

At the Root of the History of Architecture, Biography

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Paviol, Sophie. *Giuseppe Terragni : l'invention d'un espace*, Gollion : Infolio, 2006, (Archigraphy)

- 1 Biography has known its moments of glory and its moments of disgrace, but it has now regained a place in the historical genre, as is well illustrated by the discussions it has bestirred, and the various pertinent books that have been published. Three books, in particular, have just been written about architects: Fernand Pouillon (1912-1986), Georges-Henri Pingusson (1894-1978), and Giuseppe Terragni (1904-1943), written by authors with quite different careers. Danièle Voldman, author of the Pouillon book, is a historian; as director of research at the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research), she has long been interested in the history of urban reconstruction in the wake of the Second World War. Simon Texier, author of the second volume, is an art historian who is here publishing a thesis supervised by Bruno Foucart. This is also the case with Sophie Paviol, who has worked with Hubert Damisch at the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales. Another conspicuous difference is the fact that there are already several books about Terragni and Pouillon, but little indeed on Pingusson, apart from studies about some of his buildings, such as the famous Hôtel Latitude 43 in St. Tropez, and those he designed in Lorraine.

- 2 Pouillon's life reads like a novel. The figure cut by the architect probably lent itself to fiction, consumed as he was by a desire to build, and calling on his extraordinary energy to accomplish major construction feats in Marseilles, Algeria, Iran, and the Paris region... while at the same time reckoning that the urgent nature and quality of a construction site could justify turning a blind eye to certain financial and administrative limitations, a stance that even led to him being arrested in 1961, and tried in court. As a result he was written about in articles in the mainstream press, and he also published books which contributed to his reputation, one of which was *Les Pierres sauvages*, appearing in 1965 (Paris : Le Seuil), another his *Memoirs*, which came out in 1968 (Paris : Le Seuil). But his renown and his stature were also problematic: dealing with such a disparaged and novelistic character, it was easy to become both censorious and hagiographic, and all the more so because the sources used by D. Voldman are largely from private collections made available by Pouillon's close friends. The portrait she draws, on the other hand, is measured and precise. It sheds light on the blurred nature of the *Memoirs*, and proposes an approach differing from the methods adopted by previous authors, focusing on the buildings built. What interested Voldman was not so much the architecture as the architect. Not that Pouillon's works are absent from the book: the processes involved by their commissioning are described in detail, their material style is described, and most are illustrated. But the thread of Voldman's study is Pouillon's professional activity, and her goal is to describe the "cross-fertilization of an individual destiny and the development of a whole society". She responds all the better to this because she is well served by her knowledge of the cogwheels of the State and the architectural profession in the postwar period. Pouillon appears in the background of a Provençal family establishment and its networks in the building industry, then of architectural circles in Marseilles, and the policies introduced to encourage property development in the wake of the war, and lastly of French Algeria jolted by uprisings, when he undertook the design of his earliest housing units in that country, and independent Algeria, in the latter years in which he plied his trade. We discover his life, but also a slice of the history of the architect's craft "caught as ever between the freelance status and the advantages and conveniences of public commissions", in a France that was up against the various problems implicit in reconstruction and decolonization.
- 3 The books by S. Texier and S. Paviol, conversely, give works pride of place. Their titles explain their status. The first, *Georges-Henri Pingusson, architecte (1894-1978)*, is a biography whose structure is based on a chronological classification of projects. The second, *Giuseppe Terragni : l'invention d'un espace*, is an essay whose focus is the study of four major works by the architect: the Novocomum, the Casa del fascio and the Sant-Elia nursery school in Como, as well as the Danteum. These two works share another point in common: they both express interpretations peculiar to their authors--in one, it is a question of styles, in the other, spaces. S. Texier makes comparisons between Pingusson's works and those of architects he chooses in history; he calls upon contemporary writers, transporting the reader into a stunning ballet of comparisons and quotations. S. Paviol uses morphological analysis, as it is practised in schools of architecture, to extricate from each project the links between "spatial and structural devices". They both share the same liking for these architects' writings. In *L'invention d'un espace*, we find translations of four articles by Gruppo 7, to which Terragni belonged, and in *Georges-Henri Pingusson* extracts from his writings which make us want to read those still slumbering in archival crates. But these two books are quite different. One is large, generously illustrated, and based on

an analysis and breakdown of the archival collections left behind by Pingusson; it also offers an overall view of his career, which shows the variety of his output and the quality of his research. The other book, with a smaller format, and underwritten by drawings that are as demonstrative as the texts, gives an overview, by way of brief chronologies, of Terragni's dazzling career and his works, but the quintessence lies in the commentaries on his projects.

- 4 At the origin of the history of architecture, biography, as penned by Vasari's plume, was a history of people. Subsequently came the desire to deliver a knowledge of the building works that was just as great as knowledge of their author—at the risk of affecting the analysis of his projects and works to bring out the features of his personality. Added to this was the requirement to incorporate his life every bit as much as his output within an historical context, the better to understand his values. Today, with a rebirth of biography, encouraged by the ever greater number of architects' archival collections, its expressions are varied, but its goals and its methods remain under-broached in the current debate about this genre. It nevertheless raises issues other than the biography of the political person, and that of the intellectual, through this powerful tension that exists between the artist's life and the presentation of his work—and this merits further discussion.