

## The Territorial Imagination:

Re-visiting the work of Luigi Snozzi (1932-2020) and the Monte Carasso Design Seminar

Matthew Jones

“There are very few architects who are capable of, or interested in, giving order to an entire territory. This is a very difficult task, because every place, even at a distance of a mere ten metres, appears completely different, suggesting different ways of intervening with architecture. How can we respond with rules to this incredible diversity of places?”

Luigi Snozzi<sup>1</sup>

Like a huge number of architects in the UK and across the world, I was saddened to hear of the recent passing of Luigi Snozzi in December 2020. Snozzi was a charismatic, larger than life character with strong political beliefs that shaped his career. Concerned with architecture's relationship with people and place he was unafraid of making radical propositions, often designing 'counter proposals' to reveal the inherent contradictions or flaws in competition briefs. He is perhaps best known for his relationship with the town of Monte Carasso - his successful stewardship of the town over a period of more than thirty years. This is one of only a handful of examples of successful long-term collaborations between an architect and a municipality in Europe. It remains an important example of the potential of architecture and urban design to positively transform small settlements, combining a belief in the validity of the European city with an architectural language influenced by the modern movement. The news of Snozzi's passing took me back to my experience of attending the annual Monte Carasso Design Seminar, led by Snozzi, which I attended fifteen years ago. As a young architecture graduate, this was a formative experience, one which has remained an important touchstone in my work as an architect, affecting also my teaching and research. Subsequently, I have studied Snozzi's approach in detail.

### The View from Above

High in the alpine woodland above the valley, a youth hostel nestles in a cluster of stone houses. The hamlet of Curzutt is a remnant of a past life in the Swiss mountains, a time when living on the valley plains below was precarious. Frequent flooding brought not only the threat of losing a livelihood but also the risk of malaria, while the strategic importance of the town of Bellinzona saw frequent raids through the valley. During the 1700s the hamlet was abandoned as conflict reduced and residents moved down the mountain. Since 1998 this cluster of derelict houses has been renovated as a hostel and was my home for the two weeks of the Design Seminar.

Other than the dramatic view, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of its location is its means of access. A narrow lane, zig-zags its way down the mountainside, but the most direct route of descending to the village is by cable car. Located at the mid-way stop on its circuit between the valley floor and the summit of Mornera the descent offers dizzying views over the valley below- a descent I became very familiar with and one which reveals the extent of the transformation of the territory below.

---

<sup>1</sup> Luigi Snozzi, quoted in Pierre-Alain Croset, Monte Carasso: The Search for A Centre. A Photographic Survey of Gabriele Basilico with Luigi Snozzi. Switzerland: Lars Muller Publishers, 1996, p.16.

Running along the valley floor between Bellinzona and Lake Magiorre, the channelled Ticino River can be seen, flanked by waterside parkland developed as part of the region's late 20<sup>th</sup> century flood defences. The town of Monte Carasso, a low-density settlement of 1500 people, clings between the flat-bottomed valley and the surrounding steep mountains. The twentieth century saw an influx of Swiss-German residents bringing a new language and ways of life, fuelling extensive low density housing and industrial growth across the valley floor. Over three decades, Snozzi transformed the town from an unremarkable community, one under threat from the expanding 'Ticino City', into a town with a strong civic identity and sense of place.

In the distance are two blocks of apartments and a 'town wall' - defining the territory of the town and connected by a tree-lined lane. Between is a field of vines, a piece of landscape infrastructure organising a zone earmarked for smaller-scale, future growth. These walls of affordable housing confronting the highway protect the town behind, while an eighteenth-century town wall along the Sementina River gives further definition to a third side of the town. These edges are not simply lines on a plan, which can be amended and challenged, but a constructed architectonic and social limit, defining - in physical means - the town's boundaries.

Continuing one's descent, attention shifts to the town's civic heart – the church, school, community facilities and a piazza - contained within a tree lined peripheral road: this territory is the focus of Snozzi's famous "search for a centre"<sup>2</sup>, carried out over the course of his career, and our destination for the start of the seminar.

