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Key Figures In Postwar Italian Architecture: The Mannerism of Leonardo Savioli (1950-1966)

Francesca Privitera¹

Abstract

Architectural criticism has always analysed the theoretical and planning work of Leonardo Savioli (1917-1982), the master of twentieth-century Italian architecture, in two clearly different stages, one before and one after World War II. This has created a gap in critical analysis of the evolution of the compositional strategies employed by the Florentine architect before and after the war. A comparative analysis of archive sources, especially of drawings before 1948 and projects after 1950, suggest a direct consequentiality between the mannerist turning point of the 1960s and his youthful studies of sixteenth century models. Architectural strategies which can be attributed to the typical approaches of historical mannerism put into practice by Savioli after 1950 reveal a derivation not only from the compositional typologies shared by the generation which went through the laceration of the ideals of the Modern Movement and the tragic events of the Second World War, but also from Savioli's profound knowledge of the architecture of that part of the sixteenth century. Sixteenth century urban utopias, which had been an intelligible framework of reference for the visions of "Città Ideale" during the war years, would be crushed by the dramatic situation after the war.

Keywords: cultural heritage, modern architecture, mannerism, Savioli.

1. Leonardo Savioli: a hypothetical reading

A fundamental role in the cultural education of the twentieth-century Florentine architect Leonardo Savioli (1917-1982) was played by his study of the artistic culture of the late sixteenth century. This can be seen from the many drawings of mannerist architectureⁱ made by Savioli between 1943 and 1946, and also from the collection of rare books on sixteenth century artists, published before the war, in his libraryⁱⁱ.

In the early 1940s, critics and working architects were only marginally interested in that part of the sixteenth century, and the very notion of mannerism was still quite vague. It was only after the second world war that an intense cultural debate spread from Italy around Europe, which for the first time clearly set out the terms of the discussion on mannerism, first by art critics and then, with a delay of about one decade, by architectural critics.

The attention paid by Savioli to late sixteenth century painting and architecture – the features of which were still awaiting definition at the time – must therefore be attributed exclusively to his individual quest for an artistic identity of his own. Savioli delved further into the study he had begun at the Faculty of Architecture in Florence under the guidance of the master Giovanni Michelucci, on his own and in solitude due to the war and to the illness he suffered from in his youth. This interest was mirrored in his drawings and articles for "Città Ideale" which he developed between 1943 and 1945, while Florence was living through the drama of the Second World War.

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Savioli sublimated the suffering of those years into an intense artistic inner reflection, which led to the urban visions – completed by writing – of a brilliant sixteenth century city, pervaded by echoes of Michelangelo, fragments and quotations of the works of Giorgio Vasari and Bartolomeo Ammannati. Reminiscences of those studies emerged clearly again in the artistic and architectural works made by the Florentine master between the 1950s and 1960s. Without any morphological reference, it would appear again through memories of some composing strategies acquired during his youth, contaminated by an interest for contemporary artistic and architectural culture.

Convergence in the 1960s between some of Savioli's architectural experimentation and certain architectural experiences of the sixteenth century therefore has distant roots, where the youthful passion for those artists who were the first to distance them from classicism mixed with biographical events.

Only to a marginal extent may we attribute this to the interest for mannerism which a whole generation shared in those years, and to the return of historical and critical studies on mannerism, marked in Italy by the publications of Giuliano Briganti, *La maniera italiana* (1961) and of Manfredo Tafuri, *L'architettura del Manierismo nel cinquecento europeo* (1966).



1. L. Savioli. *La città ideale*, 1943-1945 (ASF, dr. 99)



2. L. Savioli, *La città ideale*, 1945. (ASF, dr. 105)

It is likely that Savioli, who was as interested in painting as he was in architecture and at the time was a friend of the art critic Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, was aware of these publications, especially that of Briganti, which met with such success among artists as to inspire the work of the producer Pier Paolo Pasolini who, made the full length feature film *La ricotta* (1963) using actors to show two symbolic works of mannerism, Rosso Fiorentino's *Volterra Altarpiece* (1521) and Jacopo Pontormo's *Altarpiece of Saint Felicità* (1526-28). However, Savioli does not actually provide a critical interpretation able to consciously change the way he sees architecture. Rather, it is a matter of acquiring some artistic and existential attitudes typical of that period and which became part of the poetics of the Florentine master thanks to a chromosomatic affinity with the restless mannerists, whom he would be evoking twenty years later in his architecture, through a not necessarily conscious figurative channel.

