

Tiziano De Venuto  
**Drawing, thinking: the experience of Livio Vacchini**

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Abstract

Livio Vacchini's experience takes on a radical and particularly problematic perspective, especially if it refers to the relationship between drawing and research into architectural forms. Vacchini shunned the sketch as a place for the formation of ideas. Considering the project as a construction of thought, between questions and themes posed, his worktable was rather 'inhabited' by diagrams, signs, words. Instead, his drawings – those iconic ideograms that describe the concepts expressed in his architecture – are well known. Sometimes Vacchini used the sketch to describe the compositional 'structure' of some of his works. He did it during his lessons. Here, flowing from the mind and through the hand, his signs do not construct complete images or images endowed with any iconicity. Rather, they allow us to retrace the trajectories of his thought with amazement.

Keywords

Idea — Sign — Construction — Drawing — Project

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Crossing the threshold of the Locarno office, in a landscape strongly measured by the light and the rough materiality of the *béton*, you come across the paintings that Livio Bernasconi – Ticino painter, whose experience is perhaps referable to the world of geometric abstraction – had given to the friend Livio Vacchini: acrylics on canvas, clear, precise signs; a reasoned sequence of figures and colors in complex “spatial” geometries. For one of these paintings – the one displayed on the wall of his personal office – Vacchini had also designed the wooden frame. A large, flat batten; a sort of *passepertout* that participates in the construction of the image itself, with a figurative intentionality comparable to some of Josef Albers' Homages to the Square, where the frame is inscribed in the homological sequence of the figures of the composition. Inside the same room, along the *béton* wall that divides the studio from the workspace for collaborators, some drawings by Vacchini hang. These are the abstract and well-known figures that represent his works in an iconic way: the house in Costa and the study of one of its variations for a project in Locarno-Monti, in this case. These are those highly iconic drawings that critics have repeatedly discussed, placing them in a perspective of progress, when Vacchini had decided to get rid of the sketch – and more generally of the drawing produced by the hand – as a place for research and construction of thought. They are his digital drawings, those produced «at and by the computer» (Masiero 2013, p. 24). Figures made for “solid” fields.

Yet Vacchini had been a “happy” draughtsman. Eloisa Vacchini (2018, p. 161) remembers this when she tells of the days spent by Livio – his father – with his grandfather (a baker), portraying horses «with coal from the bread oven». One day even «a professional counselor, seeing him draw,

expressed a strong and inviting opinion: ‘but you have to be an architect! » (*Ibidem*). A revealing and at the same time particularly problematic statement, if placed with respect to the results of the Ticino architect’s research. Such an idea, in fact, would seem to recognize in the ability to draw, in the virtuosity of the sign produced by one’s hand, a sort of propensity for the discipline and profession of architecture. At the same time, it would seem to open up to a deeper reflection on the value of drawing, as a tool and as a language of the job. Building an image, making a mark on paper with the hand, is a work that engages the mind and that can support, or even coincide, with the very formulation of thought. However, this does not seem to be entirely true for Vacchini, who, on the contrary, claimed to design «horizontally» (Masiero 2013, p. 8), lying on his sofa, without using his hand<sup>1</sup>.

I have never seen Vacchini make a sketch. When he started a job he would put himself in front of a blank sheet, on which he wrote down a series of questions, 15-20 questions that arose thinking about the project we had to face. Then, he went on to consider which ones were less relevant, [...] progressively reducing the list until he reached one or two questions. And on the answer to these questions he set up the project<sup>2</sup>. (Babyn, Navone, Zaluska 2019, p. 2)

