THE CITY AS A WHITE PAGE: THE ENCOUNTER OF TYPOGRAPHY AND URBAN SPACE IN ITALIAN LATE MODERNISM

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ABSTRACT

Between the late nineteen-sixties and the late eighties, after the seasons of radical design and modernist housing had somehow failed to keep faith to their promises, the field of Italian graphic design saw the attempt of many practitioners to test and apply ideas more immediately related to the social function of design with a very constructive, empirical approach. To some extent, this represented a novelty in the contemporary history of Italian design and that favoured balance of forces rather than direct opposition.

A central event in this context is the development of an urban form of typography, an approach to graphic and information design that intervened on the whole surface of the urban space. This paper will be looking at two examples of such interventions – Albe Steiner’s development of a coordinated information design system for the city of Urbino in 1968 and the work by AG Fronzoni for the city of Genoa a decade later – as well as the historical and theoretical framework in which they were developed.

These limited, practical interventions were structurally aimed at functioning as a mediation between institutions and community, with a focus on inclusion and on the local dimension. They were articulated as single projects rather than general theorisations and programmatic manifests. This paper subsequently argues that the experience of “urban typography” has to be framed in the contemporary European cultural milieu, which saw, on the one hand, a modernism appropriated by ideologies and corporations and, on the other, the logic of the grand, radical intervention revealing its utopian character. Urban typography, in other words, was an alternative to the polarisation between ideology and professionalisation. It offered to the graphic designers who embraced this concept an
alternative to ideological commitment and professional mannerism.

**MAIN TEXT**

In Italian society during the post-war period the public sector provided some space for the experimentation of new forms of design with a social emphasis (Tafuri, 1972; 1979).

Information design became as crucial and important as paved roads for navigation in the cities that grew in size and complexity.

A number of projects did nevertheless share similar socio-linguistic concerns and spatial strategies; they were aimed at the entire community, and their scope was horizontal and inclusive. By using the entire city as a canvas, politically and socially committed graphic designers managed to overcome the constraints that inherently limited the reach of post-war two-dimensional artifacts.

These limited projects were structurally aimed at functioning as a mediation between institutions and community with a focus on inclusion and on the local dimension. They were articulated as single interventions rather than general theorizations and programmatic manifestos. To some extent, this approach represented a novelty in the history of contemporary Italian design in that it pursued a balance of forces rather than direct opposition, as in the case of radical design.

We can call this approach “urban typography,” in that it is a general dispersion of graphic design over the whole surface of the urban space, with the designers breaking down information into constitutive units and rearranging them as typographic elements in the urban space, as on a white page. Rather than adding a further layer of commentary to the stratified text that constitutes the built environment, urban typography aimed at facilitating the navigation of the city, at providing the citizens with the visual tools to interact with its complexity. Graphic designers who worked on the urban space treated it in the same way typographers treat text when they set a page for print: emphasizing and highlighting certain elements to allow the reader to swiftly find relevant pieces of information and browse through the textual mass.

This paper looks at two examples of such interventions – Albe Steiner’s development of a coordinated information design system for the city of Urbino in 1968 and the work by AG Fronzoni for the city of Genoa a decade later – and at the historical and theoretical framework in which they were developed.

Albe Steiner and AG Fronzoni as graphic designers produced work characterized by very different aesthetic and formal values, but they both saw their design ingrained in the modernist tradition and were politically and socially committed.

Also, they had both been involved in the design of radical publications in the wake of the Second World War, Steiner designing *Il Politecnico* and Milano Sera and Fronzoni the less known, but
not less ambitious \textit{Punta} (Fig. 1).

\textit{Il Politecnico} (1945-1947) founded and directed by Elio Vittorini was a progressive but not organic political and cultural review, one of the most important amongst the journals published in the immediate post-war period in Italy. It was initially designed to be also a mural journal, affixed to the walls of the cities as a poster.

Although different \textit{Punta} was founded and directed by AG Fronzoni and published in Brescia in the Spring and Summer of 1947.

