

Manfredo Tafuri: From the Critique of Ideology to Microhistories

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Manfredo Tafuri is interpreted and understood, especially in the U.S., almost exclusively in the light of two books he published, in the original version, in 1968 and 1973: *Theories and History of Architecture* and *Architecture and Utopia*, respectively.¹

Later, fundamental developments in his thought generally are reduced to the notion that he abandoned the study of modern architecture in favor of what is almost perceived as a regression to Renaissance studies.

Even in Italy, where poor translations cannot be claimed as a justification, the development of his notion of history has been reductively read by many as an abandonment of a politically committed history in favor of an old-fashioned, erudite philologist's historiography. In the words of an Italian critic writing after his death, Tafuri sought refuge "in the past, in intelligence, and erudition. No longer remembering neither his nor our hopes in projects."²

The aim of this paper is then to better articulate and historically contextualize Tafuri's passage from the critique of ideology to a model of architectural history that I will propose as a fruitful one: a model that has a cross-disciplinary approach and for which philology is a fundamental methodological tool. At the same time, I will show that this passage does *not* represent an abandonment of his intention to write a politically committed history (provided we understand this as meaning "concerned with the contemporary"), but rather a shift in the tactics employed to achieve this aim.

I will begin with a brief outline of Tafuri's critique of ideology and then proceed to show how, in attempting to solve the problems posed by it, he modified his historiographic approach.

In 1973 Tafuri published *Progetto e utopia (Architecture and Utopia)*—published in a shorter version in 1969 in the review *Contropiano*—which earned him his undying reputation as a radical Marxist. Its central thesis—that architecture, since the age of the Enlightenment, had been the ideological instrument of capitalism and that it could not, therefore, any longer hope to have any "revolutionary" aims—raised cries about Tafuri's nihilism and his having declared the "death of architecture."

But Tafuri's message, an extremely clear one, was that one could not hope to reveal the ideologies that were represented by architecture through the production of an *alternative* architecture.

1 M. Tafuri, *Teorie e storia dell'architettura*. (Bari: Laterza, 1968). Eng. trans. *Theories and History of Architecture*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); M. Tafuri, *Progetto e utopia. Architettura e sviluppo capitalistico*. (Bari: Laterza, 1973). Eng. trans. *Architecture and Utopia. Design and Capitalist Development*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976). All dates of publication will henceforth refer to original Italian versions.

2 Antonino Saggio, Review of "Il Progetto storico di Manfredo Tafuri," *Casabella* 619–620 found in *Domus* 773 (Luglio/Agosto, 1995): 104 [my trans.].

- 3 According to orthodox Marxist thought, real change cannot occur until the underlying conditions of production are changed. Any attempt at reform in a single sector (such as architecture) constitutes therefore a serious error as it only hinders the advent of real change. For a clear instance of this critique, see Tafuri's analysis of the reasons why the experiments in social housing of the 1920s and '30s in Germany failed. Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Architettura Contemporanea* (Milano: Electa, 1976). Eng. trans. *Modern Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979), 1. See Ch. XI: "The Attempts at Urban Reform in Europe Between the Wars," esp. 156–57.
- 4 M. Tafuri, *La sfera e il labirinto. Avanguardia e architettura da piranesi agli anni '70* (Torino: Einaudi, 1980), 16 [my trans.]. Eng. trans. *The Sphere and the Labyrinth. Avantgardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the '70s*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).
- 5 W. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" first published in *Neue Rundschau* 61:3 (1950). Eng. trans. in *Illuminations. Walter Benjamin. Essays and Reflections*. Hannah Arendt, ed. (New York: Schocken, 1988), 253–264. Abundant traces of the influence exerted by Benjamin, and by this essay in particular, remain. From 1964 to 1972, Massimo Cacciari and Marco De Michelis published *Angelus Novus*, a journal inspired by the Paul Klee painting to which Benjamin refers to in this essay. Cacciari published in *Nuova Corrente*, in 1975, "Di alcuni motivi di Walter Benjamin (da Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels a Der Autor als Produzent "[On some motifs in Walter Benjamin from Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels to Der Autor als Produzent]). Tafuri makes explicit and frequent references to Benjamin's ideas. For an accurate critique of this book, see Tiedemann, Rolf, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses 'On the Concept of History'," in Gary Smith ed., *Benjamin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
- 6 M. Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, 141.

