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Luigi Cosenza, Bernard Rudofsky and Gio Ponti and the Secret of the Mediterranean Sea

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Abstract

Landscape, cavity, courtyard, skin, pergola are some of the elements of the Mediterranean abacus that architecture tries to transfigure into a single substance but also as a derivation of a great mother, the Mediterranean Sea. However, we can suppose that all these elements come from an idea that acts as a *trait d'union*, an intuition that made the domestic space of the Mare Nostrum the place of the myth of living: the innovative idea of horizon summarized as the ability of the gaze to observe outward. Gio Ponti, Bernard Rudofsky and Luigi Cosenza are the architects of the materialization of this idea where the horizon is not only found in the relationship with the landscape but is present within the domestic space. In this space full of symbolism and origin, three houses are a body to be vivisected and rediscovered. Casa per Positano... and other shores, Hotel San Michele in Capri, Casa a Procida become autoptic and utopian spaces from which to steal the secret of the Mediterranean Sea.

Keywords: Architectural Planning and Design, Landscape, Mediterranean Architecture, Vernacular Architecture.

1. Introduction

In 1940 Gio Ponti, founder of "Domus" and editor in chief of the magazine, with the issue n. 152 tried to define the Manifesto of the idea of a beach house for Italians. *"The natural preservation of character"*, writes Gio Ponti, *"even in the development and evolution of building by the sea is one of the main tasks and can be the source of an ideal job for architects since from the investigation of character they come to a more intimate and moving knowledge of the reasons why an architecture in a certain place has taken on certain enchanting aspects and must not lose them: they are reasons married to the sky, the waters, the intensity of the sun, the color of lights and shadows, the color and nature of the plantations (olive trees, agaves, pines, palms), the way of building the place, the materials of the place - primitive autarchy - finally, the special aptitudes of the peasant workers"* (Ponti, 1940). The idea, although at first it might have appeared limited to the Italian geographical area, was instead based on the possibility of indicating possible compositional strategies of the domestic project linked to the sea. The analysis of the house had already been investigated by Ponti from the first issues of "Domus". In particular, starting from the semantics of some terms that define architectural components (Ponti, 1928), number 1 led us towards a journey into Italian living that tried to be the driving force behind a new vision of the domestic space. Just as he was weaving the strings of his itinerary in living space, he met the young Luigi Cosenza and Bernard Rudofsky who had recently concluded some design experiences. If Gio Ponti had up to that moment investigated living as a mirror of the change in habits and as the result of multiple experiences of the present, the Italian-Austrian duo had dedicated for years to the discovery of living linked to the spontaneous and primordial aspect. Their stay in Procida and Capri and their discovery of Campania Coasts intrigued Ponti who decided to steal their secret by publishing one of their projects. The meeting between these three figures will produce some of the Mediterranean architectures that still form part of the Mediterranean project today and that teach us how the architectural project is itself the search for a way of relating with space, even if only on paper. Ponti, Cosenza and Rudofsky are the Vergil of this journey that leads the guest to immerse themselves in the suggestions and sounds of the Mediterranean myth.

