

POLYTECHNIC OF TORINO
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Camillo Riccio Architect

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Camillo Riccio has his cultural and professional education in the artistic environment of Turin, where a group of technics viewed architecture as a synthesis of art and science, its goal being usefulness and decoration. Consistent with the urban scenario of the late 19th century, he embodies the qualities of "humanist technic", accompanying historic erudition with openings toward social progress, liberism and the recent scientific discoveries.

Thus Riccio researches new sources and models for the city, that, while allowing to keep an overall unity, favoured the practice of a freer stylistic variety. Indeed, he feels the need to combine local traditions and the cultural references of his buildings, already rooted on a precise historical connotation; also, he exploits passing, short-lived events – the exhibitions – not only to test the impact of new architectural solutions on the city, but also to widen his horizons onto a supernational level, turning to the European context as if it were his natural counterpart. In every project, Riccio tries to combine shape and function, so as to apply, coherently with Eclecticism, an artistic process whereby the house becomes not only the product of the architect's technical abilities, but mostly the output of his "creative fantasy".

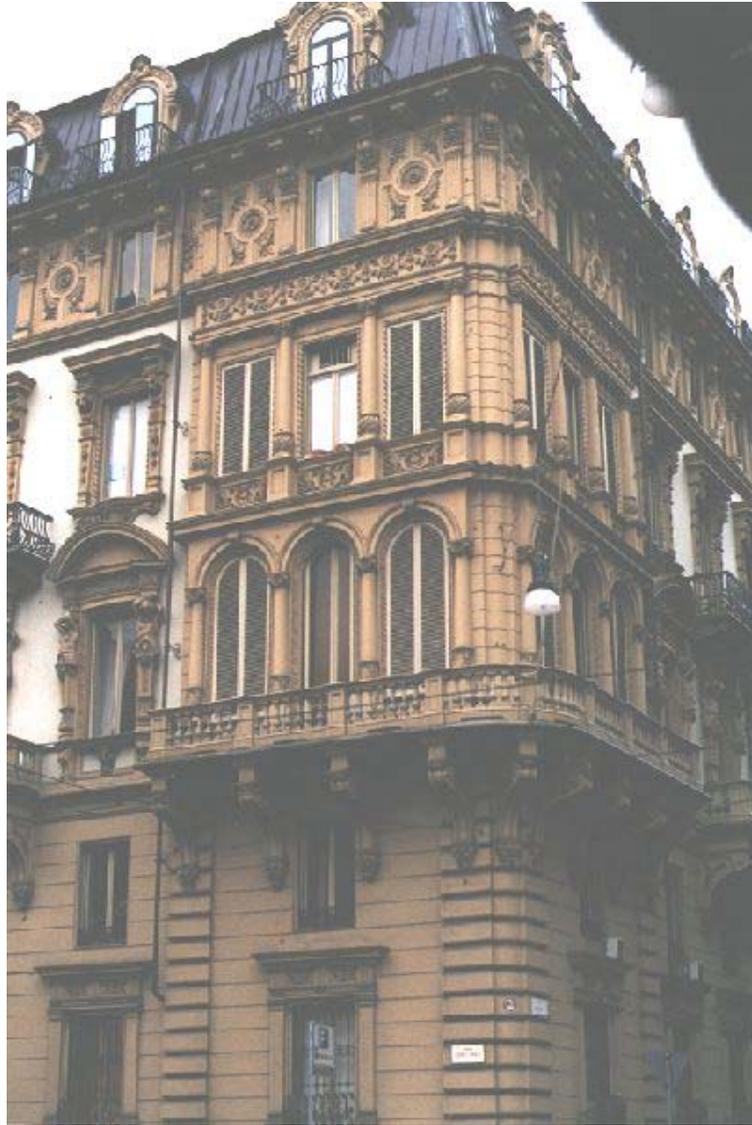


Martini and Rossi Palace in corso Vittorio Emanuele II n°42-46)

In this work, we will thoroughly and faithfully analyze the ideological motivations that ruled Riccio's professional activity, and that led him to specific public choices. Therefore, our approach was chiefly directed toward documentary sources: firstly, we examined Riccio's own reports on his projects, and on the motivations behind them, presented at the General Italian Exhibition of Turin in 1884; also, his 1890 commentary, delivered to the Engineers and Architects Society, regarding one of the great urban events he was involved in as a civil servant: the opening of Via Pietro Micca.

Secondly, we analyzed the writings of other architects both on his projects and on his professional activity; furthermore, we examined the brief letter exchange he had with the Martini & Rossi Company, found in their private archives. Lastly, the knowledge of Riccio's professional practice and technique was greatly enhanced through the analysis of projects that he either signed himself or jointly carried out with fellow architects; these documents, preserved at the Historic Archive of Turin, were filed and photographed and they are collected in the appendix.

To wrap up the analysis of Camillo Riccio's artistic production, a few more considerations are in order, especially on the relationship between the city growth and the architectural practice. From the standpoint of Turin's urban development, sensibly overseen by the City Administration, it was only after the First Italian Architecture Exhibition in 1890, and its sessions on building plans, that a true chance of comparison with foreign plans actually took place. Turin foreshadows the increasing need of legislation through the partial expansion plans that, since the 1870s, rule its growth. However, deciding whether this development has a global quality to it, or, rather, it is a limited experience, remains a difficult matter. In the light of recent studies, an even more pushing issue is determining how much the urban growth was influenced by the network of commercial links between the Administration and the construction entrepreneurs. The last chapter addresses the power of the so-called "monetary elites", and their interaction with the Municipalities; what influence they had on civil servants and, particularly, on Riccio, remains to be determined. The renewal plan of Turin, the restoration of the "environmental image of the square city", was actively pursued by Riccio both as a civil servant, serving in the city council, and on his own, working for several construction enterprises of the city. It allowed engineers two categories of building production: decorative and profitable. The first category accounts for those buildings that, while being a source of profit for the enterprise, let Riccio develop the research of a style that bound the architectural model to the final purpose of the building, faithful to a shape-function dualism.



Rey House, corner of via Magenta and corso Stati Uniti

In the second category belong those buildings whose proprietors had built solely for the purpose of diversifying their investments. However, in this case also, Riccio never abdicates to economic interests, keeping to the structural scheme similar to the earlier category and thus being attentive to the quality of dwellers' life, whatever social class they might belong to.



Quattero-Debernardi House in corso Matteotti n°47

Is "profit" the only driving force of Turin's urban development? So it would seem. Besides, would the economy-architecture relationship simply come down to a constructor-architect contract, such that one's ability to second the other's requests without betraying his own formal, esthetical principles translates into a faithful rendering of function and purpose of the building? More generally, was the construction speculation of the 19th-century liberal bourgeoisie the dominant, driving factor in Turin's urban growth of the end of the century? In Riccio's case, as far as I could verify, the answer is negative: indeed one can safely assume that "we're still witnessing an architecture that is not overcome by the strengthening economy". A further issue is the coherence of style, that is the constant research of urban front unity typical of last century's buildings in Turin: both in the activity of city centre restoration, and in the expansion areas, the architects have tried to stylistically integrate the new buildings with the existing texture. The need for a unitarian urban landscape, typical of Romanticism, agrees with a city articulated around the new hubs, identifiable, in our case, with those "architectural focal points established in the city's structure and image": squares and "portici", Turin's distinctive feature for over two centuries.

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