Francesco di Giorgio architetto

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The Art Institute of Chicago
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For many long years, exhibitions of contemporary Soviet architecture presented in the West inevitably included the largest projects designed and built by the ruling members of the official Union of Architects. Only recently has this frozen, institutionalized vision been balanced by a similarly one-sided celebration of the so-called Bumazhniki, or paper architects, who had attempted since 1980 to escape from the boredom of the bureaucratized firms through utopian designs. For the first time, in a small exhibition curated by Russian architect Eugene Asse, a different vision has been given of some thirty-five years of practice since the end of Stalinism.

Through a series of laconic personal displays, a rather mixed group of Moscow-based professionals, previously hidden in the bureaucratic structure of Mosproekt’s municipal design institutes, and representing different generations and ideological orientations, has been identified. The oldest architect featured is Leonid Pavlov (1909–90), whose elegant and abstract designs, in particular the Central Economics and Mathematics Institute (1968–78) and the project for a Computer Center (1966) indicate an interest in the architecture of Ivan Leonidov and are rooted in the education Pavlov received at VkhUTEIN in the late 1920s. Also finally acknowledged after decades of neglect at home is Andrei Meerson (b. 1930), who has been the most innovative builder of housing in Moscow, with a range of schemes extending the concept of Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation, as in the huge slab on Begovaya ulitsa (1966–70), or renewing the notion of communal housing, as in the Lebed Towers (1969–72). Meerson was also the first architect to return to the use of brick and to explore new articulations of towers and urban spaces in his scheme on the Leningradskoe Avenue (1972–78), and has since then worked extensively on the problem of inserting new buildings into the old fabric of Moscow.

Among younger architects, the Russian approach to postmodernism has resulted in several rather clumsy neo-Venitian or awkwardly playful projects represented in the exhibition. Much more interesting indeed is the work of the partnership of Igor Korbut (b. 1941)/Vladimir Gudkov (b. 1939), which recycles not only Ivan Leonidov’s abstract ideas, but also his original graphic techniques, and produces interesting urban and territorial schemes. Among the youngest architects included in the exhibition, the Doka cooperative of Totan Kuzminbaev (b. 1958) and Igor Pishkuevich (b. 1953), has also tried to design neococonstructionist follies based on the space constructions of the early 1920s and on Yakov Chernikhov’s fantastic machines, and to use them in the late 1980s as propaganda for Perestroika.

The absence from the show of one of the few really inventive avant-garde groups of the 1960s, the NER team directed by Alexei Guttov, which skillfully echoed Archigram’s designs and worked on the reconstruction of urban space, remains difficult to understand. Also, the collection of photographs by Boris Tombak, added as counterpoint to the projects, but devoid of any captions, failed to give the sense of context it was intended to furnish. The exhibition design, which aspired to recreate the “original medieval street plan of Moscow,” employing colors which claimed to “relate to the textures and tones of Moscow,” used the rather strange space devoted to the architectural gallery with mixed success.

Altogether, however, a trustworthy image of plurality and invention and a certain hierarchy of quality could be deduced from the evidence provided. The current emergence of new forms of practice to which the exhibition attests, such as cooperative joint ventures with the West, or even private firms, and of building programs such as churches, unknown in the Soviet era, give hope that the gap between designed dreams and built prosaism could finally be bridged one day.

Publication related to the exhibition:
Eugene Asse, Moscow Avant-Garde Architecture: 1955–1991, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1993, with photographs by Boris Tombak, 20 pp., illus., $5.00 (paper).

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Francesco di Giorgio architetto
Palazzo Pubblico
Siena, 25 April–31 July 1993

The complete work of Francesco di Giorgio Martini was the subject of a pair of major exhibitions sponsored by the Monte dei Paschi in Siena this summer. The section on fine arts—painting, sculpture, figurative drawing, along with illuminated manuscripts and metalwork from his circles in Siena and Urbino—was installed in the deconsecrated church of S. Agostino. In this lush Vanvitellian interior one found altarpieces mounted on real altars, waiting to be examined close up by climbing the altar steps, as though invited by a benevolent sacristan. In the nave, the designers organized several dramatic sacre conversazioni between statues by Francesco di Giorgio, Donatello, and Vecchieta. The section on architecture and fortification was installed in a totally different ambient, the Magazzini del Sale, the vaulted substructures of the Palazzo Pubblico, which serve as a dam for the Campo and foundations for the Torre del Mangia. Visitors had to descend like spelunkers into these cavernous cellars, which tell more about the traditions of Sieneese medieval engineering from which Francesco di Giorgio sprang than any document. Steel catwalks crossed through the dark voids to take one on a carefully planned route through Francesco di Giorgio’s architectural career, from the work at Urbino and the churches to the fortifications of the Marches, Naples, and Puglia, finishing with the drawings after the antique and the treatises.