Architecture had been such an integral part of the capitalist project that it was an illusion to hope that it could critique it with a *counter project*.³

Architecture could not, therefore, be "political." It was, instead, *history* that would have to become the systematic revelation, and critique, of the ideologies that architecture embodied. It was the "historical" project rather than the design one that had to become "capable of calling into question, at every instant, the historic legitimacy of the capitalist division of labor." As he still stated very explicitly years later, in 1980 in "Il Progetto storico" (The Historical Project) the introductory chapter to *La Sfera e il labirinto* (*The Sphere and the Labyrinth*).⁴

The idea of a historiography that has political potential was neither new nor peculiar to Tafuri. His position was a common one among Italian left-wing intellectuals of the '60s and early '70s. It was based upon Antonio Gramsci's and Benedetto Croce's ideas (Gramsci's in more radical terms) on the need for a history that was "alive." That was, in other words, directly connected to the present by its ability to perform a critical role in awakening consciousness and bringing about social change.

Another important source for this idea was Walter Benjamin whose works started appearing in Italian translations in the very early '60s. A short essay, the "Theses of the Philosophy of History," in which Benjamin advocated an unmediated connection between a revolutionary present and the past, proved crucial not only for Tafuri but for the whole group of the so-called School of Venice.⁵

Tafuri's aim undoubtedly was to write a history that would have political significance. The central problem, then, was that of writing such a history without transforming it into an operative one. Operative history, practiced in Italy by historians such as Bruno Zevi and Paolo Portoghesi, had been radically attacked by Tafuri in *Theories and History* in 1968. In this book, Tafuri declared operative history to be an:

analysis of architecture (or of the arts in general) that, instead of an abstract survey, has as its object the planning of a precise poetical tendency (...) derived from historical analyses programmatically distorted and finalized. By this definition, operative criticism represents the meeting point of history and planning. We could say, in fact, that operative criticism plans past history by projecting it towards the future.⁶

Operative history, in other words, applied a deforming filter to specific ages of the past, transforming them into mythical ones endowed with ideal values in order to designate them as models for design.

Tafuri certainly had no intention of writing a history that could be of any direct use to designers. Principally for the reasons

we have seen, that architecture could not become the instrument for change and because history had other tasks, the unveiling of ideologies.

But writing a history that was very much concerned with the contemporary situation, a history that had *political* aims, involved the same risks as that of writing one aimed at designers: that of deforming the past in order to suit these aims. And this risk was very clear to Tafuri. In 1966, in the preface to his book on Mannerist architecture, he declared:

While it is true that every history worthy of being called such, after Croce and Gramsci, is always “current” history, it is also necessary to emphasize that it principally has to be history: a free investigation of the events of the past, enriched by a *contemporariness* that is part of the historian’s culture, but not subjected to the demonstration of preconstituted theses.⁷

But Tafuri himself had come very close to the possible deformations caused by the “contemporariness” of some of his earlier writings. In a work published in 1961, for instance, he had argued that the baroque, seventeenth century interventions on the medieval town of San Gregorio, near Rome, had, in reality, been part of a unitary urban plan. His argument meant to critique “romantic attitudes” concerning “so-called ‘minor’ architecture” which, taken out of context was used as a model thus producing “deplorable architectural populism.”⁸ But in a much more recent interview regarding a different issue, Tafuri himself declared that there were no unitary urban plans for a city until the late eighteenth century, at least.

Again, in 1967, in an article on Borromini’s projects for Piazza Carpegna, he proposed, through a reattribution of some drawings by Borromini and the publication of new ones, a different building sequence for the palace. He demonstrated refined scholarship but did not forget to point out, in the process, that Borromini, in his projects, always rejected the use of “models and types.”⁹ This was transparent reference to the proponents of the typological approach to design, Saverio Muratori and Gianfranco Caniggia, in those years teaching at Rome’s School of Architecture. Tafuri and others, while still students, had so strongly opposed them that the school finally established a parallel, alternative, course of design taught by Carlo Aymonino, with Tafuri as one of his assistants.

Throughout Tafuri’s writings of this period, one can clearly perceive the struggle with the need to write a history that would have political relevance, but that would avoid being distorted by this purpose.

