



Towards  
a New Agenda  
for Design  
in the  
Mediterranean  
Region



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International, peer-reviewed,  
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### **PAD**

via Festa del Perdono 1 – 20122 Milano – Italy  
via Roma 171 – 90133 Palermo – Italy  
info@padjournal.net – editors@padjournal.net

### **Publisher**

**Aiap Edizioni** – via A. Ponchielli 3 – 20129 Milano – Italy  
aiap@aiap.it – www.aiap.it

PAD © ISSN 1972-7887

#16, June 2019

**www.padjournal.net**

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# CONNECTING DESIGN AND CULTURE OF TERRITORIES

# Mediterranean Critical Regionalism. A Methodological Concept Linked to the Southern Space Designs of Post-War II

**Sara Coscarelli Comas**

EINA, Centre Universitari de Disseny i Art de Barcelona

## **Keywords**

Mediterranean Architecture, Critical Regionalism, Barcelona, Post War II, Kenneth Frampton

## **Abstract**

During the Spanish post-war period, an adaptation of the design processes of the Milanese architectural imaginary is carried out by a group of architects related to the Group R founded by Coderch.

In this context, some vicissitudes are detected of a critical regionalist positioning that the architect and critic Kenneth Frampton theorizes during the eighties and who conceives as an attitude. It is applicable to any interstice that belongs to a decentralized context and therefore can be treated as generic.

As in the case of Milan and Barcelona, the critical regionalism refers to those Post-World War II architectures that take their traditional vernacular tradition as a model and reinterpret it to adapt it to the current reality and to the progressive criteria of the architectural modernity, fleeing from all folkloric connotation, but also from the lack of humanity of the International Style.

The architecture of the Modern Movement is understood as a decisive episode in the modern history of culture. It is conceived as an active way of opposing Francoist eclecticism while seeing a synthetic system capable of explaining the most varied programs from visual criteria that express singularity and identity through architecture and its historical continuity with its own past.

## 1. Introduction

During the Spanish post-war period, an adaptation of the design processes of the Milanese architectural imaginary is carried out by a group of architects related to the Group R and of which José Antonio Coderch (1913-1984) is the first referent. These architects assimilate the *modus operandi* of their Milanese counterparts, Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1909-1962), Ignazio Gardella (1905-1999) and Franco Albini (1905-1977), among others, but they accommodate it to their specifically Mediterranean context.

Following the celebration of the *V Assembly of Architects* (RED, 1949), held in May 1949 in Barcelona, and continuing with Gruppo 7 (Costanzo, 2004) and GATCPAC (Pizza, 2006), the fifties will review the tradition in Milan and Barcelona as a point of tension between the International Style and the false historicisms. The normalization of Milanese vernacularism together with the new search for material quality above the imposed formalisms will become the exponents of the use of Catalan tradition. Its architecture will no longer seek the symbiosis between respect for tradition and the Modern Movement, and it will create a personal way of looking for a constantly changing modernity that will gradually take on an identity of its own.

## 2. Suspicion of a Mediterranean Critical Regionalism

As in the case of Milan and Barcelona, Critical Regionalism refers to those Post-World War II architectures that take their traditional vernacular tradition as a model of reinterpretation to adapt it to the current reality and to the progressive criteria of the Architectural modernity, fleeing from any folkloric

connotation, but also from the lack of humanity of the International Style. The importance of the region, understood as the heritage of the being that lives there, is fundamental to understand its conception. Heidegger's *being-in-the-place* concept (Barañano, 1990), in which human existence makes sense when that being is identified with a specific place, has just given its existential and phenomenological dimension. Kenneth Frampton (1930), professor at Columbia University in New York, and theorist of the regionalist concept during the eighties, already states Coderch's participation in this Critical Regionalism: "The career of the Barcelona architect J.A. Coderch has been a regionalist inasmuch as it has oscillated, until the recent day, between a Mediterraneanized modern vernacular brick first formulated in its eight-storey ISM apartment block built in Barcelona on the National Walk in 1951 (...) and the avant-gardist (...)." (Frampton, 1980, p. 243) About *the Urbanization "Les Forques"* (1946) he writes: "It is difficult to distinguish between the earthwork and the main body of the house." (p. 244) And regarding the *Ugalde House* (1951) he defends: "Coderch's early domestic way achieves its first truly convincing formulation in the famous Ugalde House" (Frampton, 2002, p. 7). According to Frampton, Critical Regionalism is a concept that must be understood as an attitude, a category that aims to establish a direct link between the architectural fact and the place where it is built. This critical regionalist attitude should therefore be applicable anywhere in the world where there are decentralized interstices and with a strong identity weight. Therefore, this first conclusion leads to the suspicion of the existence of specific characteristics of the Critical Regionalism typical of the Mediterranean context.

