

Leonardo Ricci. Model + Structure + Form. Recorded Lectures and Seminars with Students in Venezia, Italia, 1994.

Venezia Atelier, University of Kentucky, Arts and Architecture, Building Analysis, Model Structure Form

/Abstract

The proposed paper will be the first publication from a seminar series given by Leonardo Ricci to his American students from his home in Venice, Italy. The text will be an annotated transcript drawn from 14 weekly meetings that were recorded at Ricci's living room table between January and April 1994. Topics discussed by Ricci and his students range from architectural theory to analysis of specific buildings, and include Mies van der Rohe, Louis Kahn, Carlo Scarpa, Le Corbusier, Giovanni Michelucci, Alvar Aalto, and other architects. Ricci also discusses architectural education and his own buildings and paintings. As one of Ricci's former students, then his co-teacher in Venice, Ricci asked me to record these meetings for future transcription and publication. This paper, entitled *Model, Structure, Form*, will be the first installment for a book of annotated transcripts from the full 20 hours of recordings, accompanied by the unedited audio recordings of Ricci speaking, drawing, and answering questions during each seminar.

"Making plans on the Grand Canal is utopian, almost as though the topos did not exist. Even if, once, it was possible, one wonders how a modern building could coexist with one from the past. Thus I found myself in the world of artistic creation. It was as though I were the owner of the ruins which had become the house-museum, thanks to Peggy Guggenheim, and the mayor of Venice was ready to sign the construction permit. For many sleepless nights I saw the already constructed Ca' Venier, all of it, on the Grand Canal. A magic box. Platforms suspended in space suitable for single works. Pollock suspended in the void. Klee in precious urns. Giacometti projected into the sky. The exterior like Ca' D'Oro made of marble and white stone. The interior of slate to absorb the light and leave it alone with the colors of the paintings and sculptures. But anyone who knows how to read can read the drawings and the plastic. Even the uninitiated can."

Leonardo Ricci, *La Biennale di Venezia*, 1994

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Keith Plymale received a Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Kentucky in Lexington in 1986 and a Master of Science in Architecture and Building Design from the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at Columbia University in New York, NY in 1989. He has been a professor at the College of Environmental Design in the Faculty of Architecture at the University of California Berkeley since 2000 and he has been professionally licensed to practice by the Commonwealth of Kentucky since 1992, the State of California since 2001, and the State of Florida since 2021.

He is the founding architect of San Francisco-based Volume 21 Architecture. V21A is a research office that builds houses, makes speculative projects, and pursues international competitions. The architecture of Volume 21 design work pursues many interests including: built-in cabinetry, pre-fabrication, material technology, art, music, and the dwelling patterns of the 21st century. Research interests include: Architecture & building to anticipate California Fire, body, proportion and 'the modular', construction and material technology, earthwork art/architecture, Native American architecture, Italian modernism, and the work of architect Leonardo Ricci. Plymale worked with José Oubrière [atelier Wylde-Oubrière] for 10 years. Oubrière work as the lead architect with Le Corbusier at Atelier Rue de Sèvres 35. Plymale received an AIA honor award for his work with Oubrière on the Miller House located in Lexington Kentucky, which is published extensively. Professor Plymale served as an associate professor and director of undergraduate studies (Bachelor of Architecture program) at the University of Kentucky, where he was twice honored with the AIAS Outstanding Teacher of the Year award. He has taught graduate studios at The Ohio State University and California College of the Arts. He has led several ambitious travel programs through Italy, the U.S., and California and taught extensively in Venice, Italy.



A painter and architect, Leonardo Ricci wrote, taught, and searched for new architectural models his entire life. Ricci believed in and lived for the brilliance of the human imagination. He said to his students: "If I could be remembered for one thing, I hope it would not be as an architect, a painter, a writer, a philosopher, an existentialist, or a professor. It would be as a man who found something novel in our society, new in our culture, and that I was able to communicate that to the world."

Born June 1918 in Rome, Leonardo Ricci grew up in both Rome and Venice. He moved to Paris as a young painter to engage in the active dialog of the moderns. He received his diploma of architecture from the University of Florence in 1942. After serving in the Italian engineering corps in World War II, Ricci began his teaching career in Florence in 1945.

