

## Modern attitudes towards vernacular architecture. Works by the Italians Luigi Angelini, Alberto Alpago Novello, Ottavio Cabiati, Alessandro Minali

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### Abstract

*Among the many architects practicing between the two world wars, some looked at the so-called vernacular architecture - then referred to as traditional or local, primitive, and spontaneous - as a model of genuine functionality. For some of them, its revival also stands for a solid and reliable solution for preserving the continuity between past and present, local communities and their traditions, society and its generations, a place, and its materials. Architectural historians have widely explored the theme, highlighting figures, subjects, and currents. Nevertheless, investigation of the role of history and historic culture is still far from exhausted, not only for Modernists but also among the Avantgardes and the International Style too. As a response to this conference's topics, some of the architects working in and around Milan the 20th century focused on the relationships between tradition and modernity. Here we look at some of their works to open a discussion on different scales: the landscape, the town, the building. We shall examine their proposals for a functionalist and modern design concept in traditional terms: the Mediterranean colonial house will illustrate the research by Alberto Alpago Novello and Ottavio Cabiati on local architecture; the modern pre-Alpine house proposed by the engineer Luigi Angelini for the Bergamo valleys and the building materials chosen by the architect Alessandro Minali show their respect for each place. The conclusions will – one hopes - lead to talking about typological and constructive building features, materials, and traditional techniques as a tool for preservation.*

**Keywords:** tradition; vernacular; material culture; type; modernism.

### 1. Introduction: an interest in materials culture

In 1911 the Minister for Education, Ferdinando Martini (1841-1928) launched the Italian ethnographic and regional exhibition in Rome to celebrate the first fifty years of the Unity of Italy and entrusted Lamberto Loria (1855-1913) to manage it. A brilliant and clever ethnologist, Loria arranged the objects he had gathered in the remotest areas of the Earth, already in order in the Ethnographic Museum of Florence, but he also proposed the reconstruction of ethnographic groups and of some typical architectures, even minor, to represent the Italian regions.

To display and convey the regional features of Italian architecture in the collective memory was a far-sighted idea. Loria “feared that the progressive industrialization and the consequent urbanization could lead, in the space of a few years, to the disappearance of the agro-pastoral culture in many areas of the peninsula” (Ceci, 2006). He therefore turned to Italian culture: he collected, surveyed, rearranged, and exhibited documents (including oral and video-type expressions) to highlight and, hopefully, protect their variety and traits, looking at architecture not as folklore but as an ethnographic result (Loria, 1912a). Somewhere, interest in material culture and its protection was emerging.

Rearranging this exhibition of materials in the future National Museum of Italian Ethnography proved the existence of many counter-positions. The desire for a typological criterion, which would be useful for comparative studies of the objects, was opposed to the opportunity to preserve a regional distribution (Baldasseroni, 1912). Loria agreed with these positions but, at his time – before WW I - the idea of fostering the protection of local characteristics as an element with the unity of the country, caused ideological drifts (Loria, 1912b)<sup>1</sup>. His penetrating attention to the local peculiarities of architecture, of human beings' customs and industry, was misunderstood. Nationalism translated his purpose into the search for original and primitive characters. The idea of upholding a preeminent one as an expression of Italian culture, and to export it outside the country to justify colonization prevailed. The study of traditional practices relayed by micro-communities was flattened: it became the cult of origins, the myth of the peasant, the apotheosis of rurality, or it was lent to a form of colonization that was only apparently peaceful (Aquarone, 1977). As the exhibition catalogue demonstrates, this was not the purpose of Loria nor of the others (Puccini, 2005).

The catalogue was entrusted to Francesco Baldasseroni (1878-1923), a distinguished medievalist historian. He himself presented the contents of the exhibition to the readers of the well-known *Emporium*, a monthly review on art, literature, science, and related topics and linked the event to a core cultural purpose. In his opinion, not only would opening an Italian ethnographic museum have promoted these studies but it would have validated their usefulness for artistic development (Baldasseroni, 1911).

He invited the public to seek in products made by the members of local communities and to everyday objects resulting from centuries-old practices; to consider them as know-how handed down by tradition, expressions of lasting shapes and therefore of identity. This interest in popular custom, though strongly supported by esthetic evaluations, also captured the application of architectural styles in everyday objects, the recovery of specific elements (for example the rose window) in the Abruzzo region's traditional women's dresses, ornaments and sculptural reliefs, in glass or snuffboxes. He did not consider this an original or spontaneous result, but neither was it a question of trivial copies. He did not repute the common man a creator but considered him a bearer of forms and symbols, rules and habits, who makes and upholds tradition thanks to the economic constraints<sup>2</sup>.