The manifold aspects of sixteenth century mannerism emerge and coexist in Savioli's work; a conflicting relationship with history, a revolt against rules and contamination among different and often contrasting forms of expression, a troubled will to experiment in a constant quest for spatial and compositional solutions which are complex, not out of self-gratifying virtuosity, but out of an almost existential need for *knowledge*, which reveals the disquiet of those who do not enjoy the comfort of any absolute certainty.

2. Contaminations

Historical continuity is fundamental in Savioli's work; at all times, his interests focus "vertically" on artists of the past, and "horizontally" on contemporary culture, as he explains in a letter to his friend, the painter Emilio Vedovaⁱⁱⁱ. A key feature which progressively emerges, after the end of World War II, in Savioli's work is the mannerist split between the desire to locate his work within the certainty of a historical process and the doubt that such continuity had been lost forever. A first mannerist inspiration pervades the project for the Flower Market in Pescia (1949-1951), designed in partnership with Emilio Brizzi, Enzo and Giuseppe Gori and Leonardo Ricci. The classic equilibrium, derived from Brunelleschi, which is the characteristic feature of this project, a large basilica area covered by a single thin reinforced concrete vault, contrasts with the expressive force of the structural system. A sequence of exposed triangular blades made of reinforced concrete powerfully upholds the vault, which rising rhythmically at the springline, between one wedge and the next, draws a sequence of arcs which allows light to force its way inside.

The subtle tension which pervades this work, created by juxtaposing counterpoised values, classic composure – expressive vigour, is even more characteristic of the first project entirely by Savioli, his house and studio in Galluzzo, near Firenze (1950–1952). In this work, by extending the linguistic spectrum of modernity, the architect experiments new figurative territories where counterpoised discourses measure themselves dialectically against each other: rationalism versus the vernacular, architectural artificiality and naturalness, perspective versus bi-dimensional values. Dissolution of the shape of the mannerist matrix (Tafuri, 1966) blends with the most recent acquisitions of modernity, Wright's decomposition of the wall box into bi-dimensional slabs and the free facade of Le Corbusier.



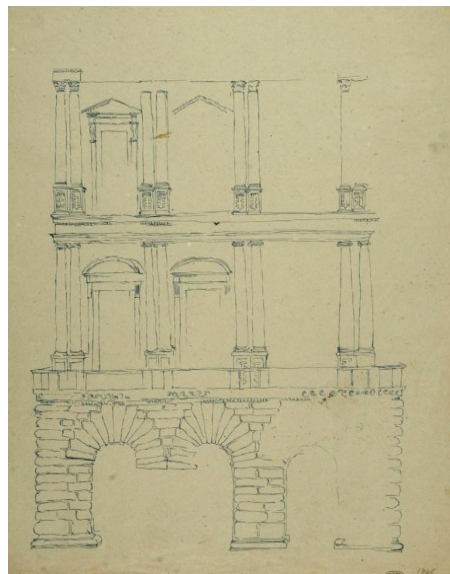
3. L. Savioli, *Flower Market, Pescia*, 1949-1951



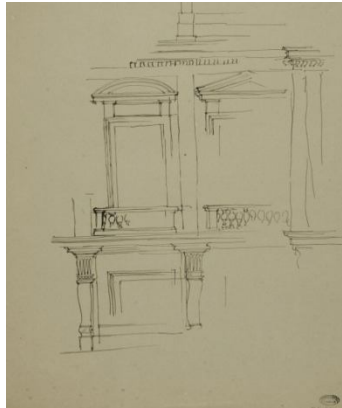
4. L. Savioli, *Home-studio*, Galluzzo 1950-1952

Savioli contrasts the mass of rustic stone of the two side walls which enclose and define the volume of the home-studio – with reference to a *natural order* and to the stereometry typical of Tuscan traditional architecture – with the architectural artifice of the *plane-surface* of the facade overlooking the garden, where geometrical composition of rectangular plaster-coated surfaces and glass surfaces are reminiscent of both Le Corbusier and of sixteenth century experiences^{iv}.

Savioli must have reflected for a long time on the typically mannerist contrast between nature and artifice, between rationality and irrationality, between natural order and classical order, as is revealed by his youthful drawings where, with an extraordinary skill in composition, the architect invents mannerist facades in which memories of the architectures of Donato Bramante and the Florentines Giorgio Vasari and Bartolomeo Ammannati blend together. The natural stone used on the sides of the home-studio contrast with the purist geometry of the front facing the garden, evoking the relationship between ashlar and architectural order.

