

# Not Existentialist, but Existential. Leonardo Ricci and the Philosophical Thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Enzo Paci

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*Existentialism, Enzo Paci, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Aesthetic*

## /Abstract

Was Ricci actually an 'existentialist architect'? And if so, was he existentialist 'in the manner of whom'? Was his thinking influenced by the phenomenological approach? And in particular, how and why his research dealt with the key theme of the 'architectural form'? This essay focuses specifically on Ricci's theoretical attitude, with the aim to contextualize it in its contemporary philosophical currents. His writings are compared with some of the most important texts of French existentialism, that influenced him during his stay in Paris in the early fifties, in particular those of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, especially focusing on his idea of 'the absurd'. In addition, a particular consideration is given to the affinities between the thought of Ricci and that of Enzo Paci, the Italian philosopher who, perhaps more than any other at that moment, dealt with the themes of architecture in his articles published on the magazine *Casabella-Continuità*: Paci's 'positive existentialism' develops concepts such as 'relationality of experience', 'permanence and emergence of forms' and considers architecture as a 'relational field' continuously mutable in a temporal evolvment. Those ideas are particularly relevant if confronted with Ricci's way of looking at the architectural form as a consequence of the 'potential for vitality' inherent within the object designed, that should respond to the basic needs, or acts, of the users, which must be re-examined case by case to understand the 'existential' reasons of the project. The analysis of those theoretic themes, if considered in addition to the exceptional results of Ricci's architectural practice, seem to give other compelling grounds for his reinstatement as a central figure in the architectural context after Second World War, and precisely in the present moment, when a re-foundation of the architectural discipline is needed as a consequence of environmental and social urgency.

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## Existentialist in the Manner of Whom?

It is common knowledge that Leonardo Ricci was an 'existentialist architect'. The term existentialist has been used several times to describe his theoretical approach and in particular the themes dealt with in his book *Anonymous (20<sup>th</sup> Century)*.<sup>1</sup>

Precisely for this reason, in a moment in which the studies on Ricci are finally deepening and intensifying, it appears necessary to re-examine the effective link of his thought with existentialist philosophy, to avoid the risk of sticking the term 'existentialist' as a 'label' next to his name, perhaps to simply make the reasoning about his work more captivating.

Was Ricci actually an existentialist thinker? And above all, being known that this great 'river' of existentialism that crosses the twentieth century is formed through the confluence of different 'tributaries', that is, through the contribution of the thought of different philosophers,<sup>2</sup> we cannot help but inquire: existentialist in the manner of whom?

Of course, during his travels to Paris at the beginning of the fifties, while exhibiting his paintings alongside those of Alberto Giacometti, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso, Ricci met Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. We can therefore begin by examining how close his thought was to that of the two philosophers.

In the spring of 1950 Ricci had inaugurated a solo exhibition of his work at the Galerie Pierre in rue des Beaux-Arts. The text accompanying his works, entitled *Confession*, was partly a poetic meditation and partly an artistic Manifesto, and it was published in Italian in the magazine *Architetti*. Here he wrote that, in an historical moment of confusion, disorder and decay, he felt the need to "make a point on human being" and seek, if possible, a "minimum common denominator on which some men can agree in order to be able to start a new process, to find on this earth a meaning and a justification for life, without which it is not possible to build something valid and of a certain duration."<sup>3</sup> "Make a point on human being": the reference to Sartre's conference *Existentialism is a humanism* is implied in this focus.<sup>4</sup>

Sartre's existentialism, or atheistic humanism, puts the concepts of freedom and responsibility at the center of our lives. Nevertheless, our freedom is seen as a sort of condemnation, since we did not choose to create ourselves and, once we are thrown into the world, we have responsibility for every act we perform, an idea that certainly resonates with Ricci's ethics. Also, the aspects of Sartre's

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1 Leonardo Ricci, *Anonymous (20<sup>th</sup> Century)* (New York: Braziller, 1962).