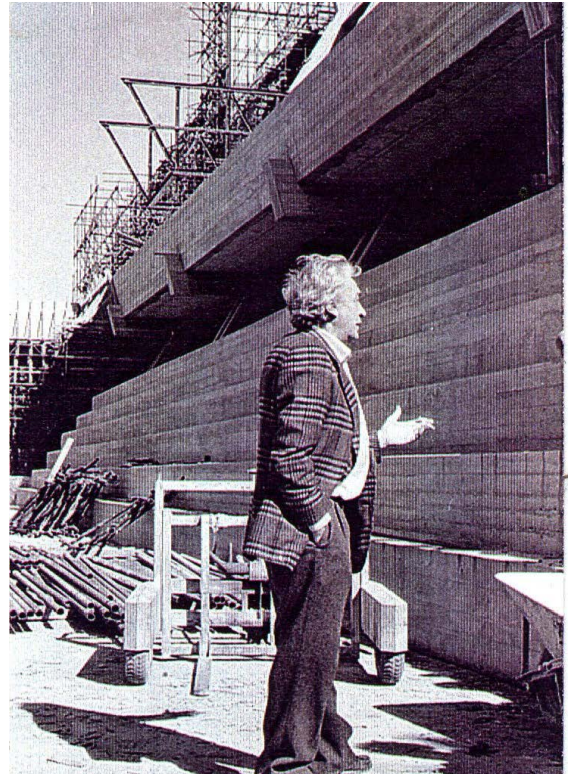
As a young architect, Ricci worked in the office of Italian modernist Giovanni Michelucci. He was one of Michelucci's primary assistants and project architect during the construction of La Chiesa Dell'Autostrada Del Sole, in Florence. In 1951 Ricci built his own house and founded the village of Monterinaldi overlooking Florence, where he eventually built 17 houses. His independent pursuits commenced a prodigious career as an architect and community visionary.

In 1961 Ricci wrote *Anonymous [20th Century]*. Through his writing, he expressed a unique understanding of life, form, structure, art, urbanism, politics and his ideology for making architecture.

Ricci first taught in the United States at MIT in 1960. From 1965 through the 1990s, Ricci taught in the United States and in Italy at Penn State University, the University of Florence (as the chair and a professor of Urbanism), the University of Florida in Gainesville, the Pratt Institute in New York, Virginia Tech University, the University of Miami, and the University of Kentucky.

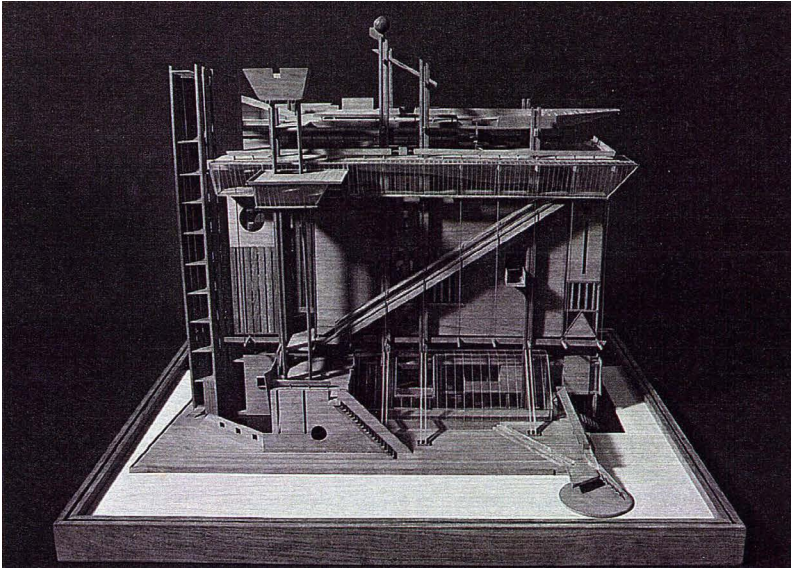
Ricci influenced the lives of thousands of his students and colleagues. Through transmission and mentorship, many of Ricci's students carry a heightened sense of awareness of the world and a belief that their architecture will improve people's lives; a testament to his life long ambition and vision.