From a political perspective, Steiner and Fronzoni shared a concern with inclusion - and followed the Gramscian lines of cultural policy adopted by the Italian left, which enthralled to culture a crucial role in generating consensus. From this point of view, the \textit{Politecnico}, whose layout was designed by Steiner and Fronzoni’s lesser known \textit{Punta} can be looked at as parallel experiences.

These publications allowed them to develop a certain theatre-like approach to the arrangement of the elements within the frame, with the designer acting as a direction. They later experimented other scales of action curating the exhibition design for private manufacturers and department stores as Milan’s \textit{La Rinascente} (Steiner) and for museums and art galleries (Fronzoni).

Both designers increasingly expanded their sphere of action. Steiner designed a sign system for the Cortina Winter Olympics in 1956, while Fronzoni built a solid reputation working with museums and art galleries, as well as designing temporary spaces for public events.

Steiner’s corporate image project for the Urbino municipality in 1968 and Fronzoni’s work on the Art and City event program in Genoa in 1979, however, were unique in the Italian landscape in the subtly radical way they engaged the public. In Steiner’s case, the project was the product of an exceptional unity of intentions between the designer, his students and their client; in Fronzoni’s case, a common concern toward a radical rethinking of the exhibition media, shared by designer, artists and the client, the municipality.

\textbf{Urbino 1968: Grafica di Pubblica Utilità}

As early as 1966, in an article on “Cultural formats” published on the \textit{Parete} magazine, Steiner pointed out that the “form” of public art should not be designed up front but left open to incorporate not only a dialogue between objects (in this case, posters) and public, but also between the designer and the clients (Steiner 1966).

Albe Steiner’s concept of “Culture Format” was reminiscent of El Lissitzky’s 1923 visionary
manifesto, originally published on *Merz* 4 in which he claimed that the space of the book, as all designed space, had to be a direct emanation of the tensions and forces included within the content. Similarly, for Steiner, the “Culture Format” is the result of a synthesis that cannot come into being without culture and and maximum freedom of expression.

What Steiner initially labelled as “public art” was a form of design practice which came to be known as *grafica di pubblica utilità* after a wording that can be translated as both “graphic design as a public service” and “graphic design for the public benefit”.

This expression was used for the first time at the end of the nineteen-sixties by Albe Steiner to describe the project he worked on with a group of his students in the ancient university town of Urbino, on the Italian east coast, at whose Applied Art Institute he was at that time teaching (Steiner 1969). Therefore, the project was the result of an informed acquaintance with the urban space of Urbino. This included also an intense collaboration and exchange with the architect Giancarlo De Carlo, himself a great promoter of civil inclusion in his work, who had worked in 1964 on the master plan of Urbino. In 1967 Steiner had already designed the corporate identity for the Urbino University Colleges and the layout of De Carlo’s detailed book concerning the urban history of the town. De Carlo’s master plan for Urbino was perhaps a stimulus for Steiner towards a radical rewriting of the design school curriculum.

Albe Steiner’s project consisted in the creation of an integrated system for the communication between the local institutions and the public, that included a new city emblem, posters, street signage, urban orientation aids, and publications. The original wording used by Steiner “*grafica di pubblica utilità*” pointed at the necessity to substitute “the heraldic symbols of ownership with signage that is actually ‘useful to the public’”. One of the key terms in Steiner’s writings is the adjective “public,” which refers to the two legitimate clients of the project: public institutions and citizenship. On the one hand, local administrations, organisations and on the other, the users, the receivers of information. The other term, “utility,” underlines the ethical quality of the work, which is thus characterised as a basic service, as the provision of an essential good: information.

The project was presented in a “working exhibition and conference” on 24-25th May 1969, (Fig. 1) which Steiner presented as an ambitious program to realize a new signage on the entire urban landscape understood as a collective project of corporate identity (Steiner 1969).

The role Steiner and his students had to play was the one for which Umberto Eco in those years coined the expression “operative practice persuaders”(Eco 1972). Indeed, Steiner also launched in parallel a new course at the Urbino Applied Art Institute on “Sign system and graphic design for old town centers” (Fig. 2). It is useful to see the different kind of artifacts that were compulsory coursework: 1. From heraldic symbols to publicly useful signs; 2. Visual communication

Fig. 2. Albe Steiner. From heraldic symbols to publicly useful signs. Visual communication on transport. Sign systems for cultural heritage and for public service corporations.