In fair correspondence, Mediterranean Critical Regionalism, due to its strong roots in the corresponding southern context, but also to the emancipating processes of Modern Movement architecture, should not be based on merely formal criteria when it comes to unifying the works architectural elements that belong to it, but should exercise the procedure to determine this architectural method of the corresponding context. The importance of the human being in Critical Regionalism, as a recipient of the place where he has to live, should still be emphasized more in the Mediterranean Critical Regionalism, where the link between being and place exceeds the physical limit of its existence and has always been a source of inspiration for writers, painters and philosophers of all times and of all places.

### **3. The Milanese continuity outside the International Style**

At the end of World War II, Europe has two major issues to solve. The first one is to deal with the issue of survival; the second one is to guarantee a place to accommodate the population after massive destruction of cities. The notable individual creations of figures such as Le Corbusier (1887-1965), Alvar Aalto (1898-1976), Jorn Utzon (1918-2008) and Arne Jacobsen (1902-1971), among others, neutral buildings that provide solutions to the problem of accommodation, hygiene and function, but which are lacking in humanity and urban sensibility. This emptiness, however, cannot be filled with pre-war versions since they did not take into account variations in climate, culture or topography. Fortunately, Italy did not expel its main architects during the war and, therefore, it has a modern and strong architectural culture to be able to re-



sume the activity. This fact, along with the aid received from the United States as a result of the Marshall Plan, allows the resurgence through the public program INA-Casa (Di Biagi, 2001) to reconstruct the cities.

The Milanese architects, own of the third generation (Giedion, 1941, p. 642), will end up disengaging from all the institutions that defend the International Style, especially after 1959, on the occasion of the XI and last CIAM, held in Otterlo, but also as a result of the exchange of articles between Rogers and the English critic Reyner Banham (1922-1988), in which the latter attacks the Milanese architecture is called by Banham Neolibertarian and historicist (Banham, 1959). Its architecture will take on a new direction that will lead it to design based on regional and vernacular tendencies, keeping technological advances and the progress that has enabled the Modern Movement. Their architects will go in search of renovated and true sources of legitimation in the real people of each district, in the popular architecture without architects, in the common sense. Led by Rogers, the Milanese architecture will normally assume the values of tradition and the urban context, where the environmental pre-existences (Rogers, 1958, p. 9) legitimize its production, while deepening in the method and not so much in formal references to internationalist dogmatism. This continuity will be reconstructed through a great effort to re-weave the broken threads of speech spearheaded by the greatest figures of Italian rational architecture: Terragni, Persico and Pagano. (Rogers, 1958, p. 11).

This attempt by the Milanese architecture to recover the traditional forms brings the best architects to realize an important methodological election, typical of the way of building in the

past; that is, the treatment of each project as an unrepeatable event. The clearest example is Torre Velasca (1951-1958) by the BBPR studio (Figure 1), which represented the originality and excellence of the difficulties in developing the urbanization issues of the current city on a certain dimension.



Figure 1. Studio BBPR, *Torre Velasca* (1951-1958). Own archive.