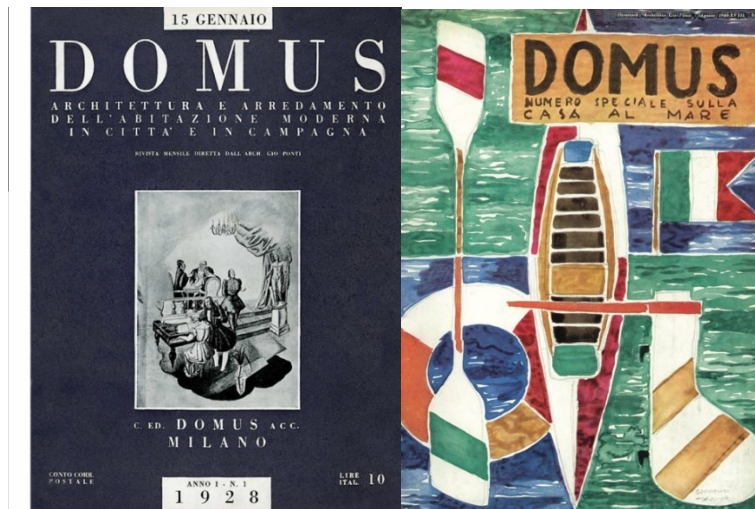


Figure 1. "Domus" n.1, 1928, "Domus" n. 152, 1940 – covers magazine

2. Mediterranean Imperfection

Campania coast has always been part of the Grand Tour which involved some of the symbolic places of the Mediterranean, a journey that was made by intellectuals who had the aim of learning about the traditions and artistic works of the old continent. As regards the students of the most prestigious engineering and architecture schools, for them the goal was to learn about the spontaneous ways of building so as to learn the power of form from the ancient world. As for Le Corbusier and his Journey to the East, even if he moved in the opposite direction to the traditional itinerary of the Grand Tour (Fatigato, 2013), some of the stops seemed almost mandatory, such as Italy - with Pompeii and Naples - and the Greece, places where you can rediscover the classical world. If, therefore, at the beginning of the twentieth century the image that was spasmodically sought was the purity of the forms of the Parthenon and the Imperial Fora, with the discovery of the islands such as Capri, Procida and then Ischia (Maglio, 2015) it will go moving an idea not only of discovery but also of a completely new life.

"Style is man - you have to look for the man who built the walls of Anacapri; they will tell you that his name was Mastr'Arcangelo. We need to know who Mastr'Arcangelo was. Mastr'Arcangelo - they say - 'built with his hands'; and they mean that he did not do things as they should be done. He did not use the 'cucchiara' and only rarely did he handle the wooden 'fracasso' that he handled like a spatula, like a stick. He didn't even use the archipenzolo - to be convinced of this, just look at the houses he built, all slightly overhanging, pulled up askew. He disdained the leveling; the plasters, which he left rough, bear his fingerprints and are so irregular and multifaceted that when the sun beats on them, it creates a play of light and shadow that animates the surfaces of those walls and makes them vibrate like a living thing. In short, he modeled the houses, molded them by hand; he could not be called a real mason - he was at most an artist, a sculptor of houses" (Mangone, 2004). This passage by Edwin Cerio originally published in "Aria di Capri" of 1927 and reported by Fabio Mangone in his book "Capri and the architects", summarizes the vision that until the early 1930s was formally transmitted to the idea of Mediterranean constituted by the wisdom of artisan imperfection. As Giuseppe Capponi wrote in 1929 *"For this architecture, especially interesting as it belongs to him, Edwin Cerio invented, with ingenuity and some modesty, the name of Capri architecture. This witty idea thrilled everyone a little and many ended up taking the Capri style too seriously, swearing and battling in his name, and exaggerating to the point, I think, to amaze and amuse the inventor himself. Thus, a kind of Capri architecture academy was formed which, if it does not die soon, will threaten the landscape of Capri as seriously as, in its time, the inauspicious passion for ribbons and stucco daisies"* (Capponi, 1929). The Caprese academia edited by Cerio is one of the examples of what we can define an exasperation of imperfection that led the intellectuals of the 1930s to be more in dialogue with the idea of a real Mediterranean revolution, a story composed of recognizable elements but transposed into a new idea of living that had no intention of denying the codes of the place but only of interpreting them as a material experience of a new way of relating to the horizon.

3. A New Way of Living

"The Mediterranean house, in its absolute honesty, not stylistically falsified, corresponding in every detail to the needs of agricultural life, simple and laborious" (Pagano, Daniel, 1936), this is the definition proposed by Giuseppe Pagano and Guarniero Daniel to describe the Mediterranean house understood as the matrix of Italian living in the Catalog of the "Italian Rural Architecture" exhibition. As previously described, we were now beyond the idea of the purely dreamy and mythical space told by painters such as Leo von Klenze or Carl Weichardt but we were looking for a new imaginary that was linked to new housing needs. Gio Ponti and Emilio Lancia with the Domus Nova holiday