As a member of Ricci's 1984-1985 studio, I was one of his eight team members who completed his entry to the 1985 Biennale di Venezia Terza Mostra (The Ca' Venier dei Leoni; Peggy Guggenheim Collection Venice, Italy). The open generosity and honest direct conversations that "Leo" shared with us while we worked gave us a deep sense of unity. We left the studio feeling we could change the world with our lives and work. It was ten years later I was invited to teach with Leonardo and Pucci Dallerba Ricci in Venezia. It was during those months in Venezia that Ricci created the fourteen-weeks seminar that is the core of this text. [Fig. 1, 2, 3].

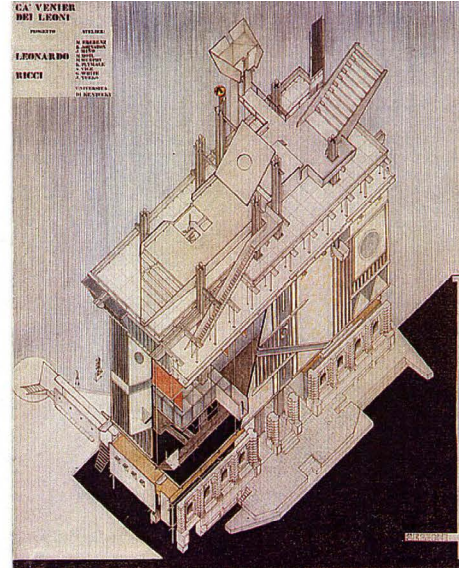


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Fig. 1
Leonardo Ricci teaching on the Palace of Justice construction site, Savona, Italy, picture by Keith Plymale.



2



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What follows are samples of the transcribed audio, they were chosen by the author, are written in a sequence, the paragraphs of each sample are introduced by and end with high quotes, the author marked the end of each sample¹.

Model Structure Form: Seminar #1, Venezia, January 18, 1994

Leonardo Ricci is sitting at his living room table, burning cigarette in hand as the students arrive to meet him for the first time. Pucci Dallerba Ricci is next to him and has assembled and organised a collection of books, images, and other visual resources that are on the table before us. The room is an atmosphere, a life, a visual city within which one's mind can learn as it swims through the collection. Pucci is the first to speak and says, "You are looking at our garden, Leo's garden in fact. The paintings, books, art are our friends, and objects, an assembly of our time. Please relax and be free to wander and ask anything that comes to your mind as we talk." Shuffling around the room, the students arrange themselves in chairs, on a large L-shaped couch, and on the floor among a vast library of books, art, and found objects. Notebooks open, silence, and Ricci begins.

"I understand you visited Torcello this morning...Ah beautiful. That is the beginning, the foundation of Venezia. Torcello was built around the time of the Mayan temples of the Yucatan. It was a city of refuge to escape the invasions on the mainland.

Today we begin. At the beginning, I believe that a theoretical introduction is most important to understand the process of an architect.

In reality, civilization is in a moment of transition. When there is a moment of transition in civilization, there is also a transition in the definitions of architecture, or in fact, many of the human disciplines, there is a fast, a rapid change!

¹ The transcription of the oral lecture by Ricci into a written text implied the maintenance of some passages in their original form, even though they are not perfectly structured for a written text. Difficult passages or paragraphs were re-written by the editor of this text, when their comprehension was difficult, and inserted in the notes.

Fig. 2-3: Model and axonometric drawing for the Peggy Guggenheim Museum, La Biennale di Venezia 1994-95, picture by Keith Plymale.

Many people discuss our time as a moment of confusion in architecture. Perhaps in part that is true. At this moment there is confusion also in language. We as architects are engaged in a moment of research to carve a path through this confusion. That is what we are here to do.

Of course when there is a new research, there is confusion. This happens always when something changes like civilization. I prefer to be an optimist in a certain way. An optimist also because I see the strength of the desires of the young people.

Personally and objectively, I like to begin with three words, or three ideas: Model, Structure, Form. These three words in any language, English, Italian, French are used about with the same meaning. Indeed we can say: I model air, I structure space, I form wind. These three words can define certain phenomena, but they have completely different meanings in reality.