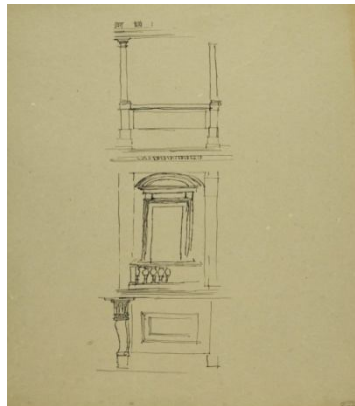


5. L. Savioli, *La città ideale*, 1943-1945. (ASF, dr. 98)

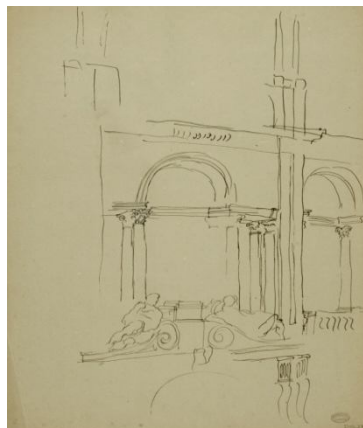


6. L. Savioli, *Mannerist Architecture*, n.d. (ASF, dr. 28)

The facade facing the garden, geometrically abstract, tends to lose its meaning of closure, of a limit between two spaces, and turns into a kind of filter between external and internal environmental values. It becomes a diaphragm wall suspended between two kinds of space, inner and outer, in the fundamental manner of late sixteenth century architecture^v acquired, perhaps, through careful observation of the worksite of the Uffizi, especially through spatial analysis of the street-court which the two main wings of Vasari's complex look over.



7. L. Savioli, *Mannerist Architecture*, n.d. (ASF, dr. 97)



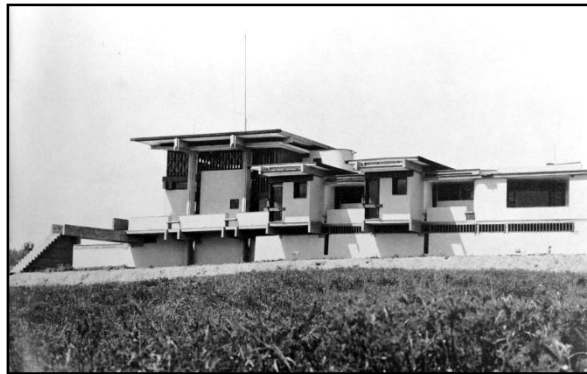
8. L. Savioli, *Mannerist Architecture*, n.d. (ASF, dr. 27)

Savioli integrates the quest for sign values, operating a breakdown by geometrical planes which tends to annul spatial depth, with a quest for perspective values: retreat from the plane of the facade of the ground floor and the two

deep excavations which symmetrically flank the candid plaster-coated frame overlooking the entrance, with its ambiguous evidence, eloquent yet mute, heavy yet suspended, which becomes the focus of the observer's attention^{vi}.

Composition of facades with rectangular frames alternating with openings appears both in late sixteenth century architecture and in that of Savioli, taking on different shapes at different times. Atmospheric and chromatic values prevail on the facade of the home-studio, according to a sensitivity which refers to the typical experience of the Venetian hinterland in the sixteenth century, while in Villa Sandroni in Arezzo (1962-1964), the plaster-coated frames which rhythmically mark the facade overlooking the garden take on the typical plastic evidence of sixteenth century Florence.

In the villa in Arezzo, the refined surface coated with white plaster contrasts with the rough grey surface of exposed cement, defining a theme which is clearly chromatic as well as compositional and which brings to mind the refined tradition of Florentine architecture, from Brunelleschi to Michelangelo.



9. L. Savioli, villa Sandroni, Arezzo, 1962-1964

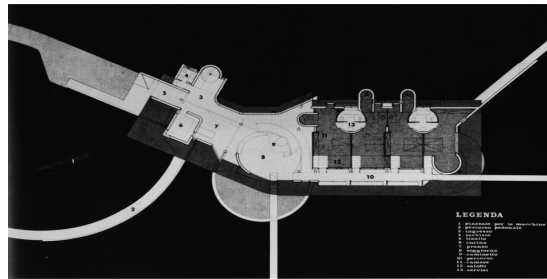
3. Polycentric space

The project of Villa Sandroni in Arezzo marks a fundamental turning point in Savioli's quest for layout and composition. The layout of the Flower Market made use of Renaissance models of space, governed by a clear central grid, and the home-studio in Galluzzo was still identified by a rectangular perimeter outlining its limits with certainty. On the contrary, in his project for the villa in Arezzo, Savioli began to experiment with a complex and articulated compositional structure, where an internal path connects independent functional nuclei.