home of 1930 show us a first attempt to compose an evident relationship with the landscape. The pergola on the roof is inspired - but without classical mimicry - by the nature that surrounds the Mediterranean houses so as to establish a continuum with the plant context. A further step towards independence from the ideals of classicism through a new vision of living is taken with the 1934 Casa alla Pompeiana where Ponti tries to rework the patio theme. The strength of the work lay in being defined only by an entrance wall, more indebted to the open pylons evoked by Marcello Canino, Giambattista Ceas, Gerardo Chiaromonte and Umberto Sommariva in the Casa sul Golfo at the Milan Triennale in 1933 (Gambardella, 2005) and to the project that Bernard Rudofsky of the same year, house in Procida. The project was, however, studied by Ponti who had the opportunity to view the graphs in 1937 in "Casabella" n. 117 with an article by Attilio Podestà, A house in Procida by the arch. Bernhard Rudofsky. After studying the project on the pages of "Casabella", Ponti asked Rudofsky to publish an article not only to describe the project but to tell his vision of the idea of home. Procida was chosen to be the point zero of the new idea of life. In fact, for Rudofsky Procida was the place chosen with his wife Berta to live after his move from Santorini from Italy and on this island, still with a genuinely archaic taste, he imagines building her house. On the pages of "Domus" no. 123 of 1938 he writes *"The discovery of an island"*, an article that brings with it not only the description of a place but of an imaginary deriving from the countless visions he had in his travels. *"It is devoid of caves, viewpoints, natural arches"*, writes Bernard Rudofsky *"- it is not famous for architectural monuments, it does not have famous paintings to boast, it has not been or is a spa of any kind, it lacks even of Roman columns[...]. Procida therefore always sleeps the sleep of the Sleeping Beauty. Moral. Tourists, cruise passengers, snobs, do well to forget the name of Procida; but artists will find their new sensations, the architects will find revelations, the gourmets will find of the first fruits, the lovers will find a hiding place. Anyone who is a bit of all this will find in Procida the place marked by her fate"* (Rudofsky, 1938). The place of choice for dreams and projects, Procida is described by the Austrian architect as a small paradise in which to grasp the magic of the Mediterranean. Rudofsky's house in Procida is composed of a square plan punctuated by the flows of domestic actions and it is singular to observe that the architect describes the project starting from the actions of the body in space, in particular the contact with the ground: *"For a long time we have lost contact with the ground. The gentleman who returning from his morning ride can take off his leather leggings only with suitable devices, the lady who wears shoes with more or less high heels that invite you to sit or lie down, but are not made for walking, the sporty woman who puts her shoes on feet in three pairs of double wool socks to squeeze them later in spiked and oiled shoe-trunks [...]. They no longer know the joy of feeling the flat of their feet velvety with sand, with well-trimmed grass, with smooth marble"*. The reason why Rudofsky chooses to introduce his project starting from how the place is "inhabited" immediately clarifies the goal of the project: to get rid of the superfluous. A house on one level with a central patio that allows you to observe all the rituals of the house becomes the beating heart of the project where the action of eating, washing and sleeping are recognized in almost primitive actions but aimed at the freedom of the body. The classic iconography used for the representation of the silhouettes is a clear indication of the desire to evoke the myth without returning to that Capri style described by Cerio. In Procida Rudofsky he had strengthened even more the association with Luigi Cosenza with whom he was carrying out Villa Oro (1934-1937). Villa Oro represents that porous city that had fascinated Walter Benjamin (Amirante, 2013), a filiation of the Neapolitan tuff dear to the Neapolitans of Cosenza combined with the purity that Rudofsky had known in Santorini. But if Villa Oro remains one of the works that best consecrate the Neapolitan and Austrian partnership, the Positano project and... other shores, drawings left on paper, represents the expressed dream of a new ideal that was grafted onto the Neapolitan coast. *"Cabanon ante litteram, the Villa in Positano is a stone and masonry tent, or rather a camp where the different functions find their own accommodation in elementary volumes that use nature as a building material: the magnolia and the fig tree that rise from the floor. of the living room, the lava wall of Vesuvius, the mighty parallelepiped in limestone as an artificial continuation of the rock"* (Irace, 2006), the house is a pure and sincere derivation of the landscape. The powerful images contained in the magazine that made this project famous underline the revolutionary abacus used; the cliff of Positano is a safe landing place for pure architecture defined by limestone blocks and pure white plaster. If Villa Oro combines the image of new modern architecture with the urban apparatus dear to Rudofsky, the House in Positano is the Manifesto of the Mediterranean Villa that does not seek the echo of the myth but tries to define one of its own. The space of the house consists of two levels where the ground floor appears as a continuous surface, a rock that turns into a lapillus boulder and invites you to walk through the house with bare feet. Nature creeps into space through the fig tree and the magnolia *"rose from the floor, escaping from the roof with their highest branches"* (Ponti, 1937). The roof, a reinforced concrete floor perforated to allow nature to immerse itself, looks like a super-light element, almost a sail, just like for the courtyard of the house in Procida. The presence of the hearth is inevitable, becoming an element jutting out from the limit of the object. The shower is the only curved element that faces the sea and the landscape for greater privacy. The upper floor contains a closed room, the bedroom which, through a directional window, observes the natural context. The choice of stone and plaster derives from the desire to emphasize the relationship between matter and purity or, as Ponti writes, to *"satisfy his lyricism"* (Ponti, 1937). The staircase that allows access

