



VISUAL

# Architecture of Photography

Roberto Collovà

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## BIOGRAPHY

Roberto Collovà, architect and photographer lives in Palermo. He has taught Architectural Design at the Faculty of Architecture in Palermo, at the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio from 2001 to 2006, and at architecture schools in various European cities. He founded the Randazzo-focus Photography Gallery in Palermo ('87/'89), which has held twenty-two exhibitions and published several photography books. He won the IN-ARCH Award for Design 1991 and Gubbio Prize 1996 for architecture in historic centres, and was also a finalist for the Mies van der Rohe Award 1990 and the Gold Medal for Italian Architecture 2003. he was a commissioner... in the Jury for the Mies van Der Rohe Award 2005, Advisor for the BSI Swiss Architectural Award 2008 and the Young Architects Program MAXXI-MoMa PS 2011/2015.

His projects and writings are published in various Italian and European books and magazines.

His photographs are published in several Italian and foreign architecture magazines.

Books include: S. Braida Santamaura, *Palermo Viva. Monumenti e Opere d'Arte da Salvare*, (Palermo: Rotary Club 1972); *Viaggio a Palermo* (Palermo: Randazzo-focus, 1987); *In Prospective N PROSPECTIVE*, vol. collet. (Reggio Emilia: Comune Reggio Emilia, 1990); *Alimena*, (Palermo: Comune Alimena, 1995); R. Collovà, *Giardino di giardini. Azioni sulla costa sud*, 2018 (Palermo: PalermoManifesta, 2018).



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After finishing my architectural studies, my disaffection was such that I immediately sold the drawing board.

I had not been given what I expected, precisely with regard to architecture. My restlessness made me imagine other ways. My interest in photography, which had first started as a support for architectural studies, had soon expanded and had moved out of the merely instrumental sphere. I had bought a Yashica 6x6 – a Japanese copy of the famous Rolleiflex – now hidden so well in the studio, as an anti-theft device, that I could no longer find it.

I had taken my first photos before I was eighteen when the prize of a school competition had given me a Kodak Brownie 6x6 cassette. Somewhere, here on the walls of the studio, there must be a small print from '62, taken with that little plastic box, which already testifies to the catastrophic transformation taking place along Via Notarbartolo in Palermo, the street I used to walk down every morning on my way to high school. Along the beautiful street were lined villas and mansions of some interest that I saw disappearing one by one. Perhaps attention to architecture and how to look at it was beginning to manifest itself that way! The enthusiasm for architecture, on the other hand, had been formed in my senior year of high school by attending the U.S.I.S., the American Library<sup>1</sup>; it was there that I would find books by contemporary architects, Wright, Neutra, Sullivan and the others. An encounter that had made me

adjust my focus; my first idea was to be an engineer but the readings and figures in contemporary architecture had fueled this broadening of interests, reducing engineering curiosity and opening the door to a more humanistic view of construction. But, as I said, after the disappointment of the University where no one had known nor could answer, after '68, the discipline-political engagement question, the question architecture or photography had remained on the table for several years as a possible exit, another passion that was being fed by other inputs and encounters.

Over time, a balance has been established between two paths that I have long experienced as alternatives and that have, I would say for specific reasons, two different speeds.



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<sup>1</sup> U.S.I.S. (United States Information Service). U.S. opens in Palermo one of the first American Libraries established in Italy since 1945.



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You know better than I do that architecture has really slow times, especially in Italy, and training to practice two different speeds of work was extraordinary for my training. Later on I discovered this double speed within the practices of architecture itself.

Photography is immediate, what you make you can process almost immediately, everything is in your hands, and you are alone in governing what you produce, just like a painter or a writer. In architecture you set in motion a complex process in which so many others are involved, almost like in film.

The theme of two speeds then I found it in many different experiences.

