

LUIGI MORETTI: A TESTIMONY

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MEETING MORETTI

I first encountered Luigi Moretti in Rome in the summer of 1961 when seeking work as an architect. I learned that Moretti had recently received a commission to design a complex of high-rise towers in Montreal, and the idea of working for an Italian architect designing a project in my hometown appealed to me for obvious reasons. I had initially planned on spending three months in Rome, getting to know the city and its architecture but these three months were to become six months, then twelve, and finally two years.

I arrived at Moretti's office on the appointed day, after siesta, and was ushered into an elegant room. The space, comfortable and lived-in, was dominated by a large desk laden with *objets d'art*, sculptures, drawings, books, periodicals, and jars of pencils and paintbrushes. The walls of the office were covered with paintings, both modern and old. Behind the desk were a large Baroque painting and an abstract canvas by Mathieu.

I found myself before a man of considerable physical proportions, with a powerful gaze, slow demeanour, and a sad and melancholic expression. Moretti received me with great reserve and formality. We spoke in French and after a lengthy introductory discussion, touching on the state of architecture in Montreal and my understanding and appreciation of Modernism, Moretti looked at my portfolio and asked why I wanted to work in Rome, and why with him? Upon learning that I had some experience in the design of high-rise building in Montreal and London¹, Moretti indicated that he would like me to work on two projects, the Place Victoria Tower in Montreal and, at a later date, the Watergate Project in Washington, DC.²

THE MAN

Moretti's imposing physicality extended itself to all aspects of his life, and was most manifest in his body language. Moretti was a man with a bear-like presence. He moved slowly, with determination, and looked intensely at his surroundings, paying attention to every detail. When greeting a friend, Moretti would not simply shake that person's hand; he would grasp it for some seconds as if to intensify the gesture. If he embraced one, he would hold one's shoulders and bring them close to his. When he wanted one to pay particular attention, he would talk holding one's arm tightly. I was to learn that Moretti was an emotional man. His eyes would well up quickly, when given a gift or a

¹ Place Ville Marie designed jointly by I.M. Pei of New York City with Arcop Associate of Montreal, and Pilkington's World Headquarters designed by Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew of London.

² Both projects were mandated by the Societa Immobiliare di Roma, a wholly-owned Vatican Real Estate Development Corporation.

compliment. His smile disarmed even his adversaries. I remember vividly how, when Moretti wanted one to talk, he would lean back in his chair with an expression that meant: “Now speak!”

Moretti’s patrician presence, erudition, and elegance were commanding. He was a *grand seigneur*, refined, eloquent, and always elegant. He was a most generous host, a good raconteur, and a keen student of human nature. He could be magnanimous, open-minded, and warm. But Moretti did not readily seek advice and when opinions were at variance with his own, he was uncomfortable. His temper was legendary, making discussion difficult and intimidating.

Despite his conservative dress and bearing, Moretti had an eccentric side. He rode through the streets of Rome in a two-tone convertible Chevrolet - black and white, with fire-engine-red upholstery. He sat next to the chauffeur, taking great pleasure in his chariot, much like a child playing with a new toy. The Chevrolet was enormous, and navigating the narrow, congested streets of Rome was a challenge which he and his chauffeur obviously enjoyed.

Sharing a meal with Moretti was a unique experience. Moretti would enter a restaurant like a Renaissance prince. In a regal manner, he would give precise instructions to waiter and chef paying attention to every detail of wine and food. He was a man of gargantuan appetite and he exhorted his guests to follow suit. Moretti would unilaterally decide the menu for all, - an act of generosity, for he wanted all to share in what he liked best. Moretti enjoyed seeing his guests eat and meals were relaxed convivial events.

THE STUDIO

Studio Moretti was located in Palazzo Colonna, a grandiose Victorian ensemble situated in the heart of Rome, off Piazza Venezia. The palazzo was the home of Prince Colonna and housed the famed Galleria Colonna, the private residences and offices of the Colonna family, and a number of other private offices and residences. Prince Colonna occupied the most important secular position in the Vatican and received a stream of important visitors, from monarchs, to cardinals, to prime ministers. Moretti’s office overlooked the entrance cortile and his staff enjoyed a ringside view of this parade of celebrities.

The office was situated in three separate apartments: Moretti and his administrative staff occupied the largest and most prestigious of the apartments, the second housed drafting rooms for the support staff, and the third contained the design development office for the two Vatican projects. All three offices were adorned with paintings from Moretti’s vast art collection.