Remarkably, Steiner and his students were working at the same time on the image for the 1968 Milan Triennale (T14), whose topic was “mass production” (il grande numero). Rather than the product of an ideological choice, in other words, the Urbino project seems to be the result of a methodological consideration, a bottom-up approach in which the context provides the designer with the raw material, as opposed to an imposition of the designer’s conceptual world on the environment.

Steiner’s approach consists in disassembling to rearrange. The elements already collected in the overall image of the city are taken apart and reorganized, and in the process they acquire new meanings. The method, nevertheless, is not an
adaptation, a post-modern use of elements already known to the user in a Pavlovian fashion, that is to inspire certain reactions. It is a sort of vegetative methods, with the basic elements distilled from the original unity and developed into new sign/meaning units. The letter “U”, for instance, which appears in most of the identity materials, is a concise version of the actual shape of the medieval city-state emblem, which very comfortably also doubles as initial of the city’s name. In Steiner’s project, however, the “U” logo is not empty filled up again with symbols and fragments, subsequently becoming again a contemporary heraldic shield (Fig. 3).

The identity of the Urbino municipality is treated as “divisible unity”: the original geometrical elements that make up the medieval symbol are disassembled and rearranged through a process that goes from a synthesis of the old heraldic identity to a new, wider public identity. The progress is from the identity of the municipality to the publication and the exhibition design.

These processes of distillation and recombination are painstakingly photographed and recorded by Steiner. Sketches, studies, dummies, everything on this project is collected in Steiner’s archive.

This is not only a forward-looking process, but also a very contemporary one. Indeed, the project reached its climax through 1969 exhibition/conference. In this occasion, the artifacts were not only collected and put on display in three sections: graphics, signage, publications (Fig. 4).

Most importantly, they were also arranged along a narrative path, which highlighted in its educational purpose the designer’s aim to render the sign system accessible, expandable and sustainable.

Fig. 3 “U” logo as a contemporary heraldic shield.
In 1979, Fronzoni’s Genoa project, called *Immagini per arte e città* (Images for Art and the City), stretched the *grafica di pubblica utilità* concept a bit further, because its purpose was to advertise a series of exhibitions, talks and events, aimed at bringing culture outside the institutional sphere, literally on the street, in to the urban space, and engage with the citizenship.

Differently from the Urbino project, however, *Arte e città* was not designed to be a long-standing, organic intervention on the urban layout. Culture was meant to become a forum – albeit temporary and exemplary – to which the individuals could take part, thus ultimately stimulating individual consciences, but also consolidating consensus around the new administration in particular, rather than the institutions in general. The program, that took place over two season in Genoa, included the organization and the promotion of a series of contemporary cultural events throughout the entire city.
The project was the result of a series of unique conditions, first of all the new left-wing local administration which ruled the city from 1978 (Guaraldi 1981). The new administration chose a museum as its headquarters, declaring through this foundational act its intention of bringing culture to the very core of its politics, to make it a channel for communication with the citizenship.

Fronzoni’s declared objective was to solve the problem of the “untidiness of the urban image.” Looking at the pictures of the city during the program (Fig. 5), Fronzoni’s intervention, with his trademark monochrome posters, appears as an attempt to lay out a grid that overlaps with the existing urban space, providing structure to it and smoothing the striated space of an old historical city centre. Genoa’s city centre, mostly organically grown and intensified during the seventeenth century, has been sometimes called a prototypical case of Italian abusivismo (with this term we refers to the post-war widespread practice of building without planning permission).

The project was a major attempt to create a series of coordinated, integrated communication artifacts, whose coherence was based on the dialectics between structural elements stay unaltered throughout the series (sizes, chromatic and formal values, Univers typeface) and others that continuously change (grid, compositional values). Interestingly, the grid is usually an element that stays unaltered throughout large projects to provide continuity. In the Genoa project, on the contrary, the grid fluidly changes from poster to poster and continuity is entrusted to other elements, as the typeface Univers, which is more readable than Futura when used in street signs and advertising. The posters that form the Arte e città series were used by Fronzoni as a manifesto on his idea of the graphic designer: a figure of mediation between some crude material (communications, information pieces) and the final user (Fig. 6-7). A professional whose main target is to actively design a path for everyone to an immaterial but extremely precious good: information. From this point of view, his brief was similar to Steiner’s as the latter approached with his students the Urbino project, a decade before.

