

Towards the Macrostructure. Leonardo Ricci's Ideas for the Unbuilt *Pleydell Bouverie House* (1958-1960)

Leonardo Ricci, *Pleydell Bouverie House*, Macrostructure, Project, Architecture

/Abstract

The essay tries to make more widely known the project of the *Pleydell Bouverie House*, which was designed by Leonardo Ricci in 1958-60 but never built. In addition, to describe the drawings, many of which have been put in a new light thanks to the Centenary of the architect's death, the text attempts to use the description of two other realized works to highlight certain characteristics. This is also supported by some three-dimensional diagrams produced during the analysis of the project. These diagrams are part of a wider research carried out by the author of the essay within the dissertation *The density of space. Forms of living in the work of Leonardo Ricci* at the Department of Architecture Theories and Design of La Sapienza University of Rome. The assumption is that, through this house in particular, Ricci tested architectural elements and strategies aimed at the realization of the macrostructure. A comparison is made with the *Cardon House* in Castiglioncello and, at the same time, with the building *La Nave* in the Sorgane district, in Florence. We find this approach interesting in order to imagine both the origins of certain ideas and what the results of the realization of *Pleydell Bouverie House* might have been. The present paper, therefore, tries to provide not only a description of a single-family house that Ricci never built, but to contribute with a precise observation of certain aspects, aimed at placing this work in the broader discussion of Leonardo Ricci's approach and vision about architecture.

/Author

Beatrice Conforti
beatrice.conforti@gmail.com

Beatrice Conforti is a freelance architect currently practicing in Tuscany and Lombardy. Since 2010, she has been involved as an assistant in the Design Laboratory of Prof. Capanni at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Florence, a collaboration that continued until one year after her graduation cum laude in 2016. In October 2017, she started a Ph.D. course at the Department of Architecture Theories and Design of the University of Rome La Sapienza. At the same time, she worked as an architect mainly focused on residential projects in collaboration with Studio GLA, based in Milan and Florence. With the support of her tutor Prof. Orazio Carpenzano and her co-tutor Prof. Maria Clara Ghia, she obtained her Ph.D. last May with top marks, with a thesis titled *The density of space. The forms of living in the work of Leonardo Ricci*.

I believe that there are three phases in architecture: the first one is the model, that is the way of living; the second one is the moment of the structure, that is the physical support that allows the incarnation of the model itself; the third visible and tactile moment is about the architectural form. The form is therefore the result; it is physical and visible, a tangible concretization of the model. I'm very much opposed to those who conceive a form, let us say, in advance, because it can only become a container of a life that has not been yet expressed.¹

Architecture always starts with the design of space. This is why Leonardo Ricci developed several formal languages throughout his career, and he was not afraid of comparing the different forms he designed. His architecture went through many different experiences: from the informal movement to brutalism. The former allowed him to experiment with a "fluid and circulating"² space, while the latter was the direct consequence of breaking free of pre-established patterns and ephemeral aesthetic issues. His brutalism, in short, was the result of a sincere approach towards structure.

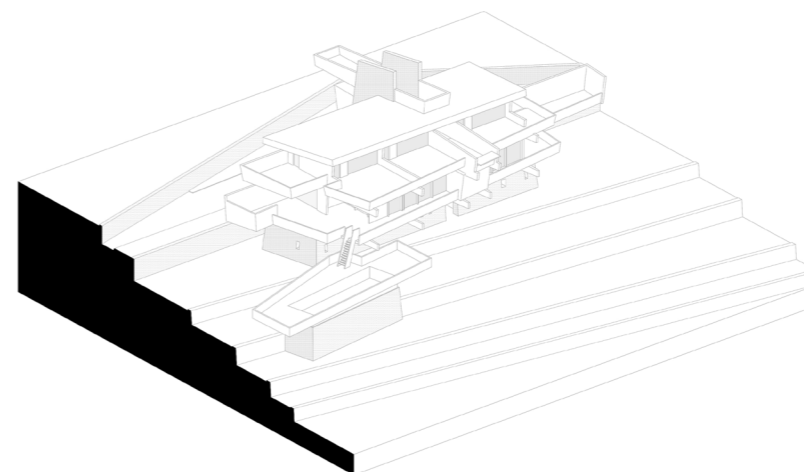
Ricci believed that the main structure should not be separated from the secondary one. He argued that it had to be integrated into the design and he also criticized modern architects for creating cage-like buildings: "The structure is something not separated but integrated, and indivisible from the object. What's the meaning of those decorated cages with panels in most modern buildings? Architects turn them into a sort of 'Liberty-style' little arches, perhaps out of boredom."³