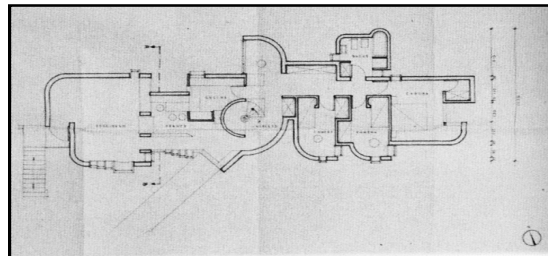
Savioli moves on from a unitary interpretation of space to a polycentric and experimental one, in a fashion typical of the late sixteenth century (Tafari, 1966, p. 117), the possibility of a synthesis between the central layout and the longitudinal one. Similar layouts are characteristic of later works, such as villa Taddei at San Domenico di Fiesole (1964-1966) and villa Mattolini at Castello (1969-1971).

In both projects, Savioli develops a longitudinal system over which, near midpoint, he places a symbolic and formal central element. In Villa Mattolini, this coincides with the living room, defined by a semi-circular seating area and by the fireplace. In Villa Taddei, it is identified by a sculpture-like helicoid staircase^{vii}. These areas are polarities which at once affirmed and denied, due to the presence of a process space which flows against them from one side. Along this itinerary, various plastic-spatial episodes follow each other: the functional blocks of the washrooms, the cells of the bedrooms projected towards the landscape, the windows made using prefabricated cement blocks and the stairs, also made of prefabricated blocks.

Savioli interprets in an entirely personal manner the fall of the anthropocentric vision of space developed by the anguished artists of mannerism. Knowledge of space in Savioli's villas as in late sixteenth century architecture no longer is the outcome of a unitary vision of a whole, but comes through the visitor's movement from one place to another. The architect thus develops in his architecture the sixteenth century theme of the 'corridor' or of the 'gallery', (Tafari, 1966, p. 13) assimilated perhaps through direct experience of the celebrated Florentine examples admired in his youth.



10. L. Savioli, Villa Mattolini, Castello, 1969-1971



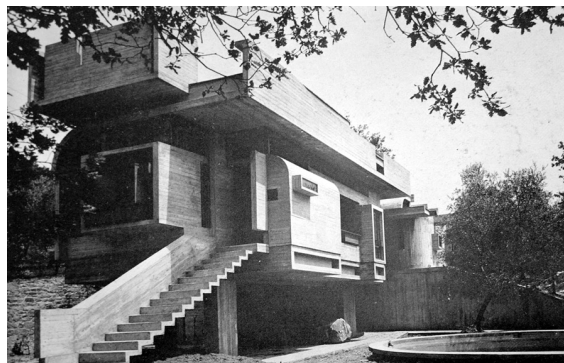
11. L. Savioli, Villa Taddei, San Domenico, Fiesole, 1964-1966

4. Re-compositions

During the 1950s, Savioli gradually started to depart from Alberti's concept of architecture as a unitary organism and in the 1960s he developed a markedly anti-naturalistic concept of architecture, following a path similar to that of the sixteenth century mannerists. The bold compositional practice with which Savioli experiments during those years' calls for the assembly of disjointed elements which are not blended together, but each preserves their own individuality and meaning.

This practice is stimulated both by interest in the most daring Anglo-Saxon and Japanese architectural experimentations and by a quest for an unconventional use of prefabrication. Widespread use of prefabricated components favours development of a compositional method which tends to break up the unity of the architectural organism, since it proceeds through an assembly of pre-built pieces, but also shows how the Florentine architect, generally speaking, belongs to the family of artists who, during the second decade of the sixteenth century, called into question the compositional unity which was the seal of the humanist interpretation of the world.

Integrity of shape, in Villa Taddei and in the apartment building in via Piagentina in Florence (1964-1966), is put to a test, Savioli having designed them as a set of assembled parts. Spaces crowded together in sculptural volumes made of exposed cement are mounted as autonomous, independent and separate parts which become meaningful only through a practice of *a posteriori* re-composition of the overall image^{viii}. Savioli immediately juxtaposes elements which are similar but on a different scale, such as the prefabricated blocks of the windows.