For example, in the work of *Malagueira*<sup>2</sup> whose book I am closing; for me, as a witness to Siza's work, time was a central issue. Malagueira's construction begins to be concretely visible but also to show itself as a stable process between 1977 and 1978 because there were many doubts that it could proceed unhindered. In the same years, from 1980 onward, Siza made other interventions with some speed, such as the Berlin<sup>3</sup> and The Hague<sup>4</sup> projects, works that had quite different rhythms, both because they were carried out in different production contexts and because of the different nature of the processes under way and their original motivations. Malagueira is a complex process that is not only about architecture, – it almost always is so – with its physiological slow times, but much more because it stems from the Carnation Revolution of 1974 and the subversion of a project that was already underway. The first project begins by using the repertoire of M.M., low houses, medium houses, high houses, which is decommissioned in progress due to the clever intuition of an architect working at the municipality, the author of the project. He understands that the subject of the SAAL Brigades<sup>5</sup> intervention at *Malagueira* is a complex issue, as well as a great opportunity, and that to conceive and govern it, it takes a sensitive mind which has a wide view; so he omits himself, proposing Siza as architect. The process is reversed and a very long journey in time begins, coinciding with a fairly long period of Siza's life. Also of mine, since my last trip to Portugal, photographing *Malagueira*, was a few months ago, while my first was in 1982.

I digressed a bit to say that the elaboration of the photography-architecture question involves common planes, similarities involving observing, looking, selecting figures, producing landscapes, the significance of details, bringing to light what others do not see, but also many differences.

Photography at first is a tool for me, but after a while, you realize that a medium cannot be just a medium, it becomes so many other things, a real practice of thinking, to see, to observe and also to witness, to create memories.

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<sup>2</sup> Álvaro Siza's *Quinta de Malagueira* neighborhood in Évora is one of the most important new construction projects promoted by the S.A.A.L. Brigades during and after the 1974 Revolution.

<sup>3</sup> Siza realizes the three projects, *Fraenkelufer*, *Kottbusserstrasse* and *Schlesisches Tor*, on one block in the Kreuzberg district.

<sup>4</sup> Schilderswijk *social housing neighborhood*.

<sup>5</sup> The S.A.A.L. Brigades (*Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local*) are Revolution intervention groups formed by workers, students, architects and other citizens to manage popular participation in construction interventions.

It still generates language.

And one thing is certain for me, you can't photograph what you don't know, you have to be inside an issue, you have to appropriate a place, an issue, an event, you have to enter into it in sympathy, literally. Not to be in this pathos, in this knowledge, is a form of blindness, and you cannot resort to ideological visions that you can then translate into photographic images, without incurring the production of a parallel, inevitably formalistic language.

There was one thing that always happened to me while I was doing a photography assignment or I had given myself a theme to develop – it opened up space for a kind of parallel, indirectly associative practice: I would take pictures sideways and these often, I found out later, were interesting and meaningful for other reasons, they were freer and lighter. It also happens to me when I write, but maybe it happens to everybody, I get thoughts, ideas, figures, that have nothing to do with what I'm writing about. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, I happened to work for magazines such as *Vogue casa*, *Ville e Giardini*, *Interni*, almost as an exercise, and later on, differently for *Lotus international* and other qualified magazines. During these engagements, I almost always found myself photographing something else as well.

In '82 I spent more than a month in Portugal photographing practically all the works of Siza and several other architects of the "Portuguese school," Távora, Soutinho, etc. At the end of the year, a substantial exhibition on Portugal came out of my work on the side.

In '80, the adventure of Portuguese architecture began, connected, in terms of meetings and relations, to the affair of the *Belice Laboratories*<sup>6</sup> in which I was, for my group-in my case Siza's – the architect on the spot, the one who supported him. The Belice earthquake produced a lot of paradoxes that are still there, the cities somehow multiplied, the shacks, the old city, the new cities ... the three cities, in some cases merged, in others remained separate.

