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## **ESCAPE FROM THE AVANTGARDE. THE HOUSE AS A STAGE OF MEMORY\***

### **ABSTRACT**

The Avantgarde and Modern Movement dogmas proposed a refusal of history, past, memory, in the name of a renewed vision and representation of the world. As a critique of this intuition, and to escape the outcomes of this strategy that took place in the cultural, artistic and architectural scenario and was realized in the urban environment, the domestic interior became an opportunity, as a theatrical stage, to celebrate memory and history. The paper focuses on these themes and in the case study of the work of Mario Praz, who transformed his own home in Rome, depicted in his autobiographical book *The house of life*, into an archaeological stratification of re-collections. The house can be read, using his words, as the “museum of the soul”, the “mirror of the spirit” and the “projection of the ego”: the inhabitant’s monument and theater, and an individual and private counterpoint to the Modernist Avantgarde’s *tabula rasa* of the past.

### **KEYWORDS**

MEMORY, HISTORY, INTERIOR, THEATER, HOUSE

## **UCIECZKA OD AWANGARDY. DOM JAKO SCENA PAMIĘCI\***

### **Streszczenie**

Dogmaty Awangardy i Ruchu Nowoczesnego proponowały odrzucenie historii, przeszłości i pamięci na rzecz odnowionej wizji i przedstawienia świata. Jako krytyka tej idei i ucieczka przed skutkami owej strategii, która zaistniała w scenariuszu kulturowym, artystycznym oraz architektonicznym i była realizowana w środowisku miejskim, wewnątrz domu stało się okazją, niczym scena teatralna, do celebrowania pamięci i historii. Artykuł skupia się na tych tematach i jest studium przypadku twórczości Mario Praza, który przekształcił swój własny dom w Rzymie, przedstawiony w autobiograficznej książce *Dom życia*, w archeologiczną stratyfikację wspomnień. Zgodnie z jego słowami, dom można odczytać jako „muzeum duszy”, „lustro ducha” i „projekcję ego”: pomnik i teatr mieszkańca, a także indywidualny i prywatny kontrapunkt dla *tabula rasa* modernistycznej awangardy przeszłości.

### **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE**

PAMIĘĆ, HISTORIA, WNEȚRZE, TEATR, DOM

### **INTRODUCTION**

“I think that there has been a moment in the twentieth century when, with the intention of refounding from zero the artistic languages, Schönberg in music,

Mondrian in painting, a narrative has been developed, in which symbols and meanings, and history itself disappeared, to start from scratch all over again”.<sup>1</sup>

In these few words of the architect and academic Luciano Semerani, we see summarized one of the most relevant characteristics of the Avantgarde and of the Modern Movement.

In fact, it is well known how the Modern Movement proposed a refusal of any relationship with history, well represented by Bauhaus, that removed the teaching of history in its pedagogical programs. On the other hand, as several scholars pointed out, many Modern Movement masters and protagonists of Avantgarde did not completely reject the past: for instance, Le Corbusier and Mies had strong connections (often hidden and not declared) with memory, history, tradition, moving towards an architecture (as Ernesto Nathan Rogers discussed very often in his writings)<sup>2</sup> that was the result not only of ingenious imagination but of a well-balanced composition of knowledge of the past, culture, memory and autobiographical creative gestures.

My paper focuses on this aspect: how history and memory survived in the artistic, architectural, and cultural discourse during the first decades of the twentieth century, and how the relationship with the past (coming from the classical world, both individual and collective) sometimes informed a sort of *escape from the Avantgarde and Modernism*, towards the refuge, the shelter, the protective realm, even as a theatrical stage, of the domestic interior.

## **ARCHITECTURE AND (THE ART OF) MEMORY**

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<sup>1</sup> L. Semerani, *Testimonianza n. 1* [in:] E. Prandi, D. Costi (eds.), *Storia e Composizione. Architetti storici e compositivi a confronto*, Festival Architettura Edizioni, Parma 2005, pp. 162–163.

<sup>2</sup> See in particular E.N. Rogers, *Gli elementi del fenomeno architettonico*, Christian Marinotti Edizioni, Milano 2006 and *idem*, *Esperienze dell'architettura*, Skira, Milano 1997 (first edition 1958).

