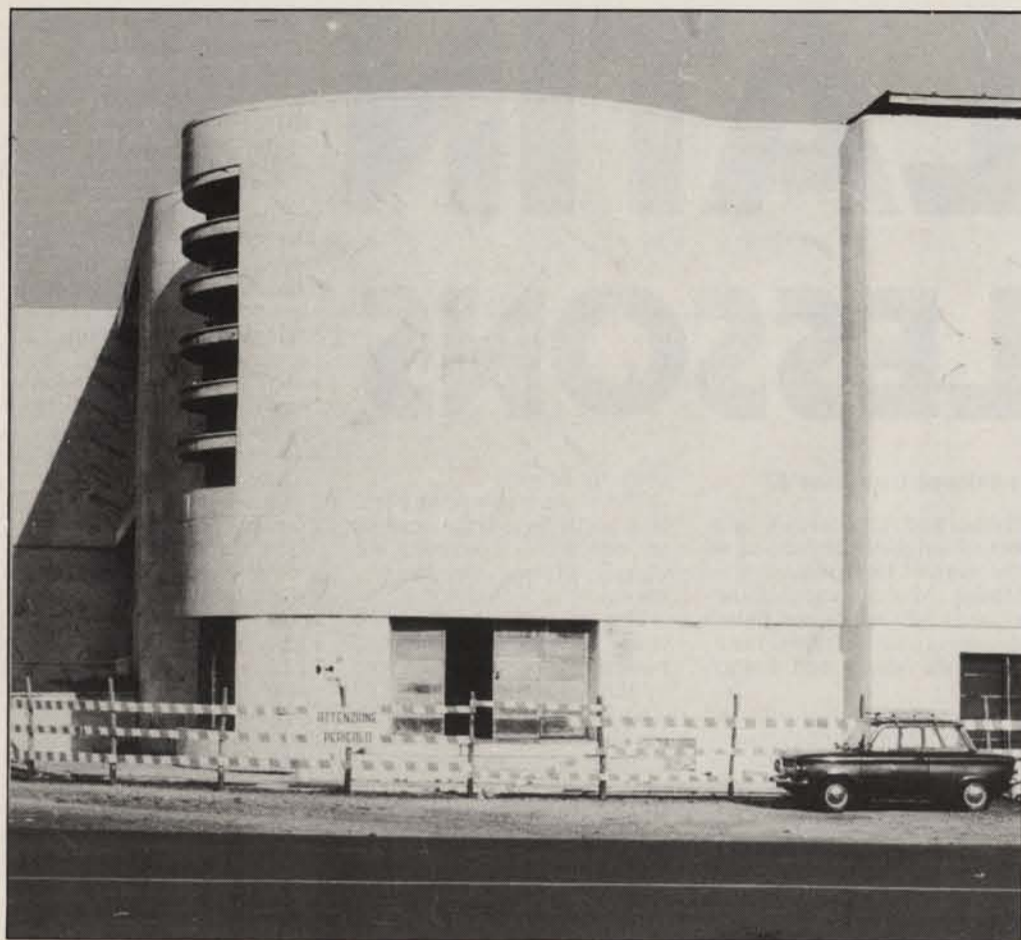
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Italian style



Arcidiacono, Beccu, Desideri, DeVita, Raimondo: design for a museum, Sicily, 1982.

and political change.

The supreme quality of the work of some of the lesser-known rationalist masters — such as Moretti's fencing hall or Libera's post-office — confirmed the need to reassess the standing of the Roman

rationalist school in the 1930s and 40s which, under the fascist regime, produced buildings which are as important to the development of Italian post-war architecture as Terragni's famous Casa del Fascio in Como.

In fact, buildings by Piacentini, De Renzi, Ridolfi and Libera demonstrate a unique combination of European rationalism with a very Roman sense of monumentality, symmetry and a strong urban presence. The participation in the conference by some of the architects of this period — Ridolfi, Frankl and Samona — led to the disclosure of fascinating personal anecdotes about the evolution of different designs and often amusing accounts of the relation between the architects and the fascist authorities.

The "Design Laboratory 1983" series will end with an international conference on the urban problems of the world's major capitals (Le Citta del Mondo, to be held from Monday to Wednesday next week) with guest speakers such as Moneo, Podrecca, Zenghelis and Rykwert. This will be followed up by a study and experimental design session in the summer which is intended to bring together the knowledge and experience gathered from the above series of

events, so as to produce design proposals for six problem areas in Rome.

The role of the local authority in the promotion of this exercise demonstrates an interest in a wide and informed discussion which, hopefully, will act as useful research for the development of architectural and urban planning policies in Rome.

Another centre of activity is the CLEAR cooperative (Viale Bruno Buozzi 105/A) run by Giorgio Muratore which was founded principally as a publishing enterprise. CLEAR produces original and inexpensive publications and catalogues of small exhibitions held on its premises. But above all the small but exhaustive bookshop is patronised by many architectural students and lecturers since it offers a 20 per cent discount on publications to members.