### A View from the Centre

Stepping off the cable car, one heads toward the former Augustinian convent, situated in the heart of Monte Carasso. The July sun makes this southernmost part of Switzerland feel Mediterranean, perhaps more Italian Riviera than Swiss Alps, as the bright light reflects off the convent's white rendered walls. Around a small bistro table, shrouded in smoke from a constantly replenished Gitane, dressed smartly in shirt and black suit, is the tall figure of Luigi Snozzi, the architect best known for his acclaimed renewal of this small Ticinese community. School was out for the summer, but empty classrooms would soon to be filled by architecture students and young graduates - on a pilgrimage of sorts, to the annual two-week Design Seminar hosted by the municipality. Led by Snozzi, and a team of assistants, this key event in the town's calendar is a testing ground for ideas and propositions which stretch and challenge the town's unique planning process. The School was our base for the two-week design seminar, and a place we came to know well. We cooked, ate and worked here, drank at the café, chatted in the piazza and sheltered in the cloisters. A studio was set up in a long gallery on the first floor, where we tackled one of three design briefs relating to the possible future development of the town. In the double height classrooms, we listened to a series of powerful and witty lectures elucidating Snozzi's working processes, and the Monte Carasso experiment.

Prior to its renovation by Snozzi, the convent had been much extended and modified, its cloisters enclosed. The proposal to build a new school on the edge of the town was countered by Snozzi's proposition to bring together the school and new community facilities within the centre- a focus for the community, located at its heart. The clearing of several small buildings

---

<sup>2</sup> Pierre-Alain Croset, Monte Carasso: The Search for A Centre. A Photographic Survey of Gabriele Basilico with Luigi Snozzi. Switzerland: Lars Muller Publishers, 1996.

and accretions allowed a small piazza to be created while the convent was restored to its original renaissance form. A series of four vaulted classrooms were constructed within the most damaged arm of the convent while community facilities including the mayor's offices were located in the remaining space. A small café-bar, in one corner, serves parents waiting for their children to emerge from school, and is a magnet for local people socialising in this very particularly urbane, civic space. During the seminar, its value as a meeting place for the local community and in marking the rhythms and rituals of the town was obvious- a host for everyday interactions, but also to festivities and events including, during our stay, a wedding.

The successful renovation of the convent led Snozzi to work with the municipality to develop a long-term plan to strengthen the core of the old town. The town's cemetery was realigned to the orientation of the church, extended with a terrace, and enclosed within a low boundary wall; while the closure of an intermediary road, further strengthens their formal and spatial relationships. New community facilities complete the civic centre. An open-air basketball court and playground sit alongside a partially sunken gymnasium. The external ground is marked by a slanted band of glass blocks, which flood light onto the blue floor of the gymnasium below. A colonnaded stoa sits at a slight angle to the gymnasium negotiating the change in level from civic centre to a new peripheral road. The colonnade provides access down into the gymnasium, while below, community storage and a wood-burning furnace provides hot water for the town (accessed from the lower street level). These spaces are available for the use of all the community. During the seminar, we played several games of football in the gymnasium - usually Italy versus The Rest of the World - after a long day in the studio.

A tree-lined road defines the edge of the civic centre. The four-storey tower of the mayor's house stands at a key point on this route: a concrete belvedere, terminating the view from the convent. Its boundary wall defines the street edge and separates public from private territories. The tall and slender building has a small footprint, preserving a field of vines; whilst its prominence marks a key point in the new urban plan. In order to achieve this, the existing planning guidelines had to be abandoned; allowing Snozzi to propose a simplified series of seven rules, rules that have been continuously tested and refined by subsequent projects. The revised guidelines allow for the sub-division of plots; infilling between existing buildings; the introduction of a wide variety of house types and sizes, thus increasing the provision of smaller scale, more affordable homes. The town's essential characteristic and urban morphology is reinforced through the requirement for 1.2 metre high boundary walls to the street. The abolition of distance limits further strengthens visual appearance of the otherwise disparate streetscape. Further guidance included introduction of a density-index, linking floor areas to site areas; increasing possible building heights to three storeys, and the lifting of material and formal limitations. These revised principles demonstrate Snozzi's belief in the importance of urban structure - rather than simply superficial appearance as the defining characteristic in creating a sense of place; an approach that described beautifully in a model of the town, exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2012, showing only the walls of each plot, and omitting all buildings except the convent.<sup>3</sup>