The topics covered in this essay have been partly and marginally examined by the author in other publications, in particular: Maria Clara Ghia, *Architecture as a living act* (San Francisco: Oro Editions, 2022); id., *La nostra città è tutta la terra. Leonardo Ricci architetto (1918-1994)* (Wuppertal: Steinhäuser Verlag, 2021); id., *Basta Esistere. Leonardo Ricci, il pensiero e i progetti per le comunità* (Roma: Fondazione Bruno Zevi, 2012).

2 Even though we are aware of Ricci's disinclination in referring to any Master, he had inevitable influential cultural references, especially those related to the thinking of the philosophers he met in person.

3 Leonardo Ricci, "Confessione," *Architetti*, no. 3 (1950), 29.

4 Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Les Editions Nagel, 1946), English Edition: *Existentialism is a humanism* (London: Melthuen & co. 1948).

thought concerning relationships between body, object and space - which are directly linked to the phenomenological approach - are particularly pertinent to Ricci's artistic activity. In *L'être et le néant* Sartre describes the body as being "extended" through the tools it uses - the chair, the room and the house - and as constituting our "adaptation" to these tools and objects: "My body is everywhere: the bomb which destroys my house also damages my body insofar as the house was already an indication of my body."<sup>5</sup>

Exactly in the same way Ricci theorizes a conception of space as an *Umwelt* in which the notions of distance and proximity cannot be restrained or controlled by geometric measures, but instead they belong to the realm of experienced sensations. It is a reality in which the boundaries between the body and physical things are merely differences of status: "There is no longer an inside of the body and an outside of the body, there is no longer an outside and an inside of oneself, but an entire reality in which a man moves. Physically and metaphysically he proceeds as if he were breathing: an inspiration and an exhalation of being, to the point of no longer being able to measure space with geometric dimensions."<sup>6</sup>

Also, in *La nausée* by Sartre, the protagonist, Antoine Roquentin, is affected by the Nausea for the first time when he holds a stone pebble in his hand. He considers that objects 'should not *touch*', since they are not alive, they are merely useful. But he insists: "they touch me, it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them as though they were living beasts", and again: "I was going to throw that pebble, I looked at it and then it all began: I felt that it *existed*. Then after that there were other Nauseas; from time to time objects start existing in your hand."<sup>7</sup> In much the same way Ricci seeks a primordial, authentic condition of contact with objects. In the *Anonymous (20<sup>th</sup> Century)*, he imagines "the savage of ten thousand years ago, and the savage of today" crouching with a stone in his hand, who suddenly gets up and "hurls the stone into the sea."<sup>8</sup> In this way he realizes the existence of the stone, as if it were an extension of his hand.

Rediscovering the direct existential relationship of harmonious unity between subject and object, man and stone, the architect and his work, was Ricci's quest. The quest for an 'anonymous' renewal in his relationship with things to finally create "that kind of existential relation between two realities [...] the relationship, I should like to call it, of Anonymous (20<sup>th</sup> Century)."<sup>9</sup> But Ricci found himself facing an impasse, since language, and certainly also architectural language, imposes a pre-constituted structure and order upon us: the possibility of having a purely physical and tactile relationship with the objects he designed

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5 Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), English Edition: *Being and Nothingness. An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 325.

6 Ricci, Leonardo, "Space in architecture." *Journal of the University of Manchester Architectural and Planning Society*, no. 224 (1956), 7-10.

7 Jean-Paul Sartre, *La nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), English Edition *Nausea* (New York: New Direction Publishing Corporation, 1964), 123.