Model comes from Latin MODUS, which means type of life. Model means type of life, type of civilization, a type of desire a certain civilization has.

Structure, on the contrary comes from Latin STRUERE. That means to build. This is the second phase after the model is clear. We can give structure to our thinking, to our philosophy, to our desire for what can be as a new, future civilization.

Form comes from Greek FORME². Form means the visual aspect. The actual molding of a thing, the making of a space.”

“When we look at architecture, or the work of artists today, we should not relegate our thoughts to likes and dislikes. It is meaningless to say ‘I like this’ or ‘I dislike that.’ What is important is to understand the process of a person, of the architect who makes architecture, who has made certain buildings, how has the sequence of the model, of the structure, and of the form been followed. It is terrible if instead of going through this process we start from form. Simply beginning with form means nothing...or...if we do something that is arbitrary or we do something that is revival, because real forms, and not only in architecture, but in all arts and science are born when a new type of life was invented.

So that when you hear of Greeks, Romans or Christians and so on, we have to see a new typology, a new morphology. Not because some ‘crazy’ architect started to think that it is better now that we design with a fashion that you can simply change tomorrow.”

“There is a new desire in relation to a new type of life. What I look for when I admire an architect, first is the process. Because all the three [Model, Structure, Form] had a new vision of what will be the life, a new vision of course to make a new architecture.

Or on the contrary, it is clear that they belonged to Enlightenment philosophy so at a certain moment in which man believed that from the man was possible totally to create a new civilization.”

2 The author here refers to the Greek word μορφή [morphè].

"As demonstrated that it was a marvellous dream, the Enlightenment. In a certain way, the Enlightenment has brought us marvellous results. But it was not enough, the Enlightenment, unless you believe that the human genius are special sons of god, I do not think that one man or one woman can invent a city, a total city, that one person cannot invent...eh...a thing."

"So that after the war, practically when I was young, we tried to find out a new process, a new success, because I don't think now that one architect, the most great architect on the earth can say... "I know what is true, I know what we need in the future of the city. I know what will be the...[result]."

[End of Transcription Sample 1]

Model Structure Form: Seminar #3, Venezia, February 1, 1994

"Last time when we met, one of you asked me to do a lecture on colour and I accepted. But perhaps I should not do it because, when you do a seminar or a lecture, if you are an honest professor, you have a background of theory that you have developed the lecture on, and so it is direct and even easy... But I, for what concerns the colour, I never studied, philosophically, theoretical[ly], those problems.... So I hope that, that today, for you, it will not [be] a bad seminar. [laugh] I try to do my best and perhaps also to clarify, clarify to myself, in what way I started to paint before architecture.

So, tonight, it will be more a story of my memories in my life, doing the exercises of the painter rather than a theoretical lesson. Of course it will also be theoretical and conceptual because living among critics, painters, and so on, I have also contributions from what was happening around me. But in a certain way could be interesting for you if you are young... to see how a person developed himself...How I developed, starting from scratch, starting from nothing.

It is true that I came here to Venice very, very young. I was eleven years old, something like this. Perhaps the key to why I became an architect and painter, perhaps this path arrived, just from Venice, because of the environment. I think that is very important. Because it is clear that a boy [has] not yet the knowledge to understand certain phenomena. But in a certain way, in a subliminal [way], he can receive the information from the environment in which I lived in. So that practically living in Venice, going to San Marco, the Campo, the little things that go on. My father gave to me a boat, a little boat, to me, to my brother—he was older than me, four years—in the laguna. For sure, I think, that I received the information from the environment, the city type of life, the nature, and so on. A certain kind of information which produced in me something that I did not know for sure being a boy.

The love of painting happened very casually. I was something like twelve or thirteen years old, living in Venice and a friend of mine had a 'compleanno', a birthday, and he received a box of watercolours. And so he opened this water-colour box. I was not like many children, very good for design, who designs very

nicely little things. No, I was completely out from this, another, direction. But as soon as I saw the watercolour box, I asked of him if I could do something and so that he give me the set, and because with the box, he had an album in which you can work³.