While in the figurative arts many turned to the peasant world and its feelings, as the paintings by Giovanni Segantini, but also pre-futurist portraits by Giacomo Balla show (Sabatino, 2010), the contemporary architects were taking a more critical attitude towards the past. It is well known how the progressives, moved by a desire for functional modernity, forced their uprooting from the past to renew forms, speed up building procedures and accelerate mobility in the cities. While enhancing artisan and local industries as a tool for economic development, Baldasseroni omitted an evaluation of regional architecture. He did not take advantage of the magazine's distribution to broadcast what he had expressed in the much rarer exhibition catalogue about "ethnographic buildings". Only the amazing 'trullo' was selected to represent Pugliese architecture and not the ordinary 'masseria' whose functional distribution was grasped to Loria by one of his collaborators (Castano, 2014).

1 In his words: "occorre studiare se non convenga avere leggi speciali per molte regioni italiane. E questo, lungi dall'essere dannoso allo spirito nazionale, sarà il cemento che unirà indissolubilmente le diverse regioni italiane", Loria 1912b, p. 79.

2 In his words: "Il popolo non crea ma conserva con accorgimento e tenacia: mantiene in vita e in vigore ciò che

le classi più alte della società gettano via e facilmente dimenticano: soggette queste al mutevole andazzo della moda, al variare dei gusti, alle sempre nuove necessità del viver civile; e per le sue stesse condizioni economiche e per il suo tenore di vita, impedito di seguire e di accogliere ogni rapida trasformazione della civiltà materiale", Baldasseroni 1911, p. 309.

## 2. Research method: from the exhibition to its reviewers, their works and professional circles

Among those recounting the exhibition was the attentive Luigi Angelini (1884-1969). His first writing only referred to the architecture designed by Cesare Bazzani (the still existing *Palazzo delle Belle Arti*) and Marcello Piacentini (the provisional pavilions) (Angelini 1912). But a second, though perhaps excessive appreciation of the eclectic pastiche of the Lombardy and Emilia Romagna pavilions, did stop to mention the “faithful and admirable reconstructions of houses and typical groups of Italian dwellings of the past centuries”, inviting us to admire their simplicity, strength and lightness; that is, to recognize the beauty also in “peasant architecture” (Angelini, 1912, p. 35).

Here we will present the outcome of a further investigation on the exhibition contents and the attitude towards vernacular architecture. Some North-Italian architects practicing between the world wars will be introduced: Luigi Angelini, Ottavio Cabiati, Alberto Alpago Novello and Alessandro Minali. It will be argued that Loria’s concern has been carried further to propose an investigation of traditional architecture as a tool for preserving cultural identity and place.

## 3. Research result: being modern while learning from the past

Three keys are offered to reading their works: recovering the authenticity of peasant life, mixing cultures, and applying craftsmen’s ability.

### 3.1. Rediscovering peasant life

A biased witness and witty chronicler at the time of the exhibition, Luigi Angelini was a civil engineer, architect, and urban planner, with fruitful activity. Born and living in northern Italy, in the province of Bergamo, he is perhaps a

minor, not very influential personality, but his writings and works serve as a faithful mirror of the contemporary architectural debate and of the arguments between ‘passatists’ and modernists. In this fluid contradiction, he is among the designers sensitive about conceive ‘another’ modernity, founded on tradition, respecting local construction know-how and practices handed down over the generations. Since 1916, having studied and surveyed the minor architecture of the valleys around Bergamo but also of the small villages of central Italy, Angelini had drawn some conclusions on their characteristics (Angelini 1916; Angelini 1918)<sup>3</sup>. They are listed in the captions to his photographs and sketches and focus on spontaneity and undesigned shapes as opposed to straight and orthogonal lines, and the exclusive use of primary colours. He counteracted the Avanguardias and reclaimed an architecture that he called: ‘environmental’<sup>4</sup>. The distance between these writings and some subsequent ones measures the well-known difficulty of defining architecture of moderate modernity (D’Amia, 2013): based on respect for the past, rejection of disruptive contradictions, and openness to solutions of quiet harmony. Between 1931 and 1932, returning to ‘rustic’ architecture, Angelini admits that the dialogue was interrupted by the prevalence of other currents (Angelini 1931a; Angelini 1931b e Angelini 1931c). He was now no longer limited to detecting picturesque aspects but proposed design criteria for architecture and landscapes. In *Caratteri e schemi dell’architettura rustica bergamasca. Per un’edilizia moderna ambientale* [Characters and schemes of Bergamo’s rustic architecture. For modern environmental building] published by the well-known *Rivista di Bergamo* between August and September 1932, directly citing Le Corbusier’s and John Ruskin’s theories, he stood his distance from standardized architecture, from “a common type of civil construction”, to promote, with no romantic

3 Regarding decay, he suggested carefully distinguishing the danger of cracked walls weighed down by prolonged fatigue or unexpected loads but tolerating the effects of simple picturesque erosions.