A first solution was provided by the adoption of the idea that there is no such thing as “objective” knowledge, and that we can only hope to attain “fragments” of it; an idea that had been

7 M. Tafuri, *L'Architettura del Manierismo nel Cinquecento Europeo* (Roma: Officina, 1966), 6 [my translation].

8 M. Tafuri, “L’ampliamento barocco del comune di S. Gregorio da Sassola” in *Quaderni dell’Istituto di Storia dell’Architettura* 31:48 (1959/61); quoted by G. Ciucci in “The formative years,” *Casabella* 619–620 (Jan.–Feb., 1995): 17.

9 M. Tafuri, “Borromini in Palazzo Carpegna: documenti inediti e ipotesi critiche” in *Quaderni dell’Istituto di Storia dell’Architettura dell’Universit di Roma* 79:84 (1967): 85–107; 94.

circulating for some time, but which gained wide resonance with the works of Michel Foucault.

Tafuri adopted this idea from Foucault, but modified the “fragments” according to the meaning which Walter Benjamin had assigned to them. These had to be the remnants, the traces left by the voiceless, and the obliterated of history. With these fragments, Benjamin wanted to write a history that “brushed against the grain” of the one written by the victors, a history that would prove to be a *counterhegemonic* one.¹⁰

In “The Historical Project,” Tafuri proposed a model of history that was a montage of fragments (which, in architectural terms, often meant unbuilt projects or anachronistic designs that resisted the dominant “style”). Each of the fragments inevitably would have been selected to the exclusion of others. This montage, a construct of the historian, obviously could not claim any absolute validity. Behind every history, including his own, there was, admittedly, a “project,” an agenda. Deformations thus were inevitable for both operative criticism and his own history. But, he still claimed, it’s a question of the ends one proposes.¹¹

The acknowledgment of the inevitable deformations that the historian’s interpretation imposes on historiography and the impossibility of attaining an “objective” historiography Tafuri owed mostly to Foucault. But this “solution” was not entirely satisfactory. Tafuri leveled a fundamental criticism at Foucault’s notion of history. The belief that history (or reality) cannot be understood in any objective way entails, as its logical outcome, an abandonment of any project of change. To put it very crudely, Foucault’s position could be summarized by the sentence “If we cannot even ‘know reality, how can we hope to ‘change’ it?”

For Tafuri, as we have seen, this was unacceptable. In 1977 he wrote, together with Franco Rella, Georges Teyssot and Massimo Cacciari, *Il dispositivo Foucault [The Foucault Mechanism]*, an articulated critique of Foucault’s ideas. In it, he asked:

Is there really space, in the current political moment, for this operation of infinite fragmentation of the various practices of power, that certainly digs inside the intersections and the interstices—and herein lies our interest in the practices of Nietzsche, Derrida and Foucault—but in order to become a “dissemination” to the wind, in a sort of game devoid of rules that can be verified in their social effects?¹²

The need for a history that contains the potential for change was unquestionable for Tafuri and not only for him.

Carlo Ginzburg, the Italian historian, already had criticized Foucault’s notion of history in the preface to *Il Formaggio e i vermi (The Cheese and the Worms)*, published in 1976.¹³ He proposed, instead of a history that is wary of attempting a recomposition and reading of the fragments of historical knowledge; and instead of a

10 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 253–264.

11 M. Tafuri, “The Historical Project,” 15. To understand the full significance of the quote we also have to bear in mind that Zevi belonged to the same political tradition as Tafuri. Zevi, too, intended writing a “militant” history. Tafuri was attacking where he knew it would hurt most: one is certainly free to write such an operative history, he meant, but it will not have the “political” effects ours will: “It is a question of the ends one proposes.”

12 M. Tafuri, “Lettura del testo e pratiche discorsive” in *Il dispositivo Foucault* (Venezia: Cluva, 1977), 45 [my trans.].

13 Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi. Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500*. (Torino: Einaudi, 1976). Eng. trans. *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980).

history that balks at interpretation because there is no “true,” “objective” meaning, etc., a *microhistory*. A history that, through the careful analysis of clues, traces, and documents, does not shy away from attempting to understand the “true meaning” of a specific historical episode or artistic object.

Ginzburg had a deep impact on Tafuri for he showed how one could write a history that was profoundly political, even if it analyzed, as in *The Cheese and the Worms*, the story of an obscure miller tried, and eventually burnt, for heresy in the sixteenth century.