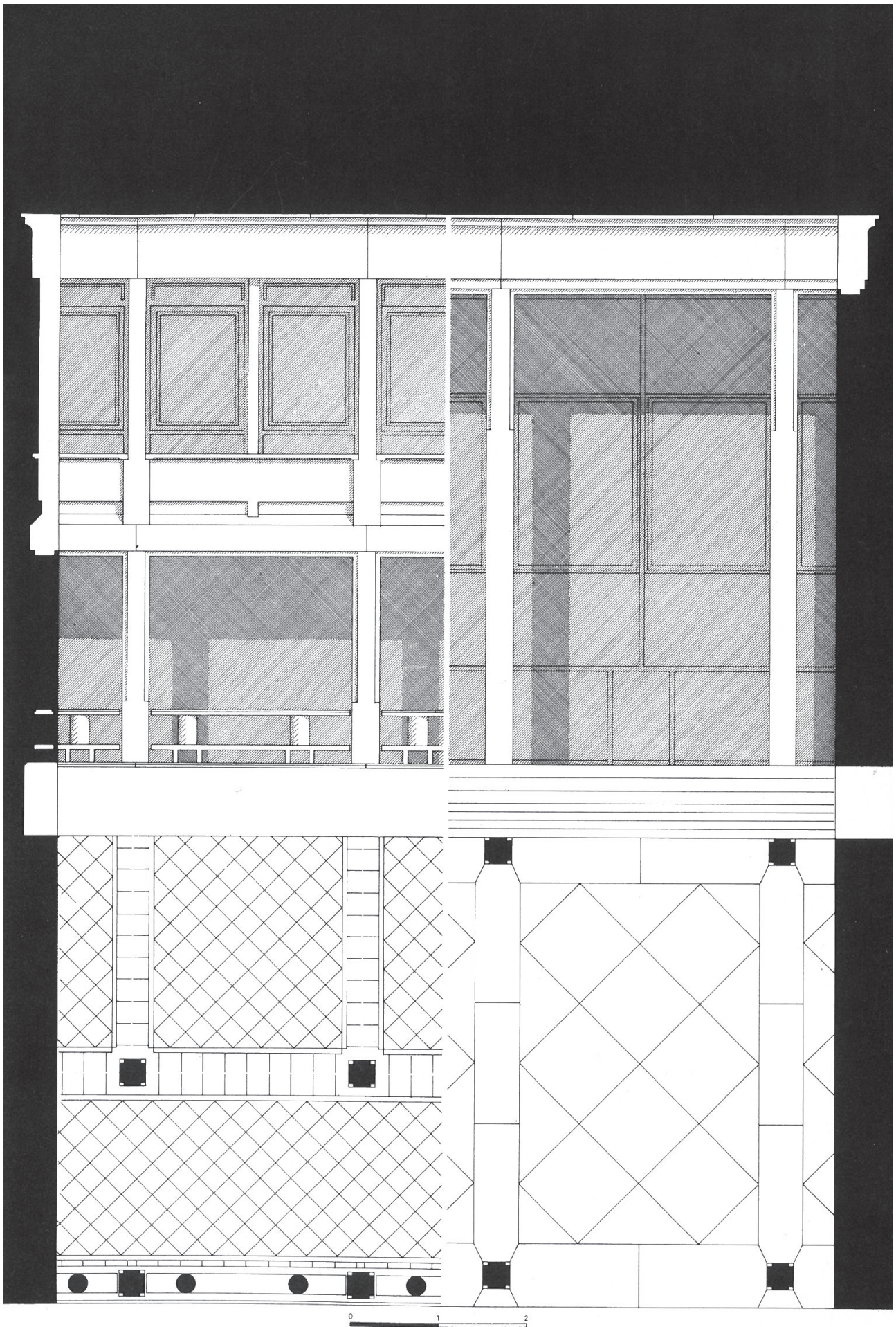
Vacchini shunned the sketch (or so he affirmed) as a place for the formation of thought. An apparently inexplicable renunciation, sometimes evaluated as painful<sup>3</sup>, but which seems to coincide with the construction of his own idea of architecture. Some of the drawings that Vacchini elaborated at the beginning of the design process of each project seem to assume a character close to that of some logical schemes, between signs and words, questions and themes posed. These “sketches” propose a use of drawing and the hand far from the idea of producing complete images or those with any value foreshadowing reality. Vacchini’s “drawn” questions – the ones Snozzi talks about – and the schemes that often accompany his reflections seem rather to express the logic, the rational thought that supports the experience of the project, which for Vacchini constantly seems to coincide with the «construction of a concept» (Moccia 2019, p. 40).