Moretti received many important personalities from the world of art, politics, business, and the Church but few of his staff came into contact with these visitors, or were familiar with what transpired. The staff consisted of about twenty people, most of whom were draftsmen, or *geometri*. These *geometri* worked under the direct supervision of Moretti’s three associates. Most senior of these was Giovanni Quadarella, the chief architect of the Studio. Lucio Causa, also an architect, had the closest design relationship with Moretti. Pierluigi Borlenghi, resident engineer, was responsible for all technical matters. This triumvirate continued the operations of the office under the name

STUDIO “MORETTI” after Moretti’s death. As well, there were a number of young foreign architects from around the world. These members had a slightly different status in the office as they were treated more like guests than permanent collaborators.

MORETTI AND ROME

Moretti was Roman to the core. He was not only a proud citizen of a city which he loved with passion and great understanding, but he was the Roman patriarch *par excellence*. Moretti took pleasure in the city’s physical form, and he loved its life, culture, and society. He was an integral part of Rome’s artistic and business elite and benefited from all its privileges.

One cannot understand and appreciate Moretti and his work without a clear grasp of the culture of his city. Rome is a place where tradition and ritual are valued, and is a city of multiple contradictions and complexity. The apparent lack of order baffles novices who have to deal with Rome’s multiple layers of governance. For the true Roman, paradox and inconsistency are norms of daily existence and Moretti navigated this intricate and incongruous context with pleasure and ease.

Moretti’s Roman birthright was so important to him that in a book he commissioned and edited, he introduced himself with an *ex-libris* signed LUIGI MORETTI, ARCHITETTO ROMANO³. He recurrently talked about the Roman sensibility which he felt defined him and his work. Rome stood for the very essence of what he held most dear. The city was not a mere geographic location in which he worked and lived. It was a state of mind, a way of life, and a source of infinite inspiration. Rome was his teacher, his mother, his habitat. It was also his most important sourcebook of architectural ideas, and a fount of continuous aesthetic and historical pleasure. Though he never said so overtly, Moretti often implied that Rome was the yardstick by which to measure all other urban environments. Rome was the sensuous centre of his rich universe. He referred to the eternal city in mystical terms, as a place ruled by a non-linear poetic logic.

Moretti enjoyed travelling in Europe, America and North Africa. He would sometimes ridicule the States, yet he loved cities like New York and Chicago for their energy and creativity. He saw America as the Brave New World, rough at the edges and lacking sophistication, but a land where so much could be achieved. Moretti admired the fact that America was egalitarian and open-ended, that everyone was a foreigner. Moretti was an admirer of American culture, both high and low. When he travelled to Montreal or Washington, he often stopped over in New York where he had many friends. He enjoyed the pulse and the morphology of the city. Moretti enjoyed visiting the numerous commercial art galleries, having been a gallery owner himself, and few things made him happier than going to small jazz clubs.

WORKING WITH MORETTI

Words were important to Moretti, and he assumed that his staff understood both the fine points and the spirit of his advice. Moretti’s use of language was very personal. He addressed the subjective

³ APOCALYPSIS IESU XRISTI ou la Révélation de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ a Saint Jean, son Disciple Bien-aimé, Luigi Moretti et Pierre Pascal, Edition du Cœur Fidele, Rome, 1963

and the objective aspects of a problem as if they were one. Feeling and mood were as measurable to him as the bearing capacity of a concrete beam. To work closely with Moretti meant understanding the myriad subtleties of his words and being able to grasp his personal sentiments. I recall an incident when I was asked to work on the configuration a corner column of Place Victoria, which he saw as one of the iconic elements of the tower. He was concerned about how to express the heavy load borne by this column. His advice was clear: the viewer must experience the static and dynamic forces at work. “*Il faut sentir et voir que la matière souffre, qu’elle travaille, qu’elle a mal*”.⁴ This was enigmatic to those of us who came from a Miesian tradition of rational and functional architecture.

All who worked with Moretti were, to a greater or lesser degree, intimidated by the man. The apprehension that his instructions were not properly followed or that his sketches were misunderstood always lingered in the minds of his colleagues. Moretti explained things by complementing words with innumerable small sketches. His drawings were clear and often stunningly evocative. Sometimes these sketches would be out of scale, which meant that they could not be adhered to with precision. Watching Moretti make these sketches was fascinating. He would start a perspective with one or two lines, sometimes at the very edge or a corner of the paper, building up the diagram without hesitation or correction. As he drew, the image became clearer and clearer, like an approaching object in a foggy landscape. Moretti had been trained in the Beaux-Arts tradition where great emphasis was placed on drawing and painting. Drawing was second nature to him; it was a natural form of communication, much like speaking. Had Moretti lived in today’s world dominated by computers, he would have been appalled by the architect’s lack of drafting skills. He would have welcomed the computer but never as a replacement for freehand drawing.

