

‘...The search for a “human” alternative ...’

‘...to the essentialism of modern rationalism ...’

Luca Reale and Josep-Maria Garcia-Fuentes on ‘Gio Ponti. Loving Architecture’ at the MAXXI



1 Pirelli Tower, Milan, 1956–8. The building was conceived together with Pier Luigi Nervi and represents a synthesis of Ponti’s idea that architecture is always the result of a formal and structural invention.

Gio Ponti. Loving Architecture / Amare l’architettura

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Reviewed by Luca Reale and Josep-Maria Garcia-Fuentes

Manfredo Tafuri, perhaps the most influential postwar architecture critic in Italy, chose a photograph of the *Torre Velasca* (BBPR, 1955–961) for the cover of his *History of Italian Architecture 1944–1985*.¹ While he dedicated just a few, almost condescending, lines to the figure of Gio Ponti (1891–1979) as he glossed over the Pirelli Tower (Ponti, Fornaroli, Rosselli, Nervi, 1955–8) – which today is considered an icon of Italy’s postwar economic boom – with the statement of it being a ‘flat exercise’ and an organism ‘animated by a pretentious and empty tension at the same time’. This sentence excluding any possibility of appeal would be

enough to explain the misfortune of the Milanese architect within the architectural debate in Italy over the twentieth century. Indeed, it’s not by chance that Ponti has been always tagged first and foremost as an artist – just think of his activity as a designer of ceramics, objects, and furniture, or as a scenographer – while his talent as an architect has rarely been emphasised. His architectural works have been difficult to pigeonhole in twentieth-century criticism that sought to divide the world into good and bad architects (not only in Italy). In this context, Gio Ponti has often ended up ignored rather than criticised. Even Bruno Zevi, the last Italian architecture critic comparable to Tafuri in terms of a strong international reputation, agreed with the Venetian about Ponti in his *History of Modern Architecture*,² when he sentenced the Pirelli Tower – in just a caption! – as ‘a scaled-up bar cabinet’ [1].

What were the reasons behind this marginalisation by mainstream criticism? The difficulty to state the sort of architect Ponti was derives from his (supposed) eclecticism in a context in which critics have always searched for coherence of topics and projects, but also from his unique way of speaking and writing about architecture; neither academic nor profound, not erudite nor rhetoric, he used a familiar lexicon that was extremely simple and direct. It was an apparently naïve style in which he continuously tried to combine the modernist dream of lightness and industrial elegance with the domestic and reassuring tradition of the Mediterranean lifestyle. This effort was anything but easy, and was never banal. The search for a ‘human’ alternative to the spatial and formal essentialism of modern rationalism: ‘for every window, the architect must image a person looking out. For each door, a person who is passing through it.’

Operating at the level of art

For this reason, the ‘Gio Ponti. Loving Architecture’ exhibition, running from 27 November 2019 until 13 April 2020 at MAXXI in Rome,³ has the merit to ‘give us back’ Gio Ponti as an architect, in place of Gio Ponti as designer and artist, in his dimension as a practicing architect but also in all his intellectual depth. Forty years after his death, this exhibition is the first attempt to portray the whole entirety of the architect’s figure, including all his complexity but also his eclectic incoherence, in its rather technical features and profound knowledge of structures, as well as in those more formal

and decorative ones. According to Gio Ponti, architecture is always the outcome of both a formal and structural invention. Unlike many of his colleagues, Ponti believes that architecture does not simply aim at 'solving a problem', but rather he puts beauty before function – 'the reason for an architecture to last, and indeed his reason to be, it's only in its beauty and not in its function'. Ponti's work combines industry and craftsmanship, without any fear of losing the right balance; he finds references to his thoughts in modernity, in classicism, and even in primitivism; he rides the wave of technological progress and the economic boom of postwar Italy – the Pirelli Tower is still today the tallest concrete tower in the world – but without turning it out into an operational ideological position. At the same time, he becomes passionate about architecture 'without architects'

and the vernacular – 'the Mediterranean taught Rudofsky, Rudofsky did to me'. Ponti himself personifies a half-century of professional practice. He is the archetype of the Italian handyman architect summarised in the Rogersian slogan 'from the spoon to the city'. The final function of architecture – Ponti often repeated – is precisely to overcome its original function. 'Operating at the level of art', this is thus the ultimate goal of architecture for Gio Ponti.

