

This essay is part of a larger mixed media project 'Like Vessels' (2011 – ongoing), exploring ideas around abstraction and interiority, and taking the architecture of Bologna as a starting and reference point.

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Like vessels: Giorgio Morandi and the porticoes of Bologna

In thinking of twentieth century artists that could be associated with some kind of interior perspective, Giorgio Morandi might surely be one of the first to come to mind. Morandi's primary subject matter, from around 1920 right up until his death in 1964, was a collection of bottles, vases and containers – quotidian objects salvaged at home or picked up in markets, and set up in carefully articulated arrangements. For most of each year, Morandi worked from a modest apartment on Bologna's Via Fondazza, the same family home that he had lived in as a student, and which after the death of his parents he shared with his two sisters. Giorgio occupied a modest studio-bedroom at the back of the apartment: sparsely furnished, with bare plaster walls – his bottles stored stacked up, huddled together on the tiled floor or on shelves and tables, and coated in a filmy patina of dust.

But within this interiorized setting, the exterior remained very much within sight and mind. The south-easterly light coming into the room from the shuttered window was an integral element of Morandi's work. Each arrangement of objects was set up on one of three deliberately situated surfaces: a small table just adjacent to the window, and two cantilevered, adjustable platforms facing the window from the other side of the room. Just beyond the balcony, the backs of the upper floors of

neighbouring apartments were visible, and Morandi would make regular recordings of the view – variegated, when seen together today, by the amount of foliage on the trees or the vantage point selected. But most particularly the city itself, outwith the apartment's immediate environs, was ever-present in the depiction of these ostensibly domestic objects. Architectonic constructions as much as still-life studies, their umber volumes and tower-like forms are suffused with the very atmosphere and appearance of Bologna. It's a resemblance that is commented on in almost every text on Morandi, and indeed, over the years, the artist and the city have become increasingly synonymous.



Luigi Ghirri
Bologna, Studio Giorgio Morandi
1989-1990
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Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

The most striking and defining feature of the cityscape by far, however, are the fantastic and seemingly endless porticoed streets – or ‘portici’. They seam together, in an astonishing 37 kilometre matrix, palazzi, civic architecture, ecclesiastical buildings, nineteenth century urban vernacular, and even post-war office blocks. Quite how the porticoes became so ubiquitous in Bologna is still a matter of some speculation, which perhaps adds to their charged, almost surrealistic, appeal today. The first wooden porticoes were twelfth and thirteenth-century additions to extant buildings; by supporting outward extension of the first floor level, they provided a

practical solution to the pressure on living space that had resulted from the influx of students to the university (Miller 1989: 36-39). Gradually, porticoes were incorporated into the standard lexicon of building design and urban planning – an embracing of form that conceivably may have owed much to the continuing of tradition and a sense of civic identity. Perhaps it was also in acknowledgement of the benefits afforded by combining the functions of housing, leisure, business and trade, in one contiguous urban space. And so it remains in modern Bologna: where the porticoes are, as cinema critic and long-time commentator on the city Renzo Renzi writes, ‘the architectural conjunction that binds together the usually contradicting characters of public and private life’ (Packard 1983: 20,29)

Like Morandi’s work, then, even on an immediate level, the porticoes participate in a distinct dialogue between interior and exterior. Visiting Bologna for the first time to see the two Morandi museums, and without any prior knowledge of the city, I was fascinated and captivated by its totally unique topography: these ongoing but always changing ‘inside’ spaces, through which one could walk and walk, from one unfamiliar area to another. And, having sensed quite strongly that exploring the city in this way would tell me as much about Morandi’s work as a visit to the museums alone, I was curious to find later that so little has been written about Morandi in the specific context of the porticoes. Karen Wilkin, in her *Works, Writings and Interviews* monograph, provides the most in depth discussion I’ve found. ‘Is it far-fetched to assume’, she asks, ‘that the almost daily activity of walking through the rose-red arcaded streets of Bologna, an experience replicated for over 40 years, somehow finds itself into Morandi’s work?’ (Wilkin 2007: 124)

Likewise, after having been compelled to follow up my first experience of Bologna with further research, it seemed appropriate that this same activity of walking and observing should frame my thoughts on a second visit. As well as considering my own responses, I wanted to consider the way in which Morandi might have

experienced the city – throughout the year, every year, both observed and recollected.



