

Collaborations Informing Collective Practice. A Conversation with Fosbury Architecture

Elettra Carnelli

While hierarchically structured offices remain the prevailing organizational model within architectural firms, in recent times more horizontally organized groups and collectives with alternative perspectives and design approaches are emerging. These collectives challenge the conventional notions of individual authorship and creativity and advocate for an egalitarian and collaborative way of practicing in response to specific situations. Even though the term has entered common usage, it is not easy to define what an architectural collective is and how it works; indeed, many aspects related to its function and motivation remain largely unexplored: What is the collective reacting to, and what strategies and tools do they employ? Which forms of collaboration – within or outside the disciplinary field of architecture – are integrated with the activities of a collective? And what role do those collaborations play in the evolution of the group?

These interrogations are explored in the conversation with Claudia Mainardi and Giacomo Ardesio, who are both members of *Fosbury Architecture*, founded in 2013 together with Alessandro Bonizzoni, Nicola Campri, and Veronica Caprino. In addition to the development of urban strategies, the reuse of existing buildings, and the design of temporary installations, the collective has participated in, and curated, numerous national and international exhibitions, most recently as curator of the Italian Pavilion at the 18th »International Architecture Exhibition« at the *Venice Biennale*. Fosbury defines itself as a spatial practice, interpreting architecture as a mediating tool between collective and individual needs, expectations and resources, sustainability and pragmatism, environment and human beings. Moreover, as a research group, Fosbury aims to push the boundaries of the architectural discipline, redefining its role and rethinking its production processes in light of contemporary challenges. In this interview, Mainardi and Ardesio reflect upon the origins and evolution of the group, detailing the challenges its members have encountered, and the insights that they have gained throughout their journey. Furthermore, they shed light on how collaborations with other collectives and actors have contributed to their growth and the explorations undertaken by their practice.

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Elettra Carnelli | Let's start from the beginning: How did you come up with the idea of founding a collective, instead of working on your own or within a more conventionally structured architectural practice?

Claudia Mainardi | It all began when we were still students, it was 2013. Some of us had just graduated from university, while others were nearing the end of their studies. Those were quite challenging years because it was just after the 2008 crisis. It was really difficult at that time, not only to find employment, but also to get into the job market. In the beginning, *Fosbury* emerged as a gathering of friends doing competitions together. It served as a platform where we could voice concerns and ideas that we perceived as urgent but could not readily express within our daily professional lives. Over time, as our group became more consolidated, *Fosbury* evolved into a sort of mental space where we could position ourselves and express ourselves freely. This allowed us to break free from certain business and production logics, also because at that time we were not so interested in making the group profitable.

EC | Why did you call yourself a collective?

CM | We initially defined our group as a collective, and we still refer to it as such, because over the years it has functioned as a sort of collector: while working on projects together, each of us was pursuing individual careers.

Giacomo Ardesio | It is also a collective because it stemmed from the involvement of many individuals, initially eight, now we are down to five: aside from Claudia and myself, there are Alessandro Bonizzoni, Nicola Campri, and Veronica Caprino. The formation of this collective was not based on a predefined group image as our individual backgrounds and diverse skills prevented a single unified profile from emerging. In truth, condensing our individualities under a collective entity was quite liberating, especially when compared with the prevailing notion of the architect-hero that was prominent during our university years. While this concept is much criticized now, it was a widespread notion at the time. We chose to follow our own inclinations, opting to avoid conforming to the

archetype of the starchitect. Instead, we aimed to be part of an impersonal entity, like *Wu Ming*, who we also involved in the publication *Incompiuto*.¹

EC | It is interesting to notice that the image of the architect as a single hero, rising above all difficulties, does not represent the actual dynamics of the profession. This notion often hinders the cultivation of collaboration, as interactions with specialists or users is perceived as intrusive.

CM | Yes, such an attitude can also lead to frustration.

GA | Besides, the pressure to develop a recognizable signature can sometimes feel like a self-imposed restriction, which is often influenced by education, expectations, and peers.

EC | Adopting a name that corresponds to a collective identity provides a certain distance from the individual personalities within the group. How did you come up with the idea of naming yourself *Fosbury*?

CM | The name was originally suggested by one of the members for whom Dick Fosbury was an idol. The name refers to the message we read in this character, an athlete who in his only sports performance in the 1968 Olympics revolutionized the high jump discipline with a new technique: instead of jumping with his chest facing the bar, he jumped with his back, achieving an incredible result after which there was no turning back. We were fascinated by this idea of metaphorically overcoming obstacles not solely through extraordinary physical performances but by seeking alternative, even very simple, ways to shift the perspective and overcome challenges.

EC | How did the collective work at the beginning and how did your organization change over the years?

CM | Our evolution unfolded in several stages. Initially, we were all based in Milan and the group served as a space on its own, separated from our everyday work. Then another phase began when Giacomo and I moved to

¹ *Wu Ming* is a collective of Italian writers formed in 2000 from a section of the *Luther Blisset Project* in Bologna. The group's literary endeavors are centered on radical fiction approaches, ranging from novels to comics, from audiobooks to screenplays.