to the upper floor is described in metal with rubber treads precisely to invite you to always be barefoot when crossing the domestic space and leads, as well as to the covered accommodation - the bedroom -, to the area which will be called open room, in the wake of the tradition closest to Rudofsky. In this project, hanging on a thread between dream and reality, between lyricism and poetry, we really see the ability to merge the worlds of the two authors who will feed on each other for a few years without fear of losing their identity.

In this house the real protagonist is none other than the rock, so much so that the authors themselves wrote that the volume is a structural continuation of the existing base. It is important to underline that what appears interesting is not only the purely naturalistic aspect in itself but the method of translation of the morphology of the cliff: the project is certainly not a fake, a mythization of the Latin echo but, on the contrary, it is strongly present in the landscape; tries, through the use of limestone, to blend with the rock but the white plaster deliberately bursts and here the myth returns but without regretting its lyricism, telling, instead, a modern and safe image of the present of architecture. If the working partnership between Rudofsky and Cosenza was now evident, Gio Ponti, older but equally moved by a passion for architecture, decides to have Rudofsky as collaborate on some issues of "Domus" but above all to experiment projects based on this new idea of Mediterraneo intended not as a reinterpretation of classical codes but a new idea of the Mare Nostrum. While Procida remains the ideal place for Rudofsky and Cosenza, Capri is instead the experimentation space chosen by Ponti and Rudofsky who in 1938 designed Un Albergo nel Bosco in Anacapri. *"Capri is an exemplary textual and visual construction. It is the place of a consoling Mediterranean 'utopia', an idyllic landscape environment, where the pre-existing architectural elements interact with the visual arts and literary culture. And the lyrical interpretation of native culture is associated with a renewed semantics of popular and tradition"* (Miodini, 2018) and it is precisely the renewed semantics - so dear to the Pontian alphabet that the Austro-Italic combination tried to describe. From their meeting came out in 1938 the project for a hotel in the woods in Anacapri where *"using a beautiful sloping site [...] the architects concentrated the main common services in the entrance building, and then dispersed the rooms, single or double, in the Macchia del bosco, like many single houses, interprets the interpretation not only of the landscape but of Capri life"* (Mangone, 2004) by designing for the first time a real widespread hotel. The aim of the project was to build spaces that could adapt to the way of living time on the island. Interesting is the planimetric drawing of the project which, as in the Rudofskian tradition, works as an urban agglomeration in which the service area is a perfect fusion of Rudofsky's straight line and the soft and enveloping Ponti curve which, never for free, directs the paths and view. Once you enter the entrance space, you enter the small village made up of rooms-houses that enclose the Mediterranean.