His thoughts about architecture and structure took shape in the mid-1960s, but there were some hints of "grammatical nudity", as Koenig defined it⁴, in his earliest projects. In most of his buildings, Ricci constantly used large load-bearing stone walls, reinforced brick floors and flat (or slightly inclined) roofs. His architectural language was quite basic: Ricci rejected unnecessary decorations and tried to create the architectural space in a spontaneous and coherent way.

These premises are essential to understand Leonardo Ricci's approach to the project and to investigate the subtle thread that links some of his designs for

private villas to his 'macrostructure'. He only partially realized it in the district of Sorgane in Florence, but some ideas on the macrostructure spaces had already emerged in 1947, when a young Ricci designed the *Villaggio comunitario di Agàpe* (Agàpe Community Village) in Prali. Indeed, the definition of 'villaggio', which Ricci uses to underline a sense of community⁵, might seem inadequate while observing the buildings. The layout composition, the continuous connections between the volumes, and the system of spaces in which the main theme was the idea of 'living together', were fundamental experiments that he would later use as the first indications for the macrostructure. One can glimpse a coherent and continuous research in similar elements of most of his housing projects: some villas seem to become experimental pieces for a wider design opportunity because they seem to contain, in a small scale, the requirements to make a further development, a leap to the larger scale.⁶

This is the case of the house designed by Ricci between 1958 and 1960 for Mrs. A.E. Pleydell Bouverie.⁷ The project remained unbuilt despite the large number of drawings still preserved in archives.⁸ The house was designed to occupy a site not far from the villa of the couturier Balmain⁹ but, after all, Ricci only built a small caretaker's house on the property because the client considered the construction of the entire project too expensive¹⁰ [Fig. 1].



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1 Doglio Carlo and Venturi Paola, *La pianificazione organica come piano della vita* (Padova: Cedam, 1979), 380. Original text: "Io ritengo che ci siano tre fasi dell'architettura: una è quella del modello, cioè modo di vivere; una seconda è il momento della struttura, cioè quel supporto fisico che permette l'incarnazione del modello stesso; il terzo momento visibile e tattile, è quello della forma. La forma è quindi il risultato; è fisica e visibile, tangibile concretizzazione del modello. Sono anzi molto contrario a coloro che presuppongono una forma, diciamo, a priori, perché non può che diventare contenitore di una vita che non si è espressa." (All translations, if not specified, are by the author.)

2 This is the case of many Ricci projects like *Spazio vivibile per due persone* (1965), the *Bruno Rossi House* (1963), the *Di Sopra House* (1972), or parts of the community village *Monte degli Ulivi in Sicily* (1962-1968). It is precisely in describing the latter that Ricci used the term "circulating space", specifically in: Leonardo Ricci, "Nascita di un Villaggio per una nuova comunità in Sicilia," *Domus*, no. 409 (1963): 6.

3 Ricci, "Nascita di un Villaggio per una nuova comunità in Sicilia," 8. Original text: "[...]cerco di indifferenziarmi con la struttura che non deve più dividersi fra portante e portata. La struttura è qualcosa di non separato ma integrata ed indivisibile dall'oggetto. Che senso hanno più quelle gabbie decorate più o meno bene da pannelli più o meno di gusto di quasi tutte le architetture moderne? Che poi per troppa noia vengono trasformati dagli stessi architetti in archetti e similari di sapore liberty? Una struttura nasce dalla terra ed assume la sua forma precisa in funzione della vita che noi vogliamo svolgere, dello spazio che permette questa vita, della materia che adoperiamo."

