

ELISABETTA TERRAGNI



Exhibition catalog for New York Institute of Technology's School of Architecture and Design

Introduction

by Judith DiMaio, Architect
Dean, School of Architecture and Design

Elisabetta Terragni is the School of Architecture and Design's Fall 2005 Distinguished Visiting Professor. We are delighted to have her here. Her involvement presents an extraordinary opportunity for our students. Her sensibility is exquisite and her projects, both permanent and ephemeral, are rigorous, critical and poetic. Elisabetta Terragni is from Como, Italy. Vestiges of Novum Comum, or the ancient Roman grid town (colonized 89 B.C.) co-mingle with modern day Como. Como's proximity to the lake and surrounding landscape is breathtaking. The quality of light and sky are translucent, glowing and dramatic, but always constant in their changeability. Como's present day ambiente is 'molto gentile.' Entwined with this gentleness is a residue of political and historical content that distinguishes Como intellectually and architecturally. It is within this layered condition of existence that I first met Elisabetta, and knew instantly that I must invite her to our college.

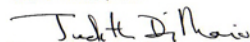
It was a rather spontaneous but long-delayed encounter. There is a small plaque on a closed gate leading to a garden and an intimate first-floor studio in Como. The plaque reads Fondazione e Archivio Giuseppe Terragni; of course, the name causing me to pause. My curiosity about what lay beyond the gate was extreme, but I never attempted to gain entry. Who ran this foundation? Were there models and drawings within of Giuseppe Terragni's astounding Casa del Fascio initiated in 1933? The Casa del Fascio stands opposite the apse of the Tardo-Gothic Cathedral initiated in the 11th Century. Two buildings, two different scales; one profoundly bare of ornament, the other's façade an outburst of encrustation, surface pattern and ornamentation. The Casa del Fascio is of white marble, which to the passerby, undoubtedly, is too abstract and extremely stark. The cathedral is of a softer, paler palette of pink and beige-colored marbles, which to the passerby is lacey and perhaps over-wrought. The combination and diversity of styles and politics is 'raffinato', but not without struggle like Como's history itself.

Two summers ago I did gain entry, and finally met Elisabetta Terragni. While I remember a self-portrait of Giuseppe Terragni leaning against the wall, it was Elisabetta's manner and the fluidity and ease with which she described her work I remember most. She discussed what she refers to as her ephemeral work and her solid work or actual buildings. Both aspects produce the most astounding assemblage of magic and rigor: layering and solidity of form; diaphanous and translucency of light, diversity and privacy of space and spaces; a touch of hand, mind and eye that I have rarely seen. Her work is effervescent and in possession of a magnitude almost impossible to imagine. She has brought to us a unique blend of rigor and passion, in essence, the best that architecture can possess. Novum Comum is fortunate she inhabits its grid, and the New York Institute of Technology is graced with her presence, artfulness and intellect. Her catalogue alone is a work of art; changeable, fleeting and solid as is her exhibition. Thank you, Elisabetta.

In closing, I would like to thank all who helped to organize this exhibition and catalogue, including Professor Matthias Altwicker, exhibition co-coordinator and curator; Jennifer Mitchell, special events coordinator, for her energy and commitment to our events; Susan Warner, director of publications and advertising; Michael Cali and Donna Seico, graphic designers; Kimberly Margan, media coordinator for publications; Lori Kamen, communications manager for her unflinching support; Professor Diane Neff, Old Westbury chairperson; and my colleagues, Danielle Dumas, June Bukovinsky and Linda Placella. Additional thanks go to students from the School of Architecture and Design who assisted in the installation of the exhibition, especially Charles Van Winkle, Michael Riscica, Leah Gazit, Daniel Martinez, Brian McCabe, Peter Rickert, Elizabeth Zaccaria, Peter Uroleski and Lee Williams.

Finally, I would like to thank NYIT's board of trustees and its president, Dr. Edward Guiliano, for creating a milieu at NYIT that makes all this possible.

Thank you,
Judith DiMaio, AIA



Dean, School of Architecture and Design
October 11, 2005

I've designed several exhibitions. To install my own work feels a little bit like a busman's holiday. But drivers, too, like to go along for the ride, and I'm grateful for the occasion to accompany my teaching at NYIT with a sampling of my architectural work. Displaying the work is a challenge, in the sense that architecture exhibitions always aim to suggest more than they can actually deliver.