The architectural exhibition was manageable in size, thoughtful in conception, and installed with a studied minimalism. It was especially impressive to find almost all the many versions of Francesco di Giorgio’s treatises; one only wished one could turn the pages. There was indeed a copy of the facsimile from 1979 of the Ashburnham manuscript from the Laurenziana that was open to spectators to leaf through at will, and other copies under glass to illustrate various buildings. Photography was kept to a minimum, limited on purpose to a selection of brilliant color transparencies of extant buildings in the first room. There were numerous older models from provincial museums, especially of the fortifications, and two gleaming blond new models built
expressly for the exhibition of works at Urbino: the bathroom wing in the Palazzo Ducale (by Felice Ragazzi working with Fiore) and the cathedral (by Pietro Ballico working with Tafuri and Sgrilli). To fill in the trecento background, there were several of the most-celebrated parchment drawings of Gothic Siena, including the grand elevation, over six feet tall, associated with Giotto’s campanile in Florence. A huge Palma Giovane canvas was hauled in because it shows the convent of S. Chiara in Urbino in the background, and more appealingly, two delicate and colorful gouaches of 1824 by Adriano Colocci that show the Palazzo della Signoria in Jesi with all of the dignity of a lively provincial capital in the age of Stendhal. Fortresses have seldom caught the artist’s eye, but a beautiful and wildly romantic painting of the 1860s by Romolo Liverani was there to show the prickly, fortified Renaissance landscape, especially the bastions of Mondolfo and Mondavio, imaginatively rearranged and softened in a golden glow.

Francesco di Giorgio is a pivotal, elusive figure whose personality is difficult to grasp in an organic way and who constantly threatens to collapse into his sub-specialties. For Federico Zeri he was an eccentric in painting but hyperreal in architecture. Much of his painting was done by assistants, whether or not one believes in the ever-faithful, often-clumsy, lifelong assistant Belloscia calls the "Fiduciario di Francesco." Francesco di Giorgio was often on the move, and his buildings were likely to be carried out by assistants from drawings and models; Tafuri wonders if he may have even enjoyed the role of fortune in their execution.

As Adams relates in his excellent essay on the fortifications, Francesco di Giorgio began his architectural career by working for the Sienese commission on the battini or aqueducts, a world in which secret technical expertise was handed on from generation to generation by oral tradition. Decades later Francesco di Giorgio would drive the French from Naples by tunneling a mine under Castel Nuovo. After an apprenticeship, possibly at Pienza in his early twenties, he was summoned to Urbino, probably about 1476, as ducal engineer. Among his 136 commissions for Federico da Montefeltro were the rebuilding of the Cathedral of Urbino and the completion of the Palazzo Ducale, on which Laurana had been working since 1472. Both buildings extend over the old city wall onto precipitous slopes that drop down a steep hillside. The huge scarp of the cathedral’s east end, still standing, shows the mathematical severity and the fondness for great mural masses of the Sienese engineer at work. Francesco di Giorgio built the cathedral nave in the same spirit: a large unbattrested barrel vault that might even be taken for the architect’s trademark, as it reappears in S. Bernardino di Urbino and in S. Maria delle Grazie al Calcinaio at Cortona. But the lack of lateral buttressing on the hillside of Urbino was not wise. Cracks began to open, and although they were beautifully surveyed by a number of late-eighteenth-century architects, no one could stop them from spreading. In January 1789 the vault fell, six months before the Bastille, and the building was rebuilt by Valadier.

The graphic material assembled and the wooden model show a strange and severe building in a style best called military classicism. As reconstructed, the nave is a windowless tunnel of darkness (although some of the drawings seem to show, and the brickwork to allow for, small windows over the flat niches that form the side chapels). Even so, the darkness would have amply evoked the horror that Alberti thought appropriate to the numerous Deity. The façade might have been unfinished and one should not rule out an attached order of some sort, but on the interior the simple, massive piers are given a kind of rudimentary cornice by the use of string courses. Famous for having confused the classical orders in his treatises, in his built architecture Francesco di Giorgio loved to create the mere suggestion of an order by cornices of an almost mathematical abstraction.

