

# The Porticoes of Bologna and contemporary architecture. A proposal for a Minor Boundary Modification towards Kenzo Tange

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## Abstract

After a long and complex process, the porticoes of Bologna were included in the UNESCO World Heritage List at the 44th session of the International Committee held in Fuzhou, China, on 16-31 July 2021. Among the aspects emphasised was the extraordinary adaptability of the asset, which has been intermediating public and private space since the 12th century. In the second half of the 20th century, the updating of technologies, materials and ways of living confirmed the importance of the portico even in the suburbs, leading to the construction of fine examples such as the one in the Barca district, designed by Giuseppe Vaccaro. Included in the UNESCO selection, on the one hand this portico courageously opens up to the contemporary, while on the other hand it imposes a reflection on the most recent interpretations of the asset. Among these, one should at least consider Kenzo Tange's arcades at the Fiera District, which, due to their historical and urban value, deserve to be included in the UNESCO selection through a Minor Boundary Modification.

## Keywords

Porticoes of Bologna, Contemporary Architecture, Kenzo Tange, UNESCO World Heritage List, Minor Boundary Modification.

## Introduction

Bologna's porticoes have been called «one of the wonders of the world»<sup>1</sup> and an «architectural symbol of the city»<sup>2</sup>. Its welcoming intimacy has often been appreciated, making it a sort of «outdoor lounge» and «symbol of Bolognese hospitality»<sup>3</sup>. With the aim of increasing knowledge and protection, the city administration first took action in 2006, sending UNESCO a petition that resulted in the inclusion of the property in the tentative list. Others followed, until in 2019 the official process to add the structure to the World Heritage List (WHL) began. The process was concluded in Fuzhou, China, in 2021 at the 44th session of the World Heritage Committee (16-31 July 2021). On that occasion, UNESCO accepted Bologna's candidature and for all intents and purposes the porticoes became a World Heritage Site<sup>4</sup>. (Fig. 1)

