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RATIONAL ITALIAN INTERIORS, 1928–1948

RACJONALNE WŁOSKIE WNĘTRZA, 1928–1948

Abstract

The essays focuses on how, between the end of the Twenties and the end of the Forties, in Italy there has been a deep reflection and investigation about the interior space of the house, and its qualities. Through exhibitions, publications, and some realizations, the Italian architects dealt with the issue of the domestic space and its different aspects: compositional, technical, economic, social. That happened thanks to a vision related to the international scenario, but also, thanks to architects and scholars such as Gio Ponti, Franco Albini, BBPR, Diotallevi and Marescotti, with a peculiar Italian interpretation of the “house of man”/“house for people” topic.

Keywords: Italy, rational, interior, interior design, house, housing, public housing

Streszczenie

Niniejszy esej poświęcony jest głębokiej refleksji i badaniom dotyczącym wewnętrznej przestrzeni domu i jej cech, które prowadzone były we Włoszech między końcem lat dwudziestych a końcem lat czterdziestych. Przez wystawy, publikacje i niektóre realizacje, włoscy architekci zajmowali się zagadnieniem przestrzeni domowej i jej różnymi aspektami: kompozycyjnymi, technicznymi, ekonomicznymi, społecznymi. Stało się to możliwe dzięki wizji związanej z międzynarodową sytuacją, ale także za pośrednictwem takich architektów i uczonych jak Gio Ponti, Franco Albini, BBPR, Diotallevi i Marescotti, i ich swoistej włoskiej interpretacji tematu „domu człowieka” / „domu dla ludzi”.

Słowa kluczowe: Włochy, racjonalność, wnętrze, projektowanie wnętrz, dom, domy mieszkalne, mieszkalnictwo publiczne

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1. 1928–1948

The years 1928 and 1948 were two fundamental moments in the formulation of a reflection on domestic interior architecture in Italy, placed between the construction of informed thinking and the tangible production of works that were based on such foundations. Indeed, the first issue of the magazine “Domus”, founded and edited by Gio Ponti, was published on 15 January 1928 and aimed at making a contribution to the renewal of the decorative arts and architecture, in the wake of the various events that had centered on such subjects, starting with the first Monza Biennial of 1923. The publication, whose subtitle was “Architecture and furnishing of the home in the city and the country” was concerned mainly with proposing innovative housing models that would identify an “Italian way” of the inflection of dwelling, though with an eye on the international scenario: not by chance, as known, Ponti’s first editorial was devoted to the “Italian-style house”, and intended to open up a debate on the subject in the pages of the magazine¹. The other end of the arc of time that this essay intends defining was a moment when, exactly twenty years after the first appearance of “Domus”, publication began of the monumental work edited by Irenio Diotallevi and Franco Marescotti *Il problema sociale, costruttivo ed economico dell’abitazione*. Organized as a collection of 196 unbound plates, it was to be published in parts up to 1950. Although not covering all the chapters originally planned, it in any case looked at the three sectors through whose lens it was possible to analyze the social housing question after the Second World War: the social aspect, the construction aspect and the economic aspect. The aim of this ambitious publication was all contained in the words of the authors themselves, collected in the first plates: *Only a new social organization can rebuild a better world than the one that two world wars have devastated in twenty five years. A new civilization cannot but be created on the basis of a new house, based on love and faith. The old houses, the old cities, ought not to be rebuilt but built according to new principles. Those who will be called on to work out the house for all ought not for any reason to forget that the production and distribution of houses constitutes an economic factor and that such a problem cannot be separated from that of work for all, social organization and security for all, education for all².*

And the dwelling, defined primarily in its quality and not only by its quantity, became the pivot for this evolution, which was both economic and social, and of course constructional and, I add, compositional: moving from the interior, from the rational composition of the spaces through the fitting out (a term I find more suited than “furnishing” in this context in which the construction of a spatial quality is defined, more than its decoration, also considering, as we shall see below, how the concept of fitting out was fundamental in the activity of architects who in that period were concerned with interiors) of the “constituent elements of the dwelling”, to arrive at the construction of the city.

2. Rational Italian Interiors

Three drawings were published in “Domus” issue number 5 in 1928 that schematically show the plan of three types of wall. The “wall of yesterday” is shown as a very thick,

¹ Gio Ponti, *La casa all’italiana*, Domus, no. 1 (1928).