#### **4. From the Francoist diplomatic isolation to the empowerment of the concept of Catalan modernity**

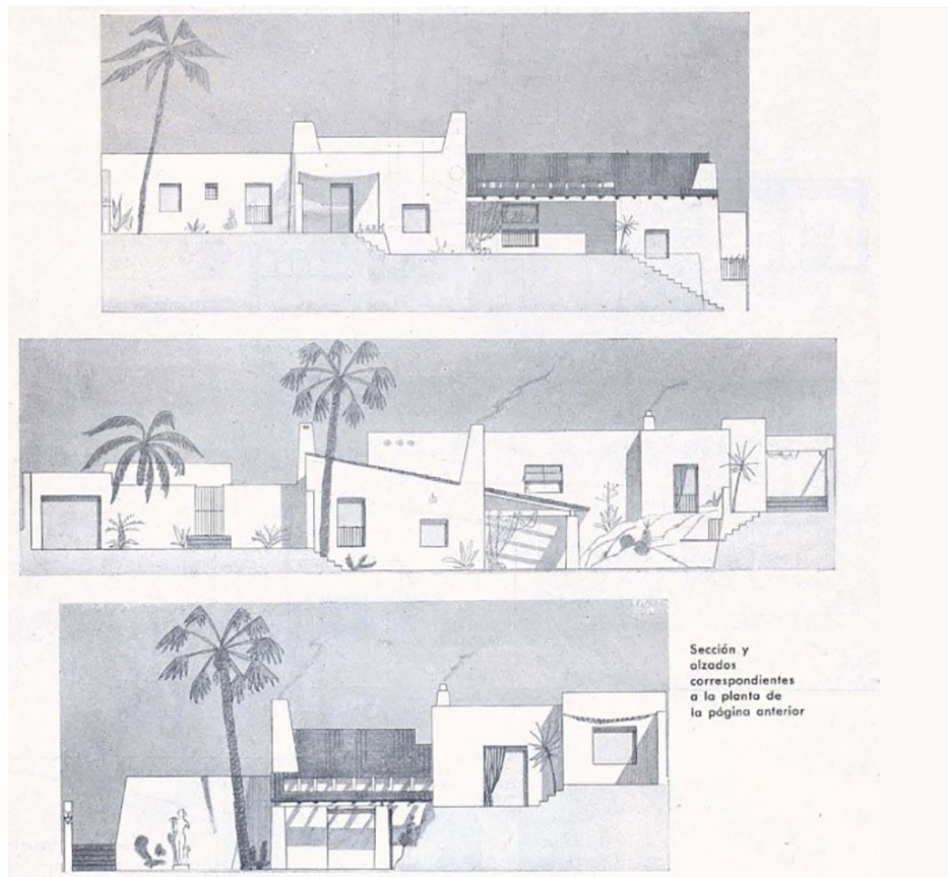
While Milan, and all of Italy, continues with the reconstruction, Spain is immersed in the midst of Franco's dictatorship, repressed and far from Europe. The end of the Civil War is a turning point in the path of Spanish architecture. The feeling of success is introduced immediately in a new type of state

architecture, based on the demonstration of the power of the nation; For that reason, own resources of the time of the Spanish empire are used.

Although most of the members of GATCPAC had been exiled since 1939, there are young architects, among them the Catalans Coderch, Valls and Josep Maria Sostres (Esteban: 2000), moved by the need to find architectural references and Stylists unrelated to prevailing academic classicism, who subscribe to journals in other countries, travel and, ultimately, restart an exchange of material with the exterior that will suppose the resumption of the path to architectural modernity. Through official state magazines there is a discreet shout of reaction to a type of architecture that, due to imposition and anachronism, has nothing to do with what happens outside the limits of the country nor does it reflect its own character. These newspapers are timidly including articles referring to foreign issues, although it is not until 1947 when the first reference to an issue is published that will become one of the main arguments of the architectural debate of the fifties: “What style should the Spanish architecture?” (RED, 1947). As of that moment, in almost all the numbers of the B.D.G.A. Some text related to the subject will appear. And in the same way, the theme around the stylistic tendencies of Spanish architecture will also be published in the National Review of Architecture (RNA).

Some steps are being taken to ensure a slight economic liberalization and a certain international openness. However, public initiative in representative buildings is virtually absent in Barcelona in those years of centralism and economic penalties. The only exception is the only residential housing by Coderch

and Valls, such as the *Les Forques* (1945) Urbanization project that was to be located in Sitges (Figure 2). Although it is never built, it is the first and most important public demonstration of young architects, who are then looking for an obvious inspiration in the logic typical of the Mediterranean peoples, where it is already possible to detect a compositional attempt that allows them to dilute the vernacular, folkloric and nostalgic mannerisms so common at the time.



**Figure 2.** José Antonio Coderch and Manuel Valls, *Residential area Les Forques* (1945), Sitges. Sections. *Cuadernos de Arquitectura*, nº 6, Barcelona, 1946.

Thus, the assumption of the models of rationalism and the meditated recovery of traditional forms finds concrete expression towards the last years of the 40's in many projects presented in the ideas contest convened by the COACB to solve the problem of housing , “The problem of economic housing in Barcelona” (Moragas, 1961), which will be the meeting point for all the architects that will create Group R. But the novelty goes beyond the simple architectural fact, since the ideas of the Award-winning work is about economic, social and urban issues linked to the reality of that specific context. And so is expressed by one of its members, Antoni De Moragas: “The fact was that we found that architecture, which is why it is utilitarian, cannot be disregarded in any way whatsoever in each historical moment” (Moragas, 1961, p. 71).