4 Like that of *Neoplasticism* which appeared in 1916, cfr. Polano 1979.

ambiguity, a poetic vision (Angelini, 1932a; Angelini, 1932b)<sup>5</sup>. He explains that between the two currents (one tending towards renewal based on tradition and the other contrary to it) he chooses the first, admitting looking at “Scandinavian, Polish and Magyar examples”<sup>6</sup>. Looking to Eastern Europe he is not explicit on his references; but we like to think of Kós Károly (1883-1977), the Hungarian architect who was translating local and spontaneous architecture - that is, vernacular - into modernity. At the same time, *Lares*, the oldest Italian anthropological magazines still existing, and probably Paolo Toschi himself, its new editor, praised the census of the ‘inn signs’ collected by the Bergamo engineer, attributing to him absolute authority in the field of ‘rustic architecture’ (P.T., 1932)<sup>7</sup>. Shortly thereafter, the same Italian ethnographers magazine published *Aspetti dell’architettura rustica nelle valli bergamasche* (Angelini 1932c): summarising what had already been described elsewhere, but more harshly, and recalling the features suggested in 1916, now arranged in six points. Like in an architectural ‘manifesto’, he suggests: I - grouping the masses of the building; II - parts of the buildings; III- overhanging and protruding roofs, IV- outdoor stairways; V- arcades and loggias; VI- long balconies<sup>8</sup>. The article was published without any illustrations. But the thousands of sketches he made of the pre-Alpine valleys are now being widely published: mostly perspectives of rustic buildings and environmental views more than architecture prototypes. The article is also a clear indictment against the demolitions and an invitation to be beware of the glamor of modernity. At that time, it sounded like a

challenge to builders, owners, and institutions; later it would offer typological prefigured schemes, as many others did<sup>9</sup>.

### 3.2. Mixing cultures

Alberto Alpago Novello (1889-1985) and Ottavio Cabiati (1889-1956) shared with Angelini a similar course of studies; trained by the same teachers (Gaetano Moretti, Ambrogio Annoni, Ludovico Pogliaghi, among others), they have the same background (Milan, now the Polytechnic, and the Brera School of Architecture). Their professional paths are different as was their participation in cultural debates: the younger architects favored the more international and distinctive sites. But there are some similarities: these relate to vernacular architecture and are captured in their design research which is similarly based on substantial studies of the context, far from prejudices towards the past, respectful of tradition, and aware of transformations. The first professional job Alpago Novello tackled was post-war reconstructions in the north-east areas of Italy, the place he came from. For the damaged buildings there was an obligation – including a moral one – of ‘re-construction’: it should have shifted from imitation towards organic modernity- at least in the words of the distinguished Ambrogio Annoni (1852-1954). One of his contemporary writings (Annoni, 1920) moved the issue towards the education of builders and recalled earlier thoughts (Giolli, 1918; Massara 1917; Melani 1917). Annoni, already a professor, rejected every kind of reconstruction: the historical, because it was false and fetishist, but also some new types, because

5 In his words: “un tipo comune di costruzione civile”.

6 For instance, he stated that in 1925 the Paris exhibition minimized the impulses that had appeared in Milan in 1919 during the *First Lombard Regional Exhibition of Decorative Art* held at the *Umanitaria* (Calzini 1919) but also of the *Biennale of Decorative Art in Monza* held in 1923 and 1925.

7 It was written: “Engineer architect Luigi Angelini is one of the few well prepared scholars of rustic architecture and, more widely, of popular art”. P.T. 1932, p. 104.

8 In his words: I raggruppamento delle masse dell’edificio; II uso delle costruzioni in sopralzo; III variazioni delle

sporgenze di tetto; IV movimento delle scale esterne; V formazione di porticati e logge; VI uso di lunghe balconate.