8 Ricci, *Anonymous*, 51.

9 Id., 52.

disappeared when the pure act of designing inevitably turned into a specific architectural 'form'.<sup>10</sup>

In that respect, what he writes in the *Anonymous (20<sup>th</sup> Century)* can be connected with another fundamental concept: that of 'the absurd' theorized by Albert Camus. While Ricci was in Paris, Camus was working on *L'homme révolté*,<sup>11</sup> an essay which presents genuine insurgency as the promotion of human values in antithesis with past and present revolutionary movements.<sup>12</sup> Camus sees the rebellion of art as being in opposition to the metaphysical revolt that denies God and the historical revolt that nullifies the value of the individual man by sacrificing him to the importance of history, and that thus ends up favouring totalitarianism:<sup>13</sup> "What is a man in revolt? A man who says no. But if he refuses, he does not give up: he is also a man who says yes from the very first move. A slave who has received orders all his life, suddenly finds a new command unacceptable."<sup>14</sup>

The activity of the artist is pervaded by a radical contradiction. He works 'for no reason' and, one might add, 'anonymously', but in the act of creation his awareness is awakened and he testifies to this by producing images of the world. According to Camus, creating means giving form a destiny of its own, and in this effort the artist discovers the discipline that will give him the will and the strength to go on living. He who creates is therefore an 'absurd' being par excellence:

What, in fact, is the absurd man? He who, without negating it, does nothing for the eternal. Not that nostalgia is foreign to him. But he prefers his courage and his reasoning [...]. Assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future, and of his mortal consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime. That is his field, that is his action, which he shields from any judgment but his own.<sup>15</sup>

Camus develops the theme further in his fundamental work *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus is the master of his own destiny and responds to the temptation of suicide with the decision to embrace the absurd. The existence of nihilism, together with the need to take positive action when confronted with it, was the central problem of the age for western civilization. It was a question of understanding whether man, without the aid either of eternal revealed truths or of rationalist thought, could create his own values for himself.

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10 The concept of 'architectural form' in Ricci's thinking will be examined later in this essay.

11 Albert Camus, *L'Homme révolté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), English Edition *The Rebel* (New York: Knopf, 1954).

12 This essay led to a bitter controversy between Camus and the press of the far left. Camus criticized Sartre's pro-Soviet attitude, causing a rift in the intellectual avant-garde of the time. When Sartre vehemently attacked Camus in the magazine *Les Temps modernes*, they broke off relations.

13 For Camus this applies equally to Bolshevism and National Socialism, although the results of the latter are worse, due to its more irrational content. In his novel *The Plague*, written during the Nazi occupation of France, the plague bacillus is a metaphor for the way Nazi-Fascism worms its way into society. Albert Camus, *La peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), English Edition *The plague* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1948).

14 Camus, *The Rebel*, 13.

15 Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), English Edition *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), 19.

In his *Anonymous (20<sup>th</sup> Century)*, Ricci explains that 'the absurd', together with 'the myth' and 'the logical', are the three categories by means of which human beings try to understand the world.<sup>16</sup> Living in a world that one has come to see as absurd means surrendering to the fact that it is senseless, that one's own existence is worthless, that every commitment is ultimately to no avail. At this point resorting to drugs or narcosis may seem the only palliative available, for gaining access to another world that appears satisfactory, but that is inevitably false and vacuous.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the theme of the absurd is tackled by Ricci in a negative key, as Ricci purifies his thought of any nihilistic nuance.<sup>18</sup> There must be another way, he keeps searching for it, and he finds it in his own existential-phenomenological approach. Ricci pursues his incessant desire for clarity and truth, which is vitally important also for his friend Albert Camus, but in opposition to the 'absurd', Ricci introduces the concept of 'the logical'. He exclaims: "How marvelous, this possibility: to have stepped out of the myth, to have overcome the absurd, to be happy within the logic of this world!"<sup>19</sup>

Ricci sees the 'logical' world as organic, natural and necessary, and he states that in this world "It is enough to exist", it is enough to find the relationships among the things that exist and then to create new ones."<sup>20</sup>

It is interesting to note that, while Ricci uses the terms 'logical' and 'existential' very often to describe his approach to life and work, the term 'existentialist' appears in the book only once. And Ricci uses it precisely to distance himself from a strictly existentialist position.