Francesco di Giorgio the engineer loved the massive wall and made it into a work of art. The leitmotif of the Madonna del Calcinaio is a wall so thick that cupola and barrel vault will never need buttressing. One recalls the Italians’ position in the famous debate at Milan Cathedral, which was disdain for the flying buttresses that their northern Gothic colleagues so proudly vaunted. The austere, elegant photograph of a window from the Calcinaio on the cover of the catalogue (and the huge mockup of the same window at the beginning of the exhibition) make the point graphically: no matter how deep the embrasures might seem to be, the distance to the glass is only halfway through the wall. The side chapels are huge niches cut out of the walls and invisible on the exterior. All of this is quite different from, say, Brunelleschi’s S. Spirito, where the chapel niches originally protruded on the outside and at the corners met back to back, like eggshells touching. The cupola of the Calcinaio is supported on heavy walls but looks like it is floating on thin grey pilasters, an airy baldachin. The barrel vaults look uniformly thick but are really quite thin at the center and counterweighted by heavy shoulders at the sides. Francesco di Giorgio’s military classicism is marked by subtle shifts between real and apparent structure.

Seventy of the 136 commissions Francesco di Giorgio undertook for Federico da Montefeltro were supposedly fortifications. After he returned home his reputation was such that any prince who asked for his services had to get permission for him to travel from the Sienese authorities, like an export license for sensitive nuclear equipment. He was one of the most imaginative fortifications architects who ever lived, and he lived in a bellicose age. The most profitable export of the duchy of Urbino was the condotta, and towns in the region developed their own specialties among the trades of war. By the time that Francesco di Giorgio came to Urbino, Federico da Montefeltro’s reputation as a soldier was such that he was often paid not to fight. The last golden years of Federico’s reign were a good time to consolidate gains, both culturally and militarily, since the fragile alliances that held the five great states of Italy in balance, and left space for small Siena and Urbino, might fray at any time, and indeed collapsed in 1499 with the French invasion.

There was another enemy as well. Constantinople had fallen to the twenty-one-year-old Mehmed II in 1453. When the young Francesco di Giorgio was possibly working at Pienza, an envoy reached Pius II from the King of Hungary, asking for help for his redoubtable vassal Vlad, better known as Dracula, then harassing the sultan in Walachia. About the same time King Stjepan of Bosnia warned Pius that after his own kingdom fell Mehmed had his eyes on Hungary and Venice, and then “he will go to Italy, which he wishes to subjugate. He often speaks of Rome and longs to go there.” “All Italy and all Christendom are in the same boat,” wrote the Doge of Venice after the fall of Negropont in 1470. The Turks took Otranto in 1480, seventy-five nautical miles from their conquests in Albania, and Francesco di Giorgio was called in
by the Duke of Calabria to help strengthen the fortifications after it was retaken. His citadel at Mondolfo may have been built after Turkish slavers raided the town in 1485. Aside from the rival Italian princes and condottieri, there is this not so distant drummer behind the urge to fortify the Marches and Puglia.

Francesco di Giorgio thought through the logic of artillery seiges and made many brilliant technical innovations in the realm of crossfire, casemates, tunnelling, and in particular his conception of a total system of defense with rapid communication between nodal strongpoints. But his fortifications are also the product of a sparkling imagination. They can be recognized by traits such as the exotically angled bastions, the bastion with convex curvature sides that meet at a sharp edge, the use of star-shaped plans with round towers at the outer points, the unusually steep scarp, and the tall, frowning machicolations that protrude out from the vertical like the top of the Torre del Mangia or the Palazzo Vecchio.

Above all, they relate to the landscapes which they studded. Rocca S. Leo grows organically and unforgettably out of a sheer cliff face in the Montefeltro heartland. Fossobombe crowns a town built in horizontal strips between a cliff and the Metaurus River in countryside that had been tramped over by Hasdrubal and Narses and tunnelled through by Vespasian. Sassocorvaro, tough as a turtle, dominates its town and points its most aggressive face at the neighboring hills. It was both bastion and residence for Federico's right-hand man, Ottaviano Ubaldini. Even in the early-eighteenth century, when Francesco di Giorgio had been largely forgotten, its exotic shape was greatly admired "ab iconographiis pulchriitudo operisque soliditate" (as reads the inscription of 1708). Mondavio, the tiny bastion with an enormously high scarp and sudden, unpredictable inflexions in a sharp-edge plan, is the breathtaking fortress that one would like to put in a museum (instead a museum of waxworks has been put in it).

In the next generation, Antonio da Sangallo the Younger would reduce fortifications to a science, moving toward the angle bastion with the same unflinching logic that carried the modern turnpike engine to the cloverleaf. Sangallo's bastions are huge, and all look alike. Francesco di Giorgio's can be quite small, ferocious little terriers that threaten the enemy with studied audacity and geometry carried to an extreme. They threaten movement ("il terroni sono ver la offesa") and they unnerve like new machines with untested advantages. They seem to say that in this constantly changing field, imagination is the best weapon, and it is on the defenders' side.

