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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'There are alternatives to square boxes': Rivolta Architetonica's Practices of Resistance and Media Resilience

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates Rivolta Architetonica (RA), the Italian section of the transnational network Architectural Uprising (AU), showing how the movement builds aesthetic counter-narratives and forms of communicative resilience within today's hybrid-media ecology. Using Multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) on Instagram posts published in a year, the study examines the interplay among discursive choices, visual techniques and semiotic oppositions (e.g., before/after, beauty/ugliness, tradition/modernism) that sustain frames of resistance and mobilization practices. Adopting the Communicative Resilience Theory, the study treats resilience as a communicative process that through recurring practices enables collectives to reimagine "urban normality". The RA case highlights: (i) the democratization of aesthetic judgment as a lever of civic inclusion; (ii) the strategic use of visual comparison to foreground what is at stake in the city; (iii) recurring calls to action that turn followers into issue publics. We discuss contributions and limitations with respect to polarization and crises of trust in expertise and conclude with implications for the study of media-based urban movements.

KEYWORDS: Architectural Uprising, Discourse analysis, Grassroots movement, Modernism, Rivolta Architetonica.

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1. Introduction

In January 2015, *Sveriges Radio*, Sweden's public radio broadcaster, aired a program provocatively titled "Box architecture: modern or simply ugly?"¹. During that broadcast, Michael Diamant, a prominent figure in what was then the newly formed movement *Arkitekturupproret*, argued that the answer to the title question could only be the second: ugly. That year, a position contrary to the extremes of architectural modernism began to make its way into the Swedish public debate, marking the birth of a movement that would challenge modernist hegemony in Europe by developing new communication strategies that deconstruct the dominant architectural discourse. Rather than confining judgment on the built environment to certified experts, *Arkitekturupproret* invited publics to evaluate facades, materials, volumes, and street sections as matters of common concern. Its memes, before/after collages, and short textual cues travel across social media feeds, condensing complex urban question into legible and shareable units. These practices begin with a simple premise: these are not merely stylistic preferences; they are communicative practices through which a movement resists what it frames as the "uglification" of cities and propose alternatives ways of imagining and governing the urban. Indeed, the criticism of this architectural style-approach put forward by *Arkitekturupproret* addresses the real problems in how architectural decisions are made in contemporary society. On one hand, it is part of a broader debate on the standardization (La Cecla 2024) and stylistic homologation of modern cities. According to the movement, these transformations of urban spaces can represent a threat not only in aesthetic and imaginary terms, but also for the possible effects on the social and cultural fabric of local communities, where gentrification processes and housing changes (Buitelaar and Schilder 2017) impact on the progressive loss of urban identity and the "sense of place" (Tuan 2001; Hillman 2004).

Therefore, a decade after that broadcast and the movement's birth, this paper examines whether the *modern/ugly* binary opposition of the title, defined by the exclusive disjunction "or", still makes sense or whether the movement's collective action has gradually built a sort of semantic equivalence between *modern* and *ugly*. The questions that emerging from this background is: through which communicative repertoires have the movement developed effective actions that enable it to challenge the architectural discourse dominated by experts and, at the same time, build sustainable communities of support?

1.1 What is Architectural Uprising and why is it an interesting movement

Arkitekturupproret began as an online community in 2014 and then became an NGO in 2016. Later renamed in a more accessible Architectural Uprising, henceforth AU, the movement is today a transnational grassroots network that mobilizes against the "uglification" process of cities. The movement pursues three objectives: (i) the preservation of the existing classical architectural heritage, threatened by modernization interventions; (ii) the promotion of new constructions that respect historical architectural styles and local identities; and (iii) the democratization of the decision-making process in urban planning, contesting what is perceived as a monopoly of the modernist vision in the places where architectural knowledge is produced. This criticism highlights how often "urban renewal" interventions based on modernist principles are accompanied by (or cause) gentrification processes that profoundly alter the social fabric of neighborhoods, causing cities to lose their soul (Zukin 2010). However, the movement also employs "defensive" strategies, with the aim of deconstructing the accusation of chronological snobbery and the fallacy of appeal to novelty according to which a preference for classical architecture implies opposition to modernity.

¹ My translation of the original Swedish title: "Lådarkitektur – modernt eller bara fult?"

<https://www.sverigesradio.se/artikel/6075658>.

A notably innovative aspect of AU's approach is the strategic use of social media as a platform for mobilization and awareness-raising. Through the sharing of images, mainly of a comparative nature between traditional and modernist architecture, the movement develops an effective visual language that contributed to its rapid spread. This communication strategy is based on the ability to make the issues of modernist architecture immediately understandable through direct comparison with examples of traditional architecture.

AU's territorial expansion has followed distinctive trajectories that merit scholarly attention. The expansion is characterized by a strong capillarity on social media and an ability to adapt to different national contexts also through mapping operations² able to give the public an overview of how new architectural constructions can adapt to classical and organic styles. This process of internationalization has led to the creation of a global network of activists who, while maintaining their local specificities, share a common vision on the need to rethink contemporary architecture. Despite initially slow uptake, the movement's Nordic roots slowly took hold in continental Europe, structuring the Dutch, German and Italian sections of the movement between 2021 and 2023. Based on mapping conducted with data current to March 2025, the movement has sections in twenty-eight countries worldwide with an independent national section but belonging to the global network. These sections have a media coverage in terms of users reached (subscribers to online groups or simple followers) with a minimum of 69 community members for the Moldovan section and a maximum of over 65800 for the Swedish one. Of particular significance within the movement is the Italian section, called *Rivolta Architettonica*, henceforth RA, numerically inferior only to Germany and Poland as far as continental Europe is concerned³.