In the '60s, Ginzburg had declared—referring to the title of a book by Croce, *What Is Alive and What Is Dead in Hegel's Philosophy*—that he wanted to write a history that was “really dead,” in obvious and polemical opposition to the views for a committed history, i.e. an “alive” one, held by the leftist intellectual milieu to which he himself belonged.¹⁴

Although the term “microhistory” was coined by Ginzburg, its concepts had been elaborated in the late 60s and 70s by a young group of historians who founded a review in 1966 the *Quaderni Storici*, that became a testing ground for new methodological approaches to history. Choosing almost randomly from works published in the review we read, for instance, of the story of Saccardino, a seventeenth century quack and charlatan who preached that religion, and especially the idea of hell, was a fraud whose only purpose was for “the princes to have their own way,” and that people had to “open their eyes.” Saccardino ended up duly hanged in Bologna’s main market square, of course, but if this was Ginzburg’s idea of a history that is “really dead,” it is little wonder that Tafuri perceived its potential.¹⁵

Almost paradoxically, in fact, such accounts as in *The Cheese and the Worms*, that of the struggle that pitted the miller against his inquisitors; his “low” against their “high” culture and the inevitably ensuing clash of languages, cultures and mental structures, illuminated the power relations that articulated the social hierarchy of that time: a politically charged history if there ever was one.

For writing such a history “philology” was an indispensable methodological tool. One that would enable the microhistorian to dismantle previous historiographic constructs and elaborate different ones, whose validity would be firmly based upon the careful scrutiny of primary sources.

To those brought up in an entirely different scholarly tradition, this may not sound like a revelation. But, in Italy, philology had been repudiated as a valid instrument for writing history for a long time. Ever since, in fact, Croce had denounced nineteenth century erudite history that based its positivistic faith on the accumulation of often uninterpreted “documents.” For Croce, history was to be based on “interpretation” just as the criticism of a work of art had to be based on “intuition.”

14 B. Croce, *Ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto nella filosofia di Hegel* (Bari: Laterza, 1907).

15 C. Ginzburg and Marco Ferrari, “La colombara ha aperto gli occhi,” *Quaderni Storici* 38 (1978): 631–9. Eng. trans., “The Dove-Cote Has Opened its Eyes” in *Microhistories and the Lost People of Europe*, Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, eds. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1991).

Italian historians, still imbued with Croce's idealism, consider with suspicion a "philological" history. As I mentioned at the beginning, the passage of Tafuri from a critique of ideology to an "old-fashioned" philological approach to history mostly has been perceived as a contradiction, or as the abandonment of a committed history after the political disillusionments of the last few years.

Alberto Asor Rosa, a literary critic and founder, with Massimo Cacciari, of the review *Contropiano*, provides us, instead, with a much more insightful explanation, seeing Tafuri's philological approach as the logical outcome of the critique of ideology. Although, he says, many might "find it difficult to understand:"

The "critique of ideology" precedes and determines the discovery of "philology," and makes it both possible and necessary. Think about this: once no veil any longer exists, all that remains is to study, understand and represent the mechanisms of reality, for which one should refinedly use the instruments of an inquiry that is (clearly within certain limits), *objective*.¹⁶

Tafuri's philological inquiry—which extends itself not only to literary texts but also to architectural models, drawings, the built works themselves and their relationship to each other—is what enables him to write his "architectural" microhistories.

The elaboration of this microhistorical method will run parallel, for Tafuri, to the project that occupied him for the last decade of his life (from *L'Armonia e i Conflitti* of 1983, to *Ricerca del Rinascimento* in 1992): the rewriting of the Renaissance.

He listed the fundamental concepts of an architectural microhistory in the introduction to *L'Armonia e i Conflitti*, an as yet untranslated book on the sixteenth century Venetian church of San Francesco della Vigna:

As far as we're concerned—he declared—the artistic object is to be questioned, rather than in its individuality, as a witness that can testify as to the roles that were assigned to it by the mentality (or mentalities) of the era to which it belongs regarding its economic meaning, its public function, the means of production incorporated in it, the structures of representation (= ideologies) that condition it, or of which it is an autonomous enunciator.¹⁷

Ricerca del Rinascimento, his last book, is a constellation of microhistories or of "monads," to use a Benjaminian term: a concatenation of minute events of the past that are particularly significant to our present.