I started to mix the colour. And for me was a revelation. Also in my book, I think I have written, or in a certain article for sure, I was asked how it was I started to paint. I understood, I had this impression of this miracle of colours. So that I remember that I started to invent. And I tried to organise the colours. Red, yellow, green, and so on. Automatically, I could say, to find the language. I remember like, like now [laughs], eh like, if you, I think, a child, still when very, very young, started to speak. Practically, I think one the greatest miracles is to see a boy when he is old enough to start to speak. If the man—later with the intelligence, the capacity to learn languages—everybody would be a genius because this speed of learning. So that practically, I had the impression that I could speak with the colours. I was learning another language. I could express myself in another language⁴.

I did a drawing, a watercolour. And I don't remember at all in what way it was done. I don't remember if it was flower or object. I really don't know. I could say that it was a kind of abstract painting. You know, a fantasy of colour. And because in the, in the box, was written that to send drawings which you did in these watercolours. And I sent this watercolour to them and I won the prize! [laughs] I won the prize, was not a prize of money. No. It was a prize that I received a nice box of good, not with watercolour, but oil colour. So that, that by myself absolutely, I started to work with the watercolour.

It was clear that in all the years I was painting in Paris, like intuition. Like instinct. I started to work with oil and I became really a lover of painting. It became the most important thing. In a way, starting with oil, honestly speaking, I have not a tendency. I started to do a portrait of my, my brothers, to do something of copies, objects, the house, flowers, and so on. There was not one direction. But I started so fast that when I was fourteen, fifteen years old, people said that I had incredible talent. Excuse me, but that is what I am saying. You know, because I was innocent! [laughs]

And so that I was invited to do a show. Quite important, also an international show⁵. I was fourteen or fifteen. So I found myself in that period, in that period, that was more or less... I was fifteen, so '33, '34, with really professional painters. Also at that time, a moment of transition of what was the culture of painting, I found myself in the middle of completely different painters, artists. There were Futurists, there were Cubists, there were Realists, and so on. So it was a salad of different tendencies.

³ The sentence could be rephrased as follows: "But as soon as I saw the watercolour box, I asked him if I could use it and so he gave me the set, because with the box he had an album".

⁴ The sentence could be rephrased as follows: "I remember it was like when a child, still when very, very young, starts to speak. I think one of the greatest miracles is to see how easily a boy starts to speak. If an adult enlived the same speed of learning in languages, it would be an expression of genius. So that in practice, I had the impression that I could speak with the colours. I was learning another language. I could express myself in another language".

⁵ Here the correct word would be "exhibition".

Honestly speaking, being so young, I had no critical preparation to understand what I understood or liked more and to choose one of these directions. Everything that I can say is that I love more the painters who were, who used very strong colours. This is the only sensation. Not important if they are Futurists or Abstract Painters or this or that. No. The colours for me, like I said before, were, the total.

So, I continue, of course, to paint. You could ask to me at that time, not of the painters. We are painting in that moment, but of the painting, of the ancient painting, what I like it more. And I can say that I liked much more the painting with the colours. I love it very much. For instance, Byzantine. Not because Byzantine, now I understand. Before I did not understand and yet, the colour use the language not like an imitation. You remember when I, last seminar, I said to how, for instance, the Chinese paint white the sky, the golden the sky Byzantine, Roman red, and so on? So that I was captured from the abstraction of the colour. Now, I understand, the golden air⁶.

But at that moment, I don't know also a great painter know. Like I don't know Tintoretto for instance. I say one who is a master and a, or I love the—perhaps because I lived in Venice—mosaic. For me, to go in the Church of San Marco and—now you have to pay the ticket and so on. Once it was free, I spent hours. You go up and you go around to watch the mosaics change. And I remember it well. Watching towers, the altar on the back, the two signification, the two manifestations of mosaic. One for the Paradise Christ and so on. And the other for the Devil. But not because I care that, that was the Devil's Inferno, that Christ Paradise. But because I was shocked at the difference of the colour between the two. After this. I could say that my direction, absolutely innocent, not a critical at all. I was captured. The language of the colours of which I did not know anything. [laughs]⁷

After this, I started continue to paint. I did not like to continue to study after, when I finished my school. I said to my father, I like to only be painter. And because I, I started to sell some paintings, my father said, on the contrary, said no, ok listen, ok, you see. You sell paintings, but certainly not to survive here. You have to go to a university.