RA was born almost at the same time as the publication of the two journalistic articles with which Italian news media, for the first time, highlighted the existence of a movement against architectural modernism and addressed its demands. On 12 August 2023 the article "Il movimento che ce l'ha con gli edifici troppo moderni"⁴ published by *Il Post*, on which polarized opinions developed, which can be observed in the comments section, followed by the *Linkiesta* (Fasanella 2023) newspaper two weeks later, a discourse around AU slowly began to emerge. This local adaptation of the movement represents an interesting case study for understanding how the global instances of AU intersect with the specificities of the Italian architectural and cultural context, a framework in which the movement's success is cause-effect of a growing attention to the quality of the built environment and its impact on community life.

1.2 Purpose of the article and research questions

The RA case illuminates two broader dynamics. First, the hybridization of media means that political work increasingly occurs in formats that are natively visual and participatory. Instagram carousels, comment threads, and repost chains function not merely as channels but as infrastructures where issues are discovered, framed and coordinated. Second, the crisis of trust that affects expert knowledge in many domains, urban planning among them, has opened a contested space in which claims about beauty, heritage, and livability can mobilize unexpectedly broad coalitions. Aesthetic disputes, in other words, double as governance disputes, they express disagreements over who gets to decide what counts as "good" city form and according to which criteria.

As anticipated before, this research focuses on the case of RA, the Italian branch of AU, a movement that challenges and criticizes the aesthetic dogmas of architectural modernism and develops its action through tactical repertoires oriented toward the models of *e-movements* and *digital grassrootsing* (Carty 2015). Through the development of a counter-narrative conveyed through social networks and digital media, RA/AU

² <https://www.architecturaluprising.com/the-map-of-new-traditional-architecture/>

³ Is excluded the French section, which groups together all the French-speaking countries in the world.

⁴ Translated: *The movement that takes issue with overly modern buildings.*

challenges the dominant architectural discourse that frames spatial organization as a function of progress, thereby diverging from the practices that conventionally constitute the classic repertoire of social movements, such as street demonstrations, squatting, boycotts, etc. Given these considerations, the research questions guiding the study are threefold:

- RQ1: In what ways does RA/AU appropriate elements of dominant architectural discourse to legitimize its counter-narrative?
- RQ2: What role do images play in RA's action on architectural resistance and the construction of a movement identity?
- RQ3: How does AU's media-based activism challenge hegemonic discourse while promoting forms of resistance and resilience against the "uglification" of cities?

To analyze the repertoires, the communicative style and the framing processes with which the movement conveys its claims and its counter-narrative this study employs a discourse analysis using visual methodologies and a semiotic approach. Initially for reasons preparatory to understanding the movement, the article provides a brief historical overview aimed at shedding light on the social and political conjunctures on which a set of demands against modernism grafted, as well as on the discourse (and its evolution) from which new subjectivities of resistance emerged. As for the empirical data, we will analyze all the content published by RA from February 20, 2024, to February 17, 2025. As will be seen in the methodological section, the choice of focus on the images produced by the movement will offer the possibility to reflect on the role of the visual dimension of protest as a strategy aimed at the construction and expansion of a transnational identity against the uglification process⁵ of cities. Along these lines, I will adopt a critical approach to emphasize the implicit and/or indirect dimensions (van Dijk 2001) of this discourse as elements capable of shedding light on broader social problems such as, for example, the impact of modern construction on the progressive loss of identity of urban areas.

2. Theoretical framework

This section advances a two-part framework with the aim of reconstructing the key points of the Modern Movement and canonical critiques as the long context in which AU situates itself; redefining AU within the ecology of hybrid and interconnected movements, demonstrating how aesthetic contention becomes an urban-political stake that links buildings to governance, and introducing the CTR as an analytical lens for understanding how the movement sustains its counter-narrative over time.

2.1 From the Modern Movement to its critics

To contextualize AU's collective action, it is necessary to first outline the Modern Movement's defining and then survey the influential critiques that have shaped the debate against modernism. Consolidating its discursive and cultural position after the World War I, the Modern Movement, whose most prominent members included Le Corbusier, van der Rohe, Wright and the Bauhaus intellectuals, represented the application of modernism to the organization and design of the "human environment". The main objectives of this school of thought, systematized by Bruno Taut in 1929, were to promote a functional architecture and urban planning, potentially to the detriment of any superfluous element, echoing the 1908 manifesto *Ornament and Crime*, in which Alfred Loos, one of the intellectual father of rationalism, stated that "the evolution of civilization is synonymous with the elimination of ornament from the object of use" (Loos 1992, 20). Consequently,

⁵ A key-concept in AU's narrative.

functionalism and rationalism became increasingly consolidated, according to which the value of the built should therefore be sought in the dogma of *form follows function*, that is, in the correspondence between *form* and *purpose* even at the expense of aesthetic beauty (Maglio 2002), a scheme that, according to detractors, would in turn follow the logic of industrial efficiency. Then, the Modern Movement's promise, standardization, functional clarity, technological optimism, codified a powerful grammar for the 20th century: abstract form, separation of functions and repeatable solutions. Its legacies persist in planning rules, procurement routines and professional vocabularies that still shape what counts as "good" or "efficient".

As an effect of this discourse that had become hegemonic in the West, the emergence of a feeling of opposition towards modernist planning marked a crucial junction in the scientific debate in the 1960s, stimulated by a profoundly critical reflection on the fundamental principles that had guided urban development since the period between the two world wars. The basic thesis of early postmodernist thought assumes that the Modern Movement represents the architectural-urbanistic expression, as well as the structural condition (Derossi 1978), of the rationality underlying industrial capitalism, in which the organization of space moves solely in function of the maximization of productivity and profit.

