

# “Questioni di architettura e urbanistica”. Giancarlo De Carlo and the Unity of Disciplines

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*Urban Planning; Urban Form; Structure*

## **/Abstract**

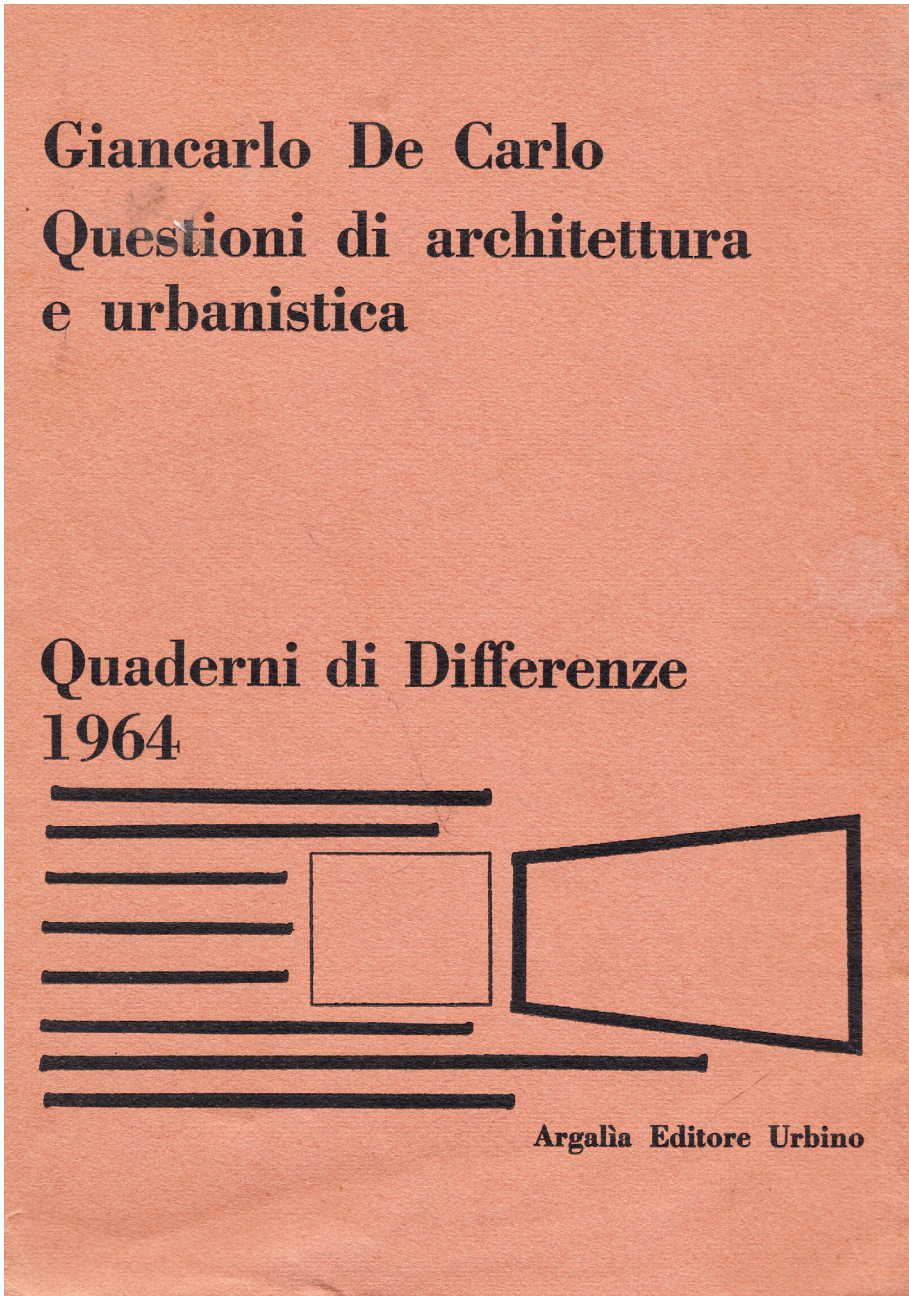
In 1964, when Giancarlo De Carlo published *Questioni di architettura e urbanistica*, was already a well-known figure in Italian architectural culture; a reputation due above all to the professional activity, on which he built his fame. There are at least two orders of factors for which it is necessary to propose today the reading of this book. The first originates from an ever-increasing interest in the “urban space” that inevitably falls on modern urban research, the second imposes a “re-reading” of a book that becomes fundamental in the biography of a character like De Carlo, especially in the years that decree it the success.