For ancient Roman rhetors, memory was one of the five parts of rhetoric and the art of recollection was a technique by which the orator could improve his memory, being able to deliver long speeches with reliable accuracy. As Frances Yates writes in her book *The Art of Memory*, according to this technique used by Quintilian and Cicero,

the first step was to imprint on the memory a series of places. The most common type of mnemonic place system used was the architectural type:

In order to form a series of places in memory, a building is to be remembered, as spacious and varied as possible, with the fore-court, the living room, bedrooms, and parlors, not omitting statues and other ornaments with which the rooms are decorated. The images by which the speech is to be remembered (...) are then placed in imagination on the places that have been memorized in the building.<sup>3</sup>

After that the orator would move in his imagination through this building, room after room, recalling in the right order images, concepts and topics, delivering the speech, since the order was fixed by the sequence of places in the building.

The architectural mnemonic system was persistent during the Middle Ages, and became very popular in Renaissance. Since then, these techniques have often been used, as a device to relate memory and places, even in the late nineteenth century. For instance, in 1851, the American educator Emma Willard created a historical timeline, which is a perfect application of the classical art of memory. The image represents a classical temple with some part of the floor, columns and ceiling marked with historical events.

Similarly, I interpret the remarkable movie *Russian Ark* by Andrej Sokurov, in which a narrator wanders through the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg, as an expression of the classical rhetorical memory techniques. The walk inside the

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<sup>3</sup> F.A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1966, p. 3.

interior of the building is not only the opportunity to visit the spaces of the museum, but a walk, and a narration, through history and memory. In fact, in each room he encounters various real and fictional people from various periods of the city's 300-year history.

But also the whole city can become a memory device. According to historian Christine Boyer<sup>4</sup> we can read Napoleon III's urban re-design of Paris as an application of the classic art of memory, with the monumental staging of monuments and buildings all connected by paths inside the urban fabric, as a celebration of the collective memory and the heroic accomplishments of his directorship.

Getting back to the Renaissance, during those times the memory system was disseminated through treatises, which prescribed that the places had to be houses but also churches, abbeys, and theaters. In this regard, it is well known how the idea of theater informed the Renaissance interpretation of the world. Especially in the Venetian context, buildings and public spaces were often transformed into stages for the life of the city, in events like the Carnival, or the processions in St. Mark's square that we see depicted in the painting of Bellini and Carpaccio, or thanks to the numerous theatres spread in the urban fabric.

Renaissance scholar Denis Cosgrove says that "the life of the Renaissance city was articulated, if not dominated, by spectacle",<sup>5</sup> and was "a mirror of a unified cosmos: the machine of the world".<sup>6</sup>

In Venice, at that time, the philosopher Giulio Camillo built a Memory Theater, bringing together the classical mnemotechnics and the theatricality of humanist culture and vision of the world. It was not a full-scale building though, but large

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<sup>4</sup> Ch.M. Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> D. Cosgrove, *The Palladian Landscape: Geographical Change and its Cultural Representations in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, Leicester University Press, Leicester-London 1993, pp. 233–234.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 242.

enough to be entered by at least two people at once, a sort of large-scale wood cabinet or container, in the shape of a theater. The Theater derived from the Vitruvian archetype and had seven steps, each divided into seven parts. Each step had different images and symbols that represented concepts, ideas, aspects of human knowledge and culture and, at the same time, they were a representation of the cosmos. Under each image, drawers and boxes contained papers with speeches by Cicero, related to the subjects of the images. The “spectator” had to stand where the stage would be and look towards this auditorium, gazing at the images in each of these sections, acquiring knowledge of the world and wisdom from the lesson of the past.

I think it is interesting to see this connection between the classical techniques of recollection that I briefly summarized, and architectural spaces and types, the theater in particular. “Memory is not an instrument for surveying the past, but its theater”, Benjamin wrote, and “remembrance (...) must, in the strictness epic and rhapsodic manner, assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layers”.<sup>7</sup> It is evident how memory is an essential component of architectural space, and of the interior, made of stratifications and traces and memories of the inhabitant, “molded into the interior”.<sup>8</sup>

The domestic interior is the place where our lives take place, where we stage our memories, our activities and the re-presentation of ourselves in everyday life, as in a theatrical play, arranging the spaces and gathering the objects that are an essential part of our life, as in a personal intimate collection that becomes, eventually, a self-portrait of our personality and a celebration of our history. Past is a presence in our domestic realm.

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<sup>7</sup> W. Benjamin, *Reflections. Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Schocken Books, New York, 1978, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Idem*, *The Arcades Project*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999, p. 20.

