Paolo Portoghesi (1931-2023)



by the editorial staff

Much was said about Paolo Portoghesi (1931-2023) in the days following his death on 30 May 2023 in Calcata, the small town between Viterbo and Rome where the architect and scholar had lived for many years with his wife Giovanna Massobrio, herself an architect and art historian. With his death, Italy has lost its best-known exponent of Postmodernism, a label Portoghesi had openly embraced, working not only as a practitioner but also as a lecturer, magazine editor, head of the architecture section (1979-82) and president (1983-93) of the Venice Biennale. His historical-critical work has had a number of effects: on the one hand, it has highlighted the Renaissance and Baroque periods as indispensable premises (*Roma Barocca*, 1966; *Borromini nella cultura europea*, 1982; *La mano di Palladio*, 2008); on the other hand, it has contributed to deciphering the architectural landscape of the late 20th century and the early millennium (*Dopo l'architettura moderna*, 1980). Also of great value are the books, co-authored with Giovanna Massobrio, on aspects of Modernism that are still underestimated, from *Album degli anni Venti* (1978) to *Casa Thonet. Storia dei mobili in legno curvato* (1980). Portoghesi's vision is all the more controversial and divisive because of his identification with the profession of architect. Some of his public buildings – theatres, multi-purpose centres, schools – can seem too literal in their reference to the past, and the transposition of certain stylistic features from the original materials (marble, brick, lime, stucco) to the grey of industrial concrete and plaster sometimes seems forced. It is perhaps no coincidence that, in Portoghesi's vast sacred oeuvre, the most celebrated work is not a Christian church but the Mosque of Rome, designed in 1974 and inaugurated in 1995, as if his strangeness to Islam had obliged him to a

simple and controlled interpretation of the theme. But the revival of the idea of dignity and harmony in the urban fabric is a valuable legacy we owe him, and the renovation of Piazza San Silvestro in Rome, which he began in 2011 and is still working on, is proof of this. Some years ago we published Portoghesi's *La decorazione e il suo linguaggio*, at faredecorazione.it/?p=2199, a text we recommend to all FD readers. It is to be hoped that the essay on beauty that Portoghesi was working on will see the light of day, albeit posthumously. The previews given by the author and published on 31 May 2023 in the online journal "Ytali", at ytali.com/2023/05/31/sulla-bellezza/, are far from clichés on the subject.

Homepage: Paolo Portoghesi photographed on July 15, 2013 while visiting Vignola, Modena (photo credits ASP G. Gasparini).