9 *Arte minore bergamasca. Vecchie case di paese* and *Arte minore bergamasca. La decorazione delle case* were published by *La Rivista di Bergamo*, a local but renowned magazine, between June and August 1937. *Arte minore bergamasca. Architetture di case: organismi, proporzioni, rapporti spaziali*, where types and standard models are clearer, would appear not before 1941.

they were standardized and serial. He was afraid of the practice “capace” but “rapace”, that sounds like speedy but greedy, of construction companies. He promoted builders' organizations to preserve their know-how and the use of local materials. Blaming school systems and the professional world, he was hoping for the rebirth of local trade schools (such as that of the wood-artisans in Brianza). He therefore approved the collection of “peasant and regional art objects” as a means of protecting the products of slow experience, gathered throughout centuries and families. He recalled his masters Luigi Conconi (1852-1917) and Giuseppe Sommaruga (1867-1917), Alessandro Mazzucotelli (1865-1938) and Giovanni Buffa (1871-1954). He professed he was one of their pupils (like Mazzucotelli, Giovanni Beltrami, Enrico Monti and Gaetano Moretti) at the ‘*Società Umanitaria*’ in Milan. While the works of Buffa and Castiglioni were sliding, he pointed out the designs by two young architects, Luigi Maria Caneva and Luigi Angelini: snapshots of damaged or endangered village houses (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. XVII century house in Montebelluna. Drawn by L. Angelini, dated, 28 January 1919. (Annoni 1920, p. 77)

Raffaello Giolli wrote first to defend “the harmony of the village house”. The renowned critic explained that it was not a matter of

“pedantic archeology” or “obstinate conservatism”; nor of ephemeral beauty, but of constructive wisdom: because “a rustic farmhouse is the result of a thousand trials and a thousand selections over the centuries”<sup>10</sup>.

He himself had already observed how villages grew slowly over the centuries, how buildings had to be placed in relation to the ground, like trees, to survive. He pointed out that we build to satisfy real daily needs and not formal criteria, making use of local materials, and thus being spontaneously vernacular (Giolli, 1918).

Critics started looking at old building techniques as genuine solutions: a kind of modern architecture seeking the best solution without prejudice to those of the past. Annoni feared post-war reconstruction when entrusted to outsiders, to foreign entrepreneurs who would provide quick, cheap results, lowering the quality of the result. Therefore, he believed in solid initiatives: one promoted by the *Amici dell'Arte Cristiana* under the impulse of Celso Costantini to establish an institution dedicated to the reconstruction of churches in the war-damaged areas; the other by the *Touring Club Italia* under the impulse of Luigi Vittorio Bertarelli and Ercole Marelli for a competition on the types of rural architecture (Bertarelli 1918; Giolli 1919). They both picked up studies conceived before the defeat at Caporetto (November 1917), inspired by foreign experience (in France and Belgium and also in England, Canton Ticino and Germany); they collected documents “on typical constructions in war zones”: a working group that in Italy found support from the most authoritative figures like Gustavo Giovannoni, Corrado Ricci, Luigi Rava, Giovanni Rocco e Antonio Massara (1878-1926), the President of the Museo del Paesaggio, and author of the cited paper. The interest for vernacular architecture, which is deeply rooted in the 19th century moderate and conservative culture in Italy and in the north-east, was running along different and

<sup>10</sup> In his word: “una cascina rustica è il risultato di mille prove e di mille eliminazioni secolari”.



contradictory roads. The clarifying writing by Massara moves the issue outside the war-damaged areas and shows the recurrent but uncertain desire to claim and protect Italian identity (Massara, 1917).

Alpago Novello's part in the reconstruction program for damaged churches was a circumstance perhaps favored by his relations (Zanella 2002, p. 31). Surely it was also an opportunity to study the local features and context and surveys before shaping the project, as he did in Agordo, near Belluno (fig. 2). Designing the new post office of this small town he arranged the central square which had been gutted when the old St. Peter church had been demolished, thus creating 'ambience'.



Fig. 2. The Post office in Agordo, Drawings of the Front and Side view. A. Alpago Novello, 1919 (Zanella 2002, p. 60)

This approach is recognized by the positive reactions to his work in the colonies where he acted both on the architectural and urban scale. In Tripoli and Bengasi, for the cathedral as for town plans, and I.N.C.I.S. residential buildings (the new district for civilian and military colonial officials) the design seems to grasp and manage social relationships, with a mix of architectural elements on different scales. When 'reading' and designing the city, he adhered to functionalism without forgetting social dynamics, by protecting identities and excluding segregation by ethnicity; thus, he firmly rejected the kind of oblique, controlled 'integration' proposed by others. Similarly, in the architectural device (a representative office or a dwelling) he explored local distribution solutions but without slipping, despite the appearance, into the ideal of a reconquest of Roman roots: the *forum*, the *domus*, etc. This resulted in some interesting hybridizations of constructive characters, like the

*mashrabiyya* (مشربية): a traditional Islamic passive cooling tool to control environmental parameters (fig. 3).

