

Mino Fiocchi and the Alps. From specific to comprehensive, from individual to collective

Elide Piras
University of Architecture of Venice
30031 Venice, Italy
elide.piras@hotmail.com

Abstract: The capability to extend the *breath* of the place through the architectural project is the basis of the thought process of architect Mino Fiocchi (1893-1983). He is the lesser known interpreter of the Italian architectural movement “Novecento Milanese” which includes the works of two known architects, Gio Ponti and Giovanni Muzio. Fiocchi’s work celebrates the encounter of architecture and nature, of the collective and individually intimate memory of the place. The architectural structures that are conceived through this process no longer belong to the architect who designs them, nor to their owners, but to the landscapes that welcome them. Fiocchi’s architectural production in the territory of the Alps and his composition method shall be the focus of this essay. This same subject is part of a larger research conducted for a PhD earned at the Università di Architettura di Venezia , in 2007.

Mino Fiocchi (1893-1983) Fiocchi is known for his Milanese works (Bianchi et al. 1986. Burg 1991. Fiocchi 1981. Fiocchi 2003-2004) and mountain lodges built around Lake Lario, between Lecco and Como. This paper will analyze this architect’s simpler and more minute Alpine production. His mountains projects had to be designed to withstand harsh atmospheric manifestations and measure up to the

Alpine altitudes, and within these elements they found the deep origin of their own existence. In these places, the power of nature, with its rains, its fogs, its cold temperatures, its snow storms and its forceful winds, prevails on the human element, that is often reduced to no more than a handful of Alpine lodges. Here more than elsewhere, the spirit of the place identifies with the ever-changing forces of nature to which artists, writers, popular beliefs, myths and legends have attributed a supernatural character, halfway between *divine* and *demoniac*.

In the Middle Ages, the pilgrims crossed the Alps to atone for their sins before reaching the Holy Land (Bocca and Centini 1994). And since the beginning of time, mountain dwellers have inhabited and climbed the Alps in humility and wisdom (Cereghini 1950). In literature, poets and writers climbed the Alps to capture the formative strength of the climbing experience (Camanni 2000. Belli, Giacomoni and Ottani Cavina 2003. Dearden 1990). In 1919, Architect Bruno Taut in his *Alpine Architektur* described the Alps as an ideal location for the establishment of a new society in which art and nature could cohabit and complement each other in perfect symbiosis (Taut 1919). In figurative arts, the painters of the late 1800s, no longer used the mountain as a backdrop but made it the focal point of their works (Scherini et al 2000). Contemplation of the peaks from afar gave way to the need to understand. Painters became climbers and climbed the mountains to uncover secrets that cannot be fathomed by sight alone.

These mountains acquired a profound significance, rooted in the collective memory of their dwellers. The mountains are the physical result of a natural process that in the collective imagination was fueled

by a heterogeneous mix of fantasies, images, myths, and historical traditions and cultures. Fiocchi, was the sensitive interpreter of this historical legacy of elements that are spiritual and physical, visible and invisible. The projects that this essay will analyze – Alpine Lodges La Roccella and Nino Castelli – clearly reveal what it means for architecture to be appropriate and adequate to the spirit of the place.

Alpine lodge la Roccella

In 1938, the architect built a home for himself and his family in the Alpine area of Pian dei Resinelli (fig. 1-2). In this architectural work, the composition process that the architect follows in order to capture the spirit of the place is clearly recognizable. For his work, he draws on personal memories, mythology, collective images and the atemporal immensity of the surroundings. This mountain lodge was set in a very special spot, with a view of both the lake and the mountain. The lodge was built on the site where the architect used to take his family on vacation, and physically encompasses the activities that the family spontaneously conducted outdoors: eating, resting, playing, contemplating, meditating. In terms of the theme being investigated, it is interesting to understand the ways the form and the character of this building, built in 1938, is part of a set of collective images immortalized by painters and poets, but also the result of a long-contemplated personal dream: visually linking the lake and the mountain through architecture.

Mino Fiocchi and the Alps .
From specific to comprehensive, from individual to collective



Figure 1-2. Mino Fiocchi – La Roccella Lodge, Pian dei Resinelli, 1938.

f“[...] building a “haven” isolated from the world, for himself and his family, in harmony with his love for mountains. [...] also our family, on holidays, would drive from Milan, stopped in Lecco for the ritual purchasing of supplies. [...] Then, we would climb a series of hairpin curves on an unpaved road that led to that uncontaminated site, where he would choose a grassy area, immersed in beech trees, from where we could see a part of the lake and the familiar outline of Mount Grigna, called *Cresta Segantini* (Segantini Crest) after the painter who immortalized it in a painting.” (Fiocchi 2003-2004).

