Laws protecting historic built environments often require new buildings to fit in, and impose some sort of aesthetic regulation forcing their external appearance to resemble neighboring structures in massing, materiality, or even style. The firm BBPR caused an uproar in 1957 when it unveiled plans to build a residential tower in the low-rise historic center of Milan, close to the Cathedral. Surprisingly, the most vehement opposition did not come from preservationists, but from dyed-in-the-wool modernist architects who felt the tower was not modern enough. Modernist critics like Reyner Banham accused Banfi, Beljioso, Peresutti and Rogers, the firm’s partners, of leading “The Italian Retreat from Modern Architecture” in The Architectural Review (March 1959). BBPR had become famous during the interwar years for designing unornamented modernist buildings in a strict rationalist mode. How could they design a tower, critics objected, that looked so Gothic? The Velasca Tower, as it was called, had expressed concrete vertical columns that looked uncomfortably like the ribbing of the Cathedral. Most egregiously, the tower had a pitched roof with protruding vertical stacks resembling chimneys. Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1909-1969) came to his firm’s defense in the editorial pages of Casabella Continuità, the international journal he edited between 1953 and 1965. Rogers called into question the idea that the outward look of a building was an indication of how modern or historical it was. By bracketing out the visual, he reminded his fellow modernists of their oft-repeated claim that modernism was not a style, but rather a way of designing in accordance with industrial materials and methods. The Velasca Tower was built in reinforced-concrete with the most contemporary industrial materials. Didn’t that make it as modern as any other? Rogers wanted to show that his critics had betrayed the anti-stylistic thrust of modernism by insisting on such things as flat roofs as a criterion for acceptance into the movement, even in cases when they were not the best technological solution. Rogers walked a fine line, because he also argued that technology should not be the sole criterion for judging a building’s modernity, and that pure technological solutions yielded mere buildings, not architecture. The task of the modern architect was to elevate construction into architecture, and the way to do that was to relate it to, and put it at the service of, the collective world of human experience. Rogers’s understanding of human experience, as both personal and inter-subjective, as something that draws from and contributes to the repository of culture, was influenced by phenomenological philosophers such as José Ortega y Gasset, and his friend Enzo Paci. Technology and culture were active social forces often pulling in different directions, and not always easy to bring together in a work of architecture. Rogers used the word tradition to refer to successful examples of this synthesis, which he believed should be the criterion for judging the architectural quality of any building, regardless of its date of construction. He saw tradition, not outward style, as the thread that tied together new architecture to its historical environment. The Velasca Tower was traditional in this sense, a synthesis of the latest technology and Milanese culture. By appropriating the word tradition for the modern movement, Rogers called into question the old dyads of historic vs. modern, and anonymous vernacular vs. authored architecture, which he showed to rely heavily on taste-driven preferences for given styles. His brand of architectural phenomenology was very influential in the 1960s, and he lectured widely both in Europe and the Americas, places where architects were looking for ways to undo the damage that WWII, or 1950s urban renewal, had caused to historic cities.

Keywords: Tradition, Context, Culture, Technology