The exhibition is organised in a series of sections that immediately conveys its importance to 'give us back' Ponti as an architectural and intellectual personality of key importance within the twentieth century. 'Towards the exact house', the first section in the exhibition, revolves around the architect's precise ideas and research on the act of inhabiting and the modern house, through reflections often

conveyed by his texts published in *Domus* and *Stile* – both magazines edited by Ponti himself. 'Living Nature' addresses the fundamental link between architecture, nature, and the Mediterranean landscape in Ponti's work, as it pays particular attention to the connections between the home and the city, and focuses on the architect's careful approach towards all interior–exterior thresholds; the porches, terraces, verandas, loggias, and pergolas in residential architecture. 'Classicisms' focuses in detail on the projects carried out during the 1930s, immediately after Ponti's training as an architect in Milan, where the sensitivity for the integration of the urban dimension and the detail emerged at the time. It emphasises the debate on public buildings and the question of architectural monumentality through the display of fundamental works such as the *Primo Palazzo Montecatini* in Milan or the School of Mathematics in Rome's *Città Universitaria* [2]. 'Architecture of the surface' describes Ponti's particular attention to the composition of surfaces in façades, which are treated by the architect as two-dimensional elements that can be drilled, folded, and perforated, in a research-by-design process that spans all the scales in the project, from the small surfaces in design objects, to large wall surfaces. These huge wall surfaces also translate into a wide range of experiments, from the construction of innovative 'light façades', to the astonishing façade dematerialisation in the *Concattedrale Gran Madre di Dio* in Taranto, which could be considered as an emblem of the most heroic works of modern architecture [3]. This question is closely related to the 'Appearance of skyscrapers' in Ponti's work, where the lightness and the refinement of their technical details led towards a synthesis of all the topics discussed in the other exhibition's sections, with a particular attention to the themes of inhabiting, industrial design of objects and architecture, and their urban insertion. Ponti reflects extensively upon the city, questioning how to relate and integrate new architecture with the existing urban fabric in an organic way, which desires to become almost natural. This territory and the built fabric



2 School of Mathematics in the *Città Universitaria*, Rome, 1932–5. Model at scale 1:100 on display at the exhibition, 2019.



3 Different study models for the façade 'sail' of the *Gran Madre di Dio*, the Con-cathedral of Taranto, 1970.



4 'Housing for All' – cover of the magazine *Stile*, no. 1/1945.

of the city up to the skyscraper are shown in the section 'The Spectacle of Cities'. Hence, these cover the key architectural topics that have shaped and fueled the architectural debate throughout the twentieth century, from the 1930s to the 1970s.

Besides these key themes of architectural modernity that organise the exhibition, the section 'Architecture as Crystal' delves into Ponti's most original ideas in regard to his conception of architecture as a 'finite form', which he defines as 'pure as a crystal, magical, closed, exclusive, autonomous, uncontaminated, uncorrupted, absolute, definitive'. This is a concept that reveals Ponti's understanding of architecture as an abstract idea, yet a positioning that foresees the strong formalist approach connecting together all the topics he explored throughout all his intense production. It is as if in this formal essence, which is mediated by the architect's

'maniera' ('manner'), there was also an almost spiritual idea of beauty as architecture. The architect's gesture reveals himself as the great mediator that makes it possible to translate ideas into tangible objects, and in this process it does not matter if the architect deals with the design of little objects: a home, a car like the 'Diamante' for the FIAT company, or even a skyscraper or the whole city: everything is architecture, and therefore 'the architect's job'. This is a conception of architecture as art.

