Paolo Portoghesi at the Italian Cultural Institute

The beautifully frescoed Baroque hall of the Italian Cultural Institute in Palace Square, Valletta, was the well-attended venue of Thursday, 31 May 2000, of a lecture delivered by the renowned Italian architect, Paolo Portoghesi.

The lecture was introduced in the presence of the Italian Ambassador Dott. Giancarlo Ricci by Dott.ssa. Rosanna Cravenna, Director of the Institute, who took the praiseworthy initiative of inviting Professor Portoghesi to Malta. In view of the rich Baroque heritage of his country, Portoghesi was particularly interested in linking historical research on Baroque architecture and project activity, this indeed being the theme of his lecture at the Italian Cultural Institute.

Born in Rome in 1931, and having graduated as an architect from Rome University in 1957, Portoghesi was at a very early stage involved in the debates and research activity concerned with Italy’s contribution to the international scenario of contemporary architecture. Professor Portoghesi’s interest in the history of architecture manifested itself in numerous books and publications about Baroque architecture, focusing in particular on the famous works of Guarino Guarini, Bernardo Vitone, and Francesco Borromini.

Professor Portoghesi’s lecture clearly betrayed the great influence that Borromini had on his career as an architect, crystallised not long ago in his Mosque building in Rome. Other buildings created by Portoghesi which reveal the architect’s thorough knowledge of the forms and compositional elements of Baroque architecture were the houses for Isac in Salerno (1981-88), the Banca Popolare del Molise at Campobasso (1984), the tegel house in Berlin (1984-88), the scenography for the ‘Le Divine’ spectacle in front of the Pisa Baptistry (1987), the thermal salon at Montecatini (1987-88) and so many other projects, all monuments to an illustrious career which repeatedly proved itself to be so very influenced by the architecture of Baroque times.

High quality slides of most of the projects mentioned were shown in Portoghesi’s lecture, preceded or overlapped with views of the great Baroque works of Borromini, such as the Galleria Spada, S. Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, S. Ivo alla Sapienza, and, of course, the remarkable Convento dei Filippini, all magnificent buildings which in the 17th century converted Rome into a splendid Baroque city.

One of Portoghesi’s admirers, the architect Mario Pisani whom I had invited to lecture in the Faculty of Architecture and Civil Engineering at the University of Malta several years ago, has published a very interesting book entitled Dialogo con Paolo Portoghesi per comprendere l’architettura (Rome, 1989).

This work examines Portoghesi’s considerable contribution to the history of modern architecture in three stages. There is firstly a rare insight into his initial formation as an architect in the immediate post-war period, in very problematic times for Italy. There was then Portoghesi’s deep understanding of the successive periods in the remarkable history of Italian architecture starting from ancient Rome and ending in the modern expression, I maestri del Movimento Moderno. There was finally the third theme of Portoghesi’s somewhat controversial views about the interesting relationship of architecture and politics.

At the end of reading Pisani’s book about Portoghesi one feels a sensation of what the Italian’s describe as benessere. I think this was the general feeling of all those who had the privilege of attending Portoghesi’s lecture at the Italian Cultural Institute - a lecture which must have had a special significance for the many architectural and MA in Baroque Studies students who attended Professor Portoghesi’s superb presentation of what is essentially a very complex subject, the prime aim of which was to explore possible interactions between Borromini’s Baroque architecture and present-day architectural expression in neighbouring Italy.

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