In this sense, the conferences held in Barcelona in May 1949 on the occasion of the *V Assembly of Architects*, where Gio Ponti (1891-1979) and Alberto Sartoris (1901-1998) are invited, along with those that would take place in the following years, the one of Bruno Zevi (1918-2000) in 1950, Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) in 1951 or Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-1983) in 1952, marked the definitive opening of the Catalan capital in Europe and in the world. Coderch is the great Catalan discovery from the Assembly. Gio Ponti is astonished by his works, which he knows in person during his stay in Barcelona; and returning to Milan, he carries out an exclusive support campaign on the pages of his magazine *Domus*. Ponti publishes a series of articles in which Coderch's work is always the counterpoint to several international proposals. One of the most important article is dedicated to *Casa Garriga-Nogués* (1947) in Sitges (Figure 3), titled *Due ville a Sitges* (Ponti, 1949), published few months after the Assembly.





**Figure 3.** José Antonio Coderch and Manuel Valls, *Garriga-Nogués House* (1947), Sitges. AH Francesc Català-Roca-AHCOAC Archive.

Here the architect observes how Coderch and Valls renounce the volumetric virtuosity to arrive at a compact distribution that in the facade is received with an almost classic, tripartite and apparently symmetrical composition, in which the porches are recovered, the large terrace of the first floor, the cover to two waters and the latticework; all of them elements of an unquestionable Mediterranean origin.



**Figure 4.** José Antonio Coderch and Manuel Valls, *Spanish Pavilion at the XI Triennale* (1951), Milan. Images and layout. AH Francesc Català-Roca-AHCOAC Archive.

In the same *Domus* number, the following article is also related to the work of the Catalan genius, in this case it is *Progetti d'abitazione in Sitges* (Ponti, 1949), a quite exhaustive analysis of “admiration of the urbanization project of *Les Forques*” (pp. 7-11).

It is worth noting the realization of two works, built in 1951 by Coderch and Valls, and that will have major repercussions for the future of the Mediterranean Critical Regionalism. The first is the *Spanish Pavilion* (1951) that the regime is responsible for the IX Triennale of Milan (Figure 4), and which is worth the *Premio Internazionale*, which will be the definitive launch of Spanish architecture, and, therefore, Catalan, on the international terrain. In the moderate and prudent

environment in which Catalan architects work at the end of the 1940s, organic-realistic and popular type solutions are, in fact, the most cautious and the least compromising among those allowed by the dictatorship. Therefore, participating in an international exhibition that proposes the exhibition of the contributions of the arts to the elevation of the material and spiritual conditions of modern civilization, the Catalan architects and their advisers opt for a heterogeneous selection but revealing Spanish modernity. On a surface of abstract wooden blinds, it appears a combination of photographs of Mediterranean architecture and works by Gaudí, while on the adjacent wall there is a Romanesque painting and a medieval sculpture of the Virgin; finally, in a kind of table of curved shapes and in the two remaining walls of the room, a selection of works by contemporary artists such as Oteiza, Ferrant, Guinovart and Miró is proposed, together with craft objects that show the news of traditional forms. Despite the success and the surprise that the pavilion woke up with this internationally unpublished image of the country, surprising coincidences with the approaches of the 1930s (RED, 1951) are recorded.

The other fundamental work carried out by Coderch and Valls is the *Instituto Social de la Marina in Barceloneta Housing Building* (1951) (Figure 5), where this adaptation of modern architecture is clearly based on the reinterpretation of Mediterranean vernacular languages and the use of organic and expressionist forms. The idea of privacy is explored from a plant, unpublished until then, in which, by losing the orthogonality, a great wealth of spaces is achieved on a surface of small dimensions, thus creating a double skin





**Figure 5.** José Antonio Coderch and Manuel Valls, *ISM apartment block* built in Barcelona in the Paseo Nacional (1951), Barcelona. AH Francesc Català-Roca-AHCOAC Archive.

with galleries protected by latticework. In fact, this work has strong similitudes with the *Borsalino Housing Building* (1951-1953) in Alessandria, by Ignazio Gardella (Figure 6), and constitutes the beginning of several comparisons that will be carried out by critics of the time between the work of the leading architects of this period, Milanese and Catalans (Coscarelli, 2013).



**Figure 6.** Ignazio Gardella, *Borsalino Housing* (1952), Alessandria. Image from own archive. Layout from Gardella Archive.