Max Hutzel
Strada Maggiore
1960-1990
Digital image courtesy of the
Getty's Open Content Program

When thinking further about an interior/exterior duality, it seemed to me that within the Bologna cityscape's reconfiguration of this dynamic, interior is often privileged over exterior. With individual buildings incorporated into a whole and continuous entity, for instance, the porticoes render a traditional hierarchy of architecture (with the 'façade' as one of its signifiers) redundant. For instance, a magnificent palazzo might have its main entrance relegated to a narrow side-street, or a baroque church might lie behind just one of many similarly un-prepossessing

doors along a walkway. Often one can glimpse, behind a door left open, porticoed loggias and inner courtyards that replicate, in more intimate scale, the very same features of the street from which they lead. (Miller 1989: 33) The interiors that lie somewhere behind these un-suggestive and layered exteriors really are *within*. And all the more appealing to the imagination of a passer-by, to envisage opulent, ornate or decadently faded spaces, of which the outside appearance reveals little clue.

What is most interesting for me about this interiorized urban topography is how it connects to the imaginative experience of the individual traversing the city. Part of my initial fascination with the porticoes was the way in which I felt they talked about abstraction: the repetition and ongoing variation of a basic vocabulary of vault, support and decoration. Likewise, in the serial re-configuration of a personal grammar of similar but different objects, Morandi's work can be seen in equivalent terms. At first, however, I found it hard to articulate why I felt this was so connected to interiority. Literary historian Victoria Rosner's comments, in her 2005 study *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*, were helpful in communicating a simple but perhaps easily overlooked point. Even linguistically, interiority and abstraction are intimately connected, and Rosner talks about the 'elasticity' of the two terms. *Interior*, as well as being an inside space is 'that which pertains to mental life'; *to abstract*, as a verb, refers to a 'habit of thought' (Rosner 2005: 170-171). As an interiorized and intellectual process then, 'abstraction' might encompass a number of functions: to observe, to reflect, to connect, to compare...

Writing in 1909 for her pocket-sized and beautifully illustrated *Bologna: its History, Antiquities and Art*, the art historian Edith Coulson-James describes the immense diversity of form that she observed in the porticoed streets:

'There are pointed arches, round arches, and points where only a flat architrave rests on and connects the pillars. [...] There are round pillars, square pillars and massive clustered pillars. [...] There are

colonnades with flat ceilings, colonnades with barn-like rafters, others with plain barrel vaulting.' (Coulson-James 1909: 2-3)

James goes on to discuss variations in building material (brick versus stone), wall decoration (frescoes, reliefs and friezes), and so on. A similar account today would no doubt read much the same, with the addition perhaps of some twentieth century variations in material and stylistic form. Transient features, too, that are specific to any given 'contemporary' timeframe – posters, graffiti and other markings – likewise come into play as variable elements. The colour palette of ochres, pinks, reds and greys is also fascinating: the way in which for instance, the outer edge of an arch is often lined with a different colour on the underside. But what is most exciting as an observer perhaps, is not only the different features in and of themselves, but their juxtapositions: where two types of column for instance, with their differing heights, widths, colours and textures, stand back to back at the join of two buildings.

It's also possible to see the way in which each district of the city has its own character – defined not by landmarks, shops or parks, but in the particular language of porticoes. On my second visit to the city, a little more familiar with the network of main streets running just south and south-east of the centre, I liked to imagine that I could identify in Morandi's works some of the different vocabularies, or *collisions* of vocabularies, that I had seen whilst walking. The lightness of touch and delicacy of form on Strada Maggiore; the unembellished, slightly squat, appearance of the vernacular streets around Via Fondazza; the dark austerity and looming presence of the architecture on Via Zamboni.

