

“Italia Mia’. Argan, Modena, and an unexecuted project by Frank O. Gehry,”  
in *Arte e politica. Studi per Antonio Pinelli*, Florence, 2013, 181-184

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[\(click here for first page\)](#)

## “Italia Mia”

Argan, Modena, and an unexecuted project by Frank O. Gehry

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Acceptance Speech, Premio Internazionale Galileo Galilei dei Rotary Club Italiani,  
Anno XLIV, Aula Magna dell’Università di Pisa, 9 Ottobre 2005, Ore 11:00

One of the most important influences on my life as an art historian came about by chance in 1961 when as young Fulbright scholar in Rome, I received a telephone call from the American Academy in Rome saying that they had been asked by the illustrious professor of art history at the University of Rome, Giulio Carlo Argan (1909-92), to recommend a young art historian with whom he might engage in conversations to improve his English. I was of course happy to accommodate, and he came to our apartment on the Gianicolo for the first session of our dialogue. Almost immediately, we discovered that we had a common passion for the art of Caravaggio, about whom he was then preparing an essay. He had read and admired the recently published Caravaggio monograph by my own German-Jewish refugee professor in New York, Walter Friedlaender, whose research assistant I had been. It was a remarkable concatenation of coincidences, and our exchange that day was unforgettable, partly because it soon emerged that Argan’s English was even more halting than my nascent Italian. The rest of that first meeting proceeded excitedly in a kind of art historical lingua franca, and it began a series of interviews, thereafter always in Italian, that continued for many years until Argan died. Every time I visited Rome, I paid a call on Argan to be refreshed from that extraordinary fountain of imagination, wit, intelligence, acumen. He loved new ideas, both his own and those of others, and listening to him was a constant source of surprise and revelation.

My conversations with Argan revealed two seemingly diverse, but, as I came to understand, closely interdependent aspects of his mind and character. The first was that he perceived works of art not simply as aesthetic or even as simply emotional expressions, but as clear and definite statements of ideas—philosophical, theological, political, scientific, sociological—equivalent in every way except form, to those of

philosophers, theologians, politicians, scientists and sociologists. His insights were absolutely brilliant in relating works of art, especially painting and architecture, to those larger realms of thought and experience. Argan was in fact a pioneer in bringing to Italy the rigorous, cross-disciplinary method of intellectual analysis developed in Germany before World War II, associated with the famous Warburg Institute, exiled to London by the Nazis because of its Jewish heritage. It happened that I had studied in New York with some of the leading exiled refugee exponents of that school. It was an exciting new way of thinking about and appreciating art. That very first discussion about Caravaggio was a perfect case in point since Argan was among the first, beside Walter Friedlaender, to argue that Caravaggio's low-life realism was not an end in itself, but in fact a highly structured artifice that embodied profound, sophisticated, and often provocative religious and social concepts. As I am sure many of you will know better than I, Argan's influence on the discipline of art history was enormous. Through his scholarship and pedagogy he brought a new vision of art, indeed culture generally, and its place in the world to generations of young Italians.

This brings me to the second aspect of Argan's character and professional life that seemed, and still seems, extraordinary to me, namely his political commitment and his direct, lifelong involvement in public affairs. This is virtually unheard of in my country, where professional protocol makes it inappropriate, even unethical to mix politics and scholarship, as it is to mix church and state. By contrast, Argan, like his famous friend and comrade-in-arms Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli (1900-75) was an intellectual beacon of the Communist Party, the party par excellence of the intellectual class, under which banner he was elected Mayor of the City of Rome, 1976-79, and from 1983 Senator of the Republic for two sessions of the legislature. He was particularly proud, I recall, of insisting that the Vatican assume its share of responsibility for cleaning the streets in front of St. Peter's!

This active concern and commitment to the contemporary world, not uncommon in Italian academic culture, in Argan's case had a professional counterpart that was also in my experience rare and inspiring, that is, his life-long devotion to and support of modern and contemporary art. He was a consummate interpreter of Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque art, but he devoted at least as much time and effort to modern

art, not only as a historian—his bibliography in that field is endless—but also as a critic and supporter of young artists, with whom he established close ties and warm friendships. And, *rara avis*, I am not aware of his ever having profited personally from these relationships. Perhaps most important of all was his direct impact on the international success of the post-war generation of Italian artists through his relationship with the great Palma Bucarelli, “*donna terribile*” (1910-98), Director of the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome (1941-75). By virtue especially of close connections she established with the leadership of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in a spectacular series of exhibitions, exchanges, and constant publications, often with the participation and no doubt with the instigation of Argan, she mounted pioneering exhibitions and acquisitions of the works of Picasso, Mondrian, Modigliani, Moore, and Jackson Pollock; and created the international reputations of the great names of Italian modernism, names like Burri, Capogrossi, Fontana, and many others.