1.
Realization of a model at the entrance of Fosbury's first studio in via Pinturicchio, Milan, 2014.

2.
Weekly meeting (together with south-American colleagues) in Fosbury's first studio in via Pinturicchio, Milan, 2014.

the Netherlands after graduation, while Nicola went to Hamburg and the rest of the group remained in Milan. So for a long time, there was a core in Milan and another one abroad, with communication primarily taking place via Skype. Our projects were mainly concentrated in Milan but our research and competition activities spanned various locations, like our proposal for the 2015 *European* competition in Leeuwarden, in the Netherlands. This competition marked a turning point for us, as it prompted us to organize ourselves a bit more. During this period, our work was project-based and executed remotely, with our organization adapting to the needs and availability of individual members. Each project typically began with extensive brainstorming sessions, although these have become less frequent over the years as we developed a better understanding of our strengths and skills. In 2020, we all returned to Milan with the intention of dedicating more time and energy to the group but the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic forced us to revert to remote work which we were already accustomed to. During the pandemic, we co-founded the *Dopolavoro* association, along with others. This initiative stemmed from the necessity of having a large space for work and events. Through a bid from the municipality of Milan, we received the initial funding to rent a former workshop in Corvetto, in the south of Milan. There, we set up our workspaces together with three other collectives, a researcher, and two journalists.

EC | Now the collective consists of the five of you, all at the same level. Do you have employees?

GA | Since the competition to curate the Italian Pavillon at the *Biennale Architettura 2023*, we have been collaborating with a selected group of practitioners, with whom we have previously done other projects.

EC | Has the move to a physical space led to changes in the dynamics of your collective?

CM | What influenced our group dynamic was the appointment as curators for the Italian Pavillon, which coincided with our relocation to the new space. As we worked for the *Biennale*, each of us had to put a halt to their collateral activities because up to that point, *Fosbury* had always been something we did in addition to our day jobs.

GA | This is a common reality for many young and small architectural practices. Throughout the years we tried to preserve *Fosbury* as a space for pursuing projects that genuinely interested us, because otherwise we would have been forced to make a series of compromises to make ends meet. Looking back, it seems that this was the right choice, as it enabled us to establish a consistent and distinctive profile in the realm of research and installation, translating applied research into tangible installation.

EC | I can imagine that it must have been quite an adjustment to physically reunite after setting aside your individual commitments.

CM | At the same time, this situation has given us the opportunity to think about how to organize ourselves in the future. We are considering whether we should go back to the size we were before, maintaining individual careers alongside collective projects or explore alternative structures. This could involve a stronger connection to academia, especially given that some of us are pursuing PhDs or working in universities. Now, we want to see what might happen as we invest more in *Fosbury* without making too many compromises.

EC | Returning to your curatorship for this year's *Biennale*: How did you come up with the idea of *Spaziale*, connecting several groups across various locations in Italy, and how did you select them?

GA | In selecting the specific profiles, we made a curatorial choice: We looked for different profiles based both in Italy and abroad, operating both in the North and South of the country, with different interests and areas of expertise. Through this process, we identified a total of nine groups. The rationale behind inviting these groups and collectives stemmed from our belief that, particularly within an Italian context, the model of collective and cooperative work we advocate for is acknowledged but has not yet garnered full legitimacy. With our *Biennale* proposal, our aim was twofold: First, to shed light on this reality, of which we are a part, and second, to incite debate. Our overarching goal was to legitimize these kinds of practices and shared ways of working by showcasing how these groups effectively operated within the collaborative framework we proposed. In fact, our primary curatorial input was to build this framework, wherein each

group collaborated with an advisor who, in turn, worked alongside local actors and supporters.

EC | Do you think that your approach to design has changed after this experience?

GA | Yes, we are currently in the process of determining our future direction, drawing on the insights we have gained this year through collaborating with all the people we have encountered. These experiences have provided us with a better understanding of how others work and manage the challenges linked to running an architectural practice. We have always been interested in exploring these issues, for example, with the fanzine *RROARK!* we investigated the contemporary condition of young workers in the field of architecture to stimulate the debate around this matter. Similarly, in the context of the Biennale, we asked Charlotte Malterre-Barthes to write an essay that addressed the weaknesses of, and challenges faced, by the groups that we had involved, including ourselves.² Her contribution posed critical questions, such as whether the collective pays maternity leave and whether the activity of the group alone can economically sustain all the individuals involved. Our intention was to bring these issues to the forefront of the discussion because we believe that it is essential to engage in these conversations openly.

CM | The organization of architectural practices is an increasingly pressing issue, as seen in one of the last issues of *ARCH+ Unternehmen Architektur*, which talked precisely about the need to change the architectural office and its organizational structures because the value systems have changed as well. It seems that there is a growing need to creatively explore new models and formats that enable architectural practices not only to sustain themselves but also to thrive through their work, a goal that still often feels like a mirage in today's context.