Moving within an experimental range, my projects derive from impressions that may seem, at first sight, alien to the familiar premises of architecture. My sense of the fleeting has led me to design ephemeral installations. Employing some of the same materials I was asked to display, such as fabrics and textile designs, I sought to capture their character while intimating connections to more elemental qualities. A display of fabric designs aboard a steamer on a rainy day offered just such an occasion: what is fluid by nature momentarily assumed a fluctuating shape, what looked wet was actually a protective sheet of plastic, while scattered rain clouds visibly merged with the fabric protecting against them.

When the Palladio Museum in Vicenza asked me to install an exhibition about a memorial Giuseppe Terragni designed for Margherita Sarfatti, I knew I was on treacherous ground. Not only are the historical circumstances of this work are fraught with problems, the protagonists themselves are deeply scarred by politics and the violence of war. I needed to frame the work within the history of 20th-century monuments. As if to lend poignancy to practicality, the walls of the museum cannot be touched, because Palladio's Palazzo Barbaran-Da Porto is a listed historic building. The imperative "do not touch" suggested to me a way of "shrouding" the subject of the exhibition within its protective setting. Experimenting with different fabrics, lighting, suspended objects and the constantly shifting impressions they offered visitors to the exhibition, I sought to give palpable reality to its layered and conflicted subject. Here and elsewhere I began to work with curators, in this case Professor Jeffrey Schnapp, director of the humanities laboratory at Stanford University, and with my friend Dr. Brigitte Desrocher, a trained architect and photographer. With exceptional talent she created, over the years, a dossier of images that renders my work not only through a sympathetic eye but also filters it by a lucid mind. As a matter of fact, the exhibition joins Desrocher's expertise in handling images with the careful contribution of Paola Frigerio in my Como studio.

Lest one think that I indulge my imagination in the hazy zones of perception, I wish to add a word about solid buildings, such as the school at Altavilla Vicentina. Large in scale for a community of its size, the school is located in a haphazardly developed area at the foot of a hill. As the winning entry in a competition, (with Lorenza Ceruti and Mirko Zardini) the school had to be bid and the most competitive offer accepted. Construction proved an uphill struggle from the start and only by assuming responsibility for all aspects of construction, from welding of sliding doors to coffering of the ceiling, was it possible to obtain a fair approximation of the intended result. In concept, the school aims to combine contrasting qualities: diversity and privacy for the pupils, differentiated unity and presence for the public. The road to the former led to a clustering of classrooms and patios, the way to the latter suggested a single-story structure floating on its site, its impression susceptible to every passing cloud and changing hour of the day. The atmosphere within affords a qualified view of the world without; seen from outside, the school holds its own, while interacting with its environment. That environment extends deep into the building and, like a half-buried hive, also accommodates a community theater. On top of its shell, kids will be playing on a gently raised platform whose curving ramps find their adult counterparts in the downward ramps of the theater.

If I'm a student of those aspects of life that defy gravity and permanence, I'm perhaps also the happy beneficiary of levity. My exhibition should exhilarate and even distract all in the name of something as fundamental as architecture.

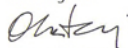
(Translated from the Italian by Selgi Ingarreta.)

ELISABETTA TERRAGNI

Elisabetta Terragni's work as an architect is balanced between the use of textiles to create specific spatial effects and the employment of a range of burning materials to produce radiant and evanescent atmospheric effects. She was trained as an architect at the Polytechnic University of Milan, like her father and grandfather. At the time, it was a thriving institution dominated by the legacy of such figures as Ernesto Rogers, Caccia Dominioni and Gio Ponti. Terragni graduated in 1986 with a thesis project for a university campus in the Swiss Ticino, under the direction of Enrico Mantero. While studying in Milan, she initiated exchange programs with both the Netherlands and Germany, and eventually became coordinator of graduate exchange programs for Polytechnic.