The sentence is of crucial importance:

In their attempts to survive, self-styled modern men have found a thousand justifications or non-justifications. None of them is acceptable to me. Thus I have set out to find my own justification, my own *raison d'être*. It is somewhere along the existentialist line; but from existentialist it has become plain existential. To put it succinctly: I am happy to be alive, and I know why. Even more than that: I know that this, my being happy and knowing why, is in no way a personal circumstance. On the contrary, it is something that is in the air, and many people find themselves in the same situation or are about to enter it. Since the ideas are clear, I feel it my duty to try to define and express them, and since my profession is that of architect and painter, in expressing them I shall naturally emphasize this particular aspect of human life.<sup>21</sup>

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16 Ricci, *Anonymous*, 13.

17 Id., 14-15.

18 At least, this can be said for Ricci's writings up to the seventies. The professional failures and the progressive withdrawal from the Italian architectural scene lead him to a disillusionment with the society that assumes more and more harsh tones of defeat in the last period of his life.

19 Ricci, *Anonymous*, 40.

20 Id., 19.

21 Id., 13.

Other words present in this sentence are not easily found in Camus's essays. For example, Ricci claims to 'be happy' and his mission on earth as an architect is an attempt to share this happiness with others, explicitly declaring his conception of architecture as a community practice.

Even more explicitly, in other pages, Ricci states that architecture is a pure 'act of love', consisting in two moments: receiving and giving back. First comes the moment of receiving: "This is the phase in which the architect is only a human being, not yet a specialized operator. The richer the humanity of this human being, the more complete will be the architect."<sup>22</sup> The architect is like a lover who must understand the object of his love 'in its existential reality'. He must comprehend the object, not as he would like or may think it to be, abstractly, but the way it exists.

Presenting his project for Monterinaldi on *Domus* magazine in 1957, Ricci wrote in so many words: "It is necessary to be, not existentialist, but existential, or to recognize as fundamental only acts that arise from the existential truths of human beings, and not from futile reasons of taste."<sup>23</sup>

Ricci is not interested in philosophical abstraction, he cares about keeping things as simple as they are, we might say. And specifically in this phase of receiving, the architect is listening and absorbing, he still 'does not use the pencil'. It is, as Giovanni Leoni pointed out, the "non-specialized dimension of architecture": a conception that arises from a "dispersion of the individual personality among things and in the singular individualities of the "clients", to found an action planning based on questioning and not on affirmation, an unattainable condition in the age of individualism."<sup>24</sup>

Then, the phase of giving back arises, and it is more difficult to explain and describe. Ricci does not want to address any specific technical or formal issue in his book. But inevitably architecture has to deal with these kind of questions. His theoretical refusal to make a priori stylistic decisions clashes with the impossibility of escaping the concrete technical answers that design requires, and the definitive architectural form that the project must assume.

Ricci, as his master Giovanni Michelucci, stresses that the formal aspects of his work are an outcome, and that the architectural creation should come into existence over time, as the consequence of a series of actions and reactions that are not rationally predictable, but are mysterious, in much the same way as the phenomena of nature. However, their work inevitably leads to completed forms, which cannot express the same degree of unpredictability, movement and becoming as their words or their design sketches. Michelucci's tormented, fine but woolly lines and the gestural impetuousness, or Ricci's decisive,

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22 Id., 235.

23 Leonardo Ricci Leonardo Ricci quoted in Gillo Dorfles, "A Monterinaldi presso Firenze," *Domus*, no. 337 (December 1957), 1-12.

24 Giovanni Leoni, *Il tema dell'Anonimo*, in Maria Clara Ghia, Clementina Ricci, Ugo Dattilo, *Leonardo Ricci 100. Scrittura, pittura, architettura. 100 note a margine dell'Anonimo del XX Secolo* (Catalogue for the exhibition at the refectory of Santa Maria Novella, April 12–May 26, 2019, Florence: Dida Press, 2019), 24.

peremptory marks and strokes, are thus transformed into concrete lexical decisions oriented towards their preferred currents and directions. Although they both try to evade any kind of formalistic complacency, they have a profound sensibility and awareness of the formal values of architecture.