Here I must admit to a personal debt to Argan that has been part of my motivation to speak at some length about him on this occasion. In 1986 I was as surprised, as I am today receiving this honor, to find that I had been elected *Socio Straniero* of the *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*. I learned only long afterward, and from someone else, that it was Argan who had promoted my nomination to that august institution. But it was the inspiration of Argan’s passionate and courageous commitment to the life of his time, intellectual as well as professional, that emboldened me in the remaining minutes of my talk, to intervene in an aspect of your amazing culture, which I have loved and studied all my life, that has troubled me with increasing concern over the years. What I am going to say may be aggressive, impolite, and indiscrete; but it is the best way I know how to acknowledge my debt to Italy and give thanks for the important honor I have just received. What triggered my diatribe—the culmination, I repeat, of years of preoccupation—was the recent repudiation of the project for a new exit from the Uffizi by the great Japanese designer Arata Isozaki, one of the acknowledged world masters of contemporary architecture. Everyone knows that the grave invasion of mass tourism has made it often practically impossible to visit the Uffizi; everyone knows that the proposal to create a new, more modern and more viable circulation route was broached long ago; everyone knows that Isozaki’s proposal, the winner of an international competition, was

the subject of much debate over the decade before it was finally approved, only to be put aside last summer before construction was to begin. Everyone also knows that the reason given, the presence of medieval remains under the proposed site, was fundamentally a pretense harboring the real objection, that is, the inadmissibility of any significant modern intervention in the heart of Florence.

I do not intend to debate the merits or demerits of Isozaki's proposal, but I profoundly regret the sad irony underlying the exaggerated historicist and conservative turn of mind that has taken hold in modern times in Florence—of all places!—stifling the spirit of adventure and innovation that made Florence the city we all love and admire, and precisely because it was the city where the very notion of modernity was invented! The Duomo, and especially Brunelleschi's cupola, would surely be vetoed today: it covered, indeed it created, much more extensive and important ruins than the scant medieval traces (of which Florence anyway has an ample supply!) underlying that area of the Uffizi; and in its time, the Duomo was certainly a colossal, modernist intervention in the old city. The truth is that in the great period of renewal following the devastation of World War II Florence had innumerable opportunities to retrieve that fabulous heritage of modernity and innovation, but what it has done instead is recreate the aspect of the medieval city, lining the streets with completely false and artificially "appropriate" facades that have no significance except to evoke the past. Florence has become a kind of Disneyland in stone. Of course, it must be said that while Florence invented Modernity, it also invented History, and I fear that we historians are very largely responsible for this sorry state of affairs: we historians (art historians especially) have done our jobs only too well. In our love and admiration for the great achievements of the past we have created a kind of monster—a tail that wags the dog, as we say in English. The last works of architecture in Florence that figure in standard books on the world history of modern architecture, were products of Fascism. I refer to Pier Luigi Nervi's Municipal Stadium (1930-32) and Giovanni Michelucci's renowned railway station (1933-35), which was, in fact, the first modern building I saw on my first visit to Florence in 1948. I was so moved and astonished by its elegant lines and limpid simplicity that, as I now realize, it was the ultimate inspiration for my unauthorized incursion into your cultural territory today. Part of the desperation of my plea stems from the fact that the last great period of architectural

experimentation and innovation in Italy was under Fascism. Giuseppe Terragni's Casa del Fascio in Como, 1936, one of the most acclaimed works in the entire history of Italian architecture, is perhaps the chief case in point; and it is particularly ironic that the building's exquisite rationality of design, abundant use of glass and open spaces flooded with light, served as a metaphor for the political ideals of beneficial public programs and transparency in government that made Fascism so appealing to so many people. I also cannot help adding, incidentally, that Michelucci was one of the few architects I have found who had the courage to lament and protest against this sorry state of Florentine affairs.