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*Questioni di architettura e urbanistica*<sup>1</sup> is a book that Giancarlo De Carlo started writing in the mid-1950s and was first published by Argalia, a small publishing house in Urbino, in 1964 for the Quaderni di differenze” [Notebooks of differences] series.

The volume is made up of three texts that De Carlo wrote at different times. The first one, *Fluidità delle interrelazioni urbane e rigidità dei piani di azzonamento* [Fluency in urban interrelations and inflexibility of zoning plans], is the reworked version of a conference talk that De Carlo prepared for a seminar study that Giulio De Luca organised for the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Naples on 4 June 1964, tackling “Problemi e prospettive dell’urbanistica

1 Giancarlo De Carlo, *Questioni di architettura e urbanistica* (Urbino: Argalia, 1964) (printed on 25 July 1964).

Fig. 1  
Cover of the first edition of  
*Questioni di architettura e  
urbanistica*, Argalia, Urbino  
1964

contemporanea”<sup>2</sup> [Problems and perspectives in contemporary urban planning]. The second text *Funzione della residenza nella Città contemporanea* [The function of residence in contemporary cities], which provides a connection with the other two texts, resulted from a lecture that De Carlo held at IUAV state university in Venice in 1963, within the framework of the “Elementi di Architettura e Rilievo dei Monumenti” [Elements of Architecture and Monument Survey] course from the first academic term.<sup>3</sup> The last text, *Memoria sui contenuti dell’architettura moderna* [Report on the contents of modern architecture] partially differs from the other two, which should be read “in parallel”, because of the issues here addressed. In this work, De Carlo, who presented the text in Otterlo in 1959 during the 11<sup>th</sup> Ciam – International Congress of Modern Architecture, better defines the details of a piece of research on “urban form and structure”, that is simply the design of contemporary cities according to the architect, a work that had been carried out with a systematic approach from this very moment, thus becoming the starting point for later research.

The highly likely reason why De Carlo had *Questioni di architettura e urbanistica* published in a few month’s time, thanks to the help provided by his friend Livio Sichirolo, a philosopher and councillor of the Municipal Council who moved to Urbino to teach Moral Philosophy, lies in the need to include a book written by the candidate in the application for a job as professor of Territorial and Urban Planning. In fact, some months after the volume was published Miro Allione wrote a letter stating “I’ve heard from Mazza about a collection of essays of yours that came out with the application for the teaching job. May I have that?”.<sup>4</sup>

Once the first edition sold out, the book was reprinted the following year, with two additional texts on the recently approved plan for Urbino<sup>5</sup> as an annex,<sup>6</sup> although De Carlo, who completely revised the speech he gave during the City Council meeting, was initially against its inclusion in the book. He claimed that “this text has got nothing to do with the three essays included in the booklet. In my opinion, if this text were added, it would radically change the tone and contents of the work. This is why my idea would be to have the second edition exactly as it used to be. If you don’t agree, let me know”.<sup>7</sup>

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2 Giancarlo De Carlo, typewritten report of a conference held at the University of Naples - Faculty of Architecture for the special Course managed by Professor Giulio De Luca: “Problemi e prospettive dell’urbanistica contemporanea”, 4 June 1964, Università Iuav di Venezia, Archivio Progetti, fondo Giancarlo De Carlo, De Carlo-scritti/031.

3 The text, which had never been published before, was presented as an original, and the occasion it was written for was not specified. The only piece of information that the author provided was the year: 1963. Thanks to the consultation of Egle Renata Trincanato’s archival collection at the Archivio Progetti [Project Archive] at IUAV, a handout of the “Caratteri” course that De Carlo held in the academic year 1962-1963 was finally found. It contained some reports on the topic of “dimensioning home”, plus this very writing, which was published without any changes even if it was used for a different purpose, Giancarlo De Carlo, typescript *Funzioni della residenza nella città contemporanea*, AP: Trinc. 2. Attività scientifica/2/140.

4 Miro Allione’s letter (Ilse) to Giancarlo De Carlo, Milan, 20 October 1964, AP: De Carlo-atti/018.

5 With reference to Urbino, please see Lorenzo Mingardi’s recent study, *Sono geloso di questa città. Giancarlo De Carlo e Urbino* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2018).