² “Aspetti sociali del problema casa”, chapter 1, plate 1, in Irenio Diotallevi, F. Marescotti, *Il problema sociale costruttivo ed economico dell’abitazione*, Officina, Roma, 1984.

probably structural, wall, at whose ends, corresponding to the crossing of two other walls identifying a room, two niches are made, which excavate the wall and can be closed with doors; the “wall of today” is a thinner panel, freed from static functions (also thanks to the innovations made by structural systems with reinforced cement framing), on whose faces, referred to the two rooms defined by the wall, cabinets are placed; finally, the “wall of tomorrow” is made up of a fitted wall, which contains a series of small, different sized spaces inside with relative doors. These diagrams thus recount an evolution in the way of fitting out a house towards a future perspective that in reality, in its final outcome, precisely the “wall of tomorrow”, takes shape as a metamorphosis or, better, a topicalization of that which was the “wall of yesterday”, or the wall that also absolves the function of a “container” of some objects or functions of dwelling (the wardrobe, the cupboard, the bookcase etc.). But these schemas also describe the attempt that was being made in those years to define a new way of domestic dwelling, in which the quality of the house is also attained by the integration and precise interdependence of the furnishings and the architectural space.

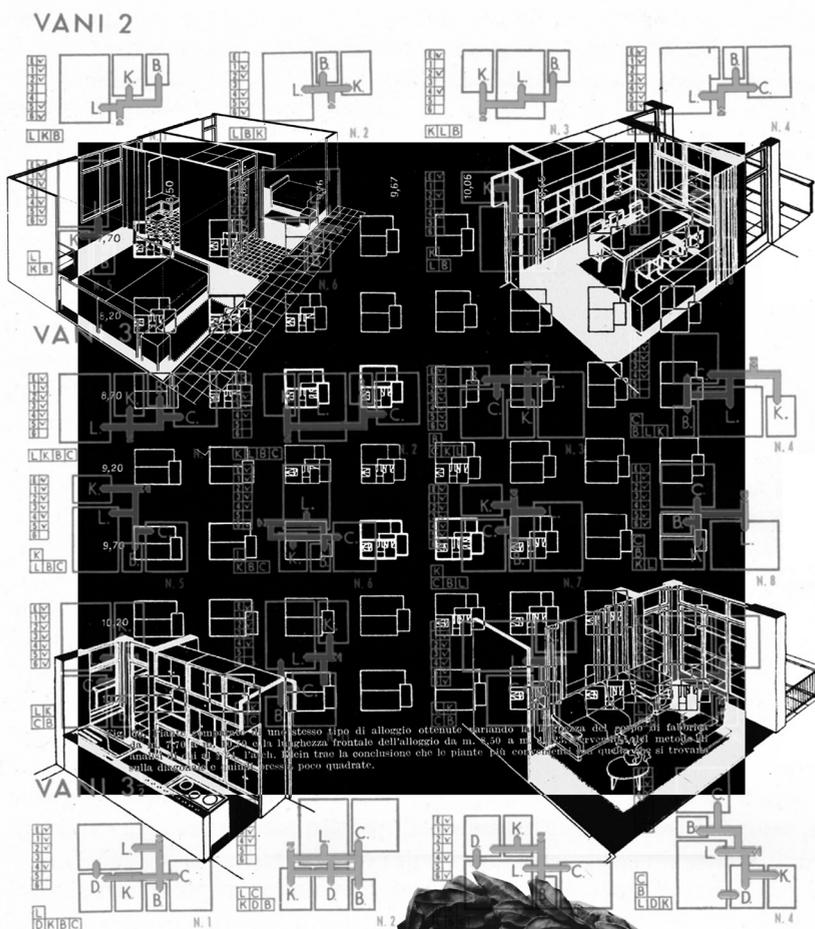
The aim, for the architects of that period, was an *ideal house, the type of dwelling (...)* that will see the abolition of all traditional furniture, as Giancarlo Palanti writes in the book *Mobili tipici moderni* of 1933³, a genuine “house without furniture”, that in the words of Giuseppe Pagano in 1936, is built *keeping in mind that shelves and cupboards are destined to disappear as ‘mobile’ elements, to become an integral part of the home instead, often becoming dividing walls between the various rooms*⁴, dominated by the rigor of forms, geometry, logic of the positions, hygiene and economy. These words have an obvious reference to those of Adolf Loos in his essay *The abolition of furniture* of 1924: *What must the modern architect do? He must build houses in which all those pieces of furniture that cannot be moved disappear into the walls*⁵.