This simple chronicle of family life reflects the origins of this lodge, that stem from the atemporal spirit of a mythical encounter. With this building, architecture becomes a tridimensional panoramic device, enclosing and defining what painters represented in two dimensions on their canvases, and what authors described on their pages. It seems fitting, albeit considering they used different instruments, to compare Fiocchi’s work with the works of poets, authors and artists. If the work of a painter is nature’s image on canvas, Fiocchi’s work is a window framing that nature. The window

frames the same natural view that had fascinated the architect during his outings and inspired this resort, triggered by this seemingly *trivial* memory. Fiocchi's architecture is never a self-celebration, but the celebration of its surroundings and of the personal or collective stories they preserve and which enhance its meaning. This is why in the Alpine lodge at Roccella, the window facing Mt. Grigna is shifted toward the corner of the building, a skewed position justified by the fact that it allows its dwellers to set their gaze on that special visual cone that encompasses both the lake and the mountain. This architecture explains the delicate balance between what belongs to the landscape and what belongs to each inhabitant. A balance struck between the collective memory of the interaction of lake and mountain, and the personal memories of the architect, who captures this interaction and materializes it into an architectural work that would have never come to being without those surroundings. This landscape can exist even without these architectures. But they react to the spirit of the place and help extend, maintain and perpetuate its visible and invisible characters, its material and spiritual features.

The design of the lodge combines two simple and recognizable figures, connected to simulate, as in many of his projects, the birth of a collective event, a human memory. Spartan and simplified, these figures are very similar to one another and to previous projects (Bianchi et al. 1986. Cereghini 1950. Fiocchi 1981. Fiocchi 2003-04. Piras 2007). These are *serial* figures, but serial in a unique way, varying imperceptibly as the landscape varies. In such a methodology, differences are produced by infinitesimal operations in which the architect's personal contribution is limited to understanding the

changing surroundings rather than affirming his own personal taste. In this perspective, architecture is not a work of art in its own right, nor is it a sculptural invention. It is an element of a larger composition – the landscape, the spiritual places of the project – that the architect is committed to completing, with modesty and human devotion. Fiocchi, while also creating panoramic devices, lets the landscape be the event. For Fiocchi, as for the Alpine painters, the mountain and nature are no longer a background, but the protagonists of his work. In his architectures, the simplicity and repetition of forms, which he strongly pursued, stems from the need to second with architecture the primacy of nature. But in this sophisticated process of modesty and progressive simplification of the architectural language, architecture achieves its objective: it belongs to the sites in which it is built and becomes an integral part of a familiar and shared landscape.

Alpine lodge Nino Castelli

The Nino Castelli lodge was conceived in 1926 and heralded the themes that would be developed at Roccella ten years later. In the former project, the architect used the architectonic composition to showcase nature, in this latter one architecture becomes the *theater* and spotlights the dawn of a traditional Alpine village, reproducing it through its salient and simplified elements (fig. 3-4). The architectural composition is crafted into a clear volume, set on a tableland, facing the valley. Eventually, the lodge needed more space and in 1928, Fiocchi designed its additions. Three years later, in that same location, a few feet toward the valley, the architect also built the Bettini Chapel



Figure 3-4. Mino Fiocchi – Nino Castelli Lodge; Valsassina, 1928-1931. View of the the lodge and the Bettini Chapel. Photo taken in those years. Fiocchi archives.

(fig. 4). The three compositional progressions, built in different years, actually represent a continuum. The structure of the extension of the lodge is akin to the previous structure, albeit stretched and elevated. As for the Roccella lodge, synthetic and similar architectural figures are clustered together. The addition is an elementary structure, linked to the first by a low connector. In the back, as in the case of the stairway in the first lodge, there is a distinct volume: a minuscule chapel, marked by a discreet and symbolic belfry (fig. 3). This structure is far from a magniloquent celebration of the divine. Rather, it is a familiar presence at those altitudes, set to evoke there more than elsewhere, the spiritual and divine element. The outline of the extension is slightly rotated compared to the first structure, so as to establish a gentle dialogue between the former lodge and the addition.

Lastly, as you descend the valley, you catch the last portion of the composition – in a single glance, within one optical cone, beyond the Castelli lodge is the Bettini Chapel (fig. 4). The two figures of the lodge, slightly rotated toward each other, seem to be telling the story of the primal origin of a mountain village and a human landscape.