The profits from the sales of books to its 6,000 members are invested in the organisation of exhibitions and seminars, often backed by public institutions such as the cultural institutes of foreign countries, or by the Rome local authority. Recently CLEAR arranged a highly successful conference on Schinkel, following the grand exhibition held in Venice and

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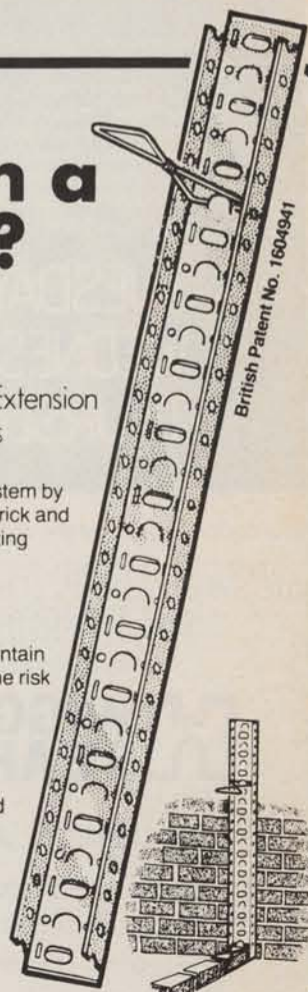
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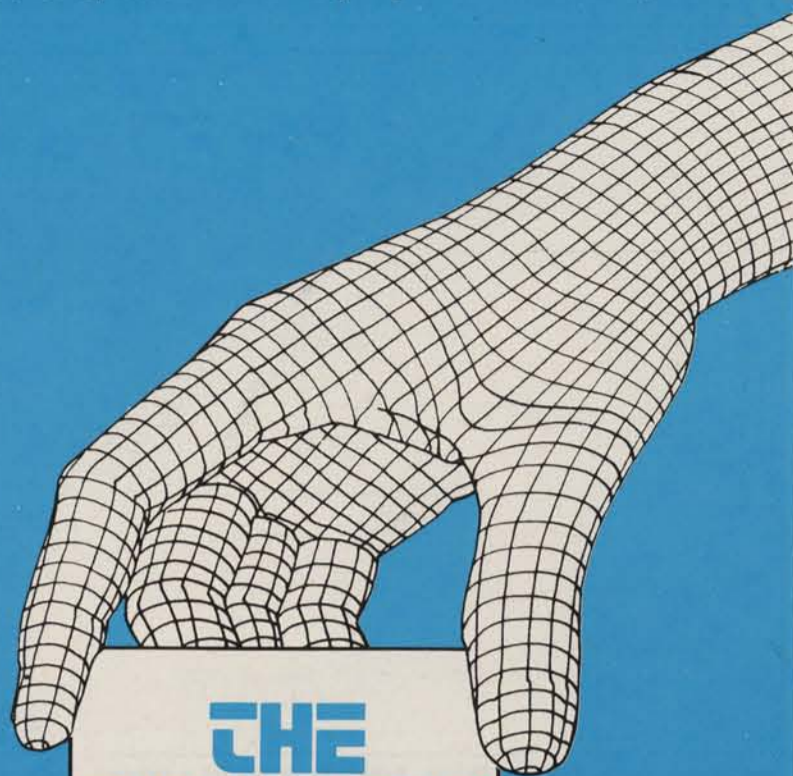
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Italian style

LATIN LESSONS

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Rome, and has hosted a number of original exhibitions on the work of foreign masters — Dudok, Mallet-Stevens, Duiker and J J P Oud — and Italian designers like Giorgio Grasse, Giovanni Muzio and Franco Stella.

These cooperatives offer serious and stimulating programmes which are generally far more innovative and controversial than the grand exhibitions and conferences arranged by the public institutions.

A further example of entrepreneurial activity is a forthcoming exhibition and ideas competition for the Isola Tiberina — the island on the Tiber in the shape of an ancient Roman ship. The island has for centuries been a centre of healing and the subject of romanticised depictions by artists and architects (even Le Corbusier produced a mythical image of the island during one of his

visits to Rome).

The island is nowadays occupied partly by a large hospital and constitutes a beautiful but slightly lifeless architectural jewel.

The organisers, the two young architects Pasquali and Passeri, have been sponsored by the regional authority and other agencies to collect an impressive array of historical material relating to the evolution of the island and its architecture.

They have also arranged an ideas competition (by invitation) to generate new ideas for the re-integration and reurbanisation of the island. The invited architects were chosen to reflect different stylistic trends and generations of designers: Aldo Rossi and Paolo Portoghesi representing the masters; Purini, Anselmi and Nicolini as the middle generation; and three groups of young promising designers taking up the rear.

The schemes, which will be

exhibited on the island in September, demonstrate the fertility and competence of Italian design and present a rare opportunity for Italian architects to test their abilities on such an important historical site in Rome.

Roman architects are therefore presented with a wide range of activities which engage their intellectual and design abilities — they are not limited to one institution or any particular architectural trend as tends to occur in London or New York. Open and informed debate takes place at all levels and on different sides of the architectural spectrum.

Significantly a new exhibition of post-modern artists, "Una Generazione Postmoderna", includes a number of architects who in any other country would be labelled as rather strict rationalists, such as Dario Passi, Bruno Minardi or Mario Seccia.

Their inclusion in an exhibition which spans from regurgitated pop art to naïve painting indicates the importance of temporal as opposed to stylistic categories and enables each project to be assessed in a broad cultural context, rather than simply in terms of particular themes such as colour or use of classical elements.

The architectural scene in Rome is eclectic and stimulating. It allows for different tastes and fashions, but on the whole the level of architectural debate — and, as a result the level of architectural production — is, in the best Italian tradition, of the highest standard.



Beccu, Desideri, Raimondo: exhibition stand, Bologna, 1983.