6 *Problemi del P.R.G. di Urbino (da un dibattito consigliare, dicembre 1963 – gennaio 1964. Registrazione) e Edilizia universitaria (Relazione al VIII Congresso nazionale dell’agere, tornata del 29 maggio 1964, Università, Urbino.*

7 “...non ha nulla a che fare con i tre saggi pubblicati nel libretto. Mi pare che il suo inserimento rappresenterebbe un salto di tono e di contenuto, perciò sarei dell’idea di fare la seconda edizione esattamente com’era. Se non sei d’accordo, avvertimi”, Giancarlo De Carlo’s letter to Livio Sichirolo, Milan, 16 April 1965, AP: De Carlo-atti/004.

Even though it was reprinted in its original form in 2008,<sup>8</sup> with a foreword by Paolo Ceccarelli, *Questioni di architettura e urbanistica* is still a fairly unknown book and rarely considered part of the background and the cultural issues it derives from and belongs to. Despite the laudable idea to make an extremely rare book available again, the reprinted edition is more of a missed opportunity than a chance to give new life to the work by an architect-writer in light of the important reflection on the theoretical foundations of architecture and urban planning that De Carlo endorsed in this book.

In fact, the short note written by Andrea Arcidiacono does not add anything to the introduction written by De Carlo in 1964, being simply a brief overview of topics already discussed in the book.

### The architecture of the text

*Questioni di architettura e urbanistica*, as it was conceived and designed, still bears the signs of an intellectual that contributed to the debate about architecture and urban planning at many levels at that time, using a wide range of tools: articles, interviews, academic papers. By reason of the way the book tackles the selected issues and references, it unveils an intrinsically polemic ground, where it reflects upon “issues” that the readers of that time and many who attended architecture schools – where the book was considered a “classic of urban planning”<sup>9</sup> for many years – deemed as emerging. As stressed by Francesco Samassa “This is exactly what Monica Perin attempts to do in a volume (*Urbanisti italiani*) published in 1992, edited by Patrizia Gabellini and Paola Di Biagi. Here De Carlo is numbered among the *Italian town-planners* and studies as such”.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that this book was considered a volume on urban planning, that the need for a complex knowledge as it was expressed by the architect from Genoa was eventually overshadowed and that he was included among the experts of a limited field of design all combined to create an unusual independent definition of “De Carlo the urban planner”, not so convincing per se, thus giving rise to a nemesis of “De Carlo the architect” “...simply because De Carlo makes no distinction between the work of architect and that of the urban planner.... It amounts to betraying one of the staples of De Carlo’s vision of architecture, his personal theoretical framework, a principle that, more than almost any other, has established De Carlo’s position in the field of architecture both in Italy and abroad”.<sup>11</sup> This procedure actually undervalues one of the bedrocks of De Carlo’s

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8 Giancarlo De Carlo, *Questioni di architettura e urbanistica* (Milan: Maggioli Editori, 2008).

9 Patrizia Gabellini, “Giancarlo De Carlo. Questioni di architettura e urbanistica, 1964. Una critica dei dogmi del movimento moderno,” in Paola Di Biagi and Ead. (eds.), *I classici dell’urbanistica moderna* (Rome: Donzelli, 2002), 253-267.

10 Francesco Samassa, “Sezioni trasversali di una fugura complessa,” in Id. (ed.), *Giancarlo De Carlo. Percorsi* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2004), 22.

11 *Ibidem*, p. 21.

theoretical view, namely the lack of distinction between architecture and urban planning.

*Questioni di architettura e urbanistica* did not represent the conclusion of a phase in De Carlo's studies and research, to the contrary it developed some interests and reflection that first came forth in the 1950s and would partly come to an end around 1968, the year when *Piramide rovesciata* [Upsidedown pyramid] was published – recently reprinted – and the 14<sup>th</sup> Triennale di Milano was held.<sup>12</sup>

The book was published while De Carlo was playing an important public role, engaged on several fronts such as the design of the Intermunicipal Plan of Milan, an urban planning project that was considered a real case in point at that time, and the finalisation of the Urbino city plan. The debate on urban planning was very lively at the time, still made vibrant by the Italian legislative reform (Sullo Reform, based on the attempt to take away the property of urban building land from the private sector in favour of the public sector), and especially focused on the need to grasp and manage the deep transformation that Italy was undergoing at that time. All of this pushed De Carlo to claim that "My architectural research has mainly dealt with urban planning for some years, since I am utterly convinced that just the scale and conditions that only this field might provide are essential to undertake...the technological, ethical and expressive developments that modern architecture is putting forward".<sup>13</sup>

Thanks to his many publications, the relevant role he played in some institutions and his experiences in terms of urban planning and design on a new scale, the so called *grande numero* [big number], the architect managed to make his views known on a number of occasions. Nevertheless, De Carlo never had the chance to express his reflections on architecture and urban planning in a comprehensive manner and arrange them in a systematic order as in this book.

