

Barbara ZILOCCHI, *Parma, il monumento a Giuseppe Verdi: ideazione, costruzione e demolizione*; rielaborazioni grafiche di Benedetta ROCCON e Michele SPOTTI, Parma, Grafiche Step, 2014, 151 pp.

Barbara Zilocchi's beautifully illustrated book concerns an edifice that was imagined as a new gateway into Parma. Inscribed to Giuseppe Verdi and comprising a triumphal arch, curved colonnade and central "altarpiece", the monument's large-scale form was conceived by Lamberto Cusani – a Parmense architect and in many ways the hero of Zilocchi's narrative. Zilocchi does not – as her title might imply – divide the book into three chronological sections dealing in turn with the monument's conception, construction and demolition. Rather she proceeds thematically. Thus the book opens with overviews of post-Unification commemorations (in Italy in general and Parma in particular); of the careers of Cusani and the sculptor Ettore Ximenes (a figure more internationally prominent than Cusani, whose role in Parma's Verdi monument has tended to overshadow the architect's); of their other collaborations; and of the early stages of the monument's conception in terms of its physical form and impact on the surrounding urban topography.

In the second half of the book Zilocchi addresses the monument directly. We read in turn about the many phases of sculptural and architectural design (a distinction that Zilocchi maintains throughout to distinguish between individual formal elements and the monumental whole); about the competing claims to its primary authorship; about how various elements of the design developed during the planning stages and construction process. She then traces with admirable thoroughness the vagaries of that long process – which began in April 1913 and continued or was halted according to the periodic arrival or exhaustion of funds until its conclusion in early 1920; she enumerates the project's costs, the firms and workers involved and their complex division of labour on the monument's site; and she examines the techniques and materials used – the most innovative of which was undoubtedly concrete – and the recep-

tion of the monument both while in progress and once completed. Perhaps unsurprisingly in the circumstances, the printed press soon christened the edifice a "monuemento"; Cusani's intention to exploit a new technology to keep construction on schedule and costs low went largely unappreciated, given the endless delays and escalating costs as the project dragged on. In a short final section Zilocchi addresses the demolition of a large part of the monument, which was damaged by Allied bombing during the Second World War; and the re-inauguration in 1951 of the surviving "altarpiece", relocated to make space for post-war building projects.

That Zilocchi's largely thematic approach generates considerable chronological back-and-forth is symptomatic of the complex and drawn-out process that constitutes her subject. There is little doubt, moreover, that the inevitable repetitions are compensated by the fascinating historical details that emerge. For instance: that as progress slowed when funding evaporated under the threat of war in 1914, the government put at the project's disposal bronze from captured enemy cannons; or that Cusani demanded that all manual labourers on the construction site be insured (and that years later he would become a prominent representative of Assicurazioni Generali); or that one of the few pre-existing public edifices made from concrete in Parma was the palazzo delle Poste e Telegrafi, erected in the decade before work on the Verdi monument began, in a more obvious entwining of new technologies in a young twentieth century.

There is, in short, great historiographical value in Parma's Verdi monument. This was a project that sought to synthesise new and old – in architectural and sculptural styles, in urban planning, in historical references, in materials – within the construction of a new symbol of Parma's contribution to a shared Italian past. The monument thus offers a snapshot of a minor episode in broader, long-established historical narratives: that of post-Risorgimento nation-building projects; and in particular of Verdi's role as a symbolic figure during this period. But it also constitutes a vantage point from which to revisit and re-examine those narratives. The later demolition of all but the monument's central altar and the evidently crucial role played in its construction and demolition by economic factors might usefully require us to address the sheer fragility of culture and cultural memory in capitalist modernity. Indeed, the fact that most of the vast edifice is now long gone must ultimately remind us that no act of

monumentalisation – and no act of historiography, no matter how self-conscious – is ever immune to its own obsolescence.

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