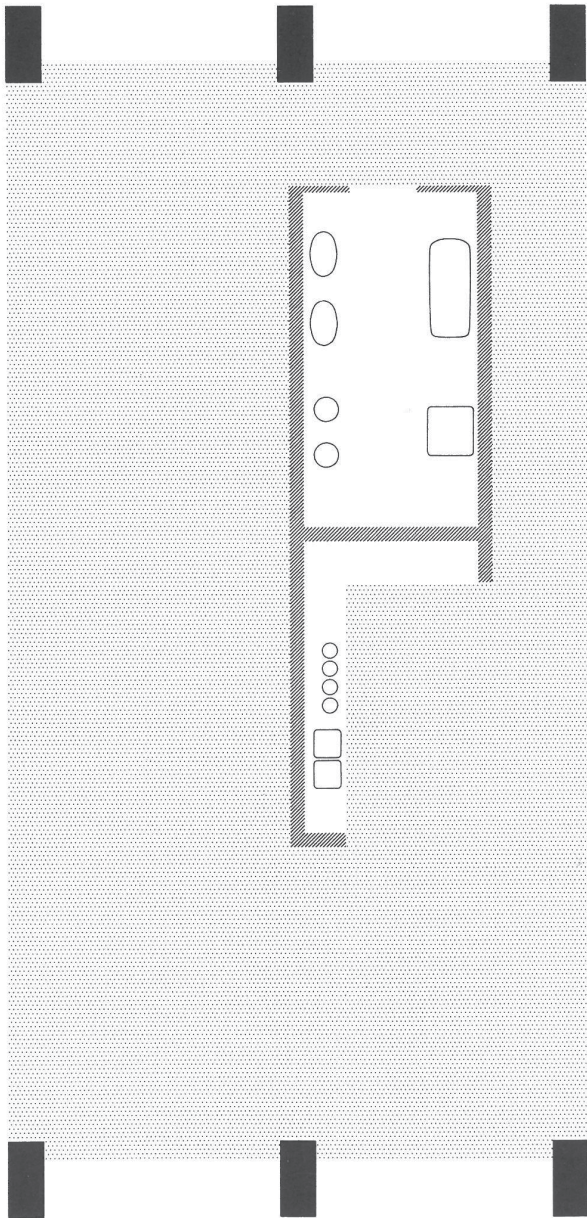
The abstract drawings – those exact ideograms displayed along the walls of his studio – express all their power in building and shaping the concepts contained in his architecture. In these, Vacchini entrusts the representation of his buildings to the Mongian projections alone, bringing back the space and the prefiguration of his character to the exactness of his constructive figures. This type of drawing seems to take on value in communicating the thought of the project, verifying it through an exercise of reduction to its elementary and therefore essential figures. Roberto Masiero, who has dedicated many important and profound reflections to the work of the Ticino master, describes these drawings through an «almost cultic, liturgical, metaphysical value» (Masiero 2013, p. 10) which would also have to do with the nourishment that Vacchini he drew from the experience of Minimal Art. An experience of art that «proceeds by removing and simplifying in order to reach the very inscrutability of the thing in itself» (*Ibidem*).

But reviewing the drawings that accompany some of Vacchini’s “youth”<sup>4</sup> projects, a significantly different style of representation emerges, still drawn up with the drafting machine, with the hand. Here, plans, elevations and sections are described through a technical drawing, inscribed within an “objective” canon of representation. Vacchini outlines the forms of his architecture with precise, abstract, neutral lines. His drawings reveal nothing