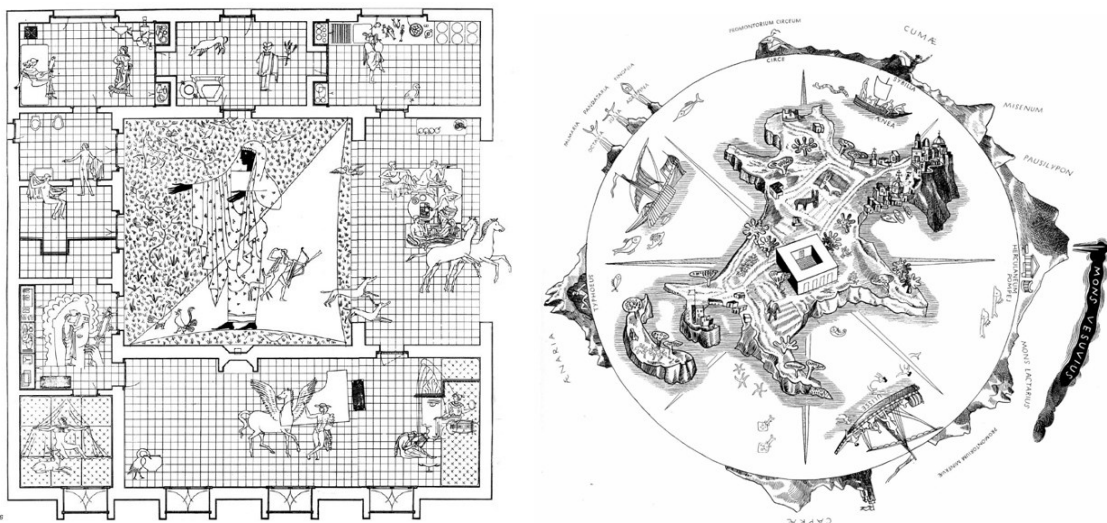


Figure 2. House in Procida, Bernard Rudofsky, "Domus" n° 123, 1938

Each house contains within itself the abacus of the Inland Sea that Ponti and Rudofsky were translating, interpreting, discretizing: the patio and the garden welcome nature that becomes part of the rooms of the house - themes that we will also find in Rudofsky's American projects such as Nivola house-; the way of observing the space takes up the themes of Casa a Procida where the body was perennially stretched out and therefore also the openings towards the landscape had to adapt to the comfort of the lifestyle. If it is true that nature is a present and central element, in the case of the Hotel in Anacapri, nature overflows not in height - as in the house in Positano where the roof and the tree are a single body - but in the horizontality penetrating into the space of life and pleasure.