Coderch will always remain outside of any type of militancy to dedicate itself exclusively to the exercise of the profession of architect. The line he chooses is the one that leads more directly to the recovery of modernity, personal timing, appropriate to new and specific realities, and that, therefore, clearly connects with the Mediterranean Critical Regionalism: “Discover who there is behind each building, attending moral values of teachers, learning from them; Think less in architecture and more in the office of architect; Prioritize the dedication to success, goodwill to ambition” (Coderch, 1961, p. 21).

The priority of the subject that projects with respect to the object that comes out of his hands and the conviction that only the architecture as an activity can correct the mistakes that his institution causes as a discipline, form the reference framework of his attitude.

#### **4. Coalitions and alliances between the Lombard and Catalan context**

During the whole of the 1950s, relations with Milan through Coderch are further intensified, which are often invited to meetings of the CIAM and after TEAM X; but also through Federico Correa (1924), the initiator of the true physical contact with the Lombard architects; and Oriol Bohigas (1925) and the influence received from the theoretical work of Rogers from *Casabella*, where the accomplishments of the Milanese masters spread: Albini, Gardella, the BBPR studio.

Based on these contacts, relationships are rapidly multiplied and trips to Italy by Catalan architects begin. For example, Correa and Alfonso Milà (1924-2009) are also strongly convinced of this historical review. In the summer of 1952, thanks to the relationship they have with Coderch – and this one with international architects –, they attend the summer courses that the CIAM makes in Venice, where they know, besides Gardella, Albini and Rogers, also Vittorio Gregotti (1927). In a chapter of his memoirs Bohigas relates a dialogue maintained with Correa that reveals important enigmas on the subject:

The contact with the Italians came with the CIAM of Venice, through Coderch, right? - Yes, clear When we started working with him, he was doing the project for the Spanish pavilion at the

51st Milan Triennial. (...) Coderch has now met Gio Ponti in Barcelona in the year 49 (...) and in Milan he met Ignazio Gardella, to Franco Albini, etc. The year after the Triennial, the 52, the CIAM organizes a summer course in Venice. Alfonso and I are accepted to this course through Josep L. Sert, then president of the CIAM. (...). The course consisted of doing a job, which was actually urban planning: “Venezia-Terra Ferma College”. The professors were Ignazio Gardella, Franco Albini, Ernesto Rogers and Giuseppe Samonà. But then there were the assistant professors: Gino Valle, Carlo Giancarlo and others I do not remember. In addition, there were visits of other architects of great international prestige. Of course, the most important was Le Corbusier. (Bohigas, 1992, pp. 57-58)

As a conclusion by the parliament of Correa, his interlocutor will find this clear influence: “There is no doubt that this was the first step in a series of contacts between the young architects of the two cities and the beginning of a strong influence in Barcelona of the Milanese architecture of those years.” (pp. 57-58)

It is needed to think about the echo found in the COAC magazine (the Professional College of Architects of Catalonia) the controversy over Neoliberalism or the debate about overcoming rationalism, to understand that Barcelona situation is a debtor of the Milanese one. In this regard, it is worth highlighting the follow-up of the steps of Correa by Bohigas, who will take him in 1957 to attend the IX Triennale in Milan as a member of the jury. Years later, he will publish in *Casabella* an article about Spanish architecture in the fifties (Bohigas, 1978).

As a conclusion to this episode, which is crucial to demonstrate the involvement of Catalan architects in the search for the Milanese imaginary, there is another example of Correa's admiration for Milanese architecture related to Torre Velasca "We went to visit the Velasca Tower, (...) the most radical that was then made in Milan. (...) Really, (...) a highlight in the evolution of architecture Italian." (Bohigas, 1978, p. 29)

## **5. The Mediterranean: inspiration of the new modern Catalan architecture**

In this way, Coderch, along with Roosters, Moragas, and later Bohigas, will propel the Catalan territory towards the new Mediterranean Critical Regionalism architecture. The rediscovery of the "Mediterraneanity" within the Catalan context must be understood as an illusory scenario of spatial and temporal continuity, which occurs during the postwar period as a response to the repressive state centralism of any other national identity. This Mediterranean tendency acquires, however, since the end of the 1940s a new sense of what GATCPAC had had. The approach of this architecture is built through a two-way theoretical effort that has, as in the Milanese model, a critical recognition of the present and a critical reconstruction of historical contributions.