#### Fig.1

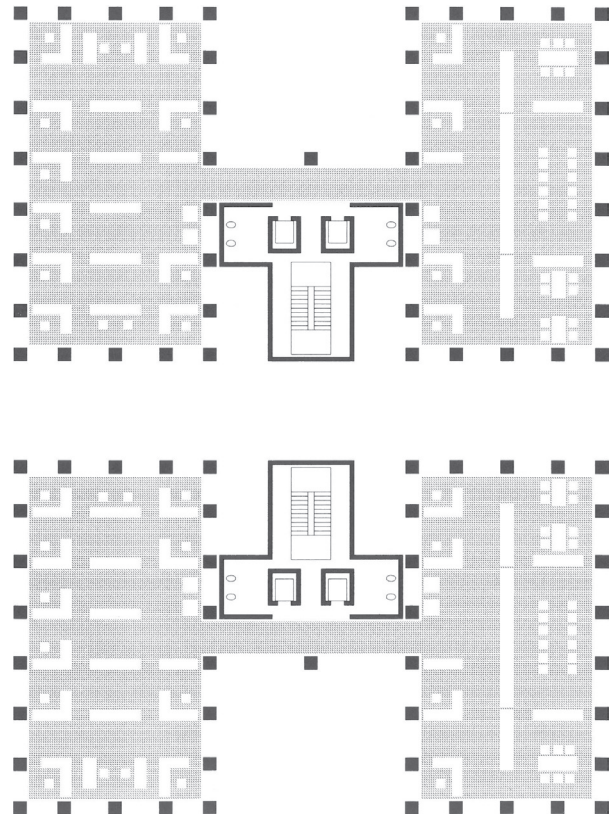
Livio Vacchini, Ai Saleggi elementary school, Locarno, 1979-78 (published in Norberg-Schulz C. e Vigato J.-C. (1987) – Livio Vacchini. Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 27).





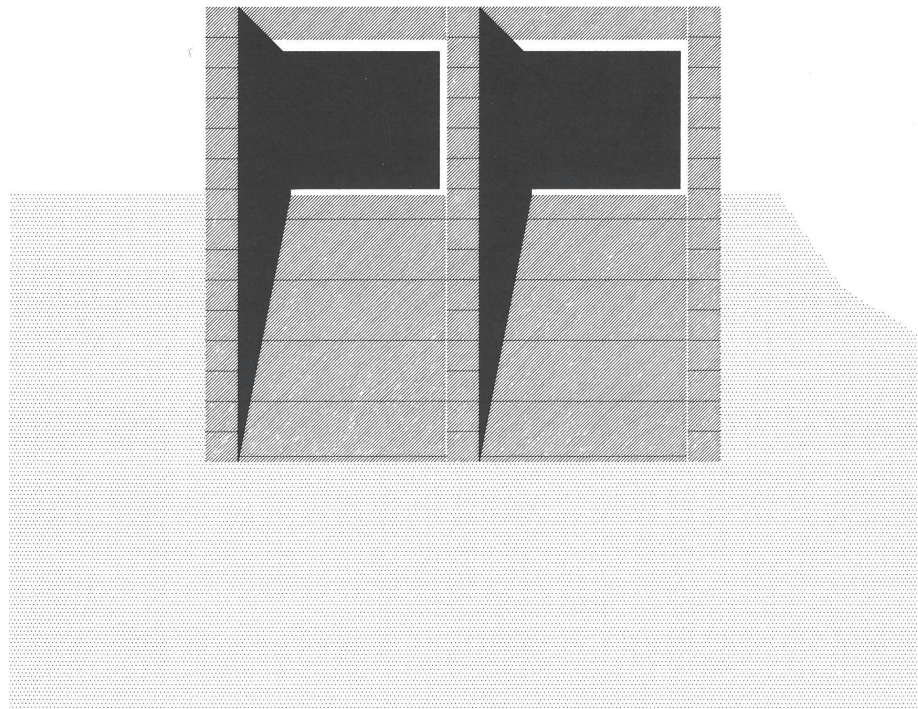
**Fig. 2**  
Livio Vacchini, Costa-Tenero house, 1990-92, plan (published in P. Disch (edited by) (1994) – Livio Vacchini architetto. ADV, Lugano, 68).

**Fig. 3**  
Livio Vacchini, Project for the Fiori-Pelosi 1990-92 administrative building, Via della Posta, Locarno, typical plan (published in P. Disch (edited by) (1994) – Livio Vacchini architetto. ADV, Lugano, 60).