*Questioni di architettura e urbanistica* covers a range of time spanning from 1959 to 1964, and the moments that each of the three titles tackles are crucial to fully comprehend the several fields of study and research that came to light back then. In this framework, 1964 was a particularly important year in the architect's professional life since he joined the public debate, endorsing a leading role around the idea of the city, which evolved rapidly at that time due to the fundamental research by the Istituto Lombardo per gli Studi Economici e Sociali (Ilse),<sup>14</sup> his work as a teacher of Urban and Territorial Planning at the University of Venice and his contribution to the "Struttura e forma urbana" [Urban structure and form] collection of which he was director, published by *il Saggiatore*.

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12 Giancarlo De Carlo, *La piramide rovesciata* (Bari: De Donato, 1968), see Id., *La piramide rovesciata. Architettura oltre il '68*, Filippo De Pieri ed. (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2018).

13 Id., "Il Piano Regolatore di Urbino" (interview), *Marche Nuove*, 3-4 (1959): 108.

14 Ilse was an institution that was funded by the Municipal Council of Milan and, to a lesser extent, by the Provincial Council and two banks deeply rooted in the Milanese territory. Its main aim was to carry out economic, sociological and urban planning studies in the Milan area.

The date De Carlo started writing his work becomes particularly relevant, underlined by the 7<sup>th</sup> INU conference entitled “Il volto della città”<sup>15</sup> [The face of the city] in Lecce, which opened the way to harsh criticism towards local governance models, especially the so-called garden cities. That very year other major events raising a great deal of interest in Italy also took place: the call for tenders for the design of the Cep neighbourhood in San Giuliano, Mestre,<sup>16</sup> for the renovation of its late 1950s architecture, and the publication of Giuseppe Samonà’s book *L’urbanistica e l’avvenire delle città negli stati europei*.<sup>17</sup> These events happened right when the city was becoming a topic that particularly interested De Carlo’s theoretical survey. This juncture between architecture and urban planning in Italy provided the background the book originated from.

### The publishing context

The size, structure and graphic design of the book demand some observations: a short-length book consisting of 99 pages, which would become 105 in its second edition. It was a pocket-size book with no images, tables, bibliography or, above all, notes, with a monochromatic cover. The book is short, consisting of three brief texts, which cannot be identified as essays, as the author claimed more than once, “I do not like the idea of writing an ‘essay’, and the word alone gives me the shivers. I do not even think I can write definitive things, and don’t think I want to either”.<sup>18</sup>

The graphic design of the “Quaderni di Differenze” series is undoubtedly interesting for being so out of the ordinary and immediately recognisable. How the book was actually drafted is a purely technical matter, mainly a Publisher’s task, with some details – whose analysis is omitted – agreed to with the author. However, since the book is an object of communication, the way it looks is an element to be taken into account in its general examination, since it is the first thing that readers notice about the book and may impress them. It also conveys hints that represent an essential part of the book itself.<sup>19</sup>

The volumes from the “Quaderni di Differenze” series all have the same covers, designed by Albe Steiner, a teacher at ISIA (Istituto Superiore per le Industrie Artistiche – Higher Institute for Artistic Industries), resulting from a set of linear measures dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century and located in the Town Hall of Urbino,

15 “VII Convegno dell’Inu «Il volto della Città», Lecce, 14-16 November 1959, the topic was the “Code of urban planning”.

16 Please see the long article to present “Concorso per un quartiere residenziale Cep in Venezia-Mestre, Barene san Giuliano,” *L’architettura. Cronache e storia*, 57 (July 1960):168-182; F. Tentori, “Un piano urbanistico per Mestre,” *Il Contemporaneo*, 27-28 (1960): 124-137; Manfredo Tafuri, *Ludovico Quaroni e lo sviluppo dell’architettura moderna in Italia* (Milan: Comunità, 1964), 158.