One of the most incisive critiques of the paradigm is the one proposed by Jane Jacobs with *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in which the author shifts the focus from a strictly architecture-oriented perspective to a broader analysis of the effects of modernist planning on social segregation, community life, principles and aims (Jacobs 1961, 3). Jacobs' argument rests on the assumption that this approach to urban planning led to the destruction of the social fabric of cities, privileging an abstract and technocratic vision of urban space at the expense of organic social dynamics. Another fundamental contribution to the theorization of modernist criticism, particularly relevant in the architectural debate on aesthetic simplification, comes from architect Robert Venturi with *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966). This text, which we could define as the manifesto of architectural postmodernism, passed into history for the famous declaration "less is a bore", in direct opposition to van der Rohe's "less is more", that challenges the modernist principles of simplicity and formal purity and represents not only an aesthetic refusal but an open distancing from the modernist ideology based on standardization. Venturi, moreover, denounces how modernism tends to operate through a forced simplification of architectural problems, reducing the complexity of reality to abstract slogans like *form follows function*. Not far from Jacobs' thinking, he too considers this ideological approach capable of producing only a sterile architecture, incapable of dialoguing with the complexity of contemporary life and disconnected from social and cultural reality. In *A Pattern Language* (1977), Christopher Alexander further develops this oppositional position, proposing an alternative approach to design based on participatory models derived from observation of traditional practices and social dynamics, in stark contrast to modernist standardization. His vision places at the center the participation of users in the design process, arguing that architecture should be accessible and comprehensible to all, not just to experts. With *Form Follows Fiasco* (1977), Peter Blake, a former apostle of the functionalist doctrine and became its "black sheep", offers the most open critique of the practical results of modernist architecture, documenting the failures of numerous projects from both a technical and social point of view and asserting that the dogma of *form follows function* and *plan libre* have increasingly lost sight of people's lived experience. His analysis highlights how the modernist obsession with functionality and efficiency has often produced unlivable environments in which the alienation of the people who use them dominates.

It is important to note that opposition to architectural modernism does not represent a simple rejection of progress or a nostalgic desire to return to the past, but rather a constructive critique that seeks to balance innovation and tradition, efficiency and livability, technological progress, and fundamental human needs. This tension continues to characterize the contemporary architectural debate, demonstrating the persistent relevance of the issues raised by the first critics of modernism.

2.2 Bridging digital and urban: understanding contemporary movements in hybrid media ecologies

The structural particularities of contemporary urban aesthetic movements require a framework that bridges scholarship on networked social movements and urban collective action while maintaining a central focus on the role of media in power-resistance dynamics. This framework argues that movements such as Architectural Uprising spread, sustain and expand themselves through platform media ecologies while remaining anchored to urban governance and lived space. AU's media action fits into that frame according to which power must be understood as an asymmetrical relationship (Castells 2009) between different actors that is expressed (also) through "mechanisms of symbolic manipulation" (Castells 2012, xxiv) capable of shaping a collective imaginary, in this case an aesthetic-architectural imaginary. Contemporary power operates through the construction and programming of communication networks; resistance, accordingly, manifests through the reprogramming of such networks and constructions of alternative meaning-making infrastructures. The above is in line with Foucauldian thinking according to which power and resistance function as two equivalent poles of relation, which means that resistance is never in a position of externality with respect to power and above all that it manifests itself within the same networks of relations in which power operates.

A now classic shift in movement theory distinguishes between collective action driven by strong organizational identities and *connective actions* (Bennett and Segerberg 2013) fueled by personalized communication, lightweight ties, and platform-mediated coordination. In connective action, participation is often issue-centric and episodic; identity is articulated through membership in bounded organization (Papacharissi 2015). These dynamics unfold within what Chadwick (2013) terms hybrid media system, where platforms, news outlets, and face-to-face events interpenetrate, and within a broader platform society in which visibility and coordination are shaped by algorithms (Van Dijck *et al.* 2018). This perspective moves beyond understanding digital technologies merely tools for «facilitating and speeding up the process of organizing, recruiting, sharing information and galvanizing support among the public» (Carty 2015, 15): research on media practices demonstrates how activists assemble repertoires by combining formats, routines, and tools across online/offline contexts (Treré 2019),

This media action aligns with Castells's framework (2009; 2012) that comes into focus for the case under study. He explains that social movements are first and foremost producers of alternative cultural meanings that challenge the dominant ones from a perspective of resistance. Action, therefore, is not limited only to the contestation of existing power but instead becomes a creative process of subjectivation and the production of collective imaginaries and meaning, enacted through different practices: from the re-signification of social reality to the creation of spaces of autonomy (Castells 2012), both physical and virtual, within which these new meanings can be collectively elaborated and experienced. What is of interest in this study, however, is the virtual space. Due to its inherently digital nature and its networked organization, AU is configured as an e-movement and has had the ability to expand continent-wide by taking advantage of the ICT and social networking paradigm.

The second category useful to read the object of study is that of the urban movement since, in practice, AU's collective action has the city as its focus, victims, according to the militants, of a progressive process of uglification. Below I propose one of the many definitions of urban movement that can facilitate reading: "urban movements are social movements through which citizens attempt to achieve control over their urban environment. Contemporary work shows how these struggles extend beyond heritage regimes, zoning standards, and public space uses, often through issue publics that mobilize intermittently but persist as interpretive communities (Iveson 2007; Nicholls 2008). In this tradition, aesthetic disputes become governance disputes: to debate facades or street sections is to debate whose criteria and whose futures matter in planning decisions. As Park (1967) noted, the city is a product of human creation in which humans are condemned to live, thus these movements mobilize not merely in the city but for the city itself.