I was working, as it were, keeping two levels of observation, one tending to the project – there was not always a client but it was as if there was – the other, one might say, somewhat rambling; in reality it was a secondary observation, an attention that could be created precisely because there was the circumstance of the first. So at the end of this experience I traveled for three months to Belice to prepare photographs for the 16th Milan Triennale in '81 invited along with Mimmo Jodice and Maria Mulas who had worked on the same theme. I had photographed the wounded architecture and the country, like anything else, with a reportage attitude.

The concepts and situations I mentioned, discovered also, and perhaps, earlier with photography than with architecture, are partly transferable to it.

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<sup>6</sup> The *Belice Laboratories* were a workshop held throughout August 1980 in Gibellina. Organized by a group of professors from the Faculty of Architecture in Palermo (Collovà, La Rocca, Aprile, Bisconti, Castagnetti) with the mayors of nine Belice municipalities, the workshop elaborated eighteen specific themes of the post-earthquake and early reconstruction, proposing them to working groups directed by invited architects: U. Riva, Á. Siza, G. Pirrone, F. Venezia, F. Purini, L. Termes, B. Minardi, O.M. Ungers, P. Nicolini.



I generally don't think of an architectural project by imagining an object, as I often see so many architects do, who start with an idea, and then engage in deductively implementing it, doing the details and all. I have never been able to think in this way. Maybe because of my own difficulties or limitations. I wasn't able to imagine from scratch, I didn't know where to start, and, on the other hand, nobody had taught me that in school.

I began to understand these things only when I did my undergraduate degree, abandoning the idea of doing an architectural project and facing an experience with Vittorio Gregotti, who proposed, to me and a fellow student, a thesis in industrial design. A discipline that was not yet being taught in our faculty. I was happy to leave the field of architecture, about which no one had taught me much, and this now, it seemed like a free field, it was like starting from scratch, like being reborn and entering a laboratory of practices for which I had curiosity but knew nothing about. I would have done it with photography but at that time there was no possibility. In about three months, I must have read and studied about sixty books and journals that related to industrial design, and so I worked on a thesis that at first was supposed to be theoretical but also had to have an application aspect. On the way we changed the program. The thesis was only theoretical, the application aspect manifested itself with an exhibition, a kind of repertoire of D.I. In truth it was a form of initiation, a first approach; and it was not by accident, everything also happened to support a teaching project, which was later realized with the establishment of the Chair of Industrial Design at the Faculty of Architecture. Our graduation opened a new path. We had been given a prize that the Compasso d'Oro reserved for graduation theses.

In architecture work, as in photography, there are always elements and initial conditions that cannot be questioned. Architecture is almost always arrived at through precise, though often thematically unfounded, assignments, but – good thing they are there –. Even if you take them as elements of security, everything else you have to do yourself, including questioning them. In the architecture of the nineteenth century, especially in the design of the city, those who drew it had at their side like a neat scansion from which to take parts, complex or more elementary pieces, that had a high level of certainty because they had already been rehearsed in the city—a relatively simple job, when compared to the contemporary condition. An architect, even a non-brilliant one, hardly ran the risk of getting urban syntax wrong and also had many comforts of language. He worked in a world of examples,





the syntax of which was known to everyone. It is clear that we are no longer in this condition, and therefore we have an obligation to be smarter, more observant, more humble, we have to identify the problem but also be able to design it, something that has nothing to do with the inheritance, let's say *compositional* – which continues to persist among other things in schools of architecture and in the profession – that is, with putting things together that form volumes and spaces. I think we should instead put together issues, questions, suppositions, hypotheses, to make our associations of ideas flow within this unsaturated “environment.”

For these reasons, for me now, working with photography or architecture, in a sense, from a method point of view, is not so different.

It's clear that as you're making one or a set of photographs, you have different conditions to respond to, elements that are of this discipline, of this craft, but you know that your most important attitude is to include or exclude. Maybe in architecture you don't have to do the same thing? If I try to design a transformation of a piece of a city, first of all I redesign things, almost instinctively, of them I know in fact that neither I nor others will question them anymore, therefore they will remain.

Here, the selective specificity of photography helped me decipher this.