Quality for the people

Perhaps the radical nature of these formalist, almost artistic ideas, together with the more political conceptions of Ponti's discourse are the reasons behind his marginalisation in the historiography of modern and contemporary architecture. Because, indeed, the Pontian promiscuity and creative eclecticism seem yet to define

unique ideological axioms – such as when he states that 'quality is something for the people – as Che Guevara says'. In the documentary for the RAI (the Italian national TV broadcaster) on display at the exhibition, the architect addresses in an informative format to a non-specialist audience, with the aim to spread across a wide population his research outcomes on housing and inhabitation. The viewer cultivated in the debates of modern architecture will find in Ponti's statement a direct reference to the ideas of Adolf Loos, however, as well as to many other references and other controversies of modernity. Yet in the light of all these considerations, another stereotype of Gio Ponti's persona that has settled down over time seems even more distant from truth: the identification of him as 'the architect of the bourgeoisie'. Nothing could be more false than this assertion, as Giorgio Ciucci has also reminded us in his lecture on 8 February 2020.⁴ Gio Ponti dealt with the theme of 'housing for all' in many of his texts and several publications, including special issues in *Domus* and *STILE* [4]. In the first magazine he stated in 1956 that 'Public housing is a transitory event':

*a transitory moment of a progressive civil action that will lead us to a general civil construction completely (and no longer discriminately) popular, because we all are the people, and housing must constitute its highest-level expression [...] the act of inhabitation is a private act, familiar, human, of freedom, which has no connection neither with profession (worker, for example, or whatever is), nor with social position, nor with classes.*⁵

Avant-garde and anachronism

The exhibition displays copious archive materials organised across the section described above – sketches, production and executive documents, and construction-site photographs, alongside publications, television documentaries with the appearance of Ponti himself, as well as many of his authored publications and materials for the preparation of the drafts for either his books and his magazines, or for articles for newspapers, together with numerous design objects and pieces of furniture designed by him [5].



5 Pieces of furniture and ceramics designed by Ponti on display in the exhibition together with various publications, as well as numerous plans, sketches, and models of his projects.



6 Some contemporary photographs on Ponti's works for 'Contemporary Gazes' on display on the left.

There is yet a final section in the exhibition entitled 'Contemporary Gazes', displaying huge photographs on eight of Gio Ponti's projects as seen through the contemporary gaze by Giovanna Silva, Michele Nastali, Giovanni Chiamonte, Allegra Martin, Stefano Graziani, Paolo Rosselli, Delfino Sisto Legnani, and Filippo Romano [6]. These shots intensively reveal to us the precious current value that Ponti's works still has today, as they demonstrate the timeless qualities of the architect's works and ideas in his conception of architecture as art, which therefore escape from fashions and its historical time, to connect directly with the essential recurrent questions of human life. The leap to the present that this section on contemporary photographs forces

us to take has still the unexpected quality of making us to look at the designs, ideas, and the works of Gio Ponti from our present time. And from this viewpoint Ponti's world appears to anticipate not so much (and not only) modernity, as rather our contemporaneity. Certainly, this is due to the Ponti's ability to synthesise with foresight the great debates of the time – not just the architectural ones – in which he carries out his activity, and to his capacity to anticipate beyond his own time. In this way – and beyond to all the key references of modernity – it is inevitable to think of Buckminster Fuller's 'Dymaxion car' in relation to Ponti's 'Diamante'; to the resonance of Team X, Robert Venturi, or Louis Kahn in his works and ideas. It is also unavoidable to think of the

pioneering style of Ponti's radical writings and ideas as forerunners of those by Rem Koolhaas, or to think of his diagrams and schemes as anticipatory of those practices rather connected to contemporary communication that has examples in the works of Bjarke Ingles and many other contemporary architecture offices [7]. Because, indeed, the selection of works on display reminds us then that Ponti – notwithstanding to be intolerant to any theory or conceptualisation (despite being Professor of Architectural Design at the *Politecnico di Milano*) – is first of all a professional who works through the happy and troubled years of twentieth century in Italy, and who uses all the means of communication at his reach – magazines, newspapers, radio, and television – to expose his ideas of living in modern times, and to persuade both public and private clients to join his projects. He is a great 'promoter of himself' who directed *Domus* throughout his life, and in addition he wrote 130 articles from 1930 to 1963 on housing in the *Corriere della Sera* – one of the main newspapers in Italy – with an informal and narrative tone aimed to reach directly to the average reader.

