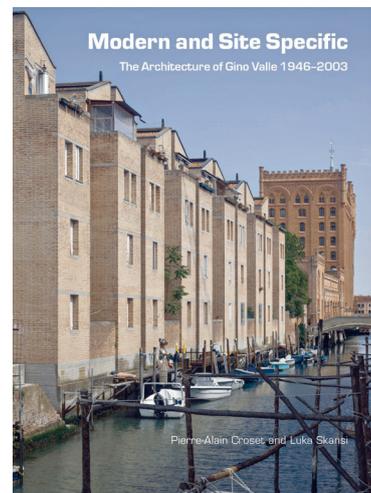


Modern and Site Specific: The Architecture of Gino Valle 1945-2003

Kenneth Frampton

Book Review / REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

**Modern and Site Specific:
The Architecture of Gino Valle 1945-2003**
By Pierre-Alain Croset and Luka Skansi
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100 b/w and 150 color illustrations
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This study of the life and work of Gino Valle immediately conveys the fact that there was more than one Gino Valle, as it analyses his extensive architectural career with the architect perpetually *en route*, as the title suggests, from one site to the next. Although it is invidious to begin a review with a critique of the publisher, it is nonetheless unfortunate that, originally published in Italian in 2010 by Electa, the format of the English version should be so much smaller. It is regrettable that the standard maintained by Electa in their “Documenti di architettura” series could not be matched by the pioneering English architectural publisher Lund Humphries. This reduction in both the length of the book and its format has necessitated the

elimination of certain works, which, while they are still cited, are represented so that one does not understand their full worth. I have in mind two projects from the early '60s in particular, namely Valle's sublime proposal for a theatre in the center of Udine and an equally remarkable hospital designed for Portogruaro in Venice, which was the responsibility of the young British architect Donald Appleyard who, at the time, worked closely with Gino and Nani Valle.

In spite of this shortfall, the authors of this study, Pierre-Alain Croset and Luka Skansi, have made a significant cut into the labyrinthine complexity of Valle's work which was never more enigmatic than when, as a young artist/architect, having won the prestigious Bergamo Prize for painting in 1943, he should spontaneously dump the entire body of his work into a Venetian canal. Thereafter he studied in the Istituto Universitario di Architettura in Venice from which, after graduating in 1948, he will enter his father's practice in Udine in the company of his architect sister Nani. One of the most promising works by the young Valle during this period was the compact 2-storey Cooperativa Muratori housing built in Lignano in 1949. During this period Valle was somewhat influenced by Aalto as we may judge from the rubble-stone base and timber superstructure of a kindergarten that he designed for the studio in the following year.

In 1951 he went to the United States ostensibly to study with Walter Gropius at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Amongst other things, this two-year residency enabled him to experience of the work of Frank Lloyd Wright first hand, whose influence is surely evident in the spa that he realized at Arta at the foot of the Carnic Alps in 1964. There is surely something Wrightian about the stepped cantilevering concrete brackets that carry the monolithic frame under the pyramidal, tiled roof that crowns the labyrinthine pitched roof sequence covering the rest of the structure.

The authors proceed to outline the extremely varied *parti pris* that characterized Valle's work throughout this early period, from the modular, prefabricated reinforced concrete paneling of the Sipre Plant in 1963 to the diagonally ribbed metal sheet which he employed for the cladding of the Fantoni plant built at Osoppo at the millennium. As the authors put it:

Pluralism and experimentation were salient features of Valle's character and he enjoyed playing at changing identity. Rather than imposing his own identity, his "authorial" mark, what was important to him was to leave behind testimony of the interpretation of a place, a situation, a context, referring himself on many occasions to his very personal interpretation of a famous aphorism of Kahn: "The place expects you to discover that is already there. But it has to be found, up until then the place does not exist." As Kahn would have put it, "the project is what a place is waiting for."

From the early '60s onwards, Valle built one single-storey, top-lit, windowless industrial shed after another, not only for the Zanussi Rex corporation, for