Exploring the town on foot, it doesn't take long to find evidence of the sage application of these rules. The use of flat roofs, and beautifully crafted, in situ concrete, is consistent across Snozzi's projects in the town, making new insertions instantly recognisable. To the south of the civic centre, the twinned Guidotti Houses front a narrow street. Under previous regulations, only an extremely narrow, two-storey house - set in the centre of its plot - would have been approved. Instead, two attached houses, a storey higher than previous regulations,

---

<sup>3</sup> Roderick Kemsley & Christopher Platt, *Dwelling with Architecture*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2012 p.130.

are allowed to fill the entire width of a plot - defining the street edge and densifying the site. A curved wall, guides cars into an undercroft parking space, and draws the eye up towards the stepped private gardens beyond. Taking advantage of a sloped site, the ground floor is raised above the street, separating public and private despite their proximity. In the Morisoli Natalino House, a different approach is taken. Similarly, located on a sloping site, here a low concrete wall gives definition to the edge of the site and the street. The house occupies half of a larger plot, leaving room for a second home to be built beside it in the future. Opposite, a similar approach is taken to the refurbishment of the Morisoli Giorgio House. The only new construction is another curving concrete wall, similarly strengthening the street-plot boundary. In total, Snozzi has completed over twenty projects in the town. A number of other Swiss-Italian Ticinese architects, including Mario Botta, Aurelio Galfetti, and some younger practitioners, have further contributed to the gradual evolution of the urban form. Snozzi claimed that the results are “not be measured in the single projects, but rather in the overall relations which bring out new values.”<sup>4</sup>

### A View from the Road

A break halfway through the seminar offered us the opportunity to get on the road. Along with two colleagues, and armed with the three volumes of Peter Disch's 'Luigi Snozzi: The Complete Works', we headed toward Locarno to seek out some of Snozzi's early projects. We paused at the much-altered 1979 Constantini Store, before climbing up toward the mountains in search of the Kalman House (1974-6), a single-family residence with panoramic views over Lake Maggiore.

Family houses were, for a long time, the largest project type that Snozzi was able to build. Despite numerous successful competition entries, his political position - as an autonomous socialist - gave him little opportunity to work for public sector clients. His small house projects thus became a testing ground, deriving their design from a critical reading of the nature of the place, its the geography, morphology, social history, urban conditions and landscape character. Common themes are evident across these projects: the influence of modernist forms and “Neues Bauen”, interpreted in a critical manner; the use of two volumes held in tension, one often cut into the ground and the other rising above it; pergola structures to give scale to the landscape and frame views; and a close relationship between interior and exterior, bringing the resident into direct contact with nature.

We found the Kalman House overlooking Locarno, on the last plot before the open mountainside. The site appears impossible to build on, a steeply sloping plot alongside a small brook. The building is carefully placed, part of an architectural promenade revealing the inherent nature of the site to all who follow it. The initial proposal was to create a terrace perpendicular to the main body of the house to bridge the stream and reveal the presence of the water below. To reduce cost this was abandoned and instead an external ramp and stair rise steeply from the street following the concrete façade of the house. Entering through a full height glazed slot, the visitor rises up from the lower ground entrance level to the main living space along a gentry curving wall following the contours of the terrain. Internally, there are minimal divisions between spaces; a fireplace divides the kitchen from the living area, while a bathroom divides the bedrooms above. Views out of the house are focussed -through a recessed panoramic window, overlooking the dramatic valley landscape beyond. All other windows are at a high level, in order to focus views away from surrounding holiday homes and toward the mountains above. The contour-datum continues, leading the visitor out of the

---

<sup>4</sup> Luigi Snozzi quoted in Peter Disch, Luigi Snozzi: The Complete Works, Lugano: ADV Publishing House, 1997 p.46-7.

living room onto a terrace. It continues as a curved retaining wall, culminating in a concrete pergola, confronting the viewer with the drama and incredible scale of the mountains, the valley and the town below.

