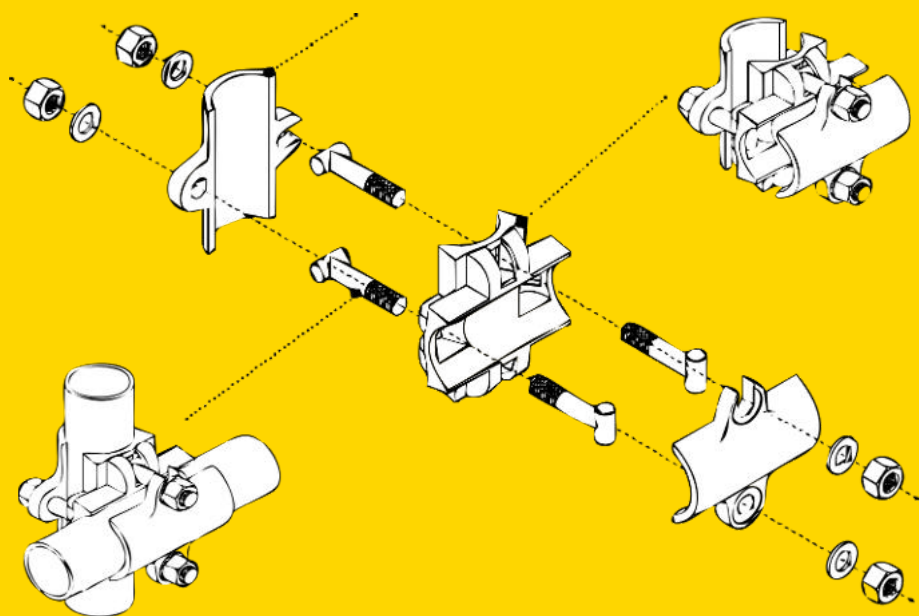


Ten More Lessons in Exhibition Design

Design in the Age of Sustainability

Editors
Davide Crippa
Massimiliano Cason Villa



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The text underwent double-blind peer review, in accordance with the criteria defined for publication in the Series

ISBN 978-88-32942-73-6

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The work is published in a digital E-Book version only ISBN 978-88-32942-73-6

Copies of this limited edition were produced for the exclusive use of the Authors. The publication is not commercially available in the print version.

Series under the patronage of:



Project funded by the European Union - Next Generation EU - PNRR
Transizione Digitale Organismi Culturali e Creativi

Graphics and layout:

Giulia Coppari

Alessandra Neri



Research funded through the Public Notice for the submission of project proposals for capacity building for cultural operators, within the framework of the PNRR, Mission 1 - Digitalization, Innovation, Competitiveness, Culture and Tourism, COMPONENT 3 - Tourism and Culture 4.0, MEASURE 3 - Cultural and Creative Industries, INVESTMENT 3.3 - "Capacity building for cultural operators to manage the digital and green transition," Sub-investment 3.3.3 - "Promoting the reduction of the ecological footprint of cultural events by encouraging the inclusion of social and environmental criteria in public procurement policies, thus guiding the supply chain towards the eco-innovation of products and services" (Action B I), funded by the European Union - NextGenerationEU and managed by the Ministry of Culture.