17 Giuseppe Samonà, *L’urbanistica e l’avvenire delle città negli stati europei* (Bari: Laterza, 1959). Ludovico Quaroni reviewed Samonà’s book in *Casabella-continuità* in 1960 and he called it the “first Italian book on urban planning”, in Ludovico Quaroni, “L’avvenire della città”, *Casabella-continuità*, 236 (1960): 19.

18 “Non mi piace l’idea di scrivere un ‘saggio’ e già la parola mi mette inquietudine. Non credo neanche di essere capace di dire cose definitive, né penso che lo vorrei fare”, in Giancarlo De Carlo, “Viaggi attraverso il mondo 3: L’urbanistica”, interview by Francesco Karrer, *Mondoperaio*, 11 (1987): 104-122.

19 Gérard Genette, *Soglie. Dintorni del testo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), in particular the chapter “Il paratesto editoriale”, pp. 17-36, [English translation, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997].

which were reworked in a stylised manner. The colour scheme of the front and back cover is characterised by colour continuity, the name of the series is placed in the centre, the author's name and the book title are on top, all with the same font, while the name of Publisher is on the bottom left.

The book's publishing background, which might be considered a niche, goes beyond the limited boundaries of the field involved. The presence of this book in the "Quaderni di Differenze" series of a small publishing house from Urbino goes against the tide, to say the least, in comparison with other contemporary architecture and urban planning publications. In fact, De Carlo availed himself of a publishing strategy that was perfectly in line with the will to attract privileged readers that might not be necessarily architects or urban planners,<sup>20</sup> since "architecture is way too important to be entrusted only to architects".<sup>21</sup> As a matter of fact, the Argalia publishing house had a strong connection with Urbino's cultural scene including Carlo Bo, chancellor of the University of Urbino, Livio Sichirollo himself and Albe Steiner, who designed the covers of the Ilse books for De Carlo.

"The title of the book is *Questioni di Architettura e Urbanistica*.<sup>22</sup> This is the blunt statement with which De Carlo opens (and closes) any discussions on the book title, whose preciseness and authoritative tone is perfectly consistent with his peculiar writing style, spontaneous, with no second thoughts and crossing out very few sentences. On the one hand, this attitude highlights extremely pristine thinking, but on the other it makes analysis of the writing process very hard.

### **Architecture versus urban planning**

The title immediately detects, defines and enhances the contents that one might expect to find in the book by stressing their inconclusive and uncertain nature, where "questions" are open to discussion by their own nature and the relation between architecture and urban planning makes clear one of the foundations of De Carlo's thinking: the unity of the two disciplines. As a consequence, De Carlo strongly denied their independence. "This distinction between architecture and urban planning is meaningless. It seems to me (but no one believes so) that there are three different practices covering the wide range that is unrealistically tackled by architecture and urban planning, mashed together. The first one is design, whose task is to design elements defining the physical space. The second one is architecture dealing with the design of the physical space (those structures and shapes by which human activities get organised

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20 A trend that was also confirmed when he started working on the "Struttura e forma urbana" series, in collaboration with Vittorio Sereni, for the publisher il Saggiatore.

21 Giancarlo De Carlo, speech at Apiaw Colloque d'Architecture (1969): "L'architecture est-elle trop importante pour être confiée aux architectes?" *Environnement*, 3, (1970): 55-60; Id., "Il pubblico dell'architettura," *Parametro*, 5: 4-13. [partially republished in English as "Architecture's Public", in Charles Jencks and Karl Kropf (ed.), *Theory and Manifestoes* (London: Academy Editions, 1997) and as "An Architecture of Participation", *Perspecta*, 17 (, 1980): 74-79]

22 "Il titolo della pubblicazione è 'Questioni di Architettura e Urbanistica'", Giancarlo De Carlo's letter to Livio Sichirollo, Milan, 1 July 1964, AP: De Carlo-atti/004.

and take shape in the physical space). This second practice makes use of some items from design and the information that the third practice develops – planning”.<sup>23</sup> Architecture and urban planning tend to coincide in the only inseparable form-structure issue of space.

De Carlo’s point of view regarding the highly debated architecture/urban planning dichotomy stresses the architect’s interest in topics and issues resulting from the major crisis that the ideology of the modern movement was experiencing by then as well as the bewilderment that the regular failures generated by rationalism triggered, not to forget declensions inspired by Adriano Olivetti’s community. Another major element to take into account in this context was the ongoing disciplinary practice generally embracing architecture, urban planning and planning.

