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BOOK

GAE AULENTI: *THE FUNCTION OF HISTORY*

Edited by Elisa Boeri (Politecnico di Milano) and Francesca Giudetti (Politecnico di Milano)

Born in 1927 in Palazzolo dello Stella, a small town in Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, Gaetana Emilia Aulenti had a career filled with great projects and awards: she was a talented architect capable of working at all scales of design, as well as experimenting extensively, especially in her early years. However, historians and scholars have particularly carried out research on three aspects of Gae Aulenti's career: the main designed museums, renovations, and furniture design². The text reported and annotated here for the "From the Archive" column of the Journal of Architectural Design and History (JADH) represents another step in the advancement of the rather recent studies of the architect's cultural production. These thoughts, handwritten by Aulenti, are contained within an unpublished agenda of the architect, covered in brown leather and dated 1973. The document is part of a series of personal diaries, stored at the Aulenti Archives in Milan, located inside the house designed and inhabited by Gae Aulenti from 1974 until her death in 2012. The home-studio hosts evidence produced in the drafting of design, architecture, urban planning, and theatre set design projects (graphs, papers, and various documents), but also some interesting papers about the preparation of writings and conferences, published and unpublished articles and interviews³. The text, provided below in its original Italian version as well as in its English translation, is a reflection by architect Aulenti on the state of the art of society and design in Italy in the early 1970s. In the first pages of this agenda, in fact, Aulenti focuses on describing a sort of pyramid structure at the top of which are the institutions, then followed by what she calls «contingenze storiche modificabili ed in continuo spostamento»⁴ and that specifically characterize the phenomenon of design. In the small text, the architect addresses three macro-themes: the definition of history and the underlying emotions inhabiting it, the importance of the individual – the architect - in the development of projects, and the difference between teaching and discipline. The last topic in particular calls to mind the interests and cultural directions well outlined by the one master Aulenti will acknowledge in his life: Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1909-1969)⁵. Rogers, who has always been concerned with the intertwining of architecture and education, is also echoed here in references to the importance of "Environmental Pre-existences"⁶ in the design field. A beloved subject to Aulenti⁷, who dealt with it especially in the early years of her career, first through her participation in Casabella magazine, directed by Rogers, and then again in the classrooms of the Politecnico. As a matter of fact, in 1965 Gae Aulenti is appointed as teaching assistant on Ernesto Nathan Rogers class at the Faculty of Architecture of the Politecnico di Milano, titled Elementi di composizione⁸.

"From him – Aulenti wrote in 2009 – we received the fundamental lesson of being intellectuals first and architects afterwards"⁹. At the end, as Aulenti's text outlined very well: "Art and culture are an important combination in respect of places and communities"¹⁰.

ITALIAN TEXT (ORIGINAL)

Si deve avere il sospetto che ci sia regolarmente, nella società, una sorta di dislivello tra i discorsi, gli atti, il fare, il progettare mediante scambi di ogni sorta¹¹. La cronaca si genera con il trascorrere dei giorni e si sviluppa con l'atto stesso del suo farsi, per mezzo dei progetti che sono all'origine di un certo numero di atti nuovi, di elementi che li riprendono, li trasformano o deformano. Questi ultimi sono i progetti che, al di là della loro formulazione, restano espressi e sono ancora da esprimere (storia). A partire dalle cose, dai sentimenti, dai pensieri, c'è la necessità di ricostruire un pensiero che sia assolutamente nuovo e innocente, in piena freschezza. Questo dislivello non c'è sempre, cioè non c'è sempre il progetto fondamentale e creatore, ed allo stesso tempo ci sono progetti che ripetono, commentano. Anzi, a tal proposito, spesso i commenti vengono ad occupare le prime posizioni. Ma la funzione della storia resta ed è continuamente rimessa in gioco, esprimendo questa necessità con utopie, gioco, o sentimenti di angoscia.

Utopia: Pensiero di un futuro possibile

Gioco: critica e racconto di un progetto che non esiste

Angoscia: il sapere che non sarà possibile.