Her research on Giuseppe Terragni, including the organization of the Archivio Giuseppe Terragni, led to a major exhibition curated by Giorgio Ciucci for the Milan Triennale in 1997. She oversaw its subsequent installation at Mito, Japan, and Santiago de Compostela, Spain. For the accompanying volume, she authored essays on Terragni's voyage to Greece and other aspects of his life and military service in Russia, as well as various catalogue entries. In recent years, she has published studies on Carlo Scarpa and Kazuo Sejima. Terragni began her career as an architect with projects for private houses, renovations and temporary installations. In particular, she developed an approach to ephemeral work that flourished into designs for textile trade fairs and museum installations such as "In cima: Giuseppe Terragni per Margherita Sarfatti," an exhibition at the Centro di Studi Andrea Palladio in Vicenza, in 2004. In 1997, Terragni was awarded the Premio Maestri Comacini for the Bianchi House in Cernobbio.

In 2003, Terragni won a competition for a large pre- and elementary-school building in Altavilla Vicentina (Vicenza), which is now under construction. Deftly combining a diverse array of classrooms, patios and circulation spaces, the plan assures that each grade has a spatial identity of its own as well as separation from the others, while orienting them all toward shared internal spaces that are easily made more intimate or enlarged by means of ever-changing sliding windows and screens. The school's "floating" roof slab was worked out in collaboration with the Swiss engineer Juerg Conzett. Terragni has designed a number of lofts and apartments in Montréal, Como, and Samedan (in the Swiss Engadine). She has taught courses in museology at the Polytechnic University in Milan, and has lectured at numerous universities in Europe and in the United States. Terragni frequently participates on juries and critics at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and Lausanne, and SCI-Arc, Los Angeles.



Elisabetta Terragni, 2005

Terragni Catalogue Colophon/Acknowledgments:

I wish to thank those who have worked with me over the years in my studio and those who have made it possible for me to spend time teaching in New York. Above all, I feel indebted to my friend Brigitte Desrochers for being a lively partner in documenting my work and in assembling it for exhibition. An architect's work depends on her clients. I've had the privilege of working with a number of enlightened clients: Silvano Bussetti, Aldo Bianchi, Dr. Guido Beltrami, Drs. Andrea and Francesca Ruckstuhl, Giovanni and Giuliana Quaini, and the former mayor of Altavilla Vicentina, Giulio Bertinato. My occasional partners, Mike Dolinski, Dr. Mirko Zardini, and Claudio Poli, deserve credit for collaborating in competitions and in supervising work on site. Architecture may be deeply rooted in one's imagination, but building even modest structures always depends on capable and imaginative colleagues.

Photo credits:

Lorenza Ceruti, Como: 26, 27 | Brigitte Desrochers, Montreal: cover, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, | Mike Dolinski, Como: 28 | Studio Aleph, Como: 4, 5 | Elisabetta Terragni, Como: 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11

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Fig. 1. The sculpture 'The Chair' by the artist, showing the use of white panels and a small, dark, abstract figure seated within the structure.



Fig. 2. The sculpture 'The Chair' by the artist, showing the use of white panels and a small, dark, abstract figure seated within the structure.



Fig. 3. The sculpture 'The Chair' by the artist, showing the use of white panels and a small, dark, abstract figure seated within the structure.



Fig. 4. The sculpture 'The Chair' by the artist, showing the use of white panels and a small, dark, abstract figure seated within the structure.



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Fig. 6. The sculpture 'The Chair' by the artist, showing the use of white panels and a small, dark, abstract figure seated within the structure.



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Fig. 8. The sculpture 'The Chair' by the artist, showing the use of white panels and a small, dark, abstract figure seated within the structure.



Fig. 9. The sculpture 'The Chair' by the artist, showing the use of white panels and a small, dark, abstract figure seated within the structure.



Exterior view of the building, showing the glass facade and the stone wall.

1



Exterior view of the building, showing the glass facade and the stone wall.

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Exterior view of the building, showing the glass facade and the stone wall.

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Exterior view of the building, showing the glass facade and the stone wall.

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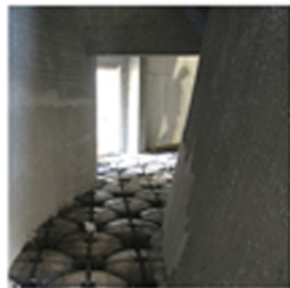
Interior view of the building, showing the glass facade and the stone wall.

5



Interior view of the building, showing the glass facade and the stone wall.

6



Interior view of the building, showing the glass facade and the stone wall.

7



Architectural drawing showing a floor plan and a section view of the building.

8



Architectural drawing showing a floor plan and a section view of the building.

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