EC | What have you gained from discussing these issues with the groups you have been involved with?

2 Malterre-Barthes, Charlotte (2023): »Kill your Darlings: Why the Office Must Be Fixed to Fix Architecture«, in: Fosbury Architecture (eds), *Spaziale. Ognuno appartiene a tutti gli altri = Everyone belongs to everyone else*, Milano: Humboldt Books, 328–233.

GA | We gained an overview into this unique universe to which we belong by asking how these groups organized themselves: Whether they operate as traditional firms, cultural associations, or individuals gathered under a common name. We also asked how they sustain themselves, through teaching, open calls, or primarily through their architectural work? This contact with other groups has allowed us to reflect on how we can organize ourselves, although we have not yet arrived at a definitive formula for us. The key takeaway is that the ultimate objective does not always have to be the establishment of a conventional company; there are various routes through this complex landscape.

EC | I guess it is part of a process: Individual members evolve, and as a result, the collective entity must adapt and evolve with them to accommodate these changes and continue to thrive.

GA | Absolutely. In fact, that is what we are envisioning, a structure that is flexible enough to allow individuals to take time for themselves and their own projects. Balancing the complexities of each person's life, both professionally and personally, can indeed be challenging, even from a legal perspective.

EC | In fact, the word »collective« does not resolve legal or organizational issues. It is perhaps in its vagueness that the beauty of the word lies, as it allows for appropriation and interpretations.

GA | A particularly intriguing aspect we observed is how each of the practices we involved defines itself: as a collective, atelier, group, or agency. The terminology is evolving, reflecting fundamental shifts in how individuals conceive their work. These are questions that we posed not only to ourselves but also to those we invited, and they resonate with many young architects today: Other paths are beginning to emerge besides that of the starchitect, which was presented as the only viable path in the past.

EC | Did you have shared references for designing, or visions for your evolution, when you first started at *Fosbury*? How have they evolved over time?

CM | In our early projects, each of us would bring in a multitude of references of all kinds. What was particularly fascinating was the sheer



5.
Alterazioni Video and Fosbury Architecture: *Pages from the publication*
«Incompiuto: The Birth of a Style», 2018.

diversity of these references, reflecting the wide-ranging interests and passions of each member.

GA | However, we never had fixed references, instead, we used different ones during the brainstorming phase. In our early days there was a discernible interest in both the *Tendenza* and the *Radicals*. This inclination was influenced by our academic and work environment because it was a period of revival for both currents when we were in university so, we were inspired by *baukuh* and their line drawings and *San Rocco* or Andrea Branzi, who collaborated with the professor we graduated with.

CM | In hindsight, I believe we have a shared but not explicit idea of aesthetics, that is certainly influenced by our context. However, the references we looked at concerned not only design: Each of us would introduce individual ideas and suggestions which served as the starting point for our discussions. While we are used to it now, in the early days we were quite captivated by one another's distinct interests. Consequently, our discussions were enriched by the introduction of references, often unexpected or lesser-known ones, which in turn, contributed to our collective growth as a group.

GA | This exchange was and still is very useful. The inclusion of non-architectural images allowed us to express a sense of irony that has always been present within our group. Perhaps irony served as a means to free ourselves from the need to provide overly precise definitions and to distance ourselves from the weight of the architect-hero image mentioned earlier. Working across different registers became a valuable tool for us and it eventually became an integral part of our method. This is perhaps also why we do not have a single, fixed recipe: It is a fundamental aspect of being a collective, where the collective identity evolves in tandem with the individuals, the project, and the context.

EC | Do interactions with references or individuals outside of architecture influence the final product, for example demonstrating that architects can engage in activities beyond building?

GA | We have consistently advocated this perspective, and not because we do not like doing architecture but because we believe that architectural

work encompasses more than just physical construction. This was exactly our aim with the *Biennale*: To convey that architecture includes a broader spectrum of interventions. This view also challenges the current educational system and emphasizes the need to expand it. In essence, I think the world is gradually realizing that the role of architects is changing.

EC | In conclusion, how has collaborating with other groups and individuals impacted your experience as a collective so far?

CM | Collaborating has profoundly changed our approach, leading to a significant evolution in our collective identity. After an initial alignment, the end result undergoes changes by necessity, as exemplified by our collaboration with *Alterazioni Video* for the publication *Incompiuto: The Birth of a Style*. Here, we merged different perspectives and skills, with *Alterazioni Video* providing their artistic expertise and we contributed as architects with an obsession for cataloging. While we have frequently engaged in collaborations with other collectives or firms in the form of group exhibitions where each participant interprets a common theme, we often find ourselves most stimulated when working with people not directly linked to our own field. This includes production agencies, artists, or graphic designers, since such collaborations enrich both the discussion and the final outcome of our projects.

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