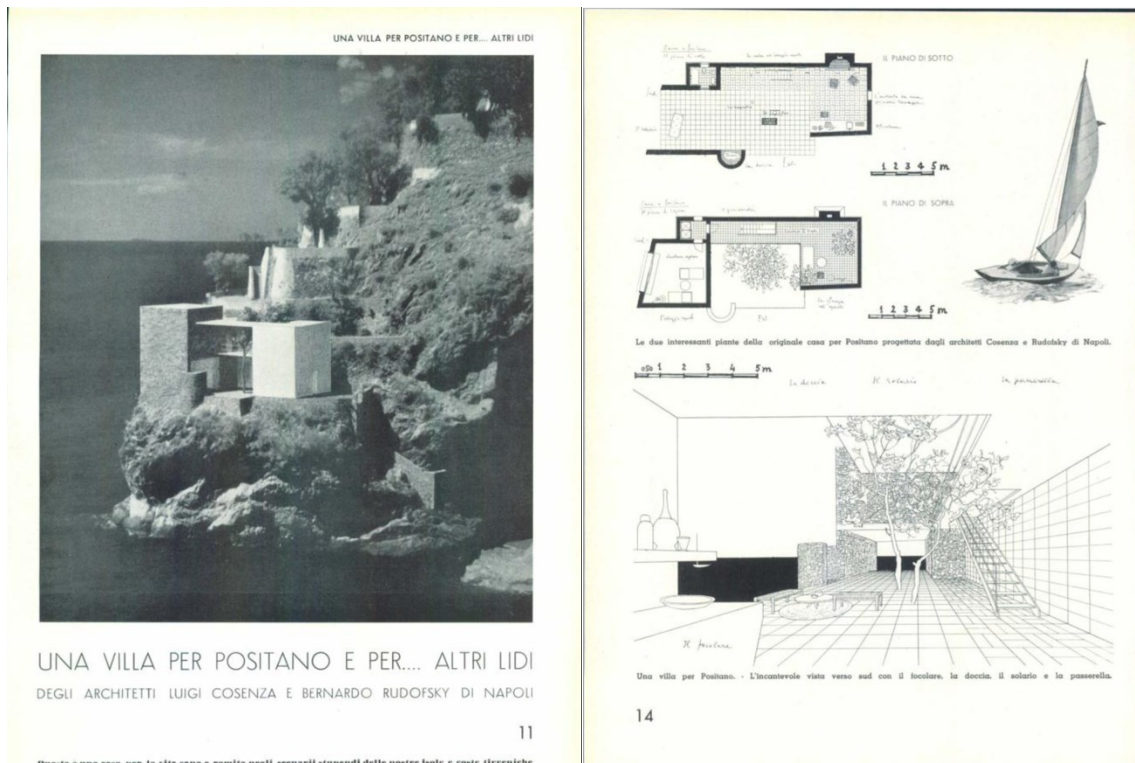


Figure 3. House in Positano and...other shores, Bernard Rudofsky and Luigi Cosenza, "Domus" n°109, 1937

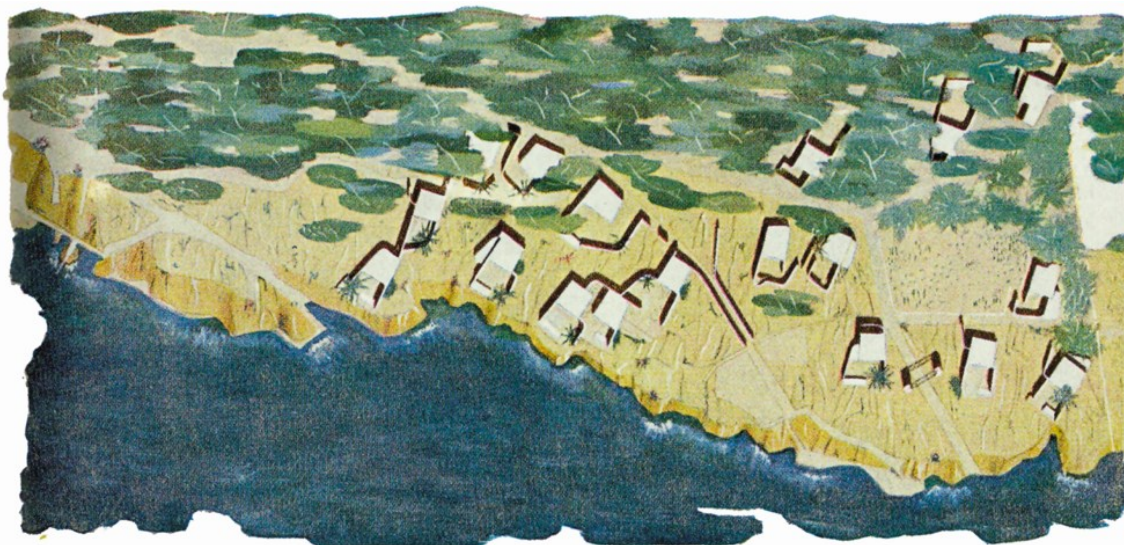


Figure 4. Gio Ponti and Bernard Rudofsky, Hotel du Camp per Eden Roc ad Antibes, 1939