## MARIO PRAZ: ESCAPING THE AVANTGARDE, TO BUILD THE DOMESTIC STAGE OF MEMORY

In 1954, Mario Praz published in Italy the book *La casa della vita*,<sup>9</sup> (translated and published in English ten years later, as *The house of life*).<sup>10</sup> The book is the autobiography of Praz, the seminal Italian literary critic, art historian, professor, essayist, and art collector, whose most important publication, in the realm of interior architecture, interior design and interior decoration, is *La filosofia dell'arredamento*, published in Italy in 1945 and translated in English in 1964 with the title *An illustrated history of interior decoration*. According to Italian professor Imma Forino, Praz holds, with this book, a prominent place in the investigation of interiors, having developed a “type of criticism making broad use of comparison, and distinguishing himself for his impassioned, never impersonal or conventional, criticism often interlaced with personal memories and motives”.<sup>11</sup>

This same character is recognizable in *The house of life*, which is the recollection of his memories, narrated using the house in Palazzo Ricci in Rome as a framework and structure. For him, as Penny Sparke and Anne Massey argue “his life, his interior environment and the artifacts within it were as near to being united into a single entity, or identity, as they possibly could be”.<sup>12</sup>

In 1934, Praz and his wife moved from Liverpool to Rome where he was hired as a Professor of English Literature at Università La Sapienza. The couple lived in the house in Palazzo Ricci in Via Giulia, that Praz furnished with an ever-growing

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<sup>9</sup> M. Praz, *La casa della vita*, Adelphi, Milano, 2012 (first edition 1954).

<sup>10</sup> Mario Praz, *The house of life*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1964.

<sup>11</sup> I. Forino, *Storie di libri (e di una 'storia' fatta di libri)/Stories of books (and a „history” in books)* [in:] B. Finessi (ed.), *Stanze: Altre Filosofie dell’Abitare/Rooms: Novel Living Concepts*, Marsilio, Venezia, 2016, pp. 150–151.

<sup>12</sup> A. Massey, P. Sparke, *Biography, Identity and the Modern Interior*, Ashgate Publishing, Farnham, 2013, p 7.

collection of pieces of eighteenth and nineteenth century furniture and objects. Therefore, the house functioned as a blank canvas, an empty container, a stage capable to host the *mise en scène* of the objects and the fragments of Praz's life and memories, later collected in his book *The house of life*.

The house had also the role of refuge, and its interior became a protective shelter from the outside world, from the city, from his beloved Rome, at that time transformed into an expression of what Praz describes as the "sad cases of modern Italy", with its modern developments (not only urban, in my opinion, but also the developments of taste and style) that, in the name of modernization, did not take into consideration the past and the history, and therefore made Mario Praz uncomfortable.

This escape from the modernity of the city towards the interior of the domestic realm has been described by Walter Benjamin in his monumental *The Arcade Projects*. Here, as scholar Charles Rice argues, the arcades of Paris represent "the wedded advance of technology and commerce, the emblem of the modernizing city; upholstery and textiles figure the domestic interior as a site of refuge from the city and its new, alienating forms of experience".<sup>13</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, the outside world followed the new paths of industrialization and technology (for Benjamin expressed by the steel and glass architecture of the arcades), introducing new unexpected models not only in the construction of the urban fabric, but also in the vision and interpretation of the world. The Impressionists' and Expressionists' untraditional representations of urban and natural environments, the abstract approaches in painting and photography developed between the 1910s and 1930s by the Avantgarde movements, the use of collage and montage as the privileged technique for the representation of the complexity of the metropolis celebrated by Sigfried Giedion,<sup>14</sup> are just a few of the

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<sup>13</sup> Ch. Rice, *The emergence of the interior*, Routledge, London 2007, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> S. Giedion, *Space Time Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, Harvard

contributions in this regard, that pushed towards the critique of the traditional presence of past, history and memory as the foundational component of life and its expression.

As a reaction to this overwhelming new world, the escape toward the interior was an invaluable option for the citizen. The shelter of domesticity, and the life inside the house, are well expressed in the nineteenth-century depictions of inhabited sections, multi-story residential buildings without facades, that Georges Teyssot calls “exteriorized interiors”, in which “the building was represented as a dissected body, allowing the eye to penetrate its interior in order to study its life, its functions, and its organs”,<sup>15</sup> where the everyday life (in the interior, not inside the city) is depicted as lively vignettes, populated by human figures acting in a sort of exposed theatrical stage inside each room.

We can see Praz, and his idea of the world and life, as part of this narrative.

