

Laudatio

Ezio Bortolussi: from Suitcase to Skyscrapers

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Abstract. Ezio Bortolussi's personal and professional life is closely intertwined with the migratory phenomena that affected Friuli in the post-war period and the impetuous development of large buildings in the urban areas of North America. This *laudation* retraces some of the significant moments of Bortolussi's professional history, culminating in his final success as a superlative interpreter of the engineering of reinforced concrete skyscrapers.

Keywords. Emigration, tall reinforced concrete buildings, technological innovation.

1. Introduction. I have entitled this *laudation* “Ezio Bortolussi: From Suitcase to Skyscrapers”, taking my cue from the opening words of an interesting little book that the *Quaderni de la Rupa* series dedicated to the candidate a few years ago (Pagnucco 2015). I made this choice because I believe that these opening words offer an extreme, but expressive, summary of Bortolussi's personal and professional path. A path rooted in the history of Friulian emigration and subsequently intertwined with the modern development of large urban

areas in North America. For these reasons, a *laudation* for Bortolussi must involve a virtual journey, from the harsh reality of Friulian post-war emigration to the impetuous development of reinforced concrete skyscraper construction popularised in 1960s North America.

2. Beginnings and context. Ezio Bortolussi was born in 1943 in Arzene, in the small Municipality of Valvasone, at the southern end of the former Province of Pordenone. After the end of the war, his father emigrated

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as a labourer and bricklayer first to France, then to Belgium, and later to Canada, before returning to Friuli for good in 1958. Ezio Bortolussi spent his youth in Arzene, engaging in his primary studies and developing a passion for football, a sport he played at a semi-professional level.

Right from the start, he showed an unusual resourcefulness and, in fact, made his first important life choices, including professional ones, very early on.

The context in which he grew up and matured in was that of 1950s and 1960s Friulian society. Taking a slightly broader perspective, the 1950s to 1970s were the years in which Italian society underwent a significant evolution, changing its original appearance in numerous ways (Vignaroli 2008). Economic and territorial structures were changing with the passage from a largely agricultural society to an industrialised one (Tab. 1), with consequent transformations in production and the economy, social and cultural constructs, and urban settlement (Tab. 2).

The causes of these changes are many and are to be found, among other things, in the opening of the European Common Market (Rome, 1957), the role of the State in infrastructure construction, technological advancement, and the availability of low cost and low conflict labour. Moreover, a decisive condition for development was represented by inter-regional migrations, capable of providing a consistent supply of labour for the “industrial triangle”

of the North West. Just to have an idea of the intensity of these internal migrations, between 1955 and 1970 there were 16.3 million inter-regional movements, and 8.6 million extra-regional movements (almost one fifth of the Italian population of that time), one third of which was made up of southern populations migrating towards the North.

In Friuli, these social movements developed against a background of still significant backwardness, the inheritance of a historical past made only worse by the war (Grandinetti P., Grandinetti R. 1979). There were still areas of stark underdevelopment within the region. The modernisation of agriculture was too slow and industrial development was sporadic. There was a lack of an overall economic policy, which was only activated by the institution of the Autonomous Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia in 1963. Industrialisation was not able to fully respond to the chronically excess labour supply in the mountain and hill areas. There was, therefore, progressive internal migration which led to the depopulation of some mountain settlements. At the same time, the phenomenon of temporary emigration abroad re-emerged (which very soon would take on new and permanent characteristics); this saw men and women, skilled workers and labourers leave, their reasons often not dictated by a free and natural mobility of labour, but by a need to survive (Tab. 3).

From what has been said above, it is not surprising that – unable to continue his studies, which required