## Relational Fields

Alongside the main themes of existentialism, another crucial question in Ricci's thought arises, namely the inquiry on the concept of 'form' in architecture: how does Ricci conceive and describe it? His idea finds parallels in the predominant contemporary philosophical movements?

In 1963, Ricci published some drawings of the project for the Waldensian village of Monte degli Ulivi in Sicily in the magazine *Edilizia Moderna*.<sup>25</sup> On the edge of the pages is quoted a sentence by Enzo Paci, which ends with the words: "The renewal of language does not consist in suffering disorder, but in making a new communication possible."<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps at that moment Enzo Paci was the Italian philosopher who more attentively observed the phenomena taking place in the architectural world. A distinguished pupil of Antonio Banfi, he fought in Greece during second world war and was detained in the prison camp of Stanbostel and then in Wietzendorf, where he met Paul Ricœur. During their imprisonment, the two young philosophers found themselves reading together Edmund Husserl, particularly the 1913 essay *Deen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*,<sup>27</sup> that will affect them for the rest of their lives.

Back in Italy, Paci began his academic career teaching Theoretical Philosophy at the University of Pavia and then at the State University of Milan, and in 1951 he founded the magazine *Aut-aut*, whose title obviously recall the famous essay by Søren Kierkegaard, precursor of existentialism in its intention to welcome the irreducible paradox of existence.

Phenomenology and existentialism, therefore, are the currents of thought that he began to spread in Italy since the early 1950s, decisively influencing the cultural trends in the country, especially in the field of architecture. From 1957 to 1965 Paci was in fact also a member of the editorial board of *Casabella-Continuità*, directed by Ernesto Nathan Rogers.

In 1965, when the *Anonymous (20<sup>th</sup> Century)* was translated into Italian by Elisabeth Mann Borgese for the publisher Il Saggiatore, it issued as one of a

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25 Leonardo Ricci, "Progetto per il villaggio Monte degli Ulivi a Riesi in Sicilia," *Edilizia Moderna*, no. 82-83 (1963), 116-118.

26 See Enzo Paci, "Entropia e informazione," *Aut aut*, no. 79-80 (1964), 104.

27 Edmund Husserl, *Deen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* (Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1913), English Edition: *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982).

series of volumes entitled *La Cultura. Storia, critica, testi*.<sup>28</sup> The original publishing project was an initiative involving Giulio Carlo Argan, Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, Giacomo Debenedetti, Ernesto De Martino, as well as Enzo Paci.

Even if we do not have evidence of a direct acquaintance between Ricci and Paci, it is impossible not to notice how much Ricci's thought, especially with regard to this concept of the architectural form, is linked and at least coincident with that of the philosopher. If we read Paci through the lens of Ricci's idea of architectural design, some of Paci's sentences seems like warnings written for Ricci himself. For example, the lucid definition of the architect's work as a synthesis between the 'world of life' and the 'world of thought', a synthesis that philosophy investigates only theoretically and that the architect can put into practice:

The architect does not need such refined philosophical perspectives but he does not need them because, if he is an architect, he experiences and implements the synthesis between nature and formal order in his work. However, if the architect theorizes and wants to impose an abstract logical order on experience [...] considered as pre-established and inevitable, he must be warned that he can do neither the one thing nor the other, because his task is to experience things always and ever anew and to find, repeatedly and constantly, a new rationality.<sup>29</sup>

In Paci's thought, philosophical work cannot be separated from cultural and social experiences, and this continuous conjunction is operated through two fundamental philosophical operators: the concepts of 'time' and 'relationship'. Those crucial notions are concretely declined with the idea of 'space': not the notion of abstract space investigated by science, but properly that particular conception of space, one could say 'physics', with which architecture is measured. Paci's approach to phenomenology is an investigation into the profound connections between the categorical world (the world of thought) and the pre-categorical world (the world of life). This method cannot be disciplinarily referred to the pure philosophical field, but involves a cultural overview, because it concerns the 'experience of living'. Paci's approach is defined as 'positive existentialism',<sup>30</sup> that also incorporates elements taken from the relationalism of Alfred North Whitehead and John Dewey, as well as Husserlian phenomenology. Its assumptions consist in three main recognitions: the impossibility of denying the dominance of technology in the contemporary age, the naturalistic accentuation of existential analysis and the refusal to take refuge in the spiritual interiority, not assuming the antithesis spirit-body as valid.