The book starts with an analysis of the urban plan for Rome of Nicholas V in the 1440s, and the role that traditionally is assigned to Leon Battista Alberti as the Pope's advisor and architect. Tafuri reads the Pope's urban strategy as part of a plan to consolidate the

16 A. Asor Rosa, "Critica dell'ideologia ed esercizio storico" [Critique of ideology and historical practice], *Casabella* 619–620 (Jan.–Feb. 1995): 33.

17 M. Tafuri, *L'Armonia e i conflitti. La chiesa di San Francesco della Vigna nella Venezia del '500* (Torino: Einaudi, 1983), 7.

papacy's secular power. To this aim, he wanted to build architecture that would demonstrate the "supreme and undisputable authority of the Roman Church" by seeming as if "built by God himself."¹⁸

Next, Tafuri philologically reconstructs the work of Alberti (both textual and architectural), and the ideas he came into contact with, penetrating his mental set with a procedure strikingly similar to that used by Ginzburg for his miller.

The Alberti that emerges from Tafuri's analysis is one who is highly sceptical of authority and is critical of the display of luxury and the rhetoric of power. How would "this" Alberti have aided the Pope in his intent to build architecture that would seem as if "built by God himself," Tafuri asks? Or, if he did, it would then be necessary to clearly distinguish the intentions of the Pope from those of the architect, in other words, analyzing the conflict that must have arisen between practices of power and artistic languages.

But a fundamental aspect of Tafuri's reassessment of Alberti lies in the awareness he claims for the Renaissance theorist, of the existence of a multiplicity of models of antiquity. In other words, Tafuri's Alberti was (and was aware of) constructing an artificial "tradition" founded, rather than on "the" model of antiquity, on a selection from the models available. Alberti and other humanists, in other words, were establishing the principles of an architectural language that was already perceived as self-referential, founded on neither "the" model of antiquity nor on a metaphysical concept of beauty.

The last chapter concludes with an analysis of an unbuilt project and three buildings in Venice by Jacopo Sansovino, who had left Rome after its sacking in 1527. Tafuri analyzes the struggle between Sansovino's "modern" Roman architectural language and the Venetian context in which he had to operate.¹⁹

The first project by Sansovino in Venice for Vettor Grimani, is one that never was built. Tafuri points out that the rotation of the axes necessary to achieve regular geometric spaces on an irregular site derives directly from the Roman tradition of Raphael, Bramante, and Sangallo. Other elements of this tradition include the monumental staircase, the lack of a portico, and the two connected courtyards. In the strained political climate between Venice and Rome, it was precisely the blatantly "Roman" character of the project, Tafuri asserts, that condemned it.

The following project by Sansovino, Palazzo Dolfin in 1536, Tafuri defines a hybrid: the facade, for instance, exhibits all three Roman orders: Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian. But the four bays on the *piano nobile* resting on the two lower arches mark the position of the traditional Venetian *portego*, the large central hall that would run across the entire building, from the front to the rear facade.

Palazzo Corner of 1545 is the most imposing and "Roman" of Sansovino's Venetian works. With its rusticated lower story and three arches, reminiscent of the so-called House of Raphael in Rome;

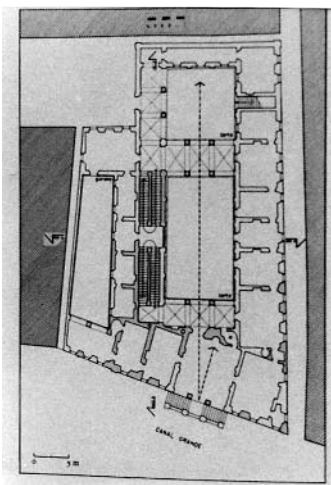


Figure 1
Palace for Vettor Grimani. Ground floor reconstruction (from M. Tafuri).

18 M. Tafuri, *Ricerca del Rinascimento. Principi, città, architetti*. (Torino: Einaudi, 1992), 38 [my trans.].

19 *Ibid.*, 305–359.

Figure 2
Palazzo Dolfin on the Canal Grande.