To conclude, it is useful to introduce the Communication Theory of Resilience (CTR) as an analytical lens through which to read the movement of interest. Originally developed by Buzzanell (2010; 2019) to understand how individuals and collectives navigate disruption and adversity, CTR treats resilience not as a trait or outcome but as an ongoing communicative process. Resilience emerges through recurrent communicative practices that enable systems—whether individuals, families, organizations, or movements, to absorb disturbance, maintain identity, and reconfigure trajectories toward preferred futures. CTR identifies some core processes through which resilience is communicatively constituted (Buzzanell 2010; 2019; Lucas and Buzzanell 2012), some of which are central in this study:

- **Crafting normalcy:** establishing routines, rituals, and reference points that make disrupted conditions feel manageable and livable. For social movements, this involves creating stable interpretive frames and repeatable action scripts that render alternatives thinkable and doable;
- **affirming identity anchors:** grounding collective identity in values, symbols, and narratives that provide continuity across changing contexts. Movements draw on historical references, aesthetic traditions, or moral claims to anchor who they are and what they stand for;
- **maintaining and using communication networks:** sustaining relationships and channels that enable information flow, mutual support, and coordinated action. In hybrid media environments, this includes both platform-based networks and face-to-face ties.

For these reasons, to conceptualize how RA's multimodal practices stabilize alternatives over time, CTR is well-suited to analyzing a platform-based urban movement for three reasons. First, it foregrounds constitutive communication, aligning with a multimodal critical discourse approach; second, it operates at multiple levels, capturing how transnational ties, local clusters, and follower publics intersect and intertwine. Third, it's non-teleological: resilience processes recur and overlap rather than unfold in fixed, linear stages, a characteristic consistent with RA's pattern of repetition and opportunistic response.

3. Research design and methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, multimodal design that integrates techniques from Critical Discourse Studies to examine how Rivolta Architettonica composes discourses, images, and interaction into communicative resilience. Treating resilience as a communicative process (rather than a trait or outcome) requires methods that can follow how meanings are assembled and stabilized across formats and over time. A multimodal approach provides that lens by analyzing captions, visuals, and thread interactions as a single semiotic event (Fairclough 1995). Through a constructivist approach, the aim is to analyze how the movement challenges hegemonic architectural discourse through the contestation of socially constructed notions of architectural beauty and ugliness. The research focuses on the movement's discursive practices designed to transform dominant urban space narratives.

Following the operational approach proposed by various CDS intellectuals (Machin and Mayr 2012), Critical Discourse Analysis will be employed to understand how the rhetorical and argumentative strategies used by RA in content published (or in shared publication) over one year on official channels and in social media posts function as a tool for the deconstruction of the dominant discourse on architectural modernism. This window captures a stable phase after RA's public emergence in Italy, includes seasonal cycles and recurring campaigns, and limits drift in platform affordances. It aligns with our focus on routine-making (CTR's crafting normalcy), which is only visible through temporal recurrence. This observation will be integrated with Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, which will allow for the examination of the interaction between various semiotic modalities, including texts, images, and layouts in the production of meaning, highlighting how multimodal choices contribute to the construction of the movement's narrative. Visual

methodologies will be specifically applied to a corpus comprising all 40 Instagram feed posts authored by RA (during the selected period) and disseminated through its social networks, focusing on strategies of visual representation of modernist and traditional architecture, visual framing processes, and the ways in which images are used as tools of resistance and mobilization. To complete the framework of techniques, semiotic analysis will be included, which will allow for the decoding of the underlying signification systems in RA's communication. By examining how signs, symbols, and visual codes are strategically employed, emphasis will be placed on semiotic figures such as opposition, overlexicalization and axiology central to the movement's discourse, which make visible the desire to compare or oppose texts in such a way as to produce euphoric or dysphoric readings of the different architectural products and to de/legitimize certain aesthetic conceptions.

Given the cross-media approach to the narration of the movement within social networks, it would have been possible to select the contents conveyed via Facebook and Instagram indiscriminately for data collection. Despite this approach, after a preliminary analysis of the possible differences in content due to adaptation to different platforms, the decision to focus on Instagram reflects the greater centrality of images in the construction of an identity of resistance and new subjectivities (van Dijck 2008, Zappavigna 2016) and therefore represents the most effective and impactful repertoire for the public. Furthermore, this choice did not preclude the possibility of also analyzing the written texts, captions and interactions. Furthermore, the decision to focus on RA rather than on other sections of the movement, as well as being a question of linguistic affinity that facilitated the analysis, also stems from the centrality of the Italian branch in terms of European relevance. In fact, the @rivolta_architettonica account is by far the two most active in Europe, along with the Danish one, with an Engagement Rate of 32.06% (as of September 14, 2025). To offer a comparison of this indicator⁶ it is enough to highlight that the Fridays for Future Italia account has an ER of 0.85%, that of Ultima Generazione Italia 6.74%, while that of the international movement Architectural Uprising is 2.86%.

The analytical framework was based on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, thus considering not only textual characteristics but also discursive practices and the broader sociocultural contexts in which these communications are embedded. Particular attention has been paid to the identification of recurring rhetorical tools, visual techniques and legitimization strategies through which the movement constructs its opposition to architectural modernism. To sum up, the analytical process began with a preliminary exploration aimed at identifying recurring themes, discursive and visual patterns in RA's communication. Subsequently, a structured coding framework was developed that included categories such as:

- discursive strategies (legitimation, delegitimization, appropriation);
- visual representation techniques (contrast, juxtaposition, highlighting);
- semiotic oppositions and rhetorical figures.