And it was precisely in experimentation in the field of fitting out home interiors that architects in Italy found opportunities for expression at the end of the 1920s. One of the possibilities – particularly in the Milan area, where opportunities for architectural and town planning practice were blocked by the presence of professionals who left no room for the new generations linked to Rationalism – was to work in the field of exhibition fittings and furnishings. This pathway was allowed by the existence of cultural events like the Milan Triennials, and also favoured by the Lombardia region itself, where furniture production (such as in the Brianza area) and arts and crafts schools have a strong presence and influence. The same sphere of exhibition fittings must be related to the work on home interiors practiced by Italian architects in that period: it compelled finding solutions also on a small scale, that of the detail, towards innovative solutions both from the technical point of view and that related to the use of materials; it compelled design reflection on movement, on resting, on the view inside a space; it compelled studying the subject of light, an incorporeal and impalpable material that nevertheless constructs and highlights the space. In this sense one thinks for example of the works of Franco Albini, in which the fertile decanting between the solutions tried out in exhibitions and those installed in the residences he furnished is often evident (the use of elements suspended on steel frames, the presence of photographic reproductions of ancient art,

³ Cited in Rassegna, no. 4 (1980).

⁴ G. Pagano, *Tecnica dell’abitazione*, Hoepli, Milano 1936.

⁵ A. Loos, *Parole nel vuoto*, (first ed. Paris–Zurich 1921), Adelphi, Milano 2001.



IL PROBLEMA
 DEL
VALORE DEL
DIMENSIONAMENTO
 del carattere qualitativo
DELL'ABITAZIONE



III. 1. P. M. Martinelli, *Rational Italian Interiors 1928–1948–2018* (digital collage)

the construction of devices that *stage* or *exhibit*, so to speak, certain moments of dwelling), documenting a unitary conception of the architecture of interiors.

At the sixth Milan Triennial of 1936, the group made up of Albini, Gardella and Camus proposed a prototype for a one room apartment and another for four people in the section entitled "Exhibition of the Home". The plans for the apartments were built up on a module of 66 centimeters, on which the furnishings, fixed and mobile, were also sized; the designs proposed open spatial solutions with the removal of fixed walls, replaced by cabinets, fitted walls, dual use and transformable furniture, all made with steel, wood, linoleum, Masonite and tempered glass (Securit, which had been put into production in those years), porcelain stoneware, Pirelli sponge rubber for beds and armchairs, so with attention focused on traditional and innovative materials, used to the best of their performance and expressive potential.

Albini presented a "Room for a man" in the "Furniture Exhibition" section of the same Triennial. This was a room of about 5 x 5 metres, conceived as unitary but articulated and fitted to respond to the needs of life: a small living room with three chairs is separated by low shelving from the sleeping area where the bed is raised on a thin metal frame, under which there is a rowing machine; a system of curtains hides the toilet, while a hand basin rises like a Le Corbusier style *objet trouvé* (recalling that in the Villa Savoye) to serve the gym equipment attached to the end wall. Few objects and fitted elements define the domestic living areas, no more closed walls: the minimum space is amplified, fluid and transparent.

The same compositional procedure can be seen in the room that BBPR fitted out for a couple, again at the sixth Triennial. This space (larger than that of Albini, given that it was an interior of about 8 x 8 metres), was set out in three functional zones: one side of the space took shape as a fitted wall, closed by opaline glass sliding doors, a kind of niche created in the wall that contained the toilet facilities; another band, perpendicular to this wall, contained the gym equipment, a bench and a rowing machine; the third space, separated by a curtain, was the bedroom itself, defined by the presence of three objects: a hammock, a bed and a wooden wardrobe. This nucleus, dropped into a steel frame, a kind of *reductio ad unum* of a series of functional components, contained a foldaway toilet, a mirror and spaces for clothes and linen, with compartments and drawers, and became the separating element between the bed and the wall containing the bathroom packet.