The section on Francesco di Giorgio's painting and sculpture installed in S. Agostino has been the subject of a close review by Carl Strehlke. Among the many objects of great beauty, one will pardon the architectural historian for selecting the paintings and bronzes with architectural motifs in the background. In fact, by coincidence, S. Agostino has a chapel, the Cappella Bichi, where a fresco cycle by Francesco di Giorgio and Signorelli was discovered beneath the baroque overlay in the early 1970s. Here the Birth of the Virgin is shown in a room close in style to the private apartments in the Palazzo Ducale at Urbino, and the Nativity takes place in front of a stable that echoes, with a little more decoration, the nave of Urbino Cathedral. The early Nativity from the Pinacoteca di Siena, the only painting authentically signed by Francesco di Giorgio, shows a curious and colorful tempietto in the background with complex arrangements of piers and columns, close to the tempietti illustrated in the Codex Saluzziano and in various related drawings. No other Renaissance architect did more to explore the tempietto as an ancient building type, and Francesco di Giorgio even projected one for the ducal mausoleum that he planned for one of the courtyards of the palace in Urbino. But it was left to Bramante, his heir in this as in so many other things, to be the first to build one. The Madonna del Perdono by Donatello, done for the Cathedral of Siena in Francesco di Giorgio's formative years, left its impact on this architecture; the church of S. Bernardino all'Osservanza is full of similar roundels carved in perspective relief all around the pendentives and vaults.

Even some of the breathtakingly beautiful small bronzes are suggestive for Francesco di Giorgio's architecture. The man who transformed the bronze medal in creations such as S. Anthony Abbot, half three-dimensional sculpture and half flat medallion, late in life designed the Nativity for S. Domenico in Siena, which was largely painted by his disciples. The Roman arch-turnable in the background shows two huge bronze medallions, strangely unplundered, although the arch itself is in ruins. The little bronze relief of St. Jerome in the Desert from Washington is an amazing tour-de-force. The background looks at first as though the wax had melted in the sun before casting, but in the mottled surface one slowly comes to see ruins haunted by an owl, a miniature lion, a scorpion, a turtle, lizards, serpents, deer, and a pair of crane-like birds that the catalogue assures us are flaminigos. A path winds up a steeping cliff where the saint's cypress-shaded hermitage is perched. No wonder Francesco di Giorgio would react with such poetry to Rocca S. Leo just a short time later.

The drawing chosen for the poster, the Atlas from Brunswick, sums up this restless genius very well. Atlas stands on the disk of the earth, his right heel pivoting in the center and his left foot propelling. As he spins, groaning in Polliaulan agony, he turns the disk of the heavens above him, which is studded with signs of the zodiac. His garments swirl around him and allow us to gauge his great speed. This is an amazing transformation of the role of Atlas, not pillar of the heavens but dervish. The master of the helicoidal ramp and the bastion that seems to spring into action, of dents that bite and tunnel that explode, of churches and fortresses planned like the human body, transformed the specialties he labored in and passed his heritage onto Leonardo and Bramante, Peruzzi and Serlio, and through them to almost every theorist of the Renaissance.

The catalogue has been produced using the highest standards by Electa. In particular the photographs by Bruno Bruchi and Grazia Sgrilli, especially the black and white prints, are extremely sensitive. There are three major essays. Tafuri (on the churches) grapples with the problem of the coherence of Francesco di Giorgio's personality and tries to define his architectural style in the context of larger aesthetic, moral, and political issues. Fiore (on the palaces) gives us an extremely close and subtle reading of the Palazzo Ducale at Urbino, trying to define exactly where Laurana left off and where Francesco di Giorgio began. Adams (on the fortifications) writes a most engaging essay on Francesco.

di Giorgio and the art and science of war. There are extensive catalogue entries on the drawings after the antique by Howard Burns, and on the treatises by Massimo Mussini. I remember with particular pleasure as well the catalogue entries on Castel Nuovo and the fortifications of Naples, the bath complex at Urbino, the Minguzzi codex in the Vatican with drawings after the forts of the Marches, the Palazzi Ducali at Urbino and Gubbio, and the ducale mausoleum of S. Bernardino at Urbino. Negotiations are underway with Electa to republish the catalogue as a book with some new material, including an additional essay on Francesco di Giorgio and the antique by Howard Burns.

Publication related to the exhibition:
*Francesco di Giorgio architetto*, Francesco Paolo Fiore and Manfredo Tafuri, editors, Milan:Electa, 1993, 426 pp., 57 color and 427 b.&w., illus. Essays by Manfredo Tafuri, Francesco Paolo Fiore, and Nicholas Adams, with catalogue entries by them and Gianni Volpe, Howard Burns, Mario Gori Sassoli, Pietro Matracchi, Jennifer Krasinski, Flavia Cantatore, Massimo Mussini, and Manuela Morresi; documentary appendix by Giuseppe Chironi; and a biographical chronology by Flavia Cantatore.

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