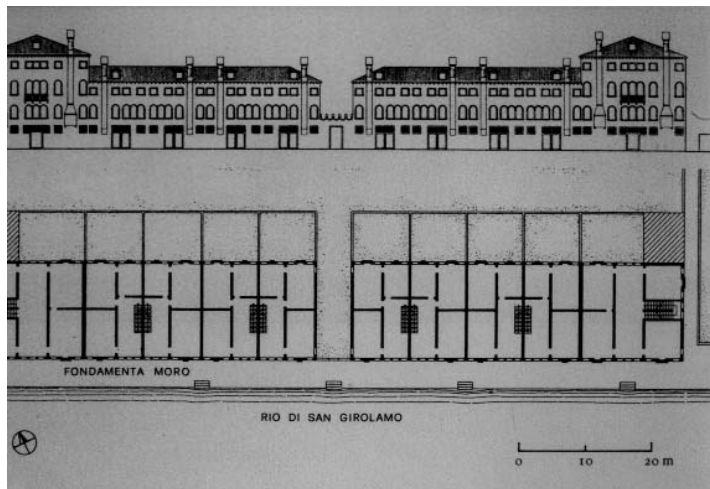
Figure 3
Palazzo Corner on the Canal Grande.



with its paired columns flanking the upper story's arches, and its unusual isolation and prominence on the Canal Grande this palace spoke of its patron's unabashed display of allegiance to Rome.

After these projects, in which Sansovino struggles to reconcile, more or less successfully, the Roman and the Venetian tradition, Tafuri proposes a fourth project by Sansovino, a practically un-

Figure 4
Case Moro on Rio San Girolamo.



known one, whose language is strikingly and unexpectedly entirely Venetian: the Case of Leonardo Moro in 1544.

Tafuri analyzes the theological and political reasons of the patron, Leonardo Moro, one of the most wealthy members of a dogal family in Venice, and reads in this building the critique made by Moro of the display of luxury that marked the palaces of the rival Loredan and Corner families. The hiring of Sansovino, who was working almost contemporaneously at the Palazzo Corner, instead of any anonymous stonemason, is significant in this sense.

With regard to architect's intentions, Tafuri points out that with simple elements of vernacular architecture (the monofores and trifores, the chimneys, and the doors), the architect achieved a rhythm in the facade, closely connected to the typology of the interior. The elevation, with the flanking towers, the horizontal central block, and the gate with its crenelations marking the entrance to the garden, reputed one of the most beautiful of the Venetian Cinquecento, for Tafuri, all point to a remarkable design effort that is all the

more significant because of its dissimulation, since the *Case* seem to submit entirely to the Venetian tradition.

Tafuri reads these houses as a critique of Sansovino to the dominant Roman classical language. The architect adopted in this project a local tradition instead of the “modern” one constructed by humanists such as Alberti, demonstrating how the certainties of the Roman “golden age” were anything but monolithic.

Tafuri tackled, single-handedly, the rewriting of the Renaissance by attacking its historiographic strongholds: the belief in the existence of a codified set of principles as elaborated by Rudolf Wittkower.²⁰ He demonstrated how these principles were anything but prescriptive. He dismantled the traditional model of the Renaissance as the age of the “return to antiquity” by showing the existence of a multiplicity of models of traditions operating simultaneously.

Above all, however, he showed how theorists such as Alberti, and architects such as Sansovino, were conscious that the architectural language they were forming was not based on universal laws of beauty or on the model of antiquity, but rather on “transgressions” of those laws that were regulated by “taste,” (“a certain natural discernment and not any art or rule”²¹) or by the conventions established by the community of contemporary artists.

What comes to the fore, in other words, is the artists’ awareness of the “self-referentiality” of architecture and, consequently, their lack of the much extolled “certainty” that supposedly derived from the belief that their architecture was solidly grounded on the models provided by a recuperated tradition, that of an age in which codified norms of proportion had been established once and for all, Tafuri describes the architecture of the Renaissance as expressing a “refined equilibrium between the pursuit of foundations and experimentation.”²² He points out the need for codified norms—the “need,” and not their existence—that arose out of the Great Schism, the politico-social conflicts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the devastating plagues. But this was only in order to juxtapose this need to the humanists’ willingness to make a leap towards the unfounded, that very same “leap in the dark” that he already had indicated in *Theories and History* as necessary for the designing of the new.²³

At this point, the significance of the revelation of a Renaissance crisscrossed by contradictions, conflicting traditions, and architectural languages, characterized by the artists’ awareness that they were critically questioning the models of antiquity, creating a “new tradition,” becomes clear.