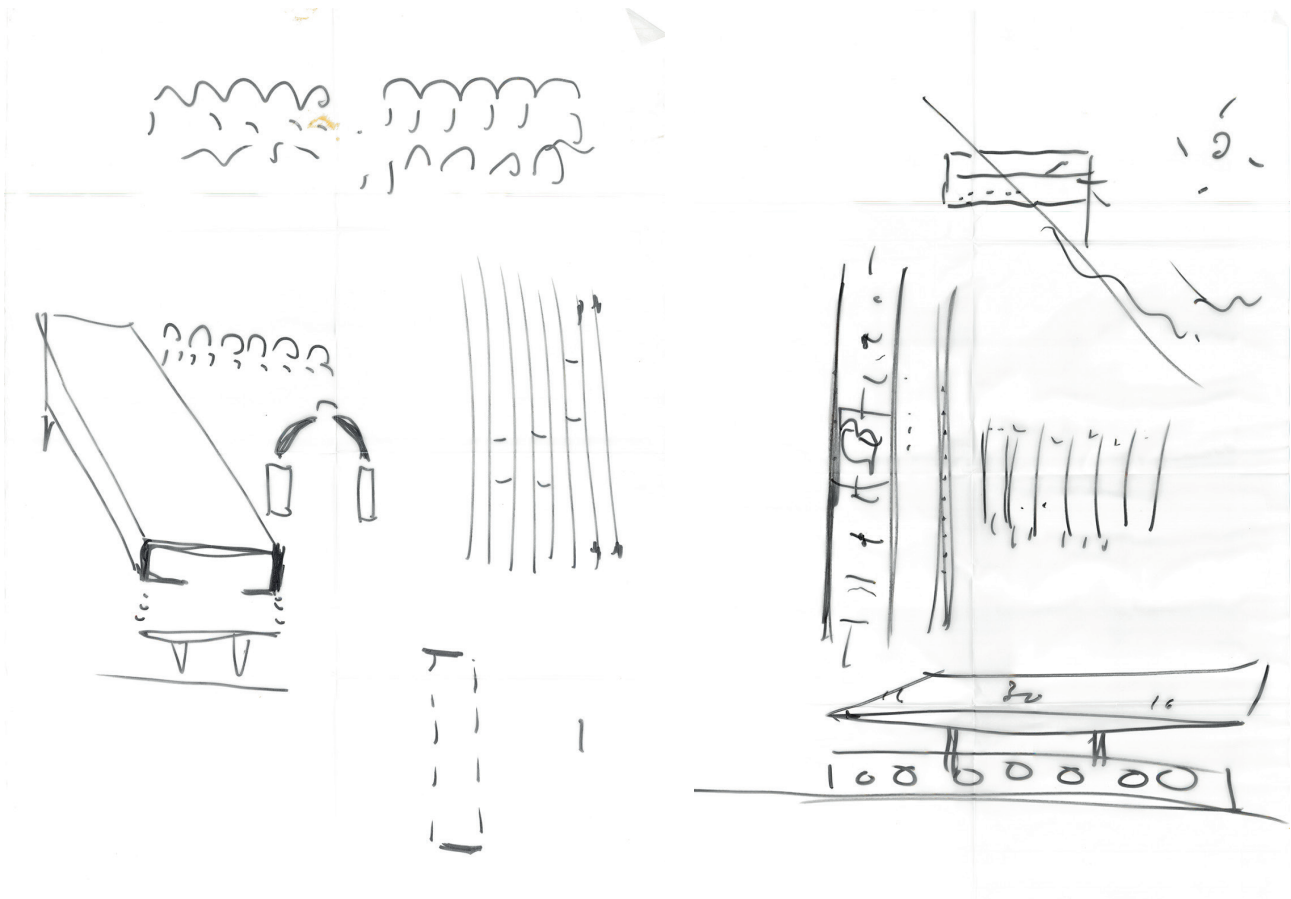
of the material that constructs space. It is only the shadows – also drawn in line, at 45° – that reveal the spatial depths of the forms that detach, by a sort of juxtaposition, from the deep black background of the “canvas” (fig. 1).