Sarebbe assurdo negare l'esistenza dell'individuo che inventa perché esso parla di oggetti, mette in opera metodi, si pone in un orizzonte teorico che può essere estraneo al presente in cui opera. Strumenti concettuali e fondamenti teorici nuovi che vengono richiesti dalla necessità di nuovi oggetti. La disciplina è un principio di controllo in quanto è definita da un campo di oggetti, un insieme di metodi, da un insieme di proposizioni considerate come vere, da un gioco di regole e di definizioni di tecniche e di strumenti. L'insegnamento, invece, si serve della disciplina ed è un sistema che ritualizza i comportamenti, riconduce alle qualificazioni e porta alla assegnazione di ruoli; è un sistema che guida a costituire gruppi dottrinali, distribuisce il potere della conoscenza e non la conoscenza. Ma ogni disciplina, a sua volta, riconosce proposizioni vere e proposizioni false. Meglio che non ci sia la scuola di design in Italia.

L'involucro esterno di una scienza è molto più popolato di quanto non si creda di esperienze immediate, di temi immaginari che propongono creativamente al di fuori della memoria, e la possibilità di errore è ridottissima; mentre una disciplina propone l'errore in quanto generato da una pratica definita. Una disciplina è un principio di controllo di una produzione: è una permanente attuazione di regole.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Despite the availability and abundance of information, the gap between thoughts and facts, between the act of designing and that of building, is still tangible in today's society. The roots of this chronicle mainly start from the subjectivity and uncertainty nature of most projects, which evolve over time and can develop along different paths. Delays are common in project design, as new acts or elements may arise from unexpected sources and may deform the initial plan. By definition, history has the ability to track these changes, and make them an important component of the master project itself. In other words, history is the linear sequence of such (sub-) projects¹². Starting from things, from feelings, from thoughts, there is a need to reconstruct a notion that is absolutely new and innocent, in full freshness. The imbalance I mentioned earlier is not always there. In fact, occasionally, a master project does not even exist in the first place. In these cases, the work-in-progress comments, written thoughts, or annotations do build the project on an ongoing fashion. They come in the form of commentaries.

In this sense, they take a crucial role as they become historical records. Nevertheless, the function of history remains the same. The exposure to fragmented information and the continuous willingness to incorporate new facts make history an expression of utopia, a game full of anguishing feelings.

Utopia: can be defined, in this sense, as the thought of a possible future.
Play: expresses the critique and narrative of a project that does not exist.
Anguish: presupposes the knowledge of something that will probably not happen or that is impossible to happen¹³.

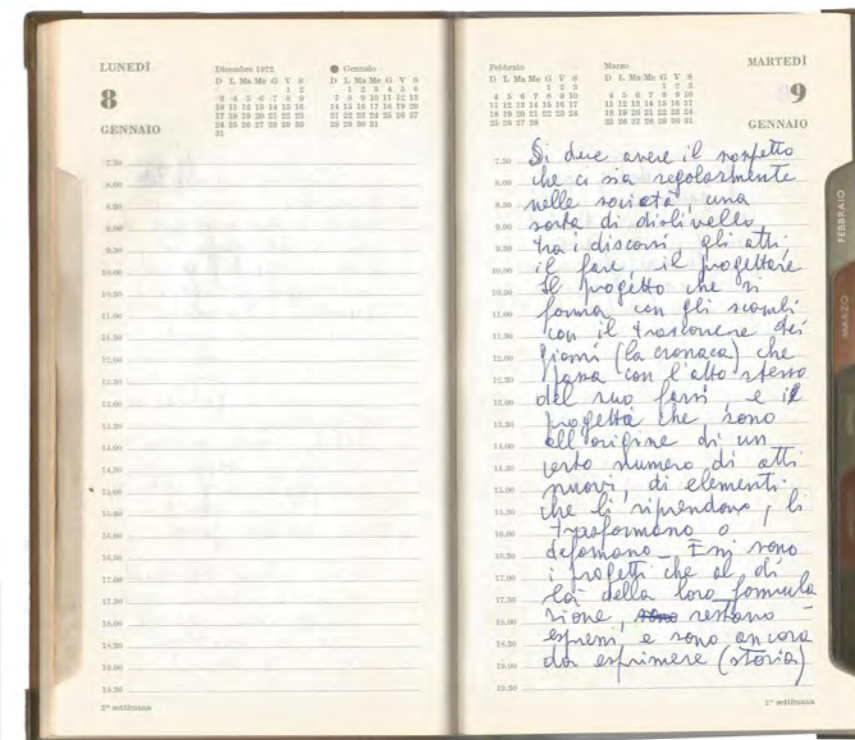
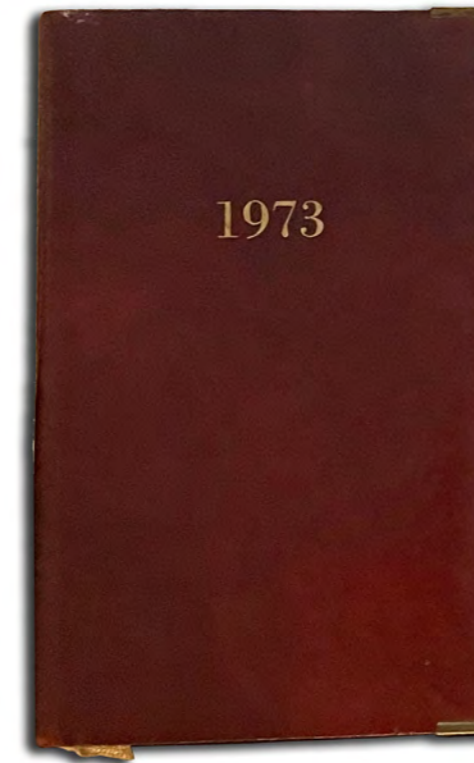
It would be inaccurate to deny the existence of the individual who invents because she speaks of objects, puts methods into operation, and sets herself in a theoretical horizon that may even be extremely different with respect to the present in which she operates. The presence of newly created objects and projects concerns the use of new conceptual tools and theoretical foundations¹⁴.