4 See Giovanni Klaus Koenig, "Leonardo Ricci e la "casa teorica" (alla ricerca di un nuovo spazio architettonico)," *Bollettino tecnico degli architetti e ingegneri della Toscana*, no. 7-8 (July/August 1958).

5 The idea of 'villaggio' usually implies the presence of independent volumes connected by streets. In the project for the Villaggio di Agàpe though, all buildings are physically connected by corridors or porticoes.

6 This intuition is well expressed by Professor Corinna Vasić Vatovec in the documentary produced by Becattini Massimo and Nocentini Luciano, titled *Anonimo del XX secolo: Leonardo Ricci* (Film Documentari d'Arte, 2019).

7 The original drawings show the name "Villa Hon. Mrs. A.E. Pleydell Bouverie". The house has sometimes been referred to as the 'Hon Villa', but we believe the abbreviation refers to Mrs. Pleydell Bouverie's 'Honorable' aristocratic position.

8 At the CSAC Archives in Parma there are several versions of the project that are not clearly distinguished from each other by a precise title. There are, however, two main versions that differ in a substantial extension of the house on the north-west front. The author of this essay has chosen the first project to produce three-dimensional diagrams of the house because it was more complete, and it could be reported more accurately.

9 It refers to the *Casa Balmain*, built by Ricci in 1958.

10 This information is taken from Corinna Vasić Vatovec, *Leonardo Ricci. Architetto esistenzialista* (Firenze: Edifir, 2005), 135.

Fig. 1
Pleydell Bouverie House, three dimensional model, graphic design by the author.

The most complete set of drawings is the one concerning the first project, which underwent a substantial increase in size in a second version. Observing the different phases of the composition, it is easy to understand Ricci's ideas about the *opera aperta*¹¹, a constantly evolving project: a design method that he had already envisioned since his studies of his *Theoretical House*.¹²

For a thorough analysis of *Pleydell Bouverie House*, it is useful to compare it with the *Cardon House* (1961-63), built a few years later in the Province of Livorno, and to deduce the elements taken up as well by the architect for the project *La Nave*¹³ (1964-78), located in the Sorgane district.

The Pleydell Bouverie project develops on a three floors structure, and it has an apparently longitudinal layout set against the orthogonal stairs that are its clear barycentric pivot: it is the motionless body between two parts of the house that seem to be two balanced wings. Each floor is practically devoid of any sort of corridors. The layout is not mono-directional, but the space is free-flowing and always expanding and dilating, as it's typical of the internal distribution preferred by Ricci: the result is never banal, yet simple and well measured. The size of the house is remarkable, even in the first version, so it is not hard to identify the similarities, even in terms of distribution, with a macrostructure designed for many families and several housing units. The space is marked out almost exclusively by structural partitions which, as we shall see, cross and support the whole structure in a very peculiar way [Fig. 2-3-4-5].

The plan of *Cardon House*¹⁴ is quite different, mainly because of its size, but the design seems coherent with the principles and the language of the project described above. One of the key features of this house is the two massive stone walls supporting the entire building; it gives the plan an extreme sense of purity and simplicity, also perceivable in the drawings. The interiors are, therefore, totally devoid of secondary walls. This could be interpreted as an attempt by the architect to create a free space adaptable to every need, but it is also clear that Ricci adopted this structural system because of his replicability.