4. Conclusions: The secret of the Mediterranean Sea

At the beginning of this story about the architecture of the Inland Sea, we talked about the disruptive force that the 1940 issue 152 of "Domus" had. In his Editorial Ponti wrote *"We want the coasts of Italy blessed by the ordinary, harmonious presence of marine colonies, each one more beautiful than the other, all highly civilized in conception, design, equipment. All are happily part of the landscape"* (Ponti, 1940) specifying how the relationship with the landscape context and the relationship between architecture and the dehoor is a characterizing element of the domestic horizon. The house is not only a place to live but a space in close contact with the naturalistic aspect. Also, in the pages of the 1940 editorial we read *"Insinuating new buildings in the characteristic landscape must be done with caution, taste and civility and under authoritative control. In the villages, character is a sacrosanct thing, it must be preserved, and certain elements of this character (especially constitutive) must be kept in mind in the developments themselves of the new surrounding buildings. It has been said that they are constitutive rather than stylistic or decorative elements because one does not have to fall into stupid imitation, falsehood, folklore, but*

because one knows how to taste certain elements of the place which naturally preserve, without mimicking, the character in a natural evolution of use" (Ponti, 1940).

In this editorial, the Editor in Chief of "Domus" had made it clear that the work must not be understood as a *"stupid imitation, in falsehood, in folklore"*, but a true interpretation of the *"constitutive"* elements. This passage is fundamental because it summarizes the key points of his Mediterranean idea, a derivation of the meeting with Rudofsky and Cosenza. Among the architectures that this issue collects we find the project by Lina Bo Bardi and Carlo Pagani which appears to be a filiation of the project by Bernard Rudofsky of Procida. The house is imagined in Sicily and also the graphic narrative mode is directly linked to Rudofsky's classical imagery. The human figure in the House on the sea of Sicily, a land of Greek and Arab contamination where *"Magna Graecia is alive everywhere"* (Bo Bardi, 1940), is represented through figures that cannot fail to remind us of Rudofsky's and also in the story of the house the space of nature becomes a unifying element of the project. The presence of the external pavilion as well as in the Procidano project is further proof that this design recognizes the strength of the Rudofskian message. The windows, as the text accompanying the project describes, are *"wide eyes of the walls that let you see the gray olive trees, the arid rock, the very blue sea"* (Bo Bardi, 1940), frame the landscape, the protagonist. One of the differences that catches the eye is the presence of the staircase which Rudofsky considers not to belong to the 'country houses' and which was used in the project with Luigi Cosenza of 1936. The influence of the house in Procida is also clearly visible in the project by Marco Zanuso for the very famous twin houses in Arzachena in Sardinia almost twenty years after the Casa in Procida and the project by Bo Bardi and Pagani (1962-1964); in this project the idea of the primitive is revived, understood as a tale for primary needs composed of the absence of limits between inside and outside and where man turns to nature composing a space in which to live in communion with it. The plan of the domestic space uses the pure geometric shape of the square where in the center we find an open-air room covered by natural woven straw that emphasizes the shadows in the heart of the space. The edge of the central area is wrapped in the doors that move into the corners of the inner square. The external walls are slightly inclined so as to give the impression of greater solidity of the work - material derivation of the ground - and underlining the idea of the house as a fence, the perimeter of human life that is grafted into the landscape. Just like the house in Procida, Zanuso works by marking the continuous flow between inside and outside, everything is idleness and is focused on the idea of a way of life in which luxury is considered other than the villa. The furnishings, simple and essential, contribute to an elitist vision of nature with the awareness that the new way of life is, perhaps, only for a few. The house in Positano and other shores is instead an inspiration for other series of projects such as "The house and the ideal" by Giulio De Luca which was published in 1942 for the series "the ideal houses" of "Domus" n° 177 and it is inspired by the idea of living in communion with nature. *"It will not be a house understood as an environment enclosed in walls, subdivided in turn into compartments into which one transforms, from time to time, according to the destination of the environment"*, wrote Giulio De Luca, *"my house will be a garden, partly covered and encapsulated between walls and windows, only for meteorological reasons. No substantial difference between the external and internal parts. Inside, come outside you can, with bare plants, absorb the softness of the moss between the joints of the splinters of the floor. Inside like outside there will be a flower bed. No separation of environments. Only tents will allow me to shut myself up in a more modest space or to participate in the life of the whole gulf"* (De Luca, 1942). Already in the description of De Luca it is clear the link with the idea of the 'new way of living' of the villa for a man who needs to relate to the landscape, the inside and the outside is evidently a single design move that sees the exterior as a monolith of stone and glass. Giulio De Luca, an architect born in Naples, not only had himself absorbed the Mediterranean lesson but in his story of the ideal space he cannot fail to reconnect with the relationship with the landscape which itself becomes the matrix of the project. On the other hand, Giulio Minoletti's project for the weekend house for a bachelor dates back to 1946 and was published by Ernesto Nathan Rogers in his "Domus" of January n° 205. The text is signed by M.Z. - which suggests that it was written by Marco Zanuso - who writes that *"in order not to lose immediate contact with the lake, the small building has adapted to the rock that the road separates from wider free land"* (Zanuso, 1946). It is clear that the relationship with nature is not a prerogative of the house in Positano but in this project the relationship of a "new" idea of life can be found. The house was almost finished in 1942 but with the Second World War the works were interrupted, and the house was completed in 1945. It was a moment in which the need for reconstruction had handed over to the architects an anxiety *"aimed at the social problem of the house. of which specific and exceptional themes such as the present are beyond necessity"* (Zanuso, 1946). The stone wall is the element of continuity between the house and the landscape, an inverse bastion that is not only reflected in the base of Villa Oro but above all in the work on the horizontality of the house in Positano. The space is an open space defined by sliding fixtures so as to obtain a single room, the bed points its gaze on the lake precisely to declare what the whole project focuses on. Minoletti's house for a bachelor is an ode to life immersed in the place just like the house in Positano. The project for the hotel in Anacapri by Ponti and Rudofsky is, on the other hand, a typological precursor. With the houses / bungalows, a way of living is inaugurated that tries to educate the guest according to the lifestyle of the place where he is staying. The idea of a widespread hotel will not