But the plague of excessive historicism is by no means confined to Florence. One could write a book, in fact, a book has been written, about the major masterpieces of Modern architecture that have failed to win approval—Capolavori Bocciati!—in Venice. In 1952 Frank Lloyd Wright designed a house for one of his young Italian admirers and assistants, Angelo Masieri. In 1964-65 Le Corbusier was commissioned to design a great new hospital whose radical originality, architecturally as well as socially, is indicated even by fact that he called it a “humanist” hospital. Both of these buildings were intended for the Grand Canal and rejected because they did not “fit”—again, a tragicomic irony because one of the glories of a cruise down the Grand Canal is the great pageant of the ever-changing history of architecture, no facades are ever alike, and to the discerning historian they are a continuous history of modernism through at least three centuries, until suddenly, it stops. The Biennale would today not only beckon to the world for the temporary exhibitions it offers, but as a major work of art in itself had Louis Kahn's 1968-74 project for a Palazzo dei Congressi been realized. The same kind of dispute is taking place right now over Gehry's project for a new airport for Venice, this time far from the heart of the city. Modena had the opportunity to become as famous for its architectural as for its automotive leadership had it approved Frank Gehry's proposal for a celebratory gateway to the city from the Via Emilia (**Fig. 1, Fig. 2, Fig. 3**). This was before Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao gave that city its brilliant cultural image known the world over.

Of course there are noteworthy exceptions to the dismal picture I have tried to paint, and notably in Rome. Rome itself now has had a new infusion of new architectural

ideas. It seems that the Ara Pacis will at last have an ample, transparent setting on the bank of the Tiber designed by Richard Meier, who was also responsible for the spirited and deeply spiritual church of the Jubilee; at last there will be a new museum of contemporary art by Zaha Hadid, now under construction. Renzo Piano's recently completed grandiose Parco della Musica has already given a new face to the auditory life of the Caput Mundi. But these bright spots are, in my opinion, exceptions that prove the rule. I doubt whether Meier's project would even have been considered had not the Ara Pacis already been given a modern installation under Fascism, by Vittorio Morpurgo, 1937. Meier's church in Rome was commissioned by the Vatican. That church, Hadid's Museum and Piano's music center are in the periphery, not in the heart of the city, where they would surely not have been permitted, even if space could have been found.

It is of considerable interest, I think, that a political component accompanied nearly every one of the modern, truly innovative works I have mentioned, built and unbuilt. They were promoted either under the Fascists or under leftwing or left-leaning postwar political parties. All of them. Although Fascism and the postwar left certainly make strange bedfellows, I do not think this strange analogy is coincidental. But it seems to me that another irony underlies the strange history I have recounted. In my own experience, and I have had some, much of the opposition to modernist projects has come from a direction that one would normally associate politically with the liberal left, namely, the Green Party and Italia Nostra. Some years ago, in a public debate about Gehry's project for Modena, the then head of the city's Green Party and Italia Nostra, a man of great intelligence, cultivated and congenial, pronounced exactly these words, "We must leave the city to our children exactly as we found it." I can only say that this radical suppression of the present and the future by the overwhelming weight of the past, from whatever direction it comes, is not Italia Mia! Nor, I think, the Italia of Giulio Carlo Argan.

I shall end by quoting from an angry letter published in the *Corriere della Sera* 7 September 1995 and signed by no less than 35 Italian architects in reaction to Isozaki's project for the Uffizi.

*"L'architettura italiana attraversa una situazione drammatica. Mentre in altre nazioni europee, in particolare in Francia, in Germania, in Spagna,*

negli ultimi decenni sono state realizzate grandi opere di interesse sociale che hanno trasformato sensibilmente l'ambiente urbano mettendo a disposizione dei cittadini nuovi servizi che esprimono lo spirito del nostro tempo, in Italia iniziative del genere si contano sulle dita. . . . Il rischio di questa situazione è che si interrompa la continuità di una ricerca che ebbe inizio negli anni Trenta del Novecento per opera di un gruppo di architetti di cui oggi si celebra in ambito internazionale la capitale importanza per lo sviluppo della modernità in architettura; uomini come Terragni, Gardella, Albini, Scarpa, Samonà, Libera, Moretti, Ridolfi. Il naturale sviluppo della linea di ricerca iniziata da questi architetti, e portata avanti con spirito innovativo da molti degli esponenti delle generazioni successive.”

Their desperate evaluation of the situation was to my estimation, more than justified. It is unfortunate, however, in my estimation, that the target of their protest was not Isozaki's project as such, about which they said nothing, but the fact that Isozaki is not Italian. Perhaps I may be forgiven for saying that, in my estimation, the wonderful prize I have received today, specifically earmarked for “stranieri,” truly represents, Italia Mia.