Tafuri’s objective in undertaking the formidable task of rewriting the Renaissance is to understand the roots of the present crisis of architecture, the reasons for the unease, and the anguish that characterizes it. He indicates in the introduction to *Ricerca del Rinascimento* the modern thinkers that have most influenced him:

20 Rudolf Wittkower. *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (New York: Norton, 1962, 1971).

21 Baldassarre Castiglione. *Il Libro del Cortegiano*. (Venice, 1528). Quoted by Tafuri, *Ricerca...*, [my trans.].

22 Tafuri, *Ricerca...*, 9 [my trans.].

23 Tafuri, *Teorie e Storia...*, op. cit. p. 233.

Hans Sedlmayer, Walter Benjamin, Robert Klein, who spoke, respectively, of the “loss of the center,” the “decay of the aura,” and the “agony of the referent.” This “agony,” this “loss,” the realization that architecture is not the physical expression of the order of the universe, was greeted as a liberation at the beginning of the century by the historical avant gardes, but considered with anguish since the ‘60s.

This is, in itself, a phenomenon to historicize, according to Tafuri, who does not see in this loss of the referent and a “foundation” of architecture a fatal occurrence but, rather, the completion of a process which it is useless to attempt to reverse by returning to a “golden age,” because no such age ever existed.

In plunging into the Renaissance (the “long Renaissance,” as he calls it), Tafuri unveils how early the loss of a sure foundation was. He points at the problematic relationship that the artists of the Renaissance had with their past in order to problematize our relationship to history, once more reasserting the impossibility of finding ready-made solutions in it. The most obvious and immediate target of his critique is postmodernism, but his critique also has a broader scope. While postmodernism had been dismissed in a few pages in 1986, the fundamental questions on the role of architecture and, therefore, the architect, remain.²⁴

Attempting to answer these questions was Tafuri’s lifetime endeavor. His whole production could be read as the struggle to clear the ground of illusions in impossible roles for architecture, in order to identify the possible ones. Thus, we can begin to perceive Tafuri’s work as organized by “projects,” which are all logically articulated parts of the same attempt to find an answer to the tormenting questions of the role of architecture, of that of history, and of the margins of possibility left to those who operate in the two distinct disciplines.

The main stages of this trajectory can be clearly identified in works such as *Teorie e Storia* (1968) and *Progetto e Utopia* (1969 and 1973), in which he attempted to define the roles and tasks of architecture, articulating and distinguishing them from those of history. While, in the first book, he dismissed all hope for a history from which to extract models for design, in the second he dismissed the possibility of a political role for architecture.

In *Storia dell’architettura italiana 1945–1985* (1982 and 1986), he examined the ramifications of a particular case, the Italian one, assessing the crisis of modern architecture against the background of the actual conditions of production of architecture, the disillusionment with leftist municipal administrations that governed some Italian cities from the late seventies to the mid-eighties, the policies adopted with regard the use and planification of the territory, and the failure of plans and projects in the very difficult reality in which architects had to operate.

24 See “La ‘gaia erranza’: ipermoderni (postmoderni)” in *Storia dell’architettura italiana 1944–1985*. (Torino: Einaudi, 1982, 1986), 230–4. Eng. trans. “Gay Errancy: Hypermoderns (postmoderns)” in *History of Italian Architecture 1944–1985* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 189–193.

The “Renaissance project” that unfolds itself in *L'Armonia e i Conflitti* (1983), *Venezia e il Rinascimento* (1985), *Ricerca del Rinascimento* (1992) and the important series of monographs, *Raffaello Architetto* (1984), *Giulio Romano* (1989), and *Francesco di Giorgio Martini* (1993), is only the logical conclusion of this process.²⁵

In reply to the appeals for a “liberation from inhibitions” that the modern movement supposedly had imposed, and a “joyous return” to the past, or to the nostalgia for various “golden ages,” Tafuri shatters all illusions in the existence of a time when the role of architecture, as the expression of the order of the universe, was clear and, consequently, so was the architect’s as interpreter of that superior order.