The bathroom-gym system, as element of interchange or filter between the living and sleeping areas, is a recurring theme, present as seen both in Albini's proposal and that of BBPR. Giuseppe Pagano himself formulated a design on the subject, published in "Domus" in 1934, in which the gym equipment (steps, a boxing ball, a jogging mat) are inserted in a precisely calibrated room defined in its chromatic and material characteristics: the cork mat, the floor in black marble, the walls painted green, the cushions in red morocco. Once again at the 1936 Triennial it is interesting to analyze the proposal for the kitchen of an apartment for three people, presented by the Scuole dell'Umanitaria, in which the various functional elements and equipment in themselves are studied, but also their composition and distribution according to work methods and actions in the kitchen, in a perspective of the rational use of the spaces, again resorting to the multi-functional fitted wall, with sliding doors, drawers and foldaway compartments, in a clean, linear design, with simple forms made from cheap materials, all with a close reference to the studies drawn up for the famous "Frankfurt kitchen" by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky in 1927.

Indeed, it is evident that the outcomes of the Italian experience that I re-present here in brief may be linked to the reflections and proposals that came from northern Europe, starting with the planning and construction experience that was systematically collected in 1929 at the II CIAM in Frankfurt, entitled the *Home for the minimum level of existence (Existenzminimum)*. The designs presented at that event centered on the organization of the domestic spaces in the most rational and logical manner, the recovery of space without any waste, in a careful survey of the dimensional and distributional questions. But it was not a mere rational exercise on design: the aspect linked to accomplishing the “right dimension” for man’s minimum needs in the domestic refuge was certainly the object of refined design reflections. That which may be seen to emerge was also the focus on psychological questions, those related to the search for the best way of living in a house, so to the spatial quality and the quality of dwelling. Even if the first parameter was the bed, in the conception and the explanation of the designs related to that experience, and even if the *display* proposed in Frankfurt scientifically conformed, also graphically, to the representation in plan, that which is suggested, but also openly stated, is the focus on these aspects that are more difficult to measure, but are absolutely central. This is clear in the words of Ernst May in one of the conference reports: the unit of measurement for “the evaluation of the general problem and its individual parts” must take into account the biological and sociological conditions, which will keep the designers a long way from “sterile theory” to arrive at building homes “made in such a way as to satisfy the material and spiritual needs of their inhabitants”. So material and spiritual aspects, those of living inside the protected refuge of the house, a place where one can “be well”, albeit one of minimum dimensions. So no longer an architecture of the facade, for example, but an architecture of the interiors: again citing May, “in building homes, the main tasks considered must absolutely not be the external appearance of the building and the linking of the facade”⁶, but the construction of the individual units, in a whole that then becomes, in the aggregation, city, by which, as Adolf Behne writes on this in those years, *the fine, interesting, external facade was no longer at the centre of the work, but rather the solid structure. Interest in the elevation representation replaced by that of the transverse section of the building*⁷.

And it is interesting to examine how this aspect of the domestic interior design was closely considered by Alexander Klein, who formalized the right dimension of the apartment, in relation to the number of inhabitants and to the distribution of spaces and thoroughfares, in his renowned planimetric schemas. In addition to the diagrammatic plans he presented the interior facades of the apartments alongside, actually non-constructional sections but elevations that, alongside the plan, were intended to show the spatial quality of the apartment, considering that, more than the external facades, it is the internal ones that make up our everyday living experience: through their configuration, articulation and the presence of domestic devices that enrich and shape them, but also and especially through the openings, which bring light and air into the house, as well as defining the relation between private interior and public exterior.

So it is evident that the functionalist experience, as Carlo Aymonino noted, codified a residential type, and at the same time (also in relation to such new forms of dwelling)

⁶ Cited in Carlo Aymonino, *L’abitazione razionale. Atti dei congressi CIAM 1929–1930*, Marsilio, Padova 1971.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

worked on the “perfecting of type-parts of the building organisms (staircase, office, bathroom-kitchen, room, classroom etc.) that could go back to being instruments of a vaster architectural composition”⁸. These are the architectural elements that are found collected in a series of books published in Italy between the end of the 1930s and the mid-1940s. They are the *Costruzione razionale della casa* by Enrico Griffini, published in 1932, the *Manuale dell’architetto*, published in 1946 by CNR edited by Mario Ridolfi, the monumental *Il problema sociale costruttivo ed economico dell’abitazione* by Ireneo Diotallevi and Franco Marescotti, whose publication, as mentioned above, began in 1948, through to *Architettura pratica* by Pasquale Carbonara in 1954. The human scale and the formulation of a construction and technological standard are backdrops that are more or less present for all the works, which nevertheless differ considerably from one another. As pointed out by Giorgio Ciucci, Griffini’s book gathers studies and proposals conducted at a national level, summarizing them rationally (also paying homage to the thoughts of Klein); in the case of Ridolfi’s *Manuale*, glorification of the trade, of experience, manual skills and attention to detail are strongly reflected on, while in Diotallevi and Marescotti’s handbook *it is the social nature of the architecture that determines and defines its ‘popularity’, which imposes mass production, which requires a planned reform starting from people’s needs, which favors the definition of types more than the study of ‘genres’*⁹.