The consciousness of overcoming functionalism, restoring the idea of modernity and referring to the vernacular and "Mediterraneanity", are the most widespread ideas in the field of Barcelona architectures that assume the Mediterranean cultural dimension of practice as an essential element of its

activity. Therefore, if the lack of concern for the needs of the human being and its relation to the context until the 1940s explained, in part, the mediocrity of an architecture without identity, from that moment the new circumstances propitiate a situation in which the problems of the house affect in a more specific way the diverse mentalities, since the connection indispensable is generated so that an architecture is complete: the *trinomium* “space-home-context”.

Insofar as these processes begin to become effective, architecture acquires a new and true cultural reality, contextualized and rooted in its territory. It assumes an active way to understand the relationships between production, the human being for who produces it and the culture in which this human being lives; all in a precise historical context, but that exists thanks to a long lasting tradition that is intended to recover in order to remove it from oblivion in which it is found. The “Mediterraneanity” therefore occupies a pre-eminent place, although at the same time certainly ambiguous, among the myths of modern architecture, as it raises the relationship with the past and the search for origins before the rupture of the avant-gardes according to two main aspects: classical tradition and anonymous popular architecture. However, it is not a myth created by the Modern Movement, but acquired.

In fact, one of the reasons for suspecting the existence of this Critical Mediterranean Regionalism during the period under consideration is the emergence of countries - Italy and Spain - governed by right dictatorships or centralizing ideologies. In the field of architecture and design, “Mediterraneanity”

can only be rethought - or at least it has always been rethought in this way - through the mythical and poetic transfiguration.

The confusion that generates the myth of the Mediterranean is, in fact, the trans-historic representation of the past understood as present. It insinuates the supposition of the eternal, beyond the cyclical mutation of the seasons, beyond the constant alternation of day and night, and beyond infinite forms with which time itself is shown, almost as if the art of each time was measured with a unique theme: the desire for harmony. And it is precisely as a myth, as a desire for simple construction and as a symbolic expression of the arithmetical canons of the “divine proportion”, that the concept of “Mediterraneanity” can and must be evaluated beyond its objective verifiability.



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# BIOGRAPHIES

**Bilge Merve Aktas**

Bilge Merve Aktas is a maker-designer and doctoral candidate at the Department of Design at Aalto University. Her research interests cover issues like textile crafts, making, materiality and nonhuman agency. Her master thesis examined ways to build a bridge between traditional woman crafts and contemporary design. In her practice-led doctoral research, she examines the interaction between human material interaction during making processes to understand how material actively affects making. From a nonhuman agency perspective, she explores the field of design as an entanglement and examines material's participation in that landscape. For her research, she examines her own felt making processes and observes expert makers.

[bilge.aktas@aalto.fi](mailto:bilge.aktas@aalto.fi)

**Jomana G. Attia**

M.Sc. degree in Design from the German University of Cairo-Egypt. Attia has experience in Marketing, Marketing Consulting and Market research. She has worked with several NGOs and SMEs in the areas of participatory design, branding and communication. She is currently teaching in the Design Theory department at the GUC, while working on her Ph.D.

[jomana.gamaldin@guc.edu.eg](mailto:jomana.gamaldin@guc.edu.eg)

**Dina Bahgat**

Dina Bahgat is an industrial product designer, after graduating university with highest honors, she worked as a junior designer in the Egyptian household appliances company Universal Group. After gaining practical experience from the market she applied to work at the German university in Cairo as a Teaching Assistant in the Product design department. Bahgat is currently working on her Master's degree with topic "Low-income Amputees in Egypt" exploring the difficulties that they face and how to optimize solutions fitting to the context and Amputees situation.

[dinaeldaresh@gmail.com](mailto:dinaeldaresh@gmail.com)

**Paola Barcarolo**

She is a researcher, professional consultant and designer working in the field of Design for Social Inclusion and ICTs. She got a Ph.D. in Civil-Environmental Engineering and Architecture – Industrial Design curriculum – and graduated with honours in Architecture-Building Engineering at the University of Udine. Her main research interests concern: a) Strategic-sustainable enhancement of physical and virtual environments, b) Multisensory environmental accessibility, c) Breaking down of physical and sense-perceptive architectural barriers, d) Inclusive and participative communication design, e) Tourist enjoyment and f) inclusive education, also in the field of visual and cognitive disability, in the context of ergonomic and photogrammetric aspects related to the accessibility of UNESCO Heritage Sites and to the 2.5/3D augmented modelling "for All" of parts of the same heritage. Her studies have been published in several scientific publication, with which she participated to national and international research projects. In addition, she is a certified specialist and she carries out professional activities and applied researches in Design, Research and Innovation as: Disability and Case Manager, Typhology Advisor, Professional in Design for All, Euro-Project Designer and Manager and Visual Merchandiser.