Then there is the formative aspect of meetings, the first with Gregotti, then the long relationship with Pierluigi Nicolini, with joint courses and *Lotus* magazine, and finally the meeting with Álvaro, with a long collaboration as well as a true friendship. There are many other encounters, with photographers for example: my old friend Fausto Giaccone to whom I managed to have the beautiful book

*Una storia portoghese* (A Portuguese Story) made from the reportage made in '75 on the occupation of land in Alentejo, when in 87-89 I was in charge of the Randazzo-Focus Gallery in Palermo. Giovanni Chiaramonte whom I invited to Architecture for several years to teach Photography courses. Ivo Saglietti, a great friend, sensitive and committed photojournalist.

The most important lesson came from all these experiences and meetings together, when I learned to understand that things are already there and that your job is to try to find them among others and put them together, when you become aware that ours is an ongoing work of inclusion and exclusion.

Photography makes you understand this because, precisely the things are there, ready to become another unpredictable, willing to become your landscape, because you have to decide what, how and when.

I can say that the practice of photography has become increasingly refined if dense with contradictions.

It has retained a residue of the initial uncertainty in me, which has become vital because of the doubt that continues to work over time as a critical assistant; of this I am quite happy.

Speaking now about Távora, I have never worked on his works with a project, although I have photographed some of the most important ones. The opposite of what I did with Siza and also with Souto de Moura and other architects. For example, regarding Gehry I did an accomplished work on the *Goldstein Siedlung* in Frankfurt on which I also wrote an essay for *Lotus*, the same with Estevan Bonell on the *Badalona Sports Hall* for *Casabella*. With this kind of work another plane opened up for me, one of great interest. The photographs began to become the text, the figure text, of another written text, of a critical text. These are not illustrations but two interrelated narratives. It happened then many other times, it is a work that I really enjoy and it continues to be an active practice.

As I said, on Távora, I have never done work that had a lens; yet, I have photographed the *Quinta da Conceição* in Matosinhos, the *Library and Square* in Aveiro, the *School* in Vila Nova de Gaia, the *Market* in Vila da Feira, and even the *Plan of Guimarães*.

In 1982, in Porto to photograph the work completed by Siza, the *Quinta da Conceição* in Matosinhos I see it as a repertory park. A refined place of sophisticated arrangements, where one encounters a kind of intentional archaeology,





where you understand that there is a certain arbitrariness in the arrangement of the fragments and all the delicacy of the reconstructive action of a possible memory, a bit like Grassi's *Sagunto Theater*. Nothing or little is philological; it is rather an analogical process. While the Fifth is a popular park.

The sequential photos, which in the book on *Malagueira* became a mode for me, here are done almost unconsciously.

It is the insistence on an evolving situation that produces scenes, it is also the expectation that something will happen.

To the Bressonian myth of the fleeting moment ... I've never believed so much, I believe in situations, rather, that things keep happening in a place, and that there are constraints, something like what Tàvora calls *circumstances*. Clearly something particularly significant happens sooner or later, however, maybe something even more significant will happen in a while. That's why I don't believe much in the fleeting moment, although I know photographs that are miraculous, beautiful and unrepeatable.

I believe to one who stands there, senses that that is a place where theater, the theater of the city, is staged, where things and actions can take meaningful forms. So these sequences were born in a magical place, evocative of many things of the past, the evocation of a Lion's Gate, where a gateway is to pass from one world to another.

The *Tennis Pavilion* I photographed that was like in a thicket, the opposite of what it looks like in some photos, a modern, clean building; it has features I want to talk about.

The characteristic feature of the architecture of this *Pavilion* is the permanent discontinuity between its parts and elements. It is all solutions of continuity, all transition from one thing to another, there is no continuous envelope, there are juxtaposed pieces.



This is also characteristic of Umberto Riva's architecture, which detaches everything, which always finds a way to build the hinge between the parts.