His “mature” drawings, on the other hand, are profoundly different. Curiously, his lines are almost completely absent: clear, exact figures, obtained solely through a “game” of vector surfaces, in black and white (fig. 2). No imperfection is attributable to the use of the hand. What changes is the relationship with the “panel”, between the object represented and the background of the “canvas” which now no longer has color, is white. In plan, the elements of the structure – which give shape to the space – are shown with a solid black screen. With a tension comparable to Luigi Moretti’s spatial models, the void takes shape. It is the shape of the space that takes figure through some filled surfaces, becoming the true subject of the representation. It is no coincidence that Vacchini no longer draws the movable furnishings that occupy the space, leaving traces of them through a “negative” white surface (fig. 3). The lines, when there are, appear as dotted traces that mark, in projection, some conspicuous points of the structure in space. Elevations and sections reinforce this interpretation;

**Fig. 4**

Livio Vacchini, Costa-Tenero house, 1990-92, elevation from the valley (published in P. Disch (edited by) (1994) – Livio Vacchini architetto. ADV, Lugano, 71).

Vacchini seems to represent the space that takes shape through material. Here, the representation of bodies is strongly characterized by solid black shadows that seem to “sculpt” the space in «reasoned relationships of light and material» (Le Corbusier 2003, p. 171). In projection, the constructive forms of the building (usually in *béton*) are still represented through textured surfaces: they tell nothing of the tactile physicality of the material, if not for some rare reference to the joints between the formworks in counterform for the casting of the concrete. It is a condition that undoubtedly arouses curiosity: walking through the valleys of Ticino one is sometimes struck by the canton’s coats of arms carved into the hard granite rock. Red is represented, in abstract, through a sequence of vertical incisions, blue, on the contrary, through horizontal lines, following the symbolic language of heraldry. Similarly, Vacchini represents his forms with screens made of lines, probably expressing a sort of metaphor for material. But these signs, on the contrary, have no symbolic value, rather revealing an inner “sound” that belongs to the mind of its author (fig. 4). All these drawings are the digital product of an «exact machine» (Trentin and Vacchini 1999), whose value, at least for Vacchini, seems to be entirely contained in the *anti-impressionistic* character of the sign. Such a perspective, together with the conceptual dimension of his research, could even recall some of the principles of Concrete Art contained in the manifesto published by Theo Van Doesburg in 1930<sup>5</sup>. But the drawing, in Vacchini, is always subordinate to the construction of the work, it has no value in itself. With respect to such a critical perspective, it would be useful to recall a reflection by Jacques Lucan (1994, p. 25) who, describing the house in Costa, argued that if «[...] were it not for the raw cement, whose rustic quality and imperfections due to excessively “artisan” construction displease the architect, the house in Costa-Tenero would be like a diagram». For Vacchini, material is construction. In this problematic horizon, it is evident that even his drawings seem to affirm that it is not the sign, or the “language” of material the theme of his architectural research. Looking at the geometric-constructive rigor of his works, one would rather wonder if they themselves express an analogy with some experiences of Concrete Art, but it is a theme that would take us

**Fig. 5**

Livio Vacchini, Sketches of a lesson held in Bari on June 13, 1996: plan and section diagrams of the Kimbell Art Museum of Luois I. Kahn, axonometric section of the Studio in via Bramantino, Locarno (private archive V.Ardito).

**Fig. 6**

Livio Vacchini, Sketches of a lesson held in Bari on June 13, 1996: Costa-Tenero house, plan and axonometric sketch of the Lido of Ascona, (private archive V.Ardito).

away from the much more “elementary” issues of this essay.