In the last section of the paper, particular emphasis will be placed on the role of the skyscraper and its imagery within the action against modernism, thus taking up an element of absolute cultural centrality for the human sciences and for technical disciplines as early as the 1960s and 1970s (Gottmann 1966). Interest in this specific construction reflects from its capacity to represent the developments and contradictions of a particular economic model, but above all for its impact on urban imagery and the related transformations taking place. More recently, with a semiological perspective, scholars have analyzed the skyscraper for its ability to become an *iconema* characterizing the urban landmark, a possible element of landscape destruction as well as a tourist attraction (Al-Kodmany 2013; Smania and Daconto 2023), both for its symbolic dimension and, through a critical gaze, for its phallic shape, emblem of patriarchal capitalism (Massidda 2006).

⁶ ER measures the average number of likes and comments of the last 12 posts (excluding the most recent one) divided by the total number of followers.

4. Communication and visual strategies of Rivolta Architettonica

To answer RQ1, RA legitimizes its counter-narratives through three recurrent discursive moves: re-appropriating professional lexicon as criteria-first rubrics; democratizing judgment via stance-marking that authorizes lay expertise; and naming procedural stakes to translate “taste” into policy-relevant claims. Initial analysis of the textual (written) components reveals a significant theme: the strategic reappropriation of specialized architectural terminology. This semantic subversion represents a deliberate attempt by the movement to reclaim technical discourse from established architectural authorities. Captions regularly recast technical terms (proportion, human scale, continuity, etc.) as short operational lists readers can apply. This criteria-first approach reduces dependence on specialist certification and normalizes the idea that “we can build otherwise”. Where bureaucratic jargon or what the movement terms “archibabble” appears as an obstacle, the caption paraphrases it into plain evaluative language, lowering entry costs. These dual moves support crafting normalcy: by repeating simple evaluative rubrics, the account stabilizes the stance that “we can build otherwise” without needing specialist certification. The movement coins such derisive neologism precisely to delegitimize modernist architectural discourse, as well as the specialists who reinforce these visions. In this sense, the architect, and even more so the “archistar”, is seen as an integral part of the power apparatus and the knowledge economy. These routines, criteria-first rubrics, inclusive stance-marking, and policy cues, map onto CTR processes (crafting normalcy, affirming identity anchors, foregrounding productive action), thus forming the discursive backbone of communicative resilience.

From an overall perspective, one can grasp the existence of a frame of (ideological) conflict (Bartholomé *et al.* 2018), according to which architectural debate represents an expression tool for a broader value-based confrontation. In this sense, modernism is personified as an entity endowed with negative intentionality (“blind modernism”), and its supporters are described as occupying “academic outposts” from which they would exercise their cultural hegemony. This framing allows the movement to present itself not simply as a subject that critically opposes a series of architectural apparatuses, but as cultural resistance against a dominant value system, potentially capable of exercising censorship and ideological impositions or, to use a term quoted by the movement, a form of “cancel culture against masterpieces of Romantic art”.

However, it is worth remembering the dangers to which the ideological prejudice of architects such as Ludovico Quaroni who, from their academic outposts, trained generations of Italian architects. With the results that we see today. (ID.12).

In this narrative, the architectural elite is represented as detached from reality, while AU positions itself as the voice of good aesthetic sense. At the same time, however, it should be noted that RA/AU itself has been accused of promoting a form of cancel culture since, by developing a critique against an artistic-architectural paradigm that has become dominant, it has constructed part of its narrative by ostracizing figures of knowledge who have made the development and affirmation of modernism possible.

Across the corpus, captions consistently re-appropriate technical lexicon while discrediting opaque expertise, a move that both lowers entry barriers and reframes architectural judgment as a public capacity. Narratives of places anchor evaluation in everyday experience, converting diffuse affect into civic entitlement to speak about the built environment. This discursive strategy challenges the authority of modernist architects and the teleological narrative of architectural progress, positing popular aesthetic judgment as a legitimate, if not superior, alternative to expert opinion, thus transforming architectural debate from an elitist issue to a topic of public interest accessible to all. The movement implicitly postulates that beauty is universally recognizable and does not require specialist mediation, anchoring itself to scientific studies conveyed through its channels both as a form of empowerment of its demands and to legitimize them transversally.

For 80 years or longer, Modernists have claimed that people one day start liking their buildings. We're still waiting for that moment. Meanwhile, we enjoy traditional architecture. (ID.24).

This alternative narrative contests the idea that architectural evolution must necessarily proceed toward minimalism and simplification, echoing functionalist discourse, proposing instead a conscious return to tradition.

And what is worse, is that the last chapter of this sad period of architecture, perhaps the worst in Italy's history, has not yet been written. (ID.16).

Continuing, to understand some traits of AU's communication, it is possible to observe the construction of an elaborate system of oppositions (see Halliday 1978; van Dijk 1998) that organize the semantic field of architecture in contrasting pairs, building a value system in which negativity is associated with modernism and positivity with tradition.

Table 1 - Terms used by RA in Instagram posts

<i>Semiotic concepts</i>	<i>Positive terms</i>	<i>Negative terms</i>
Opposition Isotopy	Beauty Beautiful, in harmony with the landscape	Ugly Ugliness; aberrant; vulgar; soulless; anonymous
Opposition Isotopy	Traditional in perfect harmony with its surroundings	Modernism Spartan monolith
Opposition Isotopy	Identity (-based) Artistic identity of the place	Anonymous Increasingly poor in identity and victim of globalization
Opposition Isotopy	Warmth	Cold Plastic-like appearance
Opposition Isotopy	Respect Careful; Respectful; The citizens managed to protect the land; What people want	Arrogance Overbearing; self-referential; Architecture imposed by arrogance; What is being built

Source: Posts from account @rivolta_architettonica.