Relishing the inherent drama of these sheer sites, Snozzi's approach establishes a critical tension between elemental cast concrete forms and the landscape, in order to reveal the extreme character of the place. The resulting houses are intricately interwoven with their sites, creating a rapport which makes explicit otherwise hidden topographical and temporal traces – and their interdependence in human inhabitation. Vittorio Gregotti described Snozzi as a hunter, carefully observing his prey before enacting a light, perfectly positioned blow: “it is surprising to observe how, from a careful, concentrated study of each tiny trace, each sign left by history on a specific site, Snozzi is able to reconstruct an overall logical system of positioning, distinguishing between what should be eliminated and what should be conserved, so that each element contains a sense of absolute necessity.”<sup>5</sup>

## Endings

The final week of the seminar was a sprint to complete our projects ready for the final presentation. This was chaired by Snozzi and attended by the architects Alessandro Fonti, Paolo Mendes Da Rocha and Aurelio Galfetti. The seminar ended with a talk by Mendes Da Rocha, a kindred spirit, who shared Snozzi's determination to reduce buildings to their elemental simplicity. For the last time, we journeyed back up the mountain to the hostel, where a final celebration was attended by local political leaders, townspeople, and friends of Snozzi. Here, the true spirit of the seminar and the collaboration between town and architecture became apparent. With wine flowing, a hearty meal eaten, and Gitane still in hand, the evening ended with the raucous singing of socialist songs late into the night - a fitting end to a formative educational and cultural experience.

## An Alternative Beginning

The incremental approach taken in Monte Carasso - and the evolution of its unique planning process – offers us a valuable and viable alternative to the recent “Top Down” approaches usually taken by design professionals and politicians to similar, smaller, civic-rural communities. By focusing on the morphology of the town - defining its centre, establishing its limits and densifying its fabric - the approach of Snozzi et al reinforces the sense of Monte Carasso as a specific place with a clear identity; and this architectonic and political consistency creates a renewed civic focus there. The urban methodology there consists of projects in combination, renewing the urban fabric in the process, and creating new relationships. Pierre-Alain Croset describes this process as: “like fitting together a village sized puzzle in which every house, every item of infrastructure, down to the most trivial feature- a path, a park bench, a garden wall- has its proper place.”<sup>6</sup>

Snozzi's approach combined a belief in the continuity of the traditional European city, with a confidence in modernist ideals, in particular a reverence for the architecture of Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn. The projects demonstrate a sense of optimism in the capacity of architecture to provide a response to the anarchy of the urban periphery, one grounded in legible design

---

<sup>5</sup> Pierre-Alain Croset, quoted in Peter Disch Luigi Snozzi: The Complete Works, Lugano: ADV Publishing House, 1997 p.47.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre-Alain Croset, 'Luigi Snozzi & Monte Carasso: A long running experiment' in La Visitateur no.16 November 2010 Bilingual Edition p122

concepts given meaning through clear rules. The result is a measured, cautious, incremental but nonetheless radical transformation of the town through a series of public and private projects that are successful at a number of different scales. The Design Seminar was an important aspect of this process of consultation and adjustment of principles, and allowed emerging possibilities to be tested, possible outcomes to be explored. The projects that were engaged with during the seminar were often those which locals considered controversial; projects which pushed at the boundaries of the planning guidelines established by Snozzi, creating an opportunity for him and others to explore ideas with the town, before committing to its further development.

What remains surprising today, is that although the town is a mecca for architects and designers, wider application of the Monte Carasso experiment is limited. Similar, long-standing collaborations between an architect, his hometown and its townspeople are few and far between – I can't think of any of a similar quality, in fact.

Exploration of such broad spatio-territorial thinking - beyond the site to the street, the town, the city and the region - suggests the need for collaboration between design professions. In doing so, creating a place for the urban designer and architect working together in determining the uses and typologies of sites: expanding their roles in planning, design and developmental processes. In small towns, where major development opportunities are rare, and funding is uncertain and often limited, Snozzi's approach offers a powerful critique of current patterns of Top Down development, and opens possibilities for something collective and co-operative in its place, I believe.

Snozzi's passing reminds us of the significance of his best and most well-known long-term project, the town of Monte Carasso itself; bringing renewed attention to the value of the territorial imagination; and also, I would suggest, to the value of courageous and radical collaborations between architects and municipalities in enabling communities to fulfil their long-term civic and social potential. The possibility of an alternative beginning, in fact.