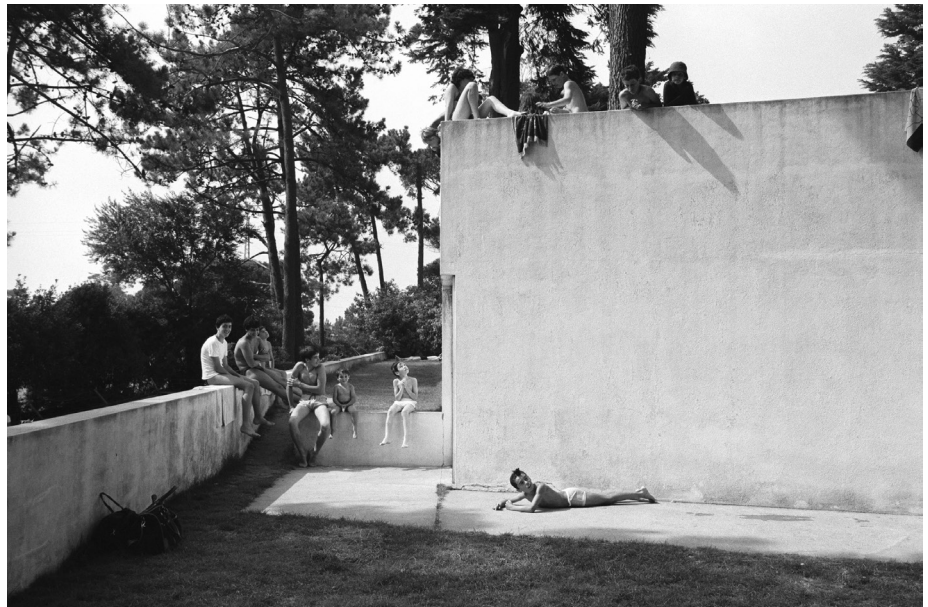
A picture like this (photograph 5) why did I take it? It reminds me of certain sketches by Le Corbusier where there is this big dimension that comes over you and where men are put there to measure space. While others I put them together because for me they are illustrations.

This one with the hand (photograph 7) is a bit of a game because the hand is real, not marble; it's almost random, I wanted to leave it because it creates a bit of a creepy suggestion, of archaeology reconstructed in a semi-arbitrary way, I guess.

As you know Távora was working on the design of a swimming pool for the highest part of the *Quinta de Conceição* but, when he embarked on the famous Gulbenkian trip, he left the design of the project to the *young man of study* (Siza). He really had to trust him! What remains and what happens again? There remains the situation. There is the hill with the slope of the flanks, the two overlooks, then the rise. Siza on one side continues to work on the construction of this sort of bastion of which the pool is the last level. I have chosen some of these photos (photograph 6) precisely to tell the story of the continuity that arises gently downstream with the pools at different levels, then the different paths to the terraces, and sometimes the stair and ramp systems that flank each other and are sometimes staggered. Gradually, we arrive at certain points wilder than the care of the older part in the valley, referring more to the pre-existences, while, at the top the buildings are getting harder because of the larger volumes and a bit “*casa portuguesa*” for the inhabited parts.

Here (photographs 2 and 3) a repertoire of somewhat domestic and urban situations opens up at the same time, in the sense that in the city we look at each other from one balcony to another, we cross the street, – it is interesting to me and has a strong relation to the question of photography and architecture – that is,

the question of relationships, at what level of proximity we move, how we recognize each other, how we measure each other. Here, for example, (photograph 4) there is a complex situation, resolved with a sequence. In the foreground there is a woman, a man and children, they are at the bottom, while, at the top, in the background, there are scenes of figures playing an important role, crossing a threshold, changing their light. And here (photograph



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8) we have arrived on the high part, where you can perceive the terraces with *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, then you see (photograph 9) some boys – again a sequence – moving in the background of a wall while others sit high up, like those in the last photograph (photograph 10) on the edge of a high wall. Here one can sense the entrenchment of the central part around the pool.

These photos were the beginnings of something that gradually became more interesting to me, in an instinctive sense because, even though they are physical constructions, you are chasing something. Something is still happening.