12. L. Savioli, Villa Taddei, S. Domenico, Fiesole, 1964-1966



13. L. Savioli, Villa Taddei, S. Domenico, Fiesole, 1964-1966

The architect takes a new look at the *ambientamento*^x- adaptation to a setting – of buildings sought for by the Florentine school, and abandons both the echoes of rural Tuscan construction tradition and the rarefied atmospheric values which he had experimented with in his project in Galluzzo. In the villa of San Domenico, matter expends pressing against form, its structures project themselves onto the surrounding nature in a plastically dramatic fashion reminiscent of Michelangelo. Villa Taddei separates itself with determination from the surrounding landscape, also thanks to the use of exposed cement, with an antagonistic relationship to the surrounding nature^x. On the entrance facade, Savioli once again proposes in plastic terms the compositional structure which he had experimented with ten years before in his own home-studio. The square window on the first floor thrusts out vigorously onto the underlying emptiness and on both side facades, and is replicated by a smaller, immediately juxtaposed square.

In his project for the tower in via Piagentina, Savioli comes to a very different conclusion. Here the architect tries to achieve, in a more stringent manner, a recovery of history which no longer takes place – as was the case fifteen years before in his Pescia project – through clarity of models, but by assembling fragments, a sediment deposited and re-processed by memory, according to an attitude which is shared by all the experiences which are called mannerist. Savioli has learned Michelangelo's lesson, and "matter begins to press outward" (Argan, 1967), but at the same time, the proliferation of plastic episodes, sources of light and balconies, assembled according to principle of paratacticity, produces the opposite effect of affirming the value of the *surface* on which they are distributed^{xi}. They confer greater evidence to the grey wall of the building, which becomes a true *support* on which Savioli places them and sets them next to each other in multiple combinations, with a method similar to the one which, during the same years, the architect was experimenting with in some of his graphic and pictorial works.



14. L. Savioli, An apartment building in Via Piagentina, Florence 1964-1966

The sculptural elements which spread out across the facades of the building, crowding together and spreading out, rest in the pauses of the reinforced concrete wall which becomes a full and indispensable part of a complex and anguished composition.

Savioli contrasts the monochrome and rough surface of the volume of the tower with the painstaking search for details, the delicate parapets consisting of the crossing of slender tubular profiles and wooden slat window frames. It is impossible to get an overall grasp of the image of the building from any single point of view. It can only be understood in stages, through the re-composition of distinct episodes, in an 'unstable' manner (Tafuri 1966). This project opens the path to Savioli's last architectural experimentations, where history is completely dissolved in studies of urban macro-structures, where Savioli's graphic and pictorial sensitivity will progressively prevail.

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ⁱ L. Savioli's drawings are kept at the State Archive of Florence in the Fondo Leonardo Savioli.

ⁱⁱ The inventory of books belonging to L. Savioli has been drawn up by the Tuscan Regional Authority. Among books on sixteenth century artists, with autograph note of ownership by L. Savioli and the date 1944: Gamba, C., (1943). *La scultura di Michelangelo*. Firenze; Bertini, A. (1943). *Michelangelo fino alla Sistina*. Firenze; Rusconi, A. J. (1943). *Le tombe medicee di Michelangelo*. Firenze; Becherucci, L. (1943). *Disegni del Pontormo*. Firenze. Without note of ownership, Becherucci, L. (1949). *Manieristi toscani*. Firenze.

ⁱⁱⁱ ASF. FS, *carteggio, Lettere di Leonardo Savioli*, p. 38.

^{iv} Rowe (1976) suggests an analogy between certain works by Le Corbusier and sixteenth century architecture.

^v Hager identifies as one of the key points of mannerist architecture, the ambiguous nature of certain spatial systems as to how they open between outdoor and indoor space, in such works as Giorgio Vasari's Uffizi (Tafuri, 1966, p. 26; p. 64).

^{vi} The compositional score of the facade overlooking Savioli's home-studio replicates the compositional pattern which, according to Rowe (1976), is shared by Palladio's House in Vicenza (1572), the Casino Zuccari in Florence (1578), Villa Schwob by Le Corbusier at La Chaux-de-Fonds (1918).

^{vii} According to the German critic, the helicoid staircase, frequent in mannerist architecture, should be the architectural paradigm of the *snake figure* in painting. (Tafuri, 1966, p. 13).

^{viii} Rowe (1976). This manner of perception, according to C. Rowe, is shared by certain architectures of the Modern Movement and sixteenth century architecture.

^{ix} *Ambientamento* means the intention to integrate buildings in a harmonious manner with their surroundings. In post-war Italian architecture, the issue of *ambientamento* was as fundamental as a means for freeing architecture from Rationalism, especially in central Italy, due to excessive compromises between Rationalism and the Fascist regime.

^x It was Hager who pointed out the conflicting relationship between mannerist architecture and the environment. (Tafuri, 1966, p. 25).

^{xi} Tafuri underlines the evidence of the surface in contrast with the proliferation of plastic episodes in the case of architectures by Alessi and Tibaldi. (Tafuri, 1966, p. 70).