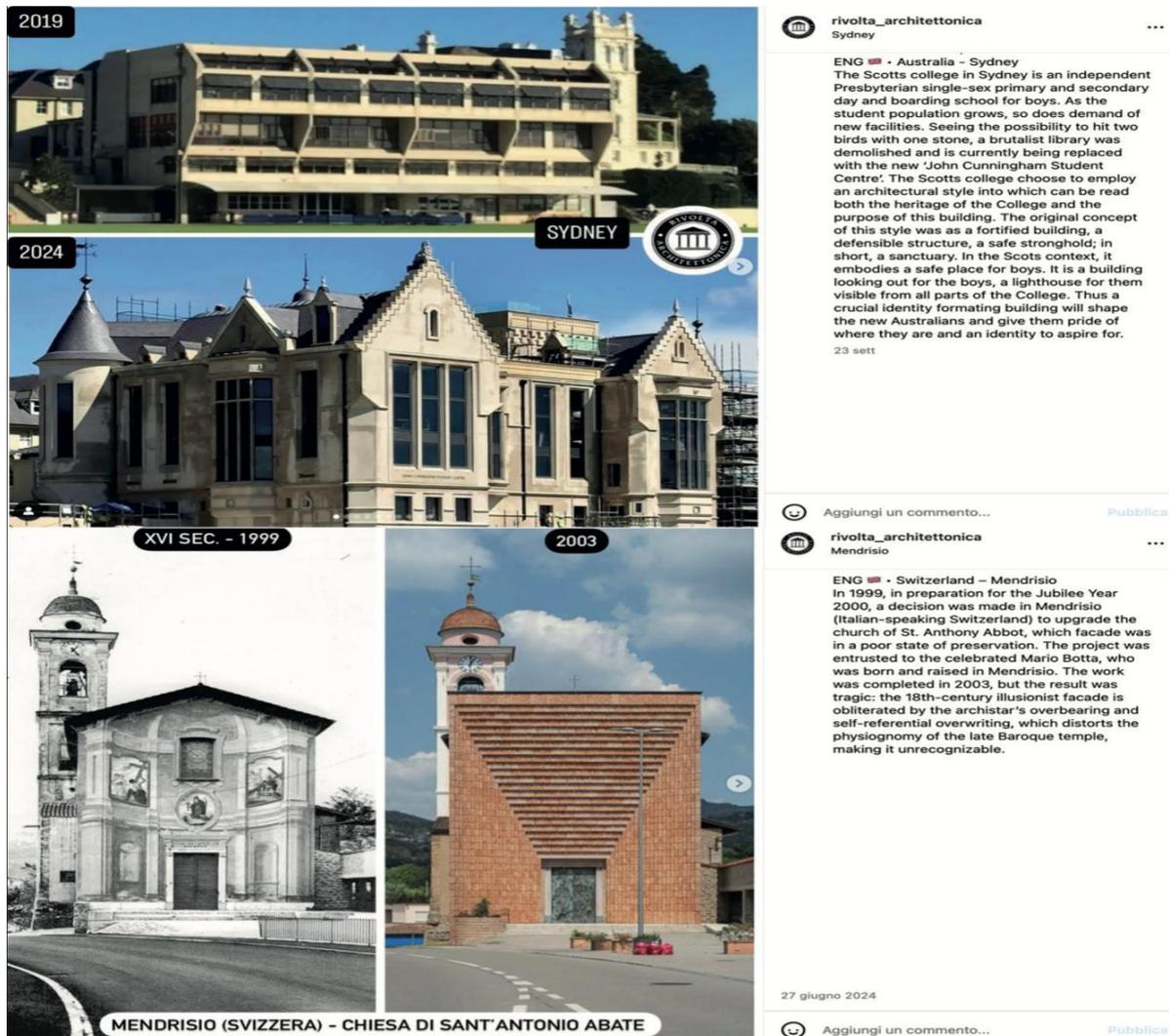
Additionally, one can easily detect the presence of a frame that we might define as "cultural loss", which presents modernist architecture as responsible for a progressive erosion of cities' cultural identity. Through a lexicon of deprivation ("erased", "demolished") and metaphors of aggression ("disfigure", "mortify", "attack"), the posts construct the image of a heritage in danger. When RA describes "a Milan increasingly poor in identity and victim of globalization" (ID.1) or laments that "there is hardly a corner of the "Bel Paese" that is not mortified by squalid little buildings like the one in the background of the picture" (ID.16), it positions the movement as a defender of a threatened cultural heritage, elevating the clash from the aesthetic plane to that of collective identity.

[...] what is indignant is the stylistic choice of the adjoining hotel. To the possibility of a building that would recall, while integrating it, the historical character of the facade, blind modernism has preferred a spartan monolith looming, without any grace, over the former church, in an aesthetic (as well as ideological) aberrant and vulgar result. (ID.1).

From a semiotic perspective, in this excerpt we can also clearly observe the presence of an overlexicalization (see Teo 2000), and consequently a semantic redundancy, developed using terms: “indignation”, “blind”, “spartan”, “without grace”, “aberrant”, and “vulgar”. Still remaining within the linguistic dimension, it is observed that the movement also coins derisive neologisms such as “archibabble” (“archifuffa” in Italian) to delegitimize modernist architectural discourse, as well as the specialists who reinforce such visions. This discursive strategy serves to destabilize specialized terminology, typically used to exclude non-professionals from architectural debate.