I was 18 years old about. After I continued to paint, I had the interruption of the war and so on. And immediately, after the war, I came in Florence. Mrs. Guggenheim, she came to see me, and she was a strange person. Because she liked one of my painting. I understand that she liked to get as a gift, not to buy like the merchants do. An I say no.

6 A possible rephrasing of the paragraph could be as follows: "So, I continue painting. You could ask me of that time, not of the painters as we are painting in a moment: I like the ancient painting at most. And I can say that I liked much more the painting with the colours as the Byzantine ones. Not because of the Byzantine tradition, but for the use of the colour as a language, not as an imitation. Do you remember when, during the last seminar, I said how, for instance, the Chinese paint white the sky, the Byzantine a golden sky, the Roman a red one, and so on? I was captured from the abstraction of the colour. So, now I understand the meaning of the golden background".

7 A possible rephrasing of the paragraph could be as follows: "But in that moment, I didn't know any great painter as I don't know Tintoretto for instance, a mosaic master I love because I live in Venice. For me, to go to the Church of San Marco and spend hours there was important. Now you have to pay the ticket, once it was free. You go up and around to observe the mosaic changes. I remember well when I was looking at the towers, at the altar on the back, at the two manifestations of mosaic: one for the Paradise Christ and the other for the Devil. I was shocked at the difference of the colours between the two. This is my point of view, which is an innocent, not a critical perspective. I was captured by the language of the colours I did not know anything about".

I was this, this young guy—twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight years old—and so, I was invited to go to Paris. And one of the best gallery of Paris [...] did a contract with me. Give to me each month a certain amount of money, like the merchants do. So, it was nothing special, just to get some painting in a year.

I don't know if in America, you use the same word because there is a stock market for the painting like there is for the money, no? And each painting is valued so much each point. What it means, a point? It depends, I don't know if in English is the same. Means that there is three dimensions. One was called a figure, one was called a landscape, and the other one was called the marina. So, that it means a different size, no?—figure was vertical, but marina was very long, or each centimetre—I don't remember how much was considered 1 centimetre, 1 ½, I don't remember—but in any case, there was a certain point.

So, I went there and I stayed in Paris for three years. But in a moment, living with the other, a younger painter who became very famous later. And also, knowing the great painters, Picasso, Matisse, Chagall, Leger, [...]. Eh, there only finally I started to have a conscience to be conscious of what means direction. What means a language, personal for a painter? What means discipline, to achieve their goal and so on? At this moment, I can say that I can do. Also if it's not mine, in mine, an invention, this was something that Douglass; the critic, Douglass, theorised. He wrote a book, a very beautiful book, saying that in painting, we always speak of tendencies.

Douglass wrote: There are two roads to achieve. One is called the timbre and one value. This is about only the great, great painters, the greatest synthesis between the road of timbre and the road of values. And of course, in this book, there are beautiful examples, for instance, that for a time, painters—Michelangelo or Tinteretto, Leonardo da Vinci and so—they choose the road of the values. Indeed, the most important things for them, how to structure the composition of the painting. The colours were not important. For instance, Michelangelo like composition more than colour is not so important. And Leonardo da Vinci practically is black and white [laughs] and so on and so on. It was the value which, which was the, was the center of the painting.

On the contrary, there were painters, also like Tuscan, like Siena. For them, it was the timbre. Indeed, Sienese take more from Byzantine, take more of, also the mosaic, because it was the timbre for them that was important. Same thing you could say that, for instance, the Venetians. Byzantine was important also the timbre.

At the moment, so that I find myself in a, in a different situation with these painters. Because some were for the timbre. Also, I don't know if they were aware or not, if was it natural or not, if some on the contrary, for the values. I can say that all, about all the abstract painters were for the timbre. The painting without content, in a way, but only the content was the language. To put the colour together in a certain way, to paint a definition of structure, a definition with colours. [...]

[End of Transcription Sample 2]