It is significant that the first of the “Renaissance books” is *L'Armonia e i conflitti*, N. 6 in the Einaudi *Microhistories* series. At the basis of Tafuri’s project, and inextricably linked to it, are his reflections on the tools and instruments of the historian. Wittkower already had analyzed the Venetian church, and had declared its design to be based on an iconological program written by one of the patrons. Tafuri proved, through his microanalysis, that the “program” did not precede but followed and justified the design. He scored a point against what he and Ginzburg called “wild iconology”: the historiographical attempt to read architecture (especially Renaissance) as the physical expression of a preexisting literary or religious text.²⁶

More important, he reassessed, in the same book, the role of the architect of the time: the image that emerged was not that of a fountainhead of creativity and acknowledged interpreter of the cosmic order, but as a professional figure that clashed, compromised, negotiated, attempted to resist, and had to come to terms with patrons, authorities, and political protagonists.

In other words, in *L'armonia*, he elaborates and tests a historiographic model while, at the same time, reconstructing a different Renaissance, dispelling the myth of an age in which architects had recourse to the safe harbor of history, or to preconstituted iconological programs, or to immutable laws of proportions from which to directly derive aesthetic principles.

In revealing the Renaissance as fragmentary, conflictual, struggling between a universal architectural language and the need for local diversity, and between the model of antiquity and the “transgressions” to it he shatters hopes with the existence of a happy condition we have to return to. There always was a crisis, he proclaims. We never were aided by an unproblematic faith in tradition, we always had a limited range of action, and always were in search of our role in society and only working at the margins, on the thresholds. The task which lies ahead of us is the exploration of the full extension of those margins.

The connections between Tafuri’s projects thus appear clearer, if viewed in this light: the elaboration of a historiographic model

25 M. Tafuri, *L'Armonia...*, Venezia e il Rinascimento. Religione, scienza, architettura. (Torino: Einaudi, 1985). Eng. trans. *Venice and the Renaissance. Religion, Science, Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); *Ricerca...*; Frommel, S. Ray, M. Tafuri eds., *Raffaello Architetto*. (Milano: Electa, 1984); H. Burns and M. Tafuri, eds. *Giulio Romano* (Milano: Electa, 1989); F. P. Fiore, M. Tafuri eds., *Francesco di Giorgio Martini* (Milano: Electa, 1993).

26 M. Tafuri. *L'Armonia...*, 9.

capable of indicating, albeit indirectly, a way out of the present crisis, follows logically the realization that it is “history” rather than “architecture” that is “political.”

We have come a long way from the “critique of ideology.” But the microhistorical model he defined—an in-depth analysis of a closely circumscribed field of inquiry capable of shedding light on broader historical issues—is the incisive instrument of a critique that is still, undisputably, very much concerned with the contemporary. That is provided, of course, the microhistories chosen do not constitute “philological gossip,” as he called it, but are “capable of calling into question” our *present* historical condition.

Nowhere is this intent stated more explicitly than in the introduction to *Ricerca del Rinascimento*. Regarding the reflections that gave birth to this volume he declares, in what retrospectively sounds as his intellectual testament, that:

Starting from what today constitutes a problem, they turn back, attempting a dialogue with the age of representation. (...) Starting from these [analyses] what will perhaps become possible will be an *elaboration of mourning*: The attempt is that of broadening—through the instruments that history can legitimately use—the significance of the questions that critically operate within current architectural culture. Remembering does not mean deluding ourselves with the sweetness of remembrance, nor is “listening” reducible to a mindless indulging in sounds.

The “weak power” of analysis, in other words, is proposed as a step in a process that lets the unresolved problems of the past live, unsettling our present.²⁷ [My emphasis].

Nothing could be further from Tafuri’s intentions than “seeking refuge in the past.” What animates his whole work is the stubborn, relentless search for the possibility of a project, of a identifying a direction of march, the possible margins of operation left to architecture.

Many issues of Tafuri’s historical project still need to be better articulated. But returning to a more careful reading of his writings might help us to construct a frame of reference, useful in understanding his work and its significance, in light of the various labels that have been heaped on him (Marxist, nihilist, etc.). These risk completely obscuring our reading of a thinker who posed questions, and struggled to find answers, that are at the very basis of our work as historians or architects.

27 M. Tafuri. *Ricerca* ...,xxi.