This is why these works are interesting as the result of some 'other modernity' (Capresi 2012) and represent a post-colonial heritage rich in stimulating protection issues.

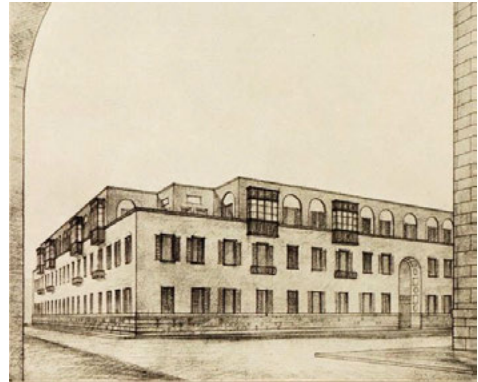


Fig. 3. Bengasi. Perspective view of the I.N.C.I.S. Quarter by A. Alpago Novello – G. Ferrazza, 1930-32. (Reggiori 1930-31, p. 1361).

Since 1911 Tripolitania and Cyrenaica had been dragged into an increasingly aggressive and imperialist colonization program, justified by the rediscovery of the Italian roots of coastal Africa. Archeological and architectural research was directed towards finding the imperial monuments buried by the sand (arches, theaters, etc.) and the mark of the Roman house in the Arab building. As far as possible unrelated to ideological and nationalistic contamination, Alpago Novello with Cabiati took the Libyan adventure as an opportunity to test new solutions, to look for modernity in tradition (Zagnoni, 1993). They investigated traditional distribution schemes and rediscovered the use of internal courtyards. They studied orientations and understood the use of the blind wall as an expedient for cooling the air. They analysed the effects of light and shaped windows and entrances regardless of symmetries according to sunlight and temperature. They observed the roofs and adopted the flat one as the most suitable for temperate and drier climates. Their design drawings, ink on paper or simply print copy, do not render this sensibility which appears in their

perspective sketches, capturing the environmental values, and in their watercolours, transferring light-dark effects (Grisoni, 2020).

### 3.3. Applying craftsmanship

Alessandro Minali (1888-1960) had an unassuming shy personality but was very active and competent professionally. His work is mostly unpublished and under study. His partnership with Alpago Novello is well known and went back some years. In 1923 they proposed, without success, to arrange a central area of Milan released from railway infrastructures, ensuring modern traffic but retaining the travellers' palace of the nineteenth-century Central Station. But Minali's debut was with Cabiati: in 1916 they took part in some funeral architecture competitions that showed the historicist imprint of their training, a Camillo Boito legacy. Without refusing this historicist root, it can also be argued that by resorting to Christian architecture, they do recall local culture. The decision to propose that style (early Christian) for that function (the cult of the dead) depended on the setting - even urban - in which the structures had to be built (the north-west of Milan). Minali would never betray this approach. Thus he proves that a certain generation of architects tried, mostly in vain and amid ideological drifts, to rejuvenate the syntax of the building preserving tradition.

### 4. Conclusions: a doomed circle

“Architecture is, among arts, the one that has more references with geographic habitat”, stated Regina (Gina) Algranati (1886-1963), a lively and witty Italian intellectual, in 1931<sup>11</sup>. She was following a study concerning the differences between urban and country architecture. But she also rediscussed folklore. She involved ethno-graphy and human geography in architectural theory and promoted local resources as opposed to international innovation. Shortly after this statement, she was asked, with Gino Chierici, to join the Naples

section of the C.N.I.A.P. (*Comitato Nazionale Italiano per le Arti Popolari*), an organization devoted to promoting the “various genius of Italians” which also enrolled, as institutional representatives (museum or school managers or National Preservation Service Officers): Ugo Nebbia for Genoa, Giuseppe Gerola for Trento, Ferdinando Forlati for Trieste, Gino Fogolari for Venice, Ettore Ghislanzoni for Padua, and Angelini – already mentioned - for Bergamo (Starace & Bodrero, 1933). A circle of competent scholars and professionals was working on vernacular. Unfortunately, Algranati was ousted from public office by the racial laws (1938). The tragic historic events of the time limited the possibilities for architects to complete their research and architectural construction. The proposal for vernacular architecture as a form of mediation between modernity and tradition, between new architecture and the preservation of that existing, ultimately suffered too.

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<sup>11</sup> So in her words: “L'architettura è, fra le arti, quella che ha maggiori rapporti con l'ambiente geografico”.

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