In short, to approach Gio Ponti today lets us to cast a fresh look into a whole century of architectural debates along his extended career, which began in the 1920s and kept its strong intensity until his death in the late 1970s, as it still lets us to interpret its developments today. The voluminous exhibition catalogue⁶ is also noteworthy, hosting over thirty contributions from prestigious international scholars who deepen the analysis of Ponti's ideas and works in collaboration with the curators of the exhibition. The exhibition catalogue expands upon the contents of the exhibition, and therefore – like the series of related lectures held at the MAXXI – it offers a precious contribution that is complementary to the materials on display. The volume's structure relates roughly to the sections of the exhibition, as it combines essays on the interpretation and broader contextualisation of Ponti, his ideas, and his works, together with detailed insight and analysis of single projects and individual works.



7 Sketches and diagrams by Gio Ponti.

Architects build 'in time'

The design of the exhibition's layout is precise and elegant, and includes refined details such as the legs of the exhibition stalls replicating those of the chest of drawers *Cassettone D.655.1* designed by Ponti in 1952 [8]. Though the most interesting element in the design is the exhibition's layout and the intelligent way in which it 'guides' the visitor up to the MAXXI's terminal *cul-de-sac* gallery that is the venue of the exhibition. The designers have spread a series of clues around the building that, for once at least, help to find the way and to orient oneself within the disorienting spaces of the museum: the aphorisms by Ponti that cover the walls of the triple height space in the museum's hall, the reproduction of the linoleum flooring for the Pirelli Tower (the *Giallo fantastico*) that lines in the walkway leading up to the exhibition Gallery at the top, the photographic project by Thomas Demand that hangs on the walls preceding the entrance to the gallery and tells about the unique models of vertical buildings preserved in the CSAC's archive⁷ that are shown in the exhibition [9].

When contemplating Ponti's polyhedral activity through the exhibition, one has the clear feeling that this figure has been until now widely underestimated by the critics, and that he and his works are still awaiting to



8 The legs of the exhibition stalls and tables for models replicate those of the chest of drawers *Cassettone D.655.1* designed by Ponti in 1952.

be discovered and deepened in all their richness. Gio Ponti has been always a 'strange body' in the Italian architectural debate, with the only exception of Fulvio Irace, who has been for years tenaciously trying to restore him to the position he deserves in the history of twentieth-century architecture, describing his role as a protagonist in his own right and *a tutto tondo* – in all his wholeness. This retrospective exhibition at the MAXXI in Rome is not just a tribute to the architect but also a tangible contribution to this aim. Yet it is a really ambitious exhibition if compared, for example, with the interesting

Parisian retrospective exhibition that was organised last year⁸ – which focused on Ponti as a designer – or with the tribute in his native Milan organised by the Triennale in 2017 – which was limited to Ponti's ceramic tile work.⁹

The alleged eclecticism of Ponti now emerges more clearly as a prejudice that has been widespread thanks to the indifference and intellectual laziness of a significant number of Italian architectural critics. For Ponti, architecture always coexists, and operates as a selfless end and with a 'perpetuity' of expression; in this sense it is necessary to



9 The linoleum flooring for the Pirelli Tower (the *Giallo fantastico*) that lines in the walkway leading up to the exhibition's entrance – hanging on the wall on the right is the photographic project by Thomas Demand and the collection of aphorisms by Ponti.