only be proposed for the Capri coasts in 1938 but also for Eden Roc in Antibes in 1939 which, as for the project in Anacapri, “emphasizes a key point for the expression of relationships between nature and artifice, between place and nature” (Rossi, 2016). The single houses, the bungalows will be re-proposed as single houses by Ponti for the section relating to the project of a small ideal house of 1939 on “Domus”.

House in Positano and other shores, House in Procida and the Hotel in Anacapri are a Manifesto of an ideal of Mediterranean living for the architectural project. Gio Ponti's interest in the holiday home has, with the works of him and those of Luigi Cosenza and Bernard Rudofsky, delivered an infinite abacus of possibilities into our hands. Nature that bursts into the space between walls and roofs, emptiness as the theme of the project, the constant interaction between interior and exterior are part of the compositional syntax that has been handed down to us. All the elements are inextricably linked to the context in which they are inserted; the landscape understood as a decisive part, the observation of the horizon as a demarcation line of the threshold are all principles that start from and are linked to the fundamental theme on which the projects are based, Mediterraneanity.

The idea that comes out of the projects of Luigi Cosenza, Bernard Rudofsky and Gio Ponti, as described for some projects of the following years, becomes a small Mediterranean breviary that will be possible to find in the projects previously described but also in the world of Antonio Coderch, Aris Konstantinidis, Luigi Moretti and all those who made the relationship with the domestic landscape and natural compositional element of the project. As Predrag Matvejevic well described, the Mediterranean is the Inner Sea where “Mediterranean appearances are not just appearances. The extension of the space, the peculiarity of the landscape, the compactness of the whole create the impression that the Mediterranean is both a world in itself and the center of the world - a sea surrounded by lands, a land washed by the sea” (Matvejevic, 2006) and it is precisely in the materialization of these words the secret of the Mediterranean, in the extension of the space within the composition which, like a mother, contains the signs and hopes of a story made up of layers of signs and dreams.



Figure 5. House on the Sicilian Sea, Lina Bo Bardi and Carlo Pagani, “Domus” n°152, 1940



Figure 6. Houses in Arzachena, Marco Zanuso, 1962-1964



Figure 7. Island House, Concetta Tavoletta, 2021

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Conflict of Interests

The Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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