MORETTI AND HIS MUSES

Architects, like artists, stand on the shoulders of their predecessors until such time as they develop their own language. Mentors, more often than not, belong to the era immediately preceding them but Moretti looked back to the late Renaissance and Baroque for inspiration. Moretti referred to Michelangelo as his great teacher. He had studied his work so exhaustively that he could draw by memory and with great precision the plans and facades of the Palazzo dei Conservatorie and of the Laurentian Library. But ultimately, it was the Baroque and Borromini which were Moretti’s most important inspiration and his truest love. Moretti found in Borromini’s architecture a new spatial freedom. He derived joy in the ingenious manipulation of light, the play of curves and counter-curves, the use of point and counterpoint, the complex geometric order and the pure inventiveness of his work. Most of all, he saw Borromini as the first truly modern architect, and he looked to his buildings a means to solve his own formal problems. Moretti admired Borromini for his skill in dealing with complexity, tensions, interactions of contrasting forms, and movement. Moretti saw himself as a contemporary Borromini.

⁴ This concern with the expressive powers of the structure had been an ongoing concern of Moretti. In his study of the architecture of Michelangelo, *GENESI DI FORME DELLA FIGURA HUMANA* published in the periodical SPAZIO II in 1950, he refers to the “weight carried above and loaded onto suffering supports”. Pierluigi Nervi, the engineer responsible for the design of the structure of Place Victoria. Nervi shared Moretti’s view and continuously spoke of “making the lines of forces manifest”.

One aspect of Borromini's architecture which particularly inspired Moretti was the articulation of the design concept by means of the cross-section. The Section, to Borromini, was a way to choreograph movement, manipulate light, and define space. Whereas Le Corbusier maintained that *le plan est le générateur*, Moretti was one of the few modern architects to actually perceive form and space simultaneously in plan and in section the very outset.

EMOTIONALISM VERSUS RATIONALISM

Moretti's emotional nature was most patent in the way he conceived his buildings. He prided himself on being a Modernist, albeit not of the Gropius/Bauhaus tradition. He often spoke of the authority of the program and conditions of site as the major factors governing design. When referring to Modernist notions of rationalism and functionalism, Moretti interpreted these terms in his own personal way. He would speak of a rational office layout but would draw a plan with complex curved circulation isles.

Moretti had a genuine interest in science and mathematics. Mathematics provided him with a gratifying sense of intellectual order, which he believed should be applied to architecture and town planning. Ever since 1939, Moretti had encouraged research in objective and scientific ways to link modern mathematics, urbanism and architecture. His premise was that a new architecture, one he labelled *Parametric Architecture*, should be derived from absolute mathematical truths, independently of other factors. The clarity, purity, and objectivity of mathematics and geometry should be the primary determinants of form and space. In 1960, Moretti also organized a major exhibition on Parametric Architecture in Milan, and in 1971, the periodical *Moebius I*⁵ devoted a complete issue to the theory of Parametric Architecture. Though Moretti was attracted to the logic of mathematics and geometry, he also knew that reason alone does not lead to good architecture. Art or architecture can never exist totally outside the realm of the senses. Moretti placed great emphasis on intuition, instinct, feeling, and the humanist tradition. His creative process was as much a cerebral as an intuitive act.

When working with Moretti on the curvilinear spaces of the Watergate Complex it was a challenge to faithfully incorporate his freehand forms in the final document destined for the engineers. He did not want a geometrically constructed line, but one that could best be expressed by what he called "the action of an angry thumb", *come un pollice arrabbiata*. We were some distance from the notions of parametric Architecture!

Moretti was a great individualist with powerful creative impulses. He believed unequivocally in the virtue of artistic self-expression and in originality. Each of his buildings was a prototype, a precedent. The use of typology, as a means to resolve formal design problems mattered little to him. Moretti was consumed by the invention of new forms. This concern for originality was both his strength and his weakness. Every project became a new exercise in formal composition. This *modus operandi* made many of his buildings daring and exciting, but by the same token, made them stand-alone statements, disconnected from their physical context. Moretti's emphasis on uniqueness came

⁵ MOEBIUS I, Ricerca Matematica in Architettura e Urbanistica, Anno IV, 1971/72

from his intellectual and emotional attraction to Rome's Baroque exuberance and the city's presence of heroic buildings. He felt all architecture should be heroic.