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28 Leonardo Ricci, *Anonimo del XX Secolo* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1965). Unfortunately it has never been republished or reprinted to date.

29 Enzo Paci, "L'architettura e il mondo della vita," *Casabella-Continuità*, no. 217 (November-December 1957), 53-55.

30 The reference to the thought of Nicola Abbagnano is implicit: see *La struttura dell'esistenza*, (Turin: Paravia, 1939); *Esistenzialismo positivo* (Turin: Taylor, 1948); *Introduzione all'esistenzialismo* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1972). Paci's existentialism is influenced by Banfi's critical rationalism, and not by the tendencies of nihilism, which he harshly criticizes.



Paci replaces the centrality of the concept of 'existence' with that of 'relationality of experience'. If existence is finite, bounded by birth and death, if it is a moment of temporality, unstoppable and irreversible, if it is a present occasion, in one word it is an 'event'. Thus the event occurs as actuality in a process, as it is always in relation with other events in a constant state of fluctuation.

No event is self-sufficient: no event is a substance per se. The insubstantiality of the event implies the principle of universal interrelation between events. Thus, the possibility of being consists in transcending always towards someone or towards something: every being is made up of reciprocal relationships with other beings, these relationships compose the web of reality and human world. This web is dynamic and its characteristic is 'temporality': there is no experience without different spatial and temporal situations, just defined by the vibrant shape of their relational position in space and time. Relationships are not shapeless precisely because they are time-based: things are conditioned by the past process, of which the effects remain, and by the possibilities of development in future. Hence, the resolution of things in 'relational fields' gives rise to forms, open and always in mutation because they are determined by the process that constituted them and that continues to evolve, according to the developments chosen in the sphere of possibility. As regards to human beings, those 'relational fields' adjust according to their behavior, their projects, their results.

Particularly relevant for our discourse is this quote from an article published in *Casabella-Continuità* in 1956:

The fundamental structure of reality is considered as a process and a relationship. The process is, concretely, spatiotemporal and, as such, it is irreversibility, entropy, consumption that requires work, a need that demands satisfaction and openness to new relationships [...] therefore proceeding over time also means expanding into larger and more organic spatial structures: time, space, consumption and work are inseparable [...]. Architecture is both an economic and social reality that responds to concrete needs and an expression of new relationships and new forms. In the process, the forms are relatively permanent and emergent. Permanence is the *firmitas*, the duration of a building over time according to certain structures and a specific and relative balance; emergence is renewal, an openness to the future and new possibility.<sup>31</sup>

In these lines, one can find the core of a discourse on architecture that includes 'life' in the process of 'permanence' and 'emergence' of forms. The plot of life is consumed and regenerated, in a series of continuous changes which tie together the past and the future. This evolution of forms has the trend of a rhythm, "the enigma of a repetition that cannot reiterate itself and that seeks its own persistence in the future, beyond itself", a rhythm in which

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31 Enzo Paci, "Problematica dell'architettura contemporanea," *Casabella-Continuità*, no. 209 (January-February 1956), republished in "Enzo Paci, architettura e filosofia," *Aut aut*, no. 333 (January-March 2007), 16.

“the past that cannot return always echoes itself in a new way, therefore proceeding towards the future.”<sup>32</sup>

Of course, architectural forms are defined as ‘relational fields’ evolving in the flow of time not in a literal sense, as if architecture were to be transformed into an evolutionary metaphor, but in a substantive way, as a rhythmic relaunch of new possibilities of life that open up from past ones and unfold to future ones. Also, those ‘relational fields’ affect the real ‘case by case’, because the same notion of a field implies a weaving of cross-references with the forces at play in architecture, a sort of ‘game’ whose rules change at the same time as it is played.