And indeed, in the first chapters of the book, Diotallevi and Marescotti collect the studies and analyses related to “Hygiene and social problems”, “Value of the building site”, “Private ownership of the building sites”, to then look at the question of the dwelling, from its development as an independent organism and part of the urban fabric through to the comprehension, analysis and decomposition of the apartment into its various components.

The strategy of the narrative coincides with a rational and systematic analytical dissection, firstly through the redesign in scale of the “Elements composing the apartment” (kitchen, services group, sanitary services, living room, bedrooms), accompanying the layouts with examples of contemporary completed works and case studies. Once the elements and parts of the domestic interior have been identified (one notes that the question of the facade is never looked at in this stage), they are (re)composed and “associated” in the subsequent chapters according to “organization and method”, so as to “reduce to the minimum the development and overlapping of thoroughfares” (these are the words of Diotallevi and Marescotti themselves) and according to a rational arrangement of the equipment and systems (ducting, plant, piping, drains, stairs etc.): the purpose is to show the correct functioning of the *machine for living*, built on the proportions, dimensions, actions, gestures, movements and behaviors of the inhabitant. The mapping and diagram become fundamental tools in this account, which define not the abstraction of the relations between the parts, but the rationale of the domestic fitting-out in relation to its use and the description and forecast of life in its interior¹⁰. The graphic layout of thoroughfares and movements was actually a widely used means of representation in those years; examples being the diagrams relating to the functioning of the Casa Elettrica by Figini and Pollini, the Casa Miller by Carlo Mollino or the Casa Ideale by Gio Ponti, all published in “Domus” in the 1920s and 1930s. The wireframe axonometry

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ G. Giucci, *Il manuale nella cultura europea*, in Diotallevi, Marescotti, 1984.

¹⁰ For an accurate analysis of this means of analysis and representation, see Douglas Graf, “Diagrams”, *Perspecta*, no. 22, 1986.

and perspective helped to emphasize, in the third dimension, the geometries of the relations and the spatial logic of the composition of the interior. The result, the rational and popular house, is the primal cell that, composed, combined, assembled and put together in configurations always recorded in the plates and supported by international case studies, builds the neighborhood, the city and the region. The rationale of the architectural composition and the construction technique in this work become the expression of a social need (giving a house to all) not only a result of the “spirit of the age”. This is one of the readings that may be made of the *Problema sociale*, as pointed out by Maristella Casciato: it is a text that proposes a “theory of town planning rationalization from below, of the imposition of a new urban condition, through the ordered construction of the most modest, but potentially most widespread, ‘monad’ of the town planning world”¹¹, the public housing, precisely, whose quality and rationale, which arise from inside, were intended to highlight the failure of the “showy” town planning, dropped from above, of fascist policy. But this colossal work, here summarily described, was not to meet with the publishing, cultural, political and social success hoped for by its authors, outclassed by Ridolfi’s *Manuale* on one hand and by the town planning policies related to the INA-Casa on the other, which preferred “not the advancement of the building sector but rather the conservation of its traditional characteristics of technological backwardness”¹². And the outcomes of these initiatives were to become a kind of “set scene” of the neo-realist imagination, more than a rational expression of the quality of domestic and urban dwelling, in a perspective of progress and rebirth, as was in the “substance of the things we hope for” that lives and that we still read and study in the research produced by Ireneo Dotallevi and Franco Marescotti.

* The essay presented here is a broadened redraft of the paper “La ricerca sull’abitare ‘minimo’: Le Corbusier, il CIAM del 1929 sull’*Existenzminimum* e l’architettura degli interni domestici fra le due guerre in Italia” published in P. M. Martinelli, *Costruzione di interni domestici in presenza della dimensione minima dell’alloggio con la tecnologia del legno*, Università Iuav di Venezia, Venice 2012. English translation: David Graham

¹¹ M. Casciato, *Quando Francoforte era sul Naviglio. Storia stampata di una ricostruzione possibile*, in Dotallevi, Marescotti, 1984.

¹² *Ibidem*.