Together, they appear to represent the embryo of a dwelling. The chapel, built in 1931, seems to celebrate its *baptism*. In the tradition of the Alps, these compositions are achieved by clustering several lodges together and are called *malghe* (Cereghini 1950). In the architect's composition process, the collective memory of the lodges translates into the symbolic structure of a mountain village.

From the valley, the hiker/visitor only sees three elements and the hint of a belfry. The way they are set, these elements announce the idea of a village. Once the hiker/visitor reaches the peak, realizes that it is not a village but a mountain lodge. However, during his short climb, he will have perceived and anticipated the warmth and the human comfort of a village. The evocative power of this compositional progression is powerful and moving at the same time. Each structure, almost insignificant if taken individually, becomes with the others a striking account of stories, landscapes and memories, that are deeply rooted in the heart of the place and in the memory of its inhabitants. With this lodge, Fiocchi built a piece of the Alpine landscape revealing the angst and the ecstasy of conquering the peak. But instead of painting or describing this feeling, as would have done painters or poets, the architect materialized it with walls and stone, adding his work to the numerous images and the many stories that have animated and fueled the myth of the Alps for centuries, along with the atemporal spirit of the place.

Conclusion

In this composition process, the spirit of these places belongs to the individual and to the community. It is born of a personal memory but is identified with a shared, collective image. It stems from a particular condition in order to result in a more general dimension. It is born as a lodge and becomes a village – the isolated memory becomes a common, shared story. Here, just as in his lacustral work (Piras 2007), temporal references vanish and the building no longer belongs to a specific point in time, or to an owner, but to the places of the Alps, the only, authentic works of art that these architectures are called to celebrate. With his work and his composition process, Fiocchi offers posterity an unsurpassed lesson of compositional *Modesty*. One in which the work does not celebrate itself, in order to investigate the generating power and the ideas embedded in the visible and invisible, material and spiritual places of the architectural project.

REFERENCES:

Belli, Gabriella, Giacomoni, Paola and Ottani Cavina, Anna. 2003. *Montagna. Arte, scienza, mito, da Dürer a Warhol*, Milano: Skira.

Bianchi, Bruno, Furlani Marchi, Maria Grazia, Gambirasio, Giuseppe, Mantero, Enrico, and Rigoli, Gianni, 1986. *Mino Fiocchi architetto*, Lecco: Comune di Lecco, Musei Civici di Lecco.

Bocca, Claudia, and Centini, Massimo. 1994. *Le vie della fede attraverso le Alpi: dall'arduo cammino degli evangelizzatori e dei pellegrini ai tormentati percorsi degli eretici*. Ivrea: Priuli e Verlucca.

Mino Fiocchi and the Alps .
From specific to comprehensive, from individual to collective

Burg, Annegrete. 1991. *Novecento Milanese. I novecentisti e il rinnovamento dell'architettura a Milano fra il 1920 e il 1940*. Milano: Federico Motta Editore.

Camanni, Enrico. 2000. La montagna descritta, in *Le cattedrali della Terra: la rappresentazione delle Alpi in Italia e in Europa 1848-1918*, 160-165. Milano: Electa.

Cereghini, Mario. 1950. *Costruire in Montagna*. Milano: Edizioni il Milione.

Dearden, James S. 1990. *John Ruskin e le Alpi*. Torino: Museo Nazionale della Montagna "Duca degli Abruzzi", C.A.I..

Fiocchi, Carlo. 1981. *Mino Fiocchi architetto, mezzo secolo di progetti*. Milano: ERIS.

Fiocchi, Carlo 2003-2004. *Nel Nome del Padre*. Querce al Pino: not published.

Piras, Elide. 2007. *Mino Fiocchi e il Novecento Milanese, nozioni di classico, nozioni di paesaggio*. Ph.D. diss., University of Architecture of Venice (IUAV).

Piras, Elide. 2007. Mino Fiocchi. Le souffle du lieu. In *Finding the spirit of place/ Ou se cache L'esprit du lieu*. Montreal: ICOMOS Canada.

Scherini, Letizia. 2000. Note per una storia del paesismo di montagna in Italia in *Le cattedrali della Terra: la rappresentazione delle Alpi in Italia e in Europa 1848-1918*, 16-24. Milano: Electa.

Taut, Bruno. 1919. *Alpine Architektur*. Hagen.