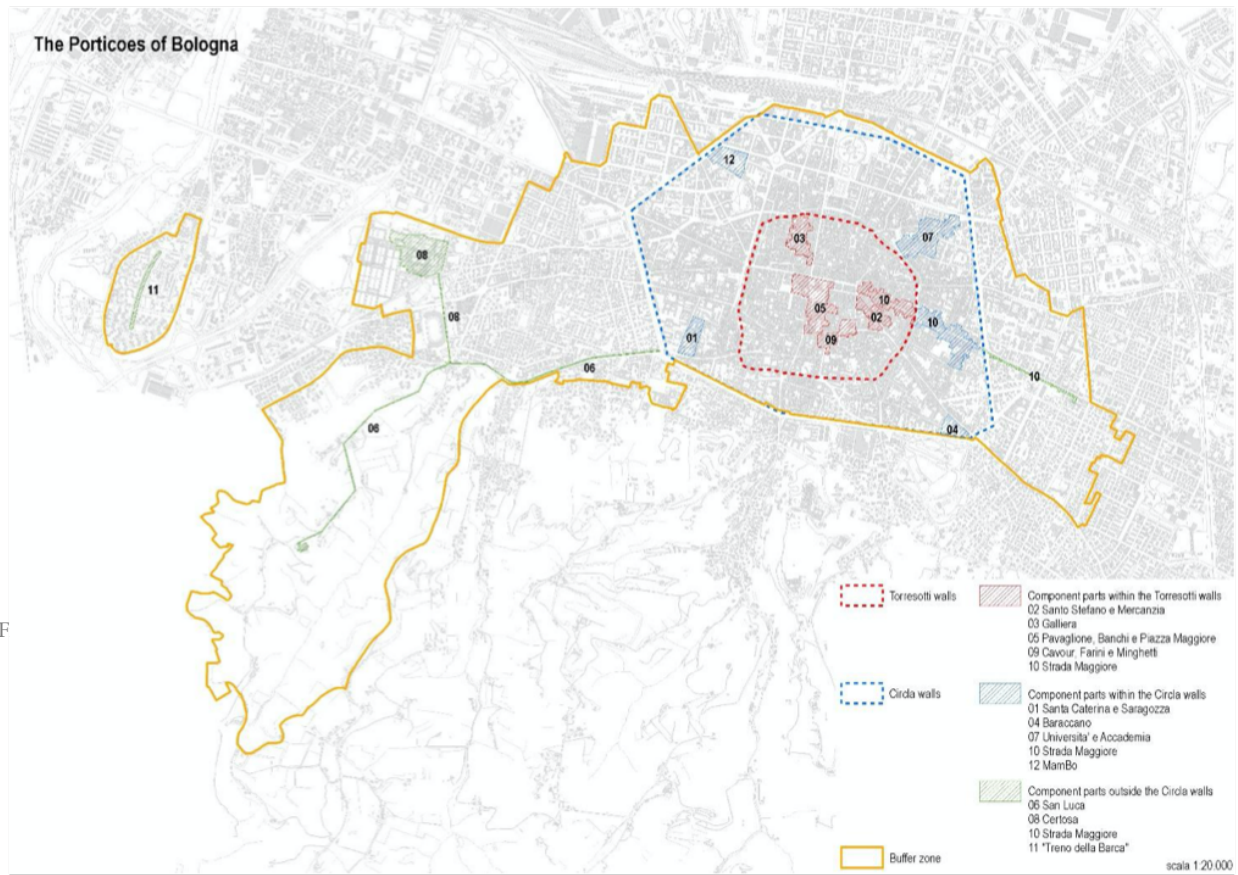


Fig. 1 The Porticoes of Bologna in the World Heritage List

The process of inclusion in the WHL was neither short nor straightforward: the candidature entailed complex work that was not easy to organise, and delicate negotiations with both UNESCO and ICOMOS, which was assigned to verify the proposal. Among the specificities of the candidature was the choice to include various built features, representative of the incorporation of this architectural typology through the centuries into the city's society and town planning. In addition to the architectural characteristics, chosen for the representativeness of the various ways in which they have been produced, the administration wanted to highlight how the portico represents a perpetual solution for mediating public and private space, from the 12th century to contemporary times<sup>5</sup>.

Among the aspects emphasised was the adaptability of these elements to time, right down to the use of contemporary technologies such as reinforced concrete, which is illustrated in the innovative idea of including the portico of a work by Giuseppe Vaccaro, the Barca (Fig. 2):

## Component 11 – “Treno della Barca”



The post-WWII modernist porticoed housing project of the Barca District, which is located beyond the ring road close to the river Reno, stays unchanged since its role has already been expressed clearly without the need for associated elements that would influence the definition of the relevant context.

On the following page:  
 above: Component 11 – “Treno della barca” - The long portico of “Treno” building  
 below: Component 11 – “Treno della barca” - Transversal view of the building

25



### Contribution to Outstanding Universal Value

This exceptionally long porticoed building for modern public housing is an innovative structure of high architectural quality that is still anchored in local history. Constructed according to rigorous functionalist principles, the “Treno della Barca” presents a modern re-elaboration of the traditional Bolognese portico to which it gives new life in a peripheral area of the city, highlighting its ongoing expressive vitality and identity-forging force rooted in a centuries-long tradition. The ongoing maintenance of this and other residential structures in the area—often by their own inhabitants—has protected this peripheral part of the city from degradation, becoming a model of social inclusiveness, as well as of architectural excellence.



26

Fig. 2 “Treno della Barca” from *The Porticoes of Bologna*, November 2020.

concrete [that] allowed the replacement of the traditional vaulted arcades with new building possibilities and a new architectural language...as exemplified in the Barca district. Together, the selected porticoes reflect different typologies, urban and social functions and chronological phases. Defined as private property for public use, the porticoes have become an expression and element of Bologna’s urban identity<sup>6</sup>.

In this lengthy study and selection process, including a segment of contemporary architecture was a brilliant and certainly bold choice as the ICOMOS assessments are stringent, and such an innovative element could have been a risk. The positive result of the candidature sent a particularly significant message, but we feel we can say that at least one «outstanding example of a type of building» has been overlooked in this innovative effort: the structure built between the 1970s and the first decade of the new millennium by Kenzo Tange at the Fiera District. Through an analysis of the event, this paper aims to illustrate why the work designed by Tange deserves to be included in the Bologna UNESCO site by way of a Minor Boundary Modification, leading to an increasingly broader and more widespread understanding and fruition of the specific heritage values of the asset.



