

IN 2015, THE VENICE BIENNALE presented two very different views of modern Italian urban history. First was the huge exhibition in the main hall of the Arsenale, entitled Monditalia, curated by Rem Koolhaas with many contributors. Second was the much smaller Italian Pavilion curated by Venetian architect, Cino Zucchi.

## Meditations on Continuity

Monditalia was a vast, confusing, and wildly ambitious attempt to document the impact of a century of modernism in Italy. It contained architectural exhibits, a smattering of art, a particularly lame section on modern dance, and forty-two screens showing excerpts from different eras of Italian film. There were probably many ways to read this collage, but what I took from it was a vast lamentation for long-dead dreams of a new society, a deep sadness at the way in which human aspirations, especially the aspirations of architects, are swallowed by history and time. Great buildings built in the glow or after-glow of the post-war boom economica – Pier Luigi Nervi's ...etc...etc... Olivetti Factory... were shown in their current state of abandonment and ruin.

Magnificent Italian rationalist buildings in Libya are shown in their original imperial glory in 1938, and then in their 2009 state of weathered assimilation into the impoverished mess of their surroundings. Accompanying the 1938 images of the great buildings, are photographs and descriptions of the vast Italian concentration camps where hundreds of thousands of Libyans perished at Italian hands. Brutal and shocking.

Monditalia was a deep song of mourning for the City of Hope, or rather two different Italian Cities of Hope - one Fascist, one Modernist, separated by thirty years.

By contrast, Cino Zucchi's Italian Pavilion was not sad at all. It recorded the work, not of the heroic pre-war or and prosperous and glamorous post-war, but of contextually sensitive adaptations of urban places over time, and of architecture in the economically weak and politically cynical present. There are no big dreams; instead a careful, loving appreciation of the best of what exists. All of the new buildings shown were conceived in relation to the particularities of site. There is no stylistic consensus, but a rich eclectic pluralism around a general idea that continuity and context are what matters. Much of what was shown is modest, skillful and makes better places. Some of it is beautiful. Architects serve the present, not the imagined future - real places, not dreams of utopia.

In the absence of the City of Hope, in the emptiness of its promises, in the destructive power of hollow dreams, the City of Love seems like the sane and life-affirming alternative. Romans were so good at building the City of Love for so long. It is a joy to study what they did and how they did it, and it is a mystery how these great masters of city building lost their way in their own most cherished of all home towns.