A sentence from a De Carlo’s article that was published in 1961 presents all the elements that not only contributed to defining the title, but also the very topic of the book “A number of totally new issues is being raised and the way these issues are further elaborated might radically change the current state of architecture by upsetting its field of interests and establishing new cultural arrangements that are absolutely in contrast with the current ones. Now that architecture and urban planning have been integrated, the cycle of the architectural practice from Industrial Design to territorial planning basically represents a wide range of possibilities where each single activity sprouts from a common root”.<sup>24</sup>

The link between the various practices this “range” is made of does not imply the chance to create architecture by means of a single methodology, according to De Carlo. This recognition has some consequences on the work of architects. They are not required to choose a specialisation over another, but the option is between two different orientations for their own career path: architecture or urban planning. Whatever the choice, architects must always consider that the large scale they are going to operate on, whether designing objects or “urban structures”, has such a number of consequences for the final users and the design itself in terms of taste, the most immediate aspect, and cultural comprehension, a much more elaborate concept, that all the foundations of the idea of quality would be overturned.

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23 “In realtà questa distinzione tra architettura e urbanistica è senza senso. A me sembra (ma nessuno lo vuol credere) che ormai esistano tre attività distinte che coprono tutto il lungo arco oggi velleitariamente investito dall’architettura e dall’urbanistica confuse insieme. La prima è il design che si occupa della progettazione degli elementi che definiscono lo spazio fisico. La seconda è l’architettura che si occupa della progettazione dello spazio fisico (le strutture e le forme attraverso le quali le attività umane si organizzano e si materializzano nello spazio fisico); utilizza gli elementi definiti dal design e le informazioni messe a punto dalla terza attività. Che è la pianificazione (planning)”, Giancarlo De Carlo’s letter to Giorgio Pecorini (*L’Europeo* magazine, on a meeting at Circolo Cattaneo on 21 April 1966), New Haven, 17 April 1966, AP: De Carlo-atti/012.

24 “Si pongono numerose questioni del tutto nuove la cui elaborazione potrà mutare profondamente la situazione attuale dell’architettura sconvolgendo il suo campo di interessi e determinando schieramenti culturali del tutto diversi da quelli esistenti. Con l’avvenuta integrazione tra architettura e urbanistica, il cerchio dell’attività architettonica dall’Industrial Design alla pianificazione territoriale corrisponde a un ventaglio dove ogni attività particolare ha la stessa radice”, Giancarlo De Carlo, “Tre interviste per Milano, hanno risposto gli architetti Samonà, De Carlo e il collettivo di architettura”, *Superfici*, 4 (1961): 19.



## Conclusion

Despite the large number of books and publications by De Carlo, the “confusion” around such an important book is inexplicable. *Questioni di architettura e urbanistica* is surely relevant both for the personal and professional side of the author, therefore the confusion around it is even more inexplicable considering the many used and mostly abused references and words that are far better defined here than elsewhere, references and words that are mainly connected to an interpretation based on words-topics used as a ritual. This practice gives rise to convincing but puzzling interpretations, seeing as what lies “beyond De Carlo” is not explored at all.

On one the hand these writings finalised some research that De Carlo had started some years earlier, and on the other opened up to design practices that contributed to the building of cities from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 1970s.

The high number of topics dealt with clearly outlines the “issues” that stand “outside” those being raised, that actually place the book on a broader background consisting of other facts. Nevertheless, an initial reading must start “from the inside”, following an increasingly complex trend. A “vertical” reading is also required, where every title reveals itself by presenting reasoning that is organised in several steps: the territory, the place of urban structures and the real subject of urban planning, the city with its building artefacts [*manufatti* in the original version] where residences are the “urban structure par excellence”,<sup>25</sup> and eventually the questioning of those principles that have ruled and regulated the development and rise of contemporary cities until that time.

The pathway starts from urban planning to ultimately reach architecture, where the central writing provides a linkage. However, in contrast with their sequence in the book, the chronological order of the titles is reversed as is the path followed by the thoughts. A path that, as the author stated in the introduction, is deeply connected to his professional experience and aimed at clarifying the “reasons” for his dual nature as architect and urban planner.

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25 Please note that Aldo Rossi considered “manufatto” [artefact] as the “human item par excellence”, in Aldo Rossi, *L'architettura della città* (Padua: Marsilio, 1966). [English translation, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1984).