love architecture, ancient and modern, 'for all that [is] fantastic, adventurous, and solemn it has created – it has invented – with its abstract shapes, allusive and figurative that enchant our soul and kidnap our thoughts, stage and aid of our life [...] for its silence, where its voice is, its secret and powerful song'.¹⁰

Perhaps where the strength of Gio Ponti's lesson is clearest, and where the complexity of his works reaches the highest evidence, is right in its being so 'classical' as well as so contemporary, and therefore out of synchronicity and out of fashion, but at the same time a step ahead of modernity. This approach towards time can be summed up in one of the hundreds of aphorisms that Ponti brought together in that brilliant collection of ideas which provided the text from 1957 to which the title of the exhibition refers: 'architects build 'in time', in culture; then architecture is a forever-built artwork: a different one is the fate of technique: it disappears because it is progressive, and it consumes itself in its use: 'architecture remains because it is art, and it goes beyond use'.¹¹

The exhibition, therefore, gives us back the richness, the complexity, and also the ambiguity of Ponti's work, precisely because he 'offers the poetic solution' for architecture, and as such it is a powerful but difficult solution to learn, to pass on, and yet to 'label' critically.

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Notes

1. Manfredo Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture 1944–1985* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986).
2. Bruno Zevi, *History of Modern Architecture* (Turin: Einaudi, 1950).
3. The exhibition is curated by Maristella Casciato (Senior Curator of Architectural Collections at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles) and Fulvio Irace (Full Professor at the Politecnico di Milano and a renowned architectural historian and critic), together with Margherita Guccione (Director of Architecture at the MAXXI), Salvatore Licitra (Responsible of Gio Ponti Archives), Francesca Zanella (President of the CSAC – Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione [Study Centre and Communication Archive of the University of Parma]) and it is produced by the MAXXI in collaboration with the CSAC, which holds the professional archive of Gio Ponti, and the Gio Ponti Archives. The main partner is Eni.
4. The lecture, entitled 'Gio Ponti e la città [Gio Ponti and the City]', has been one of the four talks in the series 'Le storie dell'architettura [The Histories of Architecture]' held at the MAXXI from January to February 2020 in support of the exhibition, with the aim to introduce the audience into Ponti's

polyhedral activity: architecture and design, teaching and editorial, decoration, and scenography. The other lectures were: 'Gio Ponti e le arti [Gio Ponti and the Arts]' by Francesca Zanella (25 February 2020), 'Gio Ponti e il design. Una regia per il design [Gio Ponti and Design. A Direction for Design]' by Domitilla Dardi (1 February 2020), and 'Gio Ponti e l'editoria [Gio Ponti and Publishing]' by Roberto Dulio (15 February 2020). In addition to this series, the opening lecture of the exhibition was entitled 'Gio Ponti: elogio della leggerezza [Gio Ponti: In Praise of Lightness]' and it was delivered by Fulvio Irace (29 November 2019).

5. Gio Ponti, 'Un nuovo quartiere Ina-Casa [A New Neighborhood In-Home]', *Domus*, 314 (January 1956), 2 (translated by the authors).
6. Maristella Casciato and Fulvio Irace, *Gio Ponti: Amare l'architettura [Gio Ponti: Loving Architecture]* (Firenze: Forma Edizioni, 2019).
7. CSAC – Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione [Study Centre and Communication Archive] of the University of Parma.
8. *Tutto Ponti. Gio Ponti Archi-Designer* ['All Ponti: Gio Ponti Archi-Designer'], Musée Des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, 19 October 2018 – 5 May 2019.
9. *Gio Ponti: L'Infinito Blu*, curated by Aldo Colonetti and Patrizia Famiglietti, *Triennale di Milano*, 10 February 2017 – 5 March 2017.
10. Gio Ponti, *Amare l'Architettura: L'Architettura è un cristallo [Loving Architecture: Architecture is a Crystal]* (Genova: Società editrice Vitale e Ghianda, 1957), p. 3 (translated by the authors).
11. *Ibid.*, p. 13 (translated by the authors).

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