In this sense, Paci’s thinking is entirely in line with Rogers’s: “it is impossible to establish any casuistry that would fatally reduce our operations within the sphere of an abstract typology. The formulation of a doctrine on the principle of the case by case is by no means agnostic but is rather the only guarantee of a constructive judgment, that can serve as a correction and guide against the errors or excesses of individuals.”<sup>33</sup>

At this point, it is evident that Paci’s interpretation not only enables the investigation of such concepts as form, relationship, possibility in architecture, but also addresses another fundamental question, namely that of freedom and the resulting uncertainty. Because if the openness of possibility is a gasp of freedom, we have no a priori guarantee of successful outcomes for our free choices. The existential condition is expressed in all its risk and in its hope. In his quest the architect, as ‘creator of forms’ in the incessant flow of life, must try to respond to new and different conditions and relationship every time, pursuing “the most intimate reasons for his own freedom and his responsibility.”<sup>34</sup> Also in this case, one cannot fail to notice how much the feeling of this freedom and the awareness of this responsibility are vivid in Ricci’s thought: “Think what a responsibility! In the everyday world, if I steal a thousand lire from no matter whom, the cops can get after me and lock me up. For a thousand lire. But as an architect, I can build an ugly house, in which people live miserably like rats, yet the police cannot arrest me. This means that I may steal the possibility of existing without being condemned.”<sup>35</sup> And again: “The way of constant doubting is painful, often made of renounces, of isolation, of that apparent unfinishedness (which however) leads to a healthy and honest assessment of things even while risking personal failure.”<sup>36</sup>

It is an almost unachievable task, not making a mistake in this process of becoming, putting oneself at the disposal and tuned, going-between different existential conditions each time. It is an overwhelming undertaking, not missing

32 Enzo Paci, “Il significato dell’irreversibile,” *Aut aut*, no. 1 (1951), 12.

33 Ernesto Nathan Rogers, *Esperienza dell’Architettura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1958).

34 Enzo Paci, “Umanesimo e tecnica,” *Aut aut*, no. 2 (1951), 150.

35 Ricci, *Anonymous*, 11.

36 Leonardo Ricci, “Michelucci attraverso un suo lavoro,” *Architetti*, no. 18-19 (1953), 13-18.

the step in this 'relational field' which is architecture: on the one hand the relationships that occur in the field prefigure the architectural form, as the outcome of the life that takes place within it. But the architectural project in turn should relaunch, as it preorders the event, as it prepares the life it generates and from which it is generated, in a continuous process of modification. If the relationships in the field prefigure the architectural forms, the architectural project in turn re-establishes a new field of possible relationships.

Ultimately, the architectural work 'configures' the life that takes place inside it, and life 'prefigures' the architectural work. And if from a historical point of view it is perhaps possible to establish a temporal precedence between the two moments of configuring/prefiguring, from a supra-historic point of view the two moments are contemporary, instantaneous, coincident. Because the architect not only designs a space [*Raumgestaltung*] in which life will take place, but also a time [*Zeitgestaltung*] during which life will take place. Venturing through successive configurations/prefigurations, we can imagine accessing the original condition, in which the individual thinks/dwells at the same time.

This is not about a nostalgic return to a past that is now all too obviously impractical, and not even an oblivion of the present and of its complexity. There is no pretense of being able to reverse the course of things, if anything, there is the will to support and revive their development.

## Right on Cue

Ricci intended design as a constant inquiry on other values than those expressed, or imposed, by the society in which he lived, trying to favor new spatial, functional, existential relationships. It is the contrast considered by his friend and colleague Umberto Eco between the meaning of architecture as 'rhetoric', as a codification that does not establish generative possibilities but rather established patterns, and the feeling that architecture is something more:

Architecture seems to show itself as a persuasive and undoubtedly consolatory message that possess at the same time heuristic and inventive aspects. It starts from the premises of the society in which it lives to submit it to critique, and every true work of architecture brings something new not only when is a good living machine or it connotes an ideology of living, but when it critiques, with is bare subsisting, the ways of living and the ideologies of living that preceded it.<sup>37</sup>