In some unpublished drawings - as testimony of a lesson that the Ticino architect held in Bari in June 1996 – Vacchini seems to have recourse to the sketch to describe the compositional “structure” of some of his works, inscribing them in the trajectory of his research and placing them in analogy to some of his “unedited” masterpieces (Vacchini 2017). Here, plans, sections, axonometries do not probably reproduce the forms of the project, but investigate its relations and its “structural” analogies in a highly ideogrammatic way. The contents of the lesson are not known, but the precise sequence of the drawings reveals itself as a precious trace through which to reconstruct the meaning of his reflections. In 1996, Vacchini had recently built his house in Costa and was about to complete the Losone gymnasium, undoubtedly recognized as one of his most representative works. In sequence, the stories of some of his projects follow one another quickly: the Locarno office, the powerful shelter for the Lido of Ascona and the house in Costa. It is also a chronological sequence, which tells a lot about the trajectories of his thought. Among these drawings (figs. 5-6) stand out some sketches from the Kimbell Art Museum by Louis I. Kahn, the work that for the Locarno master had accomplished a sort of revolution: Kahn had «freed architecture from the yoke of walls lateral bearing elements that had dominated it for five thousand years» (Falasca 2007, p. 87). It is not surprising, then, that the sequence of these drawings is articulated through a “structural” tension, building a critical comparison with his works, in the consubstantial relationship that binds the thought on space with that of the invention of its structure, between principles of composition and building systems. Vacchini seems to describe some of his works by reflecting on the spatial significance of the bay, starting from its meaning as a “confined”

place. In fact, in the axonometric section of his office in Locarno, Vacchini describes the different workspaces of the building with reference to the composition of two different structural systems. The roof, which covers the studio space, is defined by a beam-wall that constructs the metaphor of a “hollow” and inhabited space. The “open” workspace is thus defined in the relationship between the floor plate placed on the pilotis and its suspended roof, inside which the archive is located. It is the beginning of his research on complex, prestressed and post-tensioned structural systems, oriented towards the “new” spatiality of the structure. In the design of the house in Costa and with even more evidence in the axonometry for the Lido of Ascona, Vacchini highlights how it is the roof that delimits the place of the building, declining different characters and conditions of the space. Here, through a few decisive signs, the archaism of his figures is powerfully revealed.

Beyond any autograph dimension, these drawings seem to clearly express a more general point of view on architecture and the research of its forms. It is perhaps not entirely true, then, to affirm that Vacchini did not draw: «it is not that [...] he does sketches, but I do not use them as a communication towards the outside: I have modesty about my work» (Trentin and Vacchini 1999, p. 48). These sketches do not construct iconic images to be framed in a frame or with a *passepartout*; rather they seem to investigate the structures of composition / construction through an “anatomical” tension, shunning any exercise of prefiguring reality.

Looking back over the sequence of these signs, which flow from the mind and through the hand<sup>6</sup>, the beauty that appears is not that of the eye satisfied by the virtuosity of the image, it is that which springs up in the mind amazed at the thought. After all, this was Vacchini’s idea: «designing means abandoning oneself to the pleasure of constructing thought» (Vacchini 2017, p. 93).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> «Why are all these drawings produced by machines? Does drawing by hand, the mark of the designer, no longer matter? [...] Machines help me to keep personal sentiment, as such, out of the picture». Lucan J. (1994) – “Livio Vacchini. L’implacabile necessità del tutto”. In: P. Disch (edited by), *Livio Vacchini architetto*, ADV, Lugano, pp. 28-29.

<sup>2</sup> Translated by the author. Babyn E., Navone N., Zaluska M., (2019) – *Luigi Snozzi su Livio Vacchini, l’architettura e la città*, <https://www.ticino4580.ch/interviste/Luigi-Snozzi>.

<sup>3</sup> Natalini A. (2003) – “Per Livio Vacchini. Una lettera”. *Anfione e Zeto* 16, 75-76.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Lucan offers a precise historical-critical reading of the Ticino architect’s work, placing his point of view within a training path that, from a «learning» phase, will mature with the construction of his house in Costa, at the beginning of the Nineties. Lucan J. (2002) – “Livio Vacchini et l’intemporel”. *Werk, Bauen + Wohnen* 89, 68-73.

<sup>5</sup> Available to <https://www.espacedelartconcret.fr/en/histoire-et-contenu/concrete-art> [Last accessed 11/01/2021].

<sup>6</sup> Focillon H. (2002) – “Elogio della mano”. In: H. Focillon, *Vita delle forme. Elogio della mano*. Giulio Einaudi, Turin.

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