A similar system can be found in the *Pleydell Bouverie House* and, above all, in *La Nave*. In the Sorgane's building, indeed, the internal spaces are bound by the measurements of the structure but, at the same time, they are sufficiently

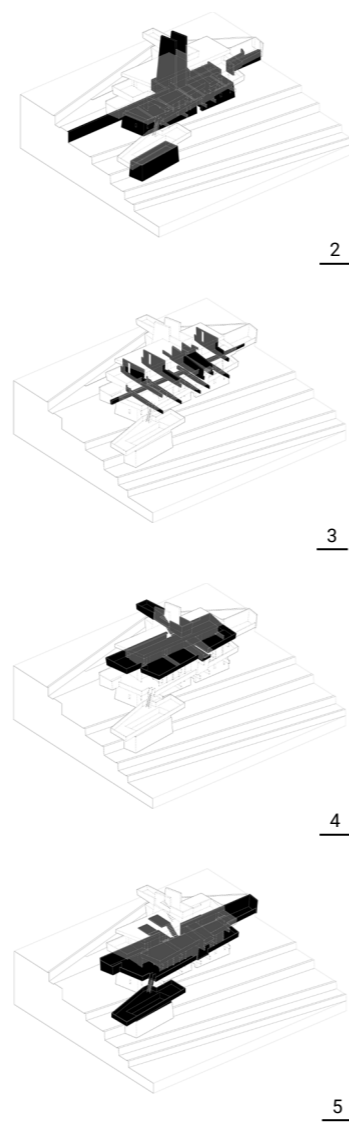


Fig. 2

Pleydell Bouverie House, three-dimensional model (ground connection and stair structure), graphic design by the author.

Fig. 3

Pleydell Bouverie House, three-dimensional model (the structural beams and 'blades'), graphic design by the author.

Fig. 4

Pleydell Bouverie House, three-dimensional model (the second and third floor 'tray-shaped' planes), graphic design by the author.

Fig. 5

Pleydell Bouverie House, three-dimensional model (the first floor and pool area 'tray-shaped' planes), graphic design by the author.

11 It's not difficult to imagine that the ideas of the possibility of variation in Ricci's works, especially in his *Casa Teorica*, gravitated around the thought of Umberto Eco (in fact, the philosopher taught for some years at the Faculty of Architecture in Florence, and dedicated to Ricci, while collaborating together on a course, the paper *Appunti per una semiologia delle comunicazioni visive*, later included in Umberto Eco, *La struttura assente* (Milano: Bompiani, 1968). In particular, the idea of the "opera aperta" is discussed by Eco into the published essay Umberto Eco, *Opera Aperta: forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (Milano: Bompiani 1962), of which Zevi makes an interesting analysis in Bruno Zevi, "La poetica dell'opera aperta in architettura," *L'architettura. Cronache e storia*, no. 84 (1962): 362-4.

12 See Koenig, "Leonardo Ricci e la 'casa teorica'."

13 Thanks to the *La Nave* building in the Sorgane complex in Florence, Leonardo Ricci won the *InArch Prize for Tuscany* in 1968.

14 There are no drawings of this project in any of the archives; they were obtained thanks to their private owner Mr. Giorgio Costagli.

flexible for the demands of their residents.¹⁵ This is confirmed by the fact that, in the architect's original intentions, *La Nave* should have given the inhabitants the opportunity to choose the distribution of the rooms in each flat before it was built. We know in fact that Ricci wished to insert prefabricated dwellings in light elements like some sort of drawers inside the reinforced concrete macrostructure.¹⁶

The extreme simplification of the *Cardon House* plan and its small size create a minimal but flexible space¹⁷, but the core of the design lies in the outstanding overhang of the horizontal structures, that were decidedly extreme for the time (almost seven meters in the house in Castiglioncello). We can find similar attempts in the drawings for the *Pleydell Bouverie House*, in which Ricci composes the transversal structure of the first floor with long, shaped concrete beams left exposed, extending outwards. A long longitudinal beam, perpendicular to this system, overhangs both ends of the building, most boldly towards the west, where it tapers into about nine meters of projection. On the upper floor, the transverse beams are transformed into structural walls to support both the second floor and the roof. These elements are pierced, shaped, and deformed according to the needs of the interior space. Zevi, in 1970, called these same elements "structural blades" when describing the Sorgane's building:

After having developed the 'structural blade' to replace the caged pillars or pilotis, he has exploded it on a gigantic scale, capable of tying together hanging paths, terraces, elevated squares, internal roads, stairways-nodes and not just stairways distributing the apartments. Within this macro-structure, flats of a happy, spacious cut are inserted without dominating, especially in the duplexes; figuratively, they disappear, devoured by the module of the enormous blades.¹⁸

These structures mentioned by Zevi are shaped, reinforced concrete partitions that are repeated throughout the building, dividing the flats and crossed by three beams on each floor. This expedient was also hinted at in the single-family project, where a single longitudinal beam protruded beyond the outermost structural blade. In *La Nave* this is taken to extremes: the last enormous septum,

15 We suppose that the project and, more generally, the characteristics of the *Cardon House* predate *La Nave* building's design, even though the two projects are almost contemporary. In support of this hypothesis is the drawing of the never-built *Tendi House* in Fiesole which, in 1953, presented a project almost identical to that of the house in Castiglioncello, therefore already present in the designer's ideas.

16 Difficulties related to bureaucratic and economic issues did not assist the architect, who was forced to rethink some elements and build them using a single construction technique. This, we can guess, has certainly compromised the final linguistic result of the building, of which there is no material differentiation. In addition, the renunciation of that type of system precluded the interaction between user and designer through which, according to Ricci, a variable architecture open to design changes would have occurred.

17 It is possible that the client's request for the *Cardon House* casually coincided with requirements that were also suitable for the units of the macrostructure, but it's perhaps more probable that Ricci wanted to test, for the first time, these substantial limits of width. He wanted to verify the quality and possibilities of a space like the one he would later create in the social flats. As a further support for this hypothesis, there is also the fact that the house site was able to contain a larger floor plan. Instead, the distance between the two walls is only 3.75 meters.

18 Bruno Zevi, "Il quartiere di Sorgane a Firenze. L'edificio città di Leonardo Ricci," in *Cronache di architettura* (Bari: Laterza, 1970), v. 12 (638/692), 300. Original text: "Dopo aver elaborato la 'lama strutturale' in sostituzione dei pilastri a gabbia o pilotis, l'ha esplosa a scala gigantesca, atta a legare insieme percorsi pensili, terrazze, piazze elevate, strade interne, scale-nodi e non solo scale distributrici degli alloggi. Entro questa macrostruttura si inseriscono senza dominare appartamenti di taglio felice e spazioso specie nei duplex; figurativamente scompaiono divorati dal modulo delle enormi lame."

which closes the north end of the building, is crossed by beams which makes evident its structural design, as well as alluding to a possible continuation of the macrostructure [Fig. 6].

As for the terraces, in the *Cardon House* Ricci creates staggered levels of a few steps, which extend and fold into balconies to create an alternation of broken profiles in section. These structures give rise to an interesting asymmetri-



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cal elevation on the short side, increasing the strength of the longitudinal ones: an overlapping of fleeting lines towards a perspective horizon that appears infinitely distant [Fig. 7].

These elements had already achieved exceptional relevance for Ricci. In the *Pleydell Bouverie House*, they were not just objects inserted in the volumetry of the building, but themselves represented the formal synthesis of a space that was both internal and external, and always free-flowing. The area dedicated to the swimming pool and the other terraced connections, for example, achieved a propensity towards the outside by building a continuous dialogue between the indoor and outdoor spaces. This structure imagined by Ricci has become not only an expressive architectural language but a practical way of elongating into a set of related 'tray-shaped' planes. One can observe these elements in the section drawings, where they seem to be sliding downwards. The last one, at the bottom, should have contained a pool of water, balanced on the stone pillar

Fig. 6

La Nave, Florence, picture by the author.

below [Fig. 8-9-10]. The structure stretches and retracts, pushing the limits of a technique now capable of pursuing an idea of space that is more than intuited, and which will become sharper in the social consequences of Sorgane's macrostructure. As described above, these are the foundations for the birth of a space that is liable to macro-development, suitable for a large house as in this case, but which ideally aspires to social use, common to several housing units and to the integration of numerous inhabitants.