Acts and existential conditions must be re-examined in every project to understand the fundamental needs and give up the conventional and superimposed ones. The way of relentlessly questioning about human condition, brings Ricci to establish a constant dialogue between ethics and esthetics: the aesthetic demand has evidently to do with the configuration of the architectural form,

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37 Umberto Eco, *La struttura assente* (Milan: Bompiani, 1968), 229.

while the ethical demand is the continuous impetus towards the needs of those who will have to live in the spaces which that form will pre-order. Undoubtedly in Ricci's writings the ethical demand prevails over the aesthetic one, the needs of life overcome the formal choices.<sup>38</sup> He writes in plain terms in his *Anonymous (20<sup>th</sup> Century)* that "The shape is a consequence of the potential for vitality inherent within the object that is about to be born" and he asks: "What sense is there in aesthetic when you set it face with ethics or with magic, let alone with the why of existence?"<sup>39</sup>

Orazio Carpenzano, reasoning about Ricci's work, focuses on one central issue:

In rethinking architecture as a *living system*, the project can and must interpret space as a field that is, at the same time, relational and co-evolutionary: something that is generated, transformed, and dissolved, and that embraces and measures new impulses. Nothing unique and stable, but a continuous interaction between the individual, his community, and his environment, in which reciprocal *perturbations* induce changes in the balance and therefore modify what is allowed and foreseen by the free relationship of the parties in game.<sup>40</sup>

For some time now, and for countless reasons that we do not have the possibility to deal with in this essay, we have been debating the need for a re-foundation of the architectural discipline, and we are looking for new directions that tackle the inflated and sometimes misunderstood theme of sustainability. But should these directions necessarily be 'new'? Can't we find traces of them in our past, and why not, in paths already followed by other architects before, certainly not to imitate their results but to convey to our present their demands that still seem relevant nowadays? Thus, more than the search for new directions, another theme should be central: go back to found the architectural research on supra-historic constants and on the analysis of the basic and authentic necessities of our contemporary society, by examining afresh existential acts in our way of living. In this sense, we could even conceive "the definitive disappearance of architecture as a specialized discipline, even more, of architecture as an activity separate from the ordinary and everyday life of everyone."<sup>41</sup>

In his *Foreword* to my monograph about Ricci's work, Anthony Vidler claims that his message combine to resonate with our present concerns, and that it is impelling "his reinstatement as a figure neither too early nor too late, but *timely*, precisely in this time of environmental and social urgency."<sup>42</sup>

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38 One could add to this consideration the analysis of how much this ethical intent actually reflects in his creations, or how much the component of aesthetic choices prevails, but it is not possible to further expand the se themes in this essay.

39 Ricci, *Anonymous*, 100.

40 Orazio Carpenzano, *Afterword*, in Maria Clara Ghia, *Architecture as a living act. Leonardo Ricci* (San Francisco: Oro Editions, 2022), 284-285.

41 Leoni, *Il tema dell'Anonimo*, 23.

42 Anthony Vidler, *Foreword*, in Ghia, *Architecture as a living act*, 10.

Turning the gaze back to the essential, we could re-evaluate the life needs that are actually fundamental in the present moment, which are so different even from the pre-pandemic ones. Learning again to think 'case by case', we could prevent repeating to the bitter end the same models that prove often-times inappropriate and immediately obsolete. If 'avoid wasting' must be one of the goals of current research, if not the essential, why not start again from the consideration of our simple acts of life and focus not only on the 'material waste' but also on the 'existential one', that Ricci himself called 'the waste of life', as a squandering that architecture can produce if it does not correspond to the actual needs of users?

Thus one can arrive at reasoning about the principles (*arché*) of architecture, the specific demands of living on Earth, listening to what the essence of the human being, always and still today, asks of architecture as an authentic and primary need, to conceive architectural design as a process that in turn 'needs the human being', without declaring abstract autonomies. In this sense, architecture demonstrates its intrinsically political nature.

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