MORETTI AND THE PAST

Moretti was passionate and knowledgeable about the past, but he was not a historian in the academic sense of the term. His interest and admiration in the arts and architecture of Antiquity, the Renaissance, and the Baroque period were evident at all times. He constantly made references to these periods, as well as to the Beaux-Arts and the Eclectic Movements, yet rarely referred to Gothic architecture. His commitment to history was significantly different from that of today's research-oriented historian. In former times Moretti would have been seen as an enlightened "amateur" of history. When he spoke of the architecture of Borromini or Guarini, one sensed his love and wonder for their buildings. Moretti's view of history was diametrically opposite to that of the Italian Futurists. For the Futurists, history was too heavy a burden to carry; for Moretti, it provided primal sustenance. He saw history as a continuum and Modernism as part of a two-thousand-year old narrative.

Rare were the times when Moretti did not bring up the question of memory while discussing art or architecture. Pure memory, as he saw it, is not a tangible truth to be recalled at will. The distortions and mutations of reality is part of life and of memory. The inevitable transformative process of memory is as important and as relevant as memory itself. Memory is not faithful or identical to history. Moretti saw history as computable, and not inevitably experienced in a personal way. Memory, on the other hand, is a uniquely personal experience dealing with personal recollection and remembrance of things past.

EPILOGUE

One man who best understood Moretti was architectural critic Bruno Zevi. The world of architecture of Rome was dominated during the 60's and 70's by Zevi and Moretti. Zevi was primarily an historian, an astute critic, and a proselytizer of the traditional Modern Movement, with a penchant for Frank Lloyd Wright and Alvar Aalto. Being Jewish and an avowed socialist, Zevi had been exiled during the War by Mussolini. Moretti, on the other hand, was highly conservative and had been very close to Il Duce and the Fascist party during the War years. He was an active practitioner rather than a writer, and a profound believer in Catholicism. Both Zevi and Moretti edited an architectural journal which they used as their personal propaganda venue⁶. Ideologically, they stood at opposite ends of the architectural, social, and political spectrums. Tension between the two was often fierce, yet at times the relationship could be relaxed and even civil. Rostagni quite astutely refers to Zevi as being Moretti's "best interlocutor, his best enemy". The day after Moretti died, Zevi wrote in *Cronaca di Architettura* a highly perceptive eulogy⁷. He paid tribute to Moretti by stating "he possessed an authentic artistic temperament integrated with a notable if nonmethodical (sic) culture and extraordinary professional capacity".

⁶ Moretti was the editor of SPAZIO, and Zevi edited ARCHITETTURA: CRONACA E STORIA

⁷ *COMPUTER INCEPPATO DAL DANNUNZIAESIMO* in *Cronaca di Architettura*: 9823 (Bari: Laterza, 1979)

Moretti was a man of immensely strong convictions and enormous intelligence. He was also a man of contradictions and inconsistencies. While his sense of authority seemed to have had no bounds, he could still have high esteem for those with opposing views. His intelligence and vast culture were time and again compromised by dogmatic preconceptions. He could be as generous as he could be parsimonious. Moretti was a man of objectivity and subjectivity, of stiff rationalism and romantic impulse, of prejudice and tolerance. If his strengths were his knowledge, his self-confidence, and his tremendous understanding, his weakness lay in his intolerance and his unrestrained behaviour. Nothing represents his contradictory and enigmatic nature more than his unaccounted war years. For three years Moretti's whereabouts were (and are still) unknown.⁸

Not long ago, I spoke to Moretti's life-long colleagues in Rome. After many years of being away from his studio, I wanted to find out if my early understanding of Moretti had been well-founded, or if my perception had been distorted by time and a young man's idealism. I discovered that, by and large, their views coincided with my own. They spoke of Moretti today in the same way we all did in the early sixties. Time had stood still for all of us, and the enigmas were still unresolved.

I had spent two intense years working closely with Moretti while my former colleagues had devoted their lifetime working with him. They knew him better than I did, and they expressed a sense of fulfilment in being a part of his great venture. But they also expressed frustration at never having been able to close the gap between themselves and Moretti. In America, they would have become true associates sharing in the fame, the gains and losses, the responsibilities, and ownership of the firm. But Roman society is too closed, too stratified to break these professional and social barriers. When it came to a formidable man like Moretti, it should have been obvious to all from the start that associates would never become "partners". Luigi Walter Moretti was the ultimate individualist who answered to no one but himself. His agenda was too personal, too unique, too overarching to be shared.

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⁸ Cecilia Rostagni, in *Luigi Moretti: Works and Writings* explains: "Between 1942 and 1945, Moretti disappeared from the public life and the professional scene, leaving behind only confused traces of his movements". She then lists the different hypotheses regarding his vanishing act.