The balconies in *La Nave* are conceived as the deck of a large boat or, in Ricci's words, as streets where children can skate and run freely and safely from cars.¹⁹



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Another relevant feature of both the single-family houses is the provision of different entrances to the habitation; in the *Pleydell Bouverie House*, in particular, by means of external access ramps. This feature was revived in Sorgane and transformed into a public space where everyone can stand or walk. The ramps and stairs of the macrostructure become fundamental passages to reach the suspended walkways connecting the floors to the street.

Some drawings show that Ricci made some preliminary studies on the type of 'duplex apartment' in the *Pleydell Bouverie House*. He tried to include, in a middle phase of the project, some spiral stairs to connect certain areas of the

Fig. 7

Cardon House, Castiglioncello, Livorno, picture by the author.

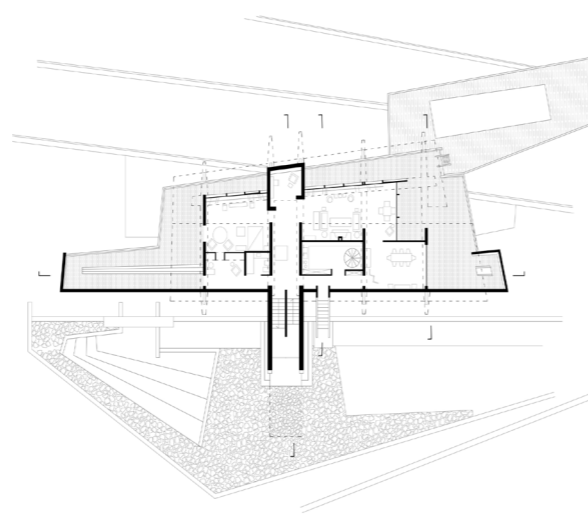
¹⁹ See the video documentary by Rabiger Michael titled *One Pair of Eyes: Starting from Zero* (BBC, 1971).

house which, between two structural walls, are reminiscent of a two-story flat. This type of accommodation is placed among the residential units in the southernmost part of *La Nave*: these are the largest flats, and this allows the architect to 'ennoble' the living area with a double-height space.

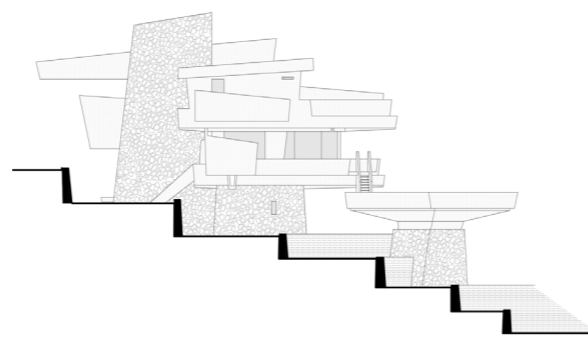
The study of the ground connection which 'raises' the house by means of structural partitions is a frequent feature of Ricci's projects and, in the *Pleydell Bouverie House*, it makes it possible to create different living spaces in the garden, more sheltered and more usable in the shade of the big terraces. In Sorgane these ground floor areas become for Ricci not only an outdoor living room but, finally, a space for everyone, where the elderly can sit in the summer shade and children can play hide-and-seek.²⁰

Lastly, the staircase of the *Pleydell Bouverie House*, described at the beginning of this text, was already a key element in the first layout of the house. In a second and larger version of the project²¹, the stairs become the pivot which acts both as a vertical connection and as a graft for new rooms. They represent the junction node of a system that is transversal to the primary one, and thus capable of further growth of the structure. Once again, Ricci doesn't apply to the layout a standard scheme of repetition in a single direction but, instead, he exploits the capacities of the structure and the ground to follow and pursue, with an organic propensity, possible spaces, different views, and new directions for the house expansion.