Fig. 6. Posters for The urban sign: investigation on the old town of Venice, 1979 and Art and Education, 1979.
The typographic space of the Arte e città posters, as a result, is made smooth from striated, exactly as in the urban scale of the whole space of the city on which the project is applies.

Since the constraint is not the grid, but the formal values, the compositional language adopted by Fronzoni has to be always self-assured, firm, sharp. This tension is palpable in these posters, with elements often in contrast (arrows pointing in different directions, broken letters, segmented paragraphs of text), and expanding into the typographic space by way of this very antagonism of empty and full, centre and periphery, limited and unlimited.

The same poetics emerges even more clearly in the design of the exhibition displays. In this case, the elements that stay unaltered are the exhibition stands, while the content of the show itself is supported and interpreted, made legible through the apparent stillness of the stands. Fronzoni designed only three exhibition systems (Fig. 8-9-10), made of modular elements that provided for infinite arrangement and layout possibilities.

The rationale behind the design of all of the three
systems is the attempt to move as farther as possible away from the architectural framework, creating room for an exhibition space by effect of this gesture. This architectural behavior brings to mind another space, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, designed only three years earlier by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers with a similar aim to extract the exhibition space from any intrusion, be structural (service spaces of the building) or external (the historical urban texture).

This empty space invites the user to make use of it, and subsequently to develop their nature by experience. As a formal constituent is therefore very similar nature to distance between the message and the viewer that characterizes Fronzoni’s posters, which is a space for speculation and critical understanding.

Conclusion

After the end of the war both Steiner and Fronzoni had been engaged (albeit to different extents and with different degrees of success) in the ideation and design of progressive publications.

These forward-thinking, radical journals and publishing houses aimed at functioning as fora of discussion and hubs for the diffusion of culture and ideology within society at large. Their effect, however, was undermined by several constrains. First of all, the simple fact that a journal had to be purchased to be accessed and activate the ideas and opinions it carried. Other important limits were also literacy and geographical reach.

These projects of urban typography share one particular aspect, which is their virtual limitlessness. They were created by graphic designers and their basic elements were twodimensional artifacts, but nevertheless they were designed to unfold and function into the three-dimensional (or even poly-dimensional considering the temporary nature of the poster) space of the city.

Another crucial element is that authorship is softened or muted altogether: rather than superimposed, systems of signs are combined, enmeshed with the built environment until they become part of the urban fabric, as structural as the material. Finally, this experience has to be framed in the contemporary European cultural milieu which saw, the grand narrative of modernism losing its appeal. On the one hand, its aesthetics was being appropriated by ideologies and corporations. On the other hand, as we have seen, the logic of the grand, radical intervention had revealed its utopian character.

This kind of public, useful graphic design was a way out of this impasse. It was an alternative to the polarization between ideology and professionalization.

Indeed, ideological commitment after the season of radical design had reached a stage at which it basically offered only two strategic options: sabotage or resignation. The other end the spectrum was professional mannerism. Most graphic designers – as demonstrated by their keen support of the Charter of Graphic Design (Anceschi 1991) – a self-generated code of practice published in 1989 – saw with suspicion
the emphasis on creativity, the totemization of
the beautiful that had and still has largely
colonized all spheres of design in Italy, especially
product and interior.

While the modernist rigor truly
represented a limit to the Italian product design
system, which aimed at a niche public, its basic
and original infatuation with standardization as
inclusion was still valid for many graphic
designers. It was not a perceived as a limit to
innovation, but as an everlasting inspiration.
While mass production was antithetic to the
culture of niche design, of exclusive furniture
pieces, this constraint affected to a lesser extent
the work of those graphic designers who were
interested in producing visual materials aimed at
mediating information to a large number of users.

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