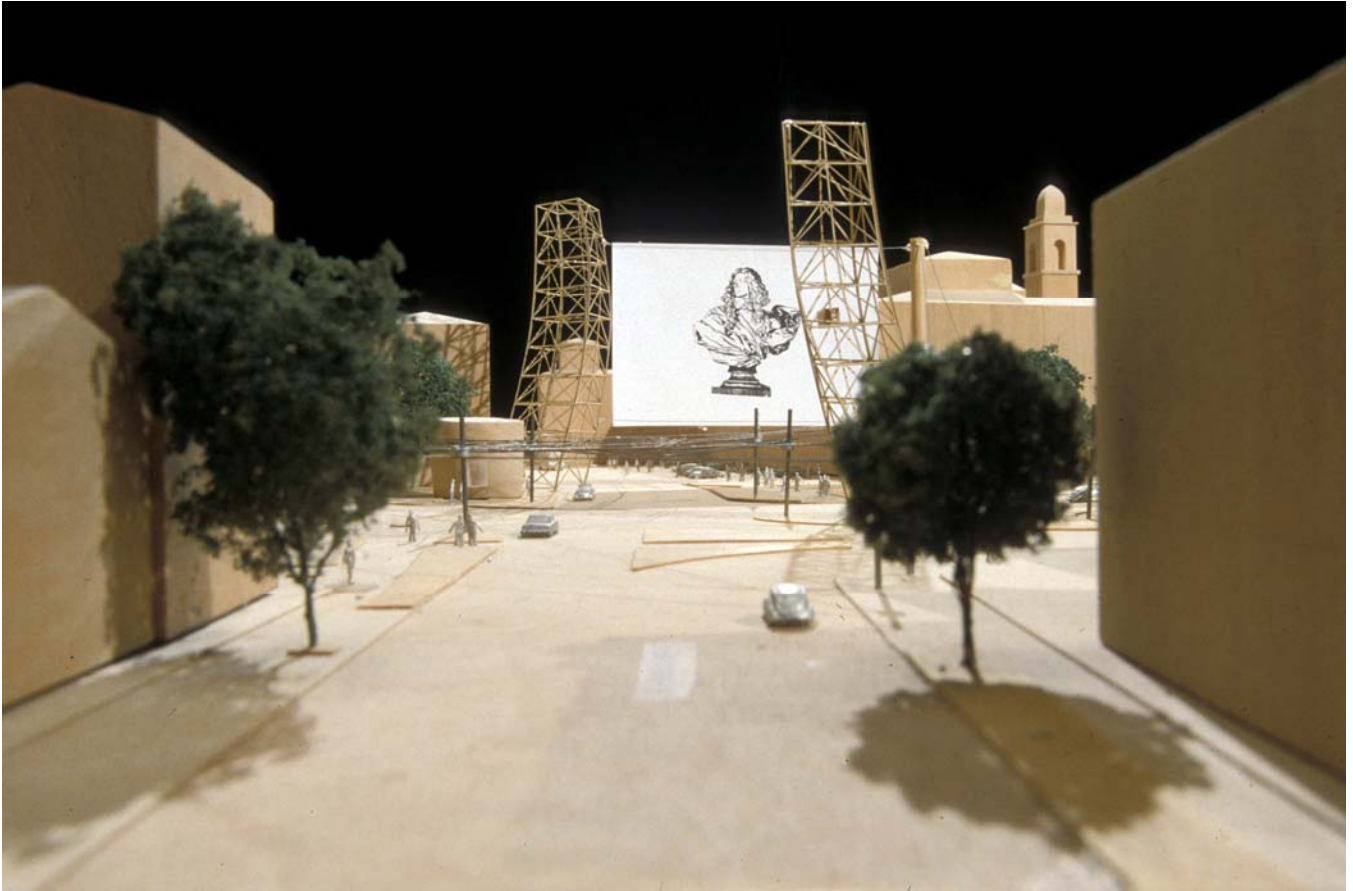


Fig. 1 Frank O. Gehry, Project for temporary installation, Piazza Aldo Moro, Modena



Fig. 2 Frank O. Gehry, Project for temporary installation, Piazza Aldo Moro, Modena



Fig. 3 Frank O. Gehry, Project for temporary installation, Piazza Aldo Moro, Modena

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