

THE VANISHING ARCHITECT

I came across a 2009 leaflet of HelpWorks Italia the other day and I found it full of interesting things and tips (if not directly for me, at least for my clients) so I decided to have a look at their website which confirmed my first positive impressions, especially the information contained in the 'download' page. Then, reading the full article in greater depth and going back to the leaflet, I noticed that in the section that was more of interest to me there was definitely something lacking: architects!

In the Guide to Renovations and Building projects, the first suggested step to make is: "acquire a Geometra" and from then onwards a list of services provided by such a figure until the final, detailed section: "Geometras: role, fees, taxes and permissions". At this point some people would be asking themselves if Architects exist at all in Italy.

When I started my university course in Florence, I was hoping to become a professional in charge of, amongst other things, Renovations and Building projects. Some years later I find out that the general public is led to think that Geometras are the main professionals suitable for such task, so I wonder if my university course was a total waste of time.

The facts that we must know are simple and straightforward: a Geometra obtains his qualification after high school, at 18 years of age, whereas an Architect, after any high school, needs to attend a 5-year course at University. It is doubtless that the formation of the two figures is totally different. Geometras - as the original greek words suggest, 'geo' meaning earth and 'metros' meaning measure - would naturally find their field in measuring/surveying the land and related tasks. There is very little knowledge (study) of design composition, history of art/architecture, town planning and all the specific matters common to Architects and their formation.

In comparison with other European countries, Geometras are really more similar to Surveyors. The average European client in need of building or restoring a house would immediately think of employing an Architect and not a Surveyor. The lack of information regarding Architects and their role in Italy has also been historical, so to speak. In the '50s and '60s, when Italy was desperately in need of lots of new buildings quickly, there were few Architects available and the general construction industry put it all into the hands of Geometras, who then used their position to establish themselves as the leading figure in the building trade. This idea continues to this day, where the general public is misled by many different sources that convince him to think that for anything concerning building work, a Geometra is what he is looking for.

An Architect? What does he do?? Maybe good for the interiors, if there is any money left! This is another cliché that it is difficult to remove. There is no such thing as interior vs exterior; architecture is a whole - you can't design the 'interior' if the 'exterior' is wrong. And this applies not just to important buildings, but to any example of architecture, from the most luxurious mansion to the smallest and derelict barn: architecture is not about size but about the relationship of spaces, materials, light and the surrounds.

I often try (jokingly) to describe this diatribe using a simile in the ambit of medicine: Architects and Geometras can be seen as the same professional relationship existing between Doctors and Nurses: they are both important in the task they have to achieve, but with very distinctive roles.

Like in any other field, there are 'good' Geometras and 'bad' Architects, as there are good nurses and bad doctors - however we should never forget that each profession is tailored to the academic route that ones has taken, and therefore renovating or designing new buildings is obviously and with no doubt the field of an Architect. Geometras can have some knowledge regarding the matter, but this would mainly be superficial and empirical, rather than based on training and specific learning process.

There are many related fields and tasks in the construction world that can be achieved by Geometras with a great deal of success...but let's leave Architecture in the hands of Architects.