Fig. 3 Kenzo Tange, *Study sketch for Bologna*, 1970 ca.

### **Why the porticoes of the Fiera District at the Bologna site**

Kenzo Tange visited Bologna for the first time in 1966 on 9-12 November when the city was hosting the international conference *Problematiche dell'architettura e dell'urbanistica odierna in relazione con i processi di industrializzazione* (Problems of today's architecture and urbanism in relation to the processes of industrialisation). At the event, organised to celebrate Giovanni Michelucci's retirement, Tange said he had visited the capital of Emilia «great enthusiasm». Indeed, with its «beautiful porticoes» it represented «the most excellent example of an urban road system. These communication spaces», he continued, «constitute an extraordinary example of an element capable of making the entire city an organic whole. Such forms suggest the future image of urban and architectural structures»<sup>7</sup>. Shortly afterwards, Tange would be entrusted with a number of important projects: the masterplan that was to lead the city towards a global future and the business centre from which to govern the <sup>8</sup> development. As is well known, of the two ambitious projects only a fragment known today as the Fiera District was realised: the impact of this work on the city, its image and history can hardly be underestimated. As with other post-World War II Bolognese undertakings, Tange's project shares the attempt to reinterpret certain traits characterising the historic centre in favour of the periphery. Several examples could be cited, but for the purposes of this essay one appears particularly worthy of mention, and that is the aforementioned "Train",

designed in the Barca district by a group coordinated by Giuseppe Vaccaro. It is certainly no coincidence that this portico – both intrinsically modern and «poetic» – has been included in the UNESCO site<sup>9</sup>. The project, together with the building it is a part of and the system of full and empty spaces that characterise it, well expresses the symbolic importance of the centre and its distinctive features, protected and developed since the 1960s with the famous Plan for the Historic City Centre<sup>10</sup>. The City Centre, protected and in some ways idealised in its main elements, became an essential point of reference after the Second World War not only for Italian designers such as Vaccaro, Enzo Zacchioli or Paolo Portoghesi, but also for international designers such as Tange. Evidence of this is the Japanese architect's aforementioned enthusiasm for the city, and a sketch dated 1970 that seems to sum up his idea of Bologna through three elements: the piazza, the towers, and of course the porticoes. (Fig. 3) From the outset, the project for the new business centre was presented as a «reconstruction of the centre of Bologna», in which its most typical aspects are preserved to emphasise a link between the past and a possible future<sup>11</sup>.

Essentially, one could therefore say that the Fiera District represents a reflection on Bologna's city centre and its distinctive elements by an internationally renowned architect. In the portico, Kenzo Tange not only sees the system capable of holding together the different areas of the city, but also shapes and moulds the covered passages of the surrounding district, demonstrating even a formal mastery of the various meanings that distinguish Bologna's porticoes. Thus the entrance to the Fair is broad, a vast protected area designed to receive people waiting to enter the exhibition areas. Conversely, for the opposite side of the piazza where a hotel was to be located and which is now the home of regional government offices, Tange chose a high portico with a more representative character marked by slender rectangular pillars capable of revealing the generous glass windows of the foyer. Situated a few steps above the level of the piazza, this section of the portico allows a strategic view of the entrance to the Fair with its massive cylindrical forms housing vertical connections and services. The varying heights also serves Tange to guide the eye and indicate crossings that, for example, lead to the towers in the background of the main squares. In this way the spatial richness of the complex is accentuated, only partially revealing less frequented areas such as the crossing system that divides the areas used for car traffic from others that are purely pedestrian in nature, such as the piazza overlooked by the CNA and LegaCoop towers. Proceeding towards Piazza Renzo Imbeni, dominated by Isamu Noguchi's austere artistic projects, the system of porticoed connections is set against the buildings, leaving the central area free. Also in this area, the white concrete that is used throughout the Fiera District dialogues with a paving of red porphyry cobblestones that with its semi-circular arrangement emulates the pattern typical of many Italian piazzas.