whom he built warehouses all over Tuscany and as far south as Rome, but also for Geatti at Terenzano in 1974, which was graced, as with the Rex warehouses, with full-height super-graphics, designed by the studio graphist Alfredo Carnelutti. Much of this work enabled Valle to devote his attention to one-off, regional set-pieces such as his neo-vernacular Casa Quaglia at Sutrio of 1954, with its square plan, massive pitched roof and eight supporting, two-storey, load bearing brick piers at the four corners of the square. This will be followed by a lightweight, spaceframe, metal roof spanning clear over the banking hall of the Cassa di Risparmio in Udine of 1955 and a *tour de force* in fair-faced *in situ* concrete, one-storey high, which Valle produced for the Arti Grafiche Chiesa printing works of 1959-60, the quality of which depends upon it being set on top of a precise brick base of the same height. Ever so often he would transcend the everyday as in the calm, harmonic eight-storey, brick-faced, all but Swedish mixed-use apartment block that he realized in Udine from 1958-60. These works came into being during the glorious, intensely fertile first twenty years of his career, that came to an unexpected still inexplicable conclusion with two masterworks; the brilliant, bridge-like Zanussi offices in Porcia, resolved as a definitive project in 1959, and built over the next three years, and the square concrete pergola of the Monument to the Resistance, completed in the center of Udine in 1967. Croset and Skansi are at their best in the critical appraisal of the genesis of this work when they write:

Already in the first sketches, the monument was split into two parts, one of the earth and one of the water, while later the elements of the air – the sky framed by the iron sculpture of Dino Basaldella, also emerged. In the successive projects, the break of the circle was no longer based on symbolism; there was also a functional motivation that led Valle to establish a pedestrian crossing in the square, a path whose tracing was associated with the memory of the “black sign of the streetcar on the white plaza on a snowy day.”

It is clear that a number of northern Italian architects were to influence Valle’s work during this period, above all Carlo Scarpa, who is a ubiquitous presence, followed surely by Franco Albini who was patently an influence on Valle’s five-storey infill, steel-framed commercial building on via Mercatovecchio inserted into the street fabric of Udine in 1963.

At this point, towards the end of the ‘60s, the scale of Valle’s work fundamentally changes as he was commissioned with one large megastructural work after another, from the Administrative Center at Pordenone, realized over a ten-year period between 1972-82, to the IBM Distribution Center at Basiano of 1983 and the Fantoni industrial complex finished in 1986. Thereafter, he will never have an opportunity to scale back the size of his commissions as he become renowned for specializing in medium-rise, bureaucratic mass-forms designed in the service of international banks and corporations of ever-increasing size, including

public institutions such as law courts. In many instances, these megaforms were invariably covered with institutional square windows throughout and situated in the non-place of the megalopolis. Of necessity they often had to create their own civic contexts, as in Valle's brilliant but unrealized 1992 proposal for IBM offices in Segrate. Moreover, on the few occasions when the preexisting urban context would cause Valle to relate to the surroundings through his modelling of the façade, it had to be something of exceptional caliber, such as in Haussmann's Paris, with his large infill block on the Avenue Victor Hugo he designed for the Société Générale. The only break in these unending megastructural commissions were Valle's occasional forays into the field of social housing, first in the medium-rise seven-storey duplex slab block that he designed for Udine and then in the low-rise, low-cost housing that he designed for San Stefano di Buia (1977-79) and, finally, with the dense settlement that he designed for an extremely tight site in the Giudecca in Venice, which in retrospect may even be seen as the swansong of the European flirtation with low-rise, high density housing, dating from the early '60s.

One of the great virtues of this study are the extraordinarily detailed footnotes, particularly in the early chapters, testifying to the dedication of the authors in pursuing their research not only with respect to the Valle archive, but also with regard to the reception of Valle's work across his lifetime, subject as it was to continual assessment and interpretation in Italian and other European journals and books, etc. Last but not least, the English version is graced with a touching introduction by Joseph Rykwert who knew Valle exceptionally well and who first introduced me to his work.

Kenneth Frampton is Ware Professor of Architecture at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation, where he has taught since 1972. He was trained as an architect at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London, and has worked as an architect and as an architectural historian and critic. In addition to Columbia, Frampton has taught at a number of leading institutions around the world including the Royal College of Art in London, the ETH in Zurich, the Berlage Institute in Amsterdam, the EPFL in Lausanne and the Accademia di Architettura in Mendrisio. Frampton is the author of *Modern Architecture and the Critical Present* (1980), *Studies in Tectonic Culture* (1995), *American Masterworks* (1995), *Le Corbusier* (2001), *Labour, Work & Architecture* (2005), and, most recently, *L'altro Movimento Moderno* (2015) and *A Genealogy of Modern Architecture: Comparative Critical Analysis of Built Form* (2015). He is currently at work on an expanded fifth edition of *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. Frampton's teaching was the subject of the 2017 exhibition *Educating Architects: Four Courses by Kenneth Frampton* at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, where his archive is held. Among his numerous awards and recognitions are the 1991 ACSA-AIA Topaz Medallion for Excellence in Architectural Education (awarded jointly every year since 1976, by the American Institute of Architects and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture), the *Metropolis* magazine recognition as a "Gamechanger" in January 2018, and the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale. Email: kf7@columbia.edu