[paolabarcarolo@gmail.com](mailto:paolabarcarolo@gmail.com)

**Sara Coscarelli**

is a PHD Fellow Professor at EINA since 2011, Centre Universitari de Disseny i Art de Barcelona, at the UAB. She is doctorate in Humanities (2023), at UPF, and Graduate in Interior Design (2004) at EINA. She combines teaching and researching in Space Design Bachelor at university. She coordinates the Master in Space Design and also she has her own studio of space design Sara Coscarelli Creación de Espacios (2008). Her researches are related with Interior Domestic and Commercial Architecture in the Mediterranean context during the Post War II. She is developing consequences of the Mediterranean Critical Regionalism concept. She has published in many international conference.

[scoscarelli@eina.cat](mailto:scoscarelli@eina.cat)

**Serena Del Puglia**

Architect, PhD in "Disegno Industriale. Arti Figurative e Applicate". She carries out research at the Department of Architecture of Palermo. She deals with Light Design and Exhibit Design, with particular reference to the field of Design

for cultural heritage, subjects that she writes articles about and took her to attend several international congresses and meetings. She takes care of the design and construction of museum systems, with particular attention to the relapse that technological innovations and the use of digital tools have in the exhibition design. Since 2011, she has been Contract Professor in Interior Design, Scenography, Industrial Design Laboratory and Industrial Design Laboratory II in degree courses in Architecture and Industrial Design at the University of Palermo.

[serena.delpuglia@unipa.it](mailto:serena.delpuglia@unipa.it)

### **Valentina Frosini**

Valentina Frosini is a Designer with a remarkable experience in work, Research and Academy. Design Degree and PhD in Design (focused on Design and Sustainability), she has 5 years of field intercultural experience in European Design-driven projects around the Mediterranean area. ADI Targa Giovani Award in 2016 with the project Ninananna®, she works in Design and Sustainability with a special focus on the relationship between Design and Education. Currently she's working on a training for Didacta "Design for Education: a call for a middle-long term co-design project between designers and teachers to re-thinking tools teaching".

[valentinafrosini@gmail.com](mailto:valentinafrosini@gmail.com)

### **Laura Galluzzo**

PhD, Research Fellow and Contract Professor in Spatial and Service Design at Design Department, Politecnico di Milano. She is part of POLIMI-DESI Lab within the DESIS Network (Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability). She works for research on public spaces, community centered design project, design for social innovation with a particular focus on spaces and services. She is the coordinator of the research ADESSO, Aesthetics for Design of Social Innovation. She works in different research programs dealing with Design for Social Innovation. In the last years she worked on campUS, a local research that was awarded of the XXV Compasso d'Oro (2018) and Human Cities- Challenging the City Scale, a European research project funded by the Creative Programme (2014-18). She was part of the Editorial Team of the Italian Pavillon for the XXII Triennale (2019).

[laura.galluzzo@polimi.it](mailto:laura.galluzzo@polimi.it)

### **Nariman G. Lotfi**

Lotfi is an instructor at the German University in Cairo where she was awarded a Master's degree in Product Design in 2014 focusing on Design and Bionics. She has focused on research in the fields of Product design, Biomimicry, and Sustainability which she presented in workshops and talks including a TEDx talk at Zewail City University in 2017. She was awarded the Grand Prize by the Biomimicry Institute for an irrigation solution for Fayoum's agriculture in 2013. She is currently working on her PhD degree focused on Design Education and the future of the industrial design scene in Egypt.

[nariman.gamal@guc.edu.eg](mailto:nariman.gamal@guc.edu.eg)

### **Mona A. Marie**

Mona A. Marie graduated in 2009 from the faculty of Fine Arts, Graphic design - animation department, Helwan University in Cairo. She Obtained a M.Sc. degree in Graphic design from the German university in Cairo- Egypt (GUC) in 2015. She is currently teaching in the graphic design department at the GUC since 2010, while working on her PH.D. Also she had the chance to be a TEDx speaker.