## Conclusions

Towards the end of the 20th century, art historian Arturo Carlo Quintavalle noted that the works and places admitted to the UNESCO WHMs were extremely heterogeneous: they ranged from the Rock Art complex in Valcamonica, accepted in 1979, to the city centre of Rome (1980), and then from the Piazza del Duomo in Pisa (1987) to the city centre of San Gimignano (1990), the Sassi in Matera (1993), the city centre of Crespi d'Adda (1995) and so on. This list was enough, Quintavalle continued, «to understand that the choices were made according to distinct cultural models» and that the issue concerned a «problem of method». The latter affected

many countries, but emerged particularly in Italy where there was «an exceptional stratification...of settlements, the continuity of the city's existence from the Etruscan and Greek ages to the Roman age and down to the Middle Ages and today: therefore urban planning, settlements are a whole to be protected»<sup>12</sup>. The continuity evoked by Quintavalle is also a prerogative of Bologna's porticoes, which have been able to adapt to the needs of the city and its citizens since the 12th century. The most recent interpretation of this architectural typology are the porticoes of the Fiera District.

There are at least two reasons why the inclusion of the porticoes designed by Tange is appropriate, if not necessary. On the one hand, added to Vaccaro's, the porticoes of the Fiera District would promote the continuity of the settlements, so typically Italian, already evoked by Quintavalle. On the other hand, built at the end of the last century and in the early years of the current one, the complex has a flaw: there are few if any protective mechanisms, as the tools provided by current national laws for the protection of architectural heritage are hard to apply<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, in the years between the end of construction and today, the complex has been subjected to interventions that have not always respected its value. However, it is well known that «once a country signs the World Heritage Convention, and has sites inscribed on the World Heritage List, the resulting prestige often helps raise awareness among citizens and governments for heritage preservation»<sup>14</sup>. In short, the inclusion of this stretch of porticoes in the site would introduce an additional degree of protection compared to the weak instruments that currently “defend” this important exemplar of Bolognese architecture, while waiting for a measure of declaration of extraordinary interest to definitively reduce the risks to its preservation.

<sup>1</sup> MARCO GASPERETTI, *I portici di Bologna sotto il segno dell'Unesco*, «Corriere della Sera», 29 July 2021, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> J. CH., *Bologna candida i suoi portici come patrimonio Unesco*, «Corriere della Sera», 12 March 2019, p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> *Buone notizie*, «Corriere della sera», 19 March 2019, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO, *Extended 44th session of the World Heritage Committee*, 2021 <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/sessions/44COM>>.

<sup>5</sup> See FRANCESCA BOCCHI, ROSA SMURRA (eds), *I portici di Bologna nel contesto europeo*, Bologna, Luca Sossella Edizioni 2015.

<sup>6</sup> ICOMOS, *Advisory Board Evaluation*, 2021 <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1650/documents/>>.

<sup>7</sup> KENZO TANGE, *Comunicazioni su recenti esperienze*, in F. Clemente (ed), *Problemi della città*, Padua, Marsilio 1967, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> GIULIANO GRESLERI, GLAUCO GRESLERI, *Kenzo Tange e l'utopia di Bologna*, Bologna, Bononia University Press 2010.

<sup>9</sup> ALESSANDRO ANSELMi, *Architettura senza ideologia*, in M. Mulazzani (ed), *Giuseppe Vaccaro*, Milan, Electa 2002, p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> See PIER LUIGI CERVELLATI, *Una politica per il centro storico*, in Various authors, *Conoscenza e coscienza della città. Una politica per il centro storico di Bologna*, Bologna, Grafis Edizioni d'Arte 1974.

<sup>11</sup> ANTONIO MONTI, *Un architetto giapponese ricostruirà il centro di Bologna*, «Corriere della Sera», 12 April 1973, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> ARTURO CARLO QUINTAVALLE, *Per il Belpaese scelta difficile: non solo monumenti, intere città*, «Corriere della Sera», 10 September 1999, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> See <http://vincoliinrete.beniculturali.it/VincoliInRete/vir/utente/login#> for details on the national protection instruments under Italian Legislative Decree no. 42/2004, Cultural Heritage and Landscape Code: it does not provide any form of national protection for the complex in question.

<sup>14</sup> UNESCO, *Questions and answers*, <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/faq/20>>.