These variations of more static structural and decorative form are always coupled with, and affected by, the continuous modulations of changing light – over the course of a day, and from season to season. On an overcast day in winter, the portico might appear as a greyed-out, absorbent corridor, in which the coldness and quickness of a reticent sun might dapple the wall for just a moment. Or I can

imagine the languor of late summer, afternoon, light in August – lengthening shadows taking their time to chart their elliptical course under the arches. Such is the intensity of perception in the porticoes that etches these little moments on the retina. Indeed, the light that is evoked in a Morandi painting is quite often, on closer inspection, not an exact, faithfully recounted, light – rather, perhaps, a ‘remembered’ light from a particular moment observed in the city (Gale 2001: 93).

This observing and reflecting on the features of one’s *own* side of the street, in proximate and saturated detail, is prompted by, as much as the visual interest inherent to the features themselves, the absence of a typical frontal view of the city ahead. Instead, in its place, there is only the continuation of the portico – often as far as the eye can see, to where it curves away, or where it finishes with a small, bright, arc-shaped lens as the corridor breaks to meet an open space. But this obscuring of a frontal view also sets up a shift in perspective to the side, an ‘oblique’ view, as architecture historian Naomi Miller describes it, over to the other side of the street (Miller 1989: 157). With it, comes the possibility to project upon the relative nature of the opposite corridor – its features, character and light – and imagine one’s own place and experience inside of it.

Sometimes the other side of the street might be far away: separated perhaps by a dense volume of rising midsummer dawn air, or alternatively by a space that whilst not that wide, in its sounds, movements and gestures, seems completely unrelated in character. At other times, whether in physical real-space, or imagined-perceived space, the other side of the street is much closer. It isn’t just a visual experience under the porticoes, then, it’s a profoundly sensory and physical one too – where one is made acutely aware of space, one’s conception of it, and one’s placement within it. Morandi’s works correlate to these choreographies perfectly: sometimes objects are spaced apart, contained in their own atmosphere; at other times, in British painter Michael Craig-Martin’s words, they are pushed up against one another ‘as if the air

had been sucked out between' (Coldwell 2006: 20). Often, their relationship is uncertain: they are almost, but not quite, touching; appearing at once to be both quietly repelling one another and nudging gently towards.

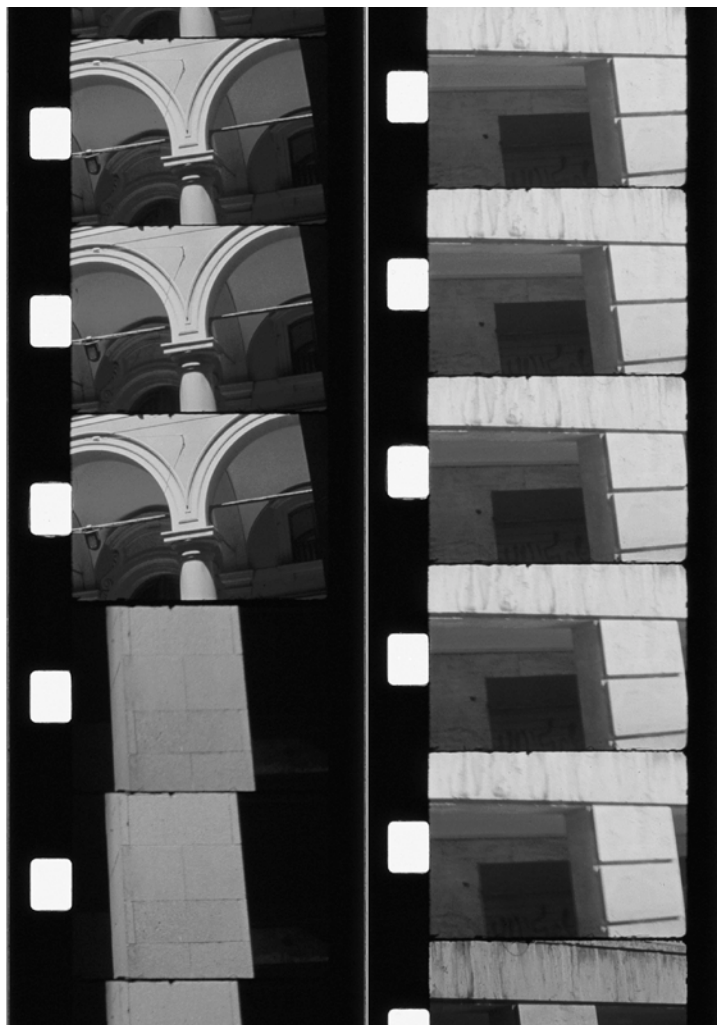
In as much as setting up this particular oblique view, the shift in perspective prompted by the porticoes also necessitates a *movement*. The supports of the arches act like markers; I am aware of my movement in one direction by their intervals. And so too, I am aware of their equivalents on the other side of the street: these two sets of verticals are constantly interacting – closing up quickly so as one in front of the other, then a moment later equidistant. One side might seem to slip past slightly quicker, or sometimes it might appear to slide past, slowly, in the opposite direction. Closer to the city centre, where the large civic buildings dominate, and where the streets are comparatively narrow, this feeling is particularly tangible. There's a sense of it sometimes in Morandi's paintings – in which scale is subverted, and lumbering architectonic forms, creaking and sliding from an internal inertia, meet and pass in the midst of a chalky temporal landscape.