[mona.marie@guc.edu.eg](mailto:mona.marie@guc.edu.eg)

### **Emilio Rossi**

He until recently was the Director of Emilio Rossi Design Consulting (Italy) and an Adjunct Professor in Industrial Design at the Department of Architecture, University of Chieti-Pescara (Italy). From October 23 rd, 2019, he joined as a Senior Lecturer in Product Design (equivalent to Associate Professor) in the Lincoln School of Design at the University of Lincoln (UK). He got a Ph.D. in Architecture and Urban Planning, with curriculum in Industrial Design, at the University of Chieti-Pescara (Italy) in 2014. He carries out advanced studies in the area of industrial design and on products' technological innovations; specific areas of research and work are: Design for Social Inclusion, Sustainable Human Centred Design, Knowledge Sharing, 3D Printing and Innovation Design in/for SMEs. His researches have been published in several publications, including: books (as

an editor), conference proceedings, peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters; he also wrote six encyclopaedic entries for The Bloomsbury Encyclopaedia of Design. Since 2010 he is member of the Technical Committee on 'Human Factors and Sustainable Development'; at the International Ergonomics Association (IEA) and, from 2017, he co-chairs the International Conference on 'Additive Manufacturing, Digital Modelling and 3D Prototyping' at Applied Human Factors and Ergonomics (AHFE).

[erossidesign@gmail.com](mailto:erossidesign@gmail.com)

### **V. M. Viviana Trapani**

Architect and designer, associate professor in Industrial Design. She is member of the Department of Architecture of Palermo. She is Coordinator of the Master's Degree in Design and Culture of the Territory. She carried out an intense didactic and research activity in the fields of design for sustainable development in the Mediterranean areas, design strategies for territorial resources and the art-design relationship. Now she is mainly developing a research on design for the Cultural Heritage enhancement and fruition, through forms of technological and social innovation that make it possible to activate and communicate in particular the intangible aspects of cultural heritage.

[viviana.trapani@unipa.it](mailto:viviana.trapani@unipa.it)

### **Ahmed Wahby**

Graduated in 1992 with a degree in Architecture from Ain Shams University, Cairo Egypt. In 2000 he obtained an MA degree in Islamic Art and Architecture from the American University in Cairo, AUC where he had worked as a research assistant for almost 4 years. In 2008 he was awarded his Ph. D degree in Islamic Art, Architecture and Archaeology from the Oriental Department of the Otto-Friedrich University, School of Human Sciences, Art and Culture, in Bamberg, Germany. Dr. Wahby has been teaching since 2008 at the German University in Cairo GUC, the Faculty of Applied Sciences and Arts in the Design Theory Department. He has also served as the Faculty's Vice Dean for 8 years. He has numerous publications in local and international journals.

[ahmed.wahby@guc.edu.eg](mailto:ahmed.wahby@guc.edu.eg)

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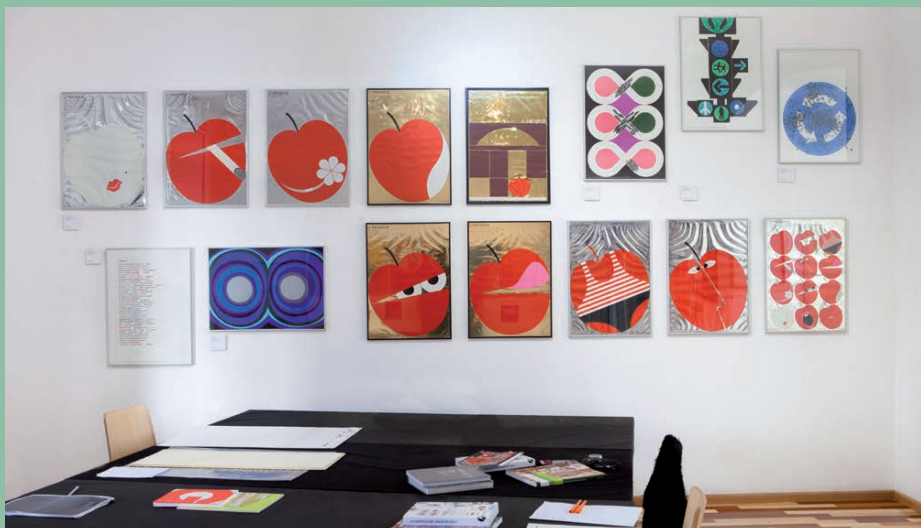
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**PAD. Pages on a and Design**

International, peer-reviewed,  
open access journal  
ISSN 1972-7887

#16, June 2019

[www.padjournal.net](http://www.padjournal.net)



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