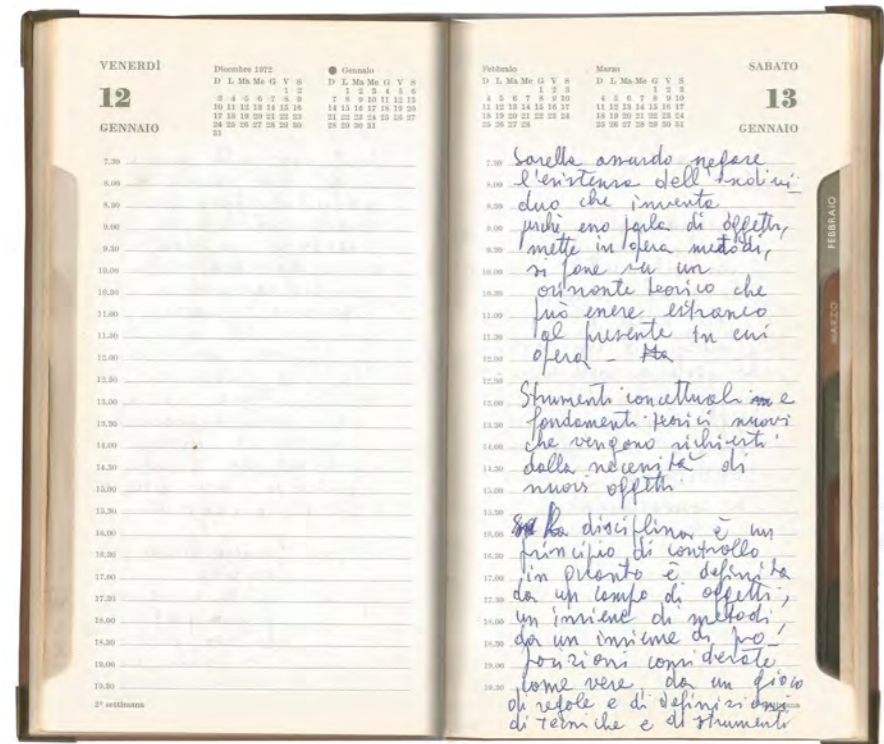
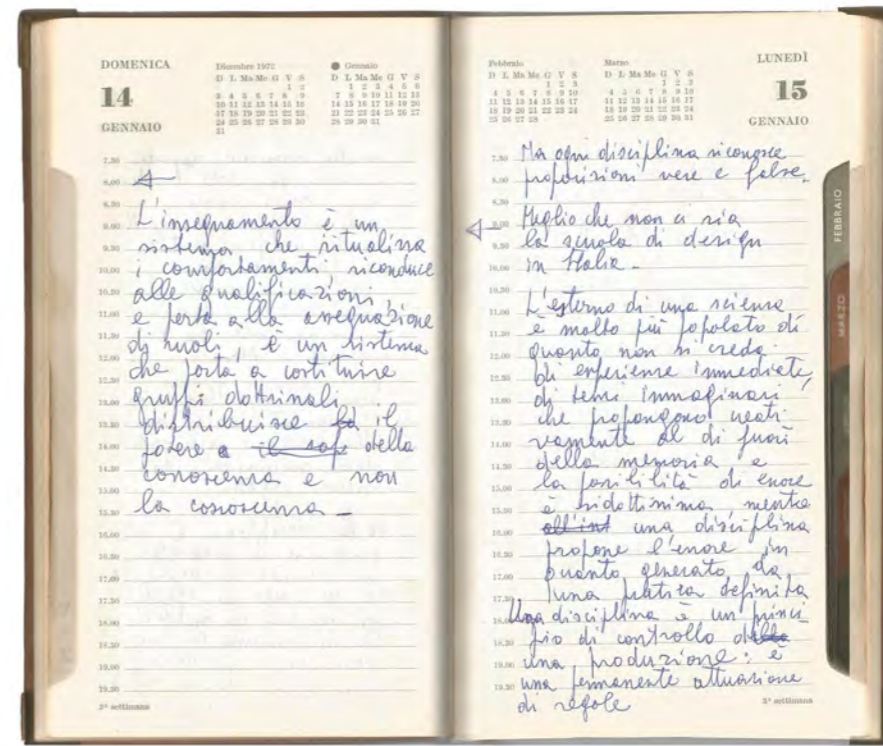
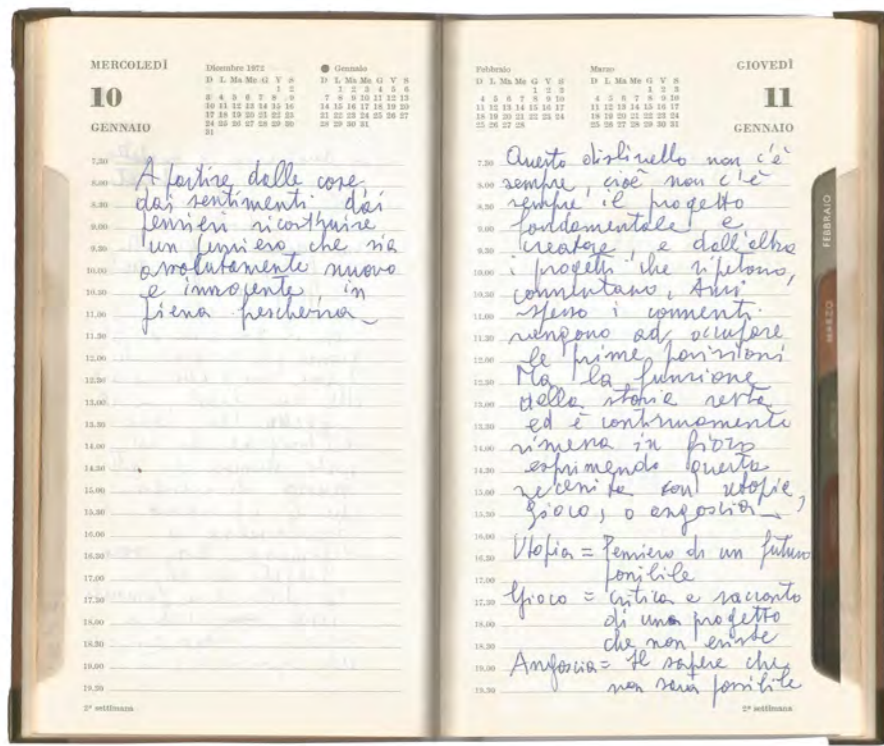
A research field is a controlling principle that is determined by a field of objects, a set of methods, and a set of propositions that are based on previous studies. Moreover, there are specific rules and appropriate definitions of techniques and tools that have to be used within a certain space.