Regarding RQ2, three visual forms dominate RA’s repertoire: the before/after montage, the didactic carousel and exemplar spotlights. Each function as a public reasoning device, not merely illustrations. Turning now to the visual analysis of images, as anticipated in the methodological section, it is deemed functional to adopt a multimodal approach particularly effective in the era of social media, where images circulate more rapidly than argumentative texts and where the “before/after” format constitutes a consolidated and immediately recognizable communicative genre. Analyzing therefore the visual production, RA deploys sophisticated visual strategies that, integrated with the text, construct a powerful counter-narrative regarding modernist architecture. Examining the materials, it emerges how the movement uses specific communicative schemes based on juxtaposition and contrast to convey its aesthetic ideology and mobilize the public. In numerical terms and relevance, the predominant visual strategy is that of juxtaposing *before* and *after*, capable of visualizing the transformations of the same place over time. By treating comparative visuals as public evidence and choreographing didactic carousels toward concrete calls-to-action, these formats instantiate CTR’s “putting alternative logics to work” and reinforce “foregrounding productive action.”

Figure 1 – Above a positive example of before and after, beneath a negative one



Source: Instagram account @rivolta_architettonica.

This technique functions as empirical demonstration of the movement's theses, showing both interventions considered positive (e.g. the redevelopment of the Utrecht canal, the reconstruction in traditional style of the hotel in Barcelona) and negative (e.g. the modernization of the Church of Sant'Antonio Abate). The use of explicit temporal labels in the "before and after" images emphasize the documentary nature of the images, which are presented as objective evidence of the transformations rather than subjective interpretations. Particularly explicit is the case of the juxtaposition between two works of art present in the Neapolitan territory, the "Cristo Velato" by Sanmartino (1753) and the contemporary installation by Gaetano Pesce (2024), in which the effect desired by the movement is to convey the message of "artistic decadence", creating a bridge between architectural criticism and broader cultural criticism. These juxtapositions function as "visual evidence" supporting the movement's thesis, materializing the dichotomy between beauty (tradition) and ugliness (modernism).

We have received reports from Naples' historic center, specifically at No. 45 Via Scura, regarding the installation of these balcony railings and window frames, which are completely out of context and inconsistent with those present on the rest of the historic building. (ID.37).

The transnational visual repertoire constructed by AU documents cases of uglification and virtuous recovery, building a visual atlas of good and bad practices that transcends national boundaries and serves to legitimize the movement as a global phenomenon.

After fifty years of contestation, the citizens of Utrecht have seen water once again embrace the old city center in its entirety. The former Catharijnesingel canal, drained in 1969 to make way for an urban highway, has resurfaced thanks to an award-winning intervention by Dutch firm OKRA Landschapsarchitecten, completed in 2020. Thus arose a large space dedicated to pedestrians and cyclists, enhanced by a path along the water that invites recreational and sports use. Is it so difficult to imagine the same future -one example among all- for Milan's Navigli? (ID.7).

In terms of urban resilience, AU's action aims to promote the enhancement of local identity as an antidote to the widespread standardization that is particularly common in large Western cities. This rhetoric connects aesthetic resistance to broader issues of cultural identity and community belonging, expanding the scope of architectural criticism from a simple matter of taste to a broad political and social problem. To neutralize the accusation of reactionary nostalgia and melancholy often levelled at supporters of traditional architecture, particularly through social interactions, AU proposes a vision in which modern technology is placed at the service of architectural tradition, a sort of discursive framework based on "technology at the service of tradition" in which it aims for a virtuous integration between technical innovation and traditional aesthetics. This discursive strategy effectively neutralizes the modernity/tradition opposition, suggesting that true innovation consists in harmonizing new technologies with traditional aesthetics, rather than completely rejecting the past in favor of modernist abstraction.

The demolition and reconstruction in wood of this historic building in the province of Modena, by Vario Haus, is an interesting example of how prefabricated wood technology lends itself to reconstructing historical buildings, keeping their architectural features unchanged but equipping them with the highest safety standards, including earthquake-proofing, and efficiency. (ID.14).

This type of analysis also offers the possibility of reasoning about the strategic use of visual language, particularly through a technique that which may be analytically described as "ideological tagging". The image of the Milanese Olympic⁷ village is dominated by the provocative question "Leningrad 1978?" which immediately inserts the architecture into a political-ideological frame, associating it with Soviet building. The lower label "No! Milan-Cortina 2026 Olympic Village!" creates a shock effect by revealing that the building does not belong to the Soviet past but represents the future of Milan. This technique amplifies the textual message that describes the buildings as "soulless parallelepipeds" and "corporate dormitory of the Brezhnev era". A similar discourse also applies regarding the use of metaphors: Figure 2 uses a satirical cartoon to convey criticism through the visual metaphor of the "naked king" (reference to the tale "The Emperor's New Clothes"). By representing a naked architect in front of a minimalist building, with the caption "Did the architects finally buy new clothes? No they are still naked!", the cartoon visually translates the criticism of modernist architecture as devoid of substance, masked by false innovation.

⁷ ID.40.

The last real strategy is that of chromatic symbolism, observable because most of the images, particularly those based on before and after, associate the monochromatic concrete facades that characterize modernist structures are visually associated with emotional coldness, standardization, and social alienation, whereas the polychromatic palette of traditional architecture is presented as evoking human connection and organic vitality.

Figure 2 - Meme using the metaphor from *The Emperor's New Clothes* taken from the fairy tale by Andersen



Source: <https://www.arkitekturupproret.se/2022/02/06/masters-and-monsters-in-new-nordic-architecture-2022-the-mamma-prize/>

The analysis concludes by examining a notable case within the corpus⁸: RA's response to a skyscraper project in Milano Marittima, in the Ravenna province. The content presented illustrates a classic conflict between real estate development and environmental/landscape conservation in which the modern project by architect Mario Cucinella, conceived in 2009, represents an emblematic example of how private and public interests can join forces to promote controversial real estate development. This case appears particularly significant because it demonstrates the convergence of RA's discursive strategies with broader civic resistance: beyond the movement's critical thematization, local citizens mobilized against the project through multiple channels, including petition campaigns, protest actions, legal challenges, parliamentary interventions and electoral mobilization (*Il Fatto Quotidiano* 2013). The proposed building, an 18-story residential skyscraper characterized by a "stacked floors" structure reminiscent of stacks of planks, was presented with a rhetoric typical of contemporary architectural marketing, a marketing strategy employing vague captivating terms such as "new generation high sustainability", references to a "new way of thinking about pathways" and promises of a "succession of cultural experiences", which functioned as a sort of linguistic rebranding.