Away from the street, away from the urban realm, away from the modern world, he collects his objects and narrates his life inside his house, the protagonists of his book *The house of life*. Here Praz describes seven rooms (even though the rooms were actually more than seven): the entrance hall, the dining room, the bedroom overlooking Piazza Ricci, the anteroom, Lucia’s bedroom, the drawing-room, the boudoir. And seven, as already said, were the parts that represented the whole human knowledge and past, in Giulio Camillo’s Memory Theater. Every room and object Praz describes operate as a memory place, as prescribed by Quintilian and Cicero: the memories are impressed in places, and in the pieces collected such as furniture, painting, statues, objects, and the rhetorical narration of his life takes the shape of a *promenade architecturale* in the interior of the house.

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University Press Cambridge, 1959.

<sup>15</sup> G. Teyssot, *A Topology of Everyday Constellations*, The MIT Press, London–Cambridge, MA, 2013, p. 101.

And one spot, in the house, seems to be almost a literal transfiguration of Camillo's model. Praz writes:

If you stand in the doorway and look all around you can see: behind, the dining-room, and beyond it the flower-stands in the hall; obliquely to the left, part of the bedroom; sideways to the right, beyond a further door, a portion of my daughter's room; and straight ahead part of the study or drawing-room. This, therefore, is a point of view which allows a general view of the rooms in all the variety of their different colored wallpapers and in the richness of their furnishings.<sup>16</sup>

Besides the hidden reference to Giulio Camillo, it is clear the theatrical aspect of this space: from here, the spectator (inhabitant, visitor, guest) could admire the *mise en scène* of the whole house, in its complexity and richness. But every room is a theater of memories, a collection of objects, a recollection of events, an opportunity to tell a story, that can be very personal but often related to the historical context he was living in.

In the 1976 revised edition of the book, Praz, as a perfect theatrical play writer, narrates a surprising *coup de théâtre*. One evening, Praz gets back to his house and sees that a tentative burglary happened. A few days later, there is another similar episode, scary but without any damage or theft, that eventually "changed the character of the house, letting in, the breath of death", transforming it into a dead thing. The "house of life" becomes, all of a sudden, the house of death. The objects, on the other hand, are not contaminated, only the "shell of the residence has been affected by the burglary" he says. The consequence of the violation of the house is that Praz gets tired, as he writes, "not of the furniture, but only of the house".<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> M. Praz, *The house of life...*, p. 142.

<sup>17</sup> *Idem*, *La casa della vita...*, p. 424.

Therefore, after this episode, he decides to move from his beloved house in Palazzo Ricci to another apartment in Rome, in Palazzo Primoli. Before moving, the writer becomes a designer. He says, “I had a plan of the apartment, I calculated the available spaces in millimeters, and drew the disposition of the pieces of furniture and of the paintings, for each room”.<sup>18</sup>

On twenty sheets of paper, with precision and care Praz draws every interior elevation of the new house, with his beloved pieces of furniture, objects, paintings, adding notes and comments, trying to recreate the previous juxtapositions, even creating some new ones, because of the different spatial arrangement of the new place. The drawings are accurate surveys of each piece, placed with accuracy in order to build the narrative, design the interior stage of the representation of his world, and to re-install, on the new shell, his theater of memory.

With this surprising move, he wanted to detach his objects from the infected envelope and find a new “theater” for them, for his life, for his memories. In this process, the house as “a projection of the ego” and “a mirror of the spirit”<sup>19</sup> (recalling Bachelard) loses all its meaning and importance. The violation he suffered, has been an event so strong and powerful that actually deleted the importance of the house in Palazzo Ricci, the house about which he wrote a book of memories.

He lived in this house until he died in 1982, and now the house is a museum (a literal house and theater of memory), as he desired.

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 429.

<sup>19</sup> *Idem, An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration: From Pompeii to Art Nouveau*, Thames and Hudson, New York 1964, pp. 21, 50.

Praz's book and house show us that "we can travel the world and into the past without ever leaving our room",<sup>20</sup> using a metaphor from German historian Karl Schlögel. That's what Mario Praz did, room after room in his house, page after page in his book, where the past, memory, and history are staged as presence in everyday life: for himself and for us, spectators and participants of his theater of memory. We can also point out that this strategy represents a critique of the world he was living in, and of the modernity that informed culture, art, urban spaces. As an opponent to the Avantgarde's negation of history and past, and like the bourgeoisie citizen depicted by Benjamin who found a safe place of expression in the domestic interior, escaping the modern urban environment, Praz molded his interior realm according to his life, personality, memories, celebrating the individual and collective history.

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<sup>20</sup> K. Schlögel, *In Space We Read Time: On the History of Civilization and Geopolitics*, Bard Graduate Center, New York, 2016, p. 274.

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**ILLUSTRATION**

P.M. Martinelli, *La casa della vita*, 2022