Teaching, on the other hand, uses discipline (these fields) to ritualize behavior, and resort to qualifications. It leads to the assignment of roles. The structure of teaching is a system that leads to the establishment of doctrinal groups, distributes the power of knowledge rather than knowledge for its own sake.

Each discipline, in turn, recognizes true and false propositions. Better that there is no design school in Italy¹⁵. A discipline is a principle of production control: it is a permanent implementation of rules and sees the possible presence of errors.

The external surface of a science is much more populated than one would think with imaginary issues that suggest creative acts outside of memory, and the possibility of error is very small. A discipline, on the other hand, reiterates mistake as generated by a defined practice. A discipline is a controlling principle of a production: it is a permanent implementation of rules.





NOTES

- [1] The original document, written in pencil and left in a draft format, has no reference title. The authors therefore chose to excerpt a fragment of text related to the "function of history" and use it as the headline of this commentary. We thank Nina Artoli and the Aulenti Archives in Milan for their helpfulness in accessing and providing this unpublished material.
- [2] Among all, the Gare d'Orsay in Paris, MNAC Barcelona and Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, Palazzo Grassi in Venice, and the National Museum of Modern Art at the Centre Georges Pompidou, always in Paris.
- [3] Some of these papers have been collected in the small volume: Gae Aulenti, Vedere poco, immaginare molto. Roma-Ivrea, Edizioni di Comunità, May 2021.
- [4] These words are quoted in the agenda page dated December 31, 1972.
- [5] Aulenti will never neglect to remember Rogers as a 'total' master. See G. Aulenti, "Fare Architettura", lecture's typescript (Tokio, 1991). Now in Gae Aulenti: Vedere molto, immaginare molto, Roma/Ivrea, Edizioni di Comunità, 2021.
- [6] E. N. Rogers, Le preesistenze ambientali e i temi pratici contemporanei, in «Casabella-continuità», n. 204, febbraio-marzo 1955.
- [7] See, for example, Aulenti's early projects. G. Aulenti, Abitazione e scuderia a Milano S. Siro, in Casabella Continuità, n. 219, May 1958.
- [8] See the letter formalizing the appointment dated 9 July 1965 sent to Aulenti and Rogers by the Rector of the Politecnico. In Gae Aulenti Private Archive, "Personal documentation 1945-2012, 7.5 ua02 - S7.
- [9] Ivi.
- [10] Stradaroli, L. (curated by) Intervista con Gae Aulenti, Domus Aurea, year II, n. 1, January 2011, p. 41.
- [11] The authors aimed to keep the paper as faithful as possible to the one discovered in the agenda. Small discrepancies with the original concern the punctuation of the text or other minor editing changes.
- [12] Gae Aulenti defines history as the linear sequence of accomplished and unrealized projects ("espressi e ancora da esprimere"), also emphasizing the repetition of certain design processes, phases and perceptions that periodically put history itself back into question and doubt.
- [13] As in a timeline, the architect uses the concepts of play and anguish to express, respectively, the fantasies and unrealizability of certain projects and utopia to shape possible futures. "(...) there is no such thing as an electrocution (...) Every work has its own life and destiny, which is built up over time. When you think that an architectural process lasts almost a decade, then you can understand the factors involved" says Aulenti in an interview. See Milanese, A. (curated by), Con lo sguardo rivolto al futuro, in MAG, Year I, No. 4, December 2004, p. 6.
- [14] For Aulenti, the individual-designer is the inventor who can choose what theoretical horizon to operate within and makes use of methods, theories, tools and, in general, the discipline. This latter controls sets of propositions and implements rules by means of teaching, not without errors at times. That suspicion, that gap of which the architect speaks can be stemmed by a careful study of history.
- [15] The quote "Better that there is no design school in Italy" is not meant in an absolute meaning but should be interpreted according to Aulenti's thinking. Against specializations of any kind the architect, indeed, has always believed in the interweaving of different disciplines and she doesn't create distinctions between architecture and interior design. For Gae Aulenti, architecture and design are sources of similar processes and they have similar functions.