In advance of visiting Bologna on the first occasion, knowing that I would visit the Morandi museums, I took some books out of the library – one of which was the catalogue for the Morandi retrospective at the Tate in 2001. The catalogue included a number of responses to Morandi's work by contemporary artists and architects, and I was particularly struck by one short extract, by architect Sarah Jackson. 'They are studies in formal composition', she writes,

'...explorations of light and shade. But most importantly they make you think of the edge. Boundaries within Morandi's paintings change, so too for our cities; within the vastness we make our own tangible constraints.' (Gale 2001: 56)

There was something about these two words, *edge* and *boundary*, and the images and associations that they invoked, that made a real impression on me; I remember that they were very much in my mind as I went round the Morandi museum, and later that day as I walked in the city. I realized that these words corresponded perfectly to the porticoes: the boundary between two spaces intrinsically connected yet still apart; the edge that runs between a walkway and the open street; the boundaries set up by juxtaposing features and forms. Likewise where boundaries can't be crossed or where they are heavily outlined, or where they can be erased, smudged out or re-configured somehow. In this context, a boundary is not so much the fault line that demarcates inside and outside, private and public, but rather a fundamental character in an abstract, spatial and interiorized language.



Vicky Falconer
Like Vessels
Drum-scanned super8 film strips
2014
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By way of conclusion, I should return to the question of the interior/exterior relationship. My account of this interiorized city has presupposed as its protagonist an individual – walking around the city, absorbed in the rather solitary occupation of observing, and reflecting on, visual cues and the abstract qualities of space. Even taking into account the way in which being a stranger in a city naturally effects a more reflective state of mind, it seems that Bologna, by its very design, precipitates this kind of introspective experience – reflecting in it, too, a similar nature of its own.

For Morandi it seems that interior and exterior – his studio and the city in which it is contained – were not opposing realms. The interior was not a refuge from the chaotic and de-personalising aspect of the city, as expounded in much classic Modernist theory (Rosner 2005: 147). Neither were the space and life of the city, on the other hand, revitalizing repose from a more stifling interior realm. Interior and exterior were (and are) similar, intrinsically connected, and mutually informing. Morandi's daily walks in the city, under the arches, provided perhaps both distance from his work, and inspiration; his studio was a place of peace and quiet contemplation, but one in which he reconfigured the spaces and images of the city. For me, Morandi's paintings and the Bologna porticoes are lenses – through which each can shed light on the other.

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