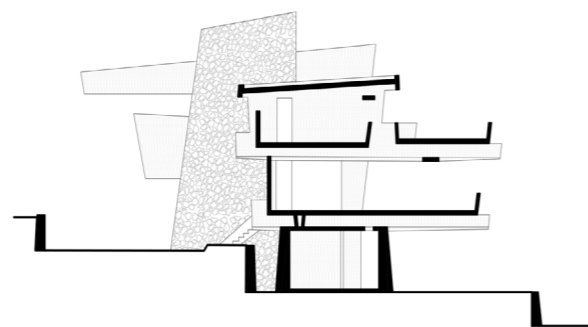
The stairwell proves to be an exceptionally interesting space, even in the macrostructure in Sorgane: it is crossed by the inhabitants, giving "different sensations on different levels".²² In *La Nave*, the southern staircase is articulated from one side of the building to the other in an admirable extension of overhangs which create public spaces in the open air at different heights in a dynamic way, creating places for communal living. A second staircase further north, also recognizable by its protruding volumes on each floor, has a 'fan-shaped' plan as in other junctions of Ricci's projects. [Fig. 11] The form of this element works like a hinge and allows the direction of the building to change slightly.



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Fig. 8

Pleydell Bouverie House, first floor plan, graphic design by the author.

Fig. 9

Pleydell Bouverie House, east elevation, graphic design by the author.

Fig. 10

Pleydell Bouverie House, transversal section, graphic design by the author.

20 See the video documentary by Rabiger Michael titled *One Pair of Eyes: Starting from Zero* (BBC, 1971).

21 We can observe this dynamic clearly in the plan of the larger project, as visible in Fig.7.

22 These are the words that Leonardo Ricci uses to describe them in the video documentary by Rabiger Michael *One Pair of Eyes*, at the min. 32.

However, the construction of the "macrostructure for an integrated city"²³, as Ricci intended it, did not take place in full, and the neighborhood was considered by himself and many others to be a mutilated experiment that was only half successful. In spite of this, we cannot fail to identify traces of incessant research that certainly did not end with it, and which originated, as we have seen, in previous projects. This is particularly true for the *Pleydell Bouverie House*, a preparatory project which remains suspended, like its terraces over the landscape, towards a potential future development; a house that is certainly representative of Leonardo Ricci's way of conceiving architecture.

The current era is an age of transformation. Everything that happens in the field of urbanism and architecture is merely an inevitable consequence. No architect can foresee man's future reality, which implies a new motivation for existence and, consequently, new associative relationships between men. [...] As far as my personal work is concerned, I think that I have made some contribution in the field of space and the consequences of a new way of life possible in this space, in a new way of considering the structures and materials that identify with this space, and above all in a new way of considering certain problems regarding form, that I no longer consider in terms of style but, on the contrary, in terms of "open formativeness", an inevitable and necessary consequence of the different components that form the basis of the project.²⁴



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Fig. 11

La Nave, Florence, picture by the author.

23 See Maria Clara Ghia, *La nostra città è tutta la terra. Leonardo Ricci architetto (1918-1994)* (Wuppertal: Steinhäuser Verlag, 2021), 227-9.

24 Leonardo Ricci, "Leonardo Ricci Italia," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, no.119 (1965): 59. Original text: "L'époque actuelle est une époque de transformations. Tout ce qui se passe dans le domaine de l'urbanisme et de l'architecture n'en est qu'une inévitable conséquence. Aucun architecte ne peut préjuger de la réalité future de l'homme, qui implique une nouvelle justification de l'existence et, par conséquent, de nouveaux rapports associatifs entre les hommes.[...] En ce qui concerne mon oeuvre personnelle, j'estime avoir apporté quelque contribution dans le domaine de l'espace et des conséquences d'un nouveau mode de vie possible dans cet espace, dans une nouvelle manière d'envisager les structures et les matériaux qui s'identifient avec cet espace et surtout dans une nouvelle manière d'envisager certains problèmes concernant la forme que je ne considère certes plus en termes de style mais, au contraire, de 'formativité ouverte', conséquence inévitable et nécessaire des différences composantes qui sont à la base d'un projet."

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