⁸ Published on 16th April 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C50eVLkKIt/>

The project, created by the architect Mario Cucinella, immediately earned the nickname of “eco-monster” for its landscape and environmental impact. The marketing department did its best, with glossy renderings and the usual archi-babble such as “new generation high sustainability”, “new way of thinking about routes”, and – our favorite – “a succession of cultural experiences”. (ID.2).

Furthermore, for a long time the linguistic choice of the architect remained at the center of the debate. On many public occasions, the architect decided to avoid using the term “skyscraper” preferring the neologism *skerry-building* (*Ravenna Today* 2012) a choice that RA’s posts satirize through juxtaposition and captioned criteria.

Addressing RQ3, RA’s communicative repertoire systematically enacts the five processes theorized by the CTR, transforming what might initially appear as mere aesthetic preference into a durable counter-narrative capable of challenging entrenched professional assumptions. From this perspective, resilience emerges not as static trait or fixed end-state, but rather as a processual work, carried out under conditions of enduring disruption: the perceived hegemony of modernist defaults, the exclusion of lay publics from design decisions, and the erosion of local identities through standardization. RA crafts normalcy by repeating caption templates and visual grammars, belying their routinized criteria-based rubrics, and carousels that progress from problem identification to exemplar or call-to-action, ensuring that traditional references become an expected, legitimate standard rather than a nostalgic exception. It foregrounds productive action by pairing imagination with concrete pathways (links, deadlines, consultation portals, petition language), while policy cues translate aesthetic preferences into procedural claims that can enter planning arenas. The work affirms identity anchors through inclusive stance-marking (“residents”, “neighbors”, “heritage caretakers”, “citizens”), authorizing lay expertise and binding heterogeneous publics across locations without requiring formal membership. It maintains and uses networks through cross-account mentions, follower contributions, and thread exchanges that function as micro-tutorials, keeping criteria flexible rather than dogmatic and sustaining translocal connections while remaining locally embedded.

Finally, it puts alternative logics to work by treating everyday perception as public evidence and recasting technical terminology into accessible criteria, repositioning professional knowledge as one input among others, accountable to shared standards such as human scale, continuity, and materiality. Across these interwoven processes, resilience emerges as active, ongoing, distributed labor. RA has made public aesthetic judgment both thinkable and expressible within contemporary urban discourse, equipping dispersed publics to intervene, modestly yet concretely, in planning processes. Its long-term viability, however, depends on continually renewing routines, refreshing networks, and navigating tensions around polarization and visibility constraints

5. Conclusions

Seeking to enrich the debate on a movement that, despite its importance, has received limited academic attention beyond a few clusters in northern Europe, this article has argued that Rivolta Architettónica (RA) is best understood as a media-based urban movement that assembles communicative resilience in and through its multimodal routines. Rather than treating resilience as a trait or an outcome, the study adopted the Communication Theory of Resilience to show how RA’s captions, visuals, and thread interactions constitute a processual repertoire that makes an alternative urban “common sense” thinkable, learnable, and doable within a hybrid-media environment. The findings indicate that RA’s work is not merely oppositional or aestheticist; it is organizational communication that scripts repeatable practices for publics to recognize problems, name criteria, and intervene in governance. By reframing the debate on urban aesthetics, the movement reclaims the right to define beauty as a shared cultural value rather than a prerogative of experts. Through media activism

and digital visual culture, RA positions traditional architecture as a symbol of authenticity, community, and identity, while portraying modernism as an agent of cultural erosion and spatial alienation. The analysis reveals this binary approach as the pivot for the construction of a movement identity and acts not only as the basis for aesthetic judgment but also as a broader critique of contemporary urban development processes that threaten local identities and community values. Using visual techniques, in particular before/after juxtapositions, it provides empirical evidence of architectural deterioration or positive transformations. The movement counters accusations of nostalgia and pastiche by championing technological innovation within traditional aesthetics and proposing a future-oriented vision that integrates contemporary capabilities with historical sensibility, thus positioning AU not as a reactionary subject, but as a promoter of an alternative path of architectural development. The case of RA demonstrates how media activism can function as a form of resistance, creating spaces for collective action in the digital sphere, and not resorting to traditional protest repertoires.

Lastly, the communicative effectiveness of RA lies in its strategic integration of visual, textual, and emotional elements into a coherent multimodal system in which the movement, through the exposed techniques, aims to:

- visually materialize the binary oppositions (beautiful/ugly, traditional/modernist, warm/cold) that structure its discourse;
- democratize architectural criticism, translating complex concepts into immediately comprehensible images even to non-experts;
- build a visual archive of architectural "successes" and "failures" that serves as a repertoire of shared examples for movement members;
- emotionally mobilize the public through the contrast between images of "ugly" architectures presented as threats to cultural identity and images of "beautiful" architectures offered as possible alternatives;
- create a bridge between architectural aesthetics and broader social issues (sustainability, urban livability, cultural identity), expanding the scope of its criticism.

In sum, RA case shows how a movement can withstand the gravitational pull of established defaults while enabling alternative urban imaginaries by crafting normalcy, foregrounding action, affirming identities, mobilizing networks and reframing authority. Centering communicative resilience reveals the movement's most consequential achievement: not a single victory in a single project, but the incremental re-design of public reasoning about the city so that different futures become sayable, seeable and doable.

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