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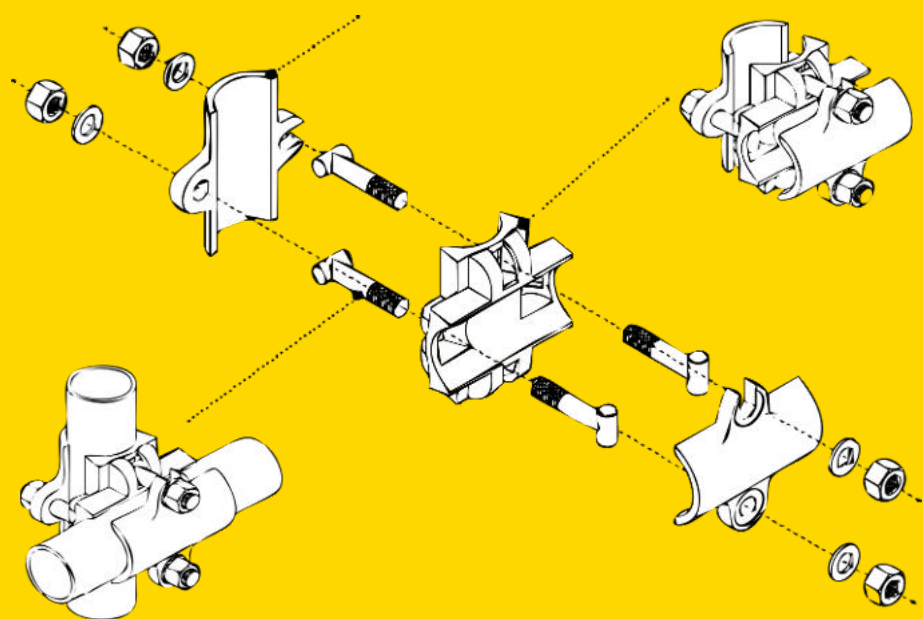
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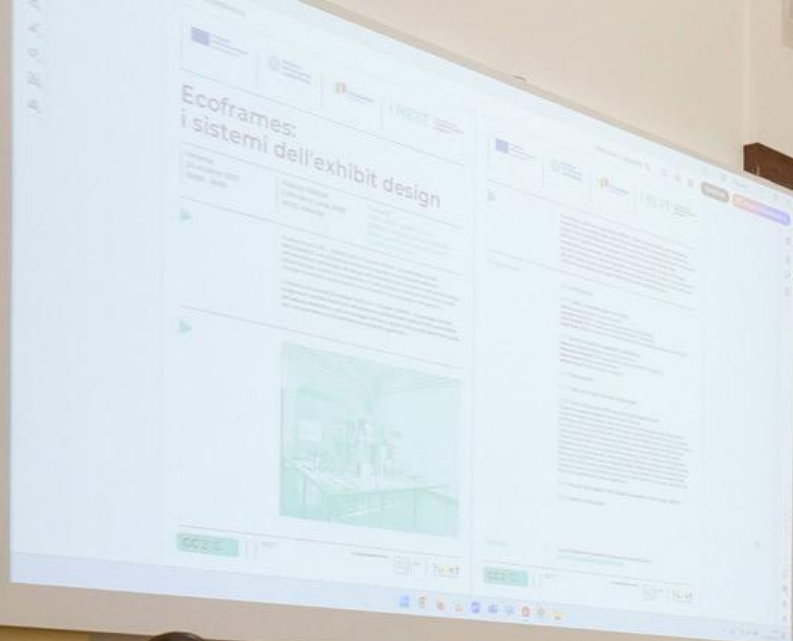
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STARTING FROM MASTROPIETRO

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STARTING FROM MASTROPIETRO

When Mario Mastropietro published *Immagine Progettare mostre. Dieci lezioni di allestimento* (Mastropietro, 1991) with Edizioni Lybra in 1991, he achieved something that went far beyond simply compiling a collection of essays: he established a tradition. Or, more precisely, he brought it to light - because that tradition already existed on construction sites, in design studios, and in university classrooms that were beginning to embrace exhibition design as a discipline worthy of independent reflection. What was missing was a tool capable of making it transmissible, of establishing its basic grammar while at the same time rendering it in all its vibrant contradictions. The book did not emerge from a vacuum. Rather, it arose from an editorial and cultural project that Mastropietro had launched in 1982 with the founding of Edizioni Lybra Immagine: a publishing house created with a specific mission, namely that of fostering a culture of design capable of portraying design as a relational process between designers and industry, from concept to realization. Exhibition design - which until then had lacked dedicated publishing outlets, a critical identity, and a recognized academic space - soon became Lybra's primary field of interest. It was within this framework that *Mostrare. Exhibition Design in Italy from the 1920s to the 1980s* by Sergio Polano (Polano, 1988) was published in 1988, the publishing house's first volume explicitly dedicated to the history of exhibition design and still the fundamental reference text

for the discipline in Italy. Polano constructs an unprecedented critical survey, ranging from the rationalist exhibition design of the 1920s - with the great seasons of the Triennale and ENAPI - to the work of postwar masters such as Franco Albini, BBPR, Carlo Scarpa, and Luca Meda. The book restores to the history of Italian architecture a genealogy that had been lost and offers the generation of designers of the 1980s an awareness of their own origins. It is on this basis that *Progettare mostre* could be developed as an educational tool: no longer the first word on an unexplored field, but the third pillar of a cultural system encompassing history (Polano, 1988), current developments (*Exporre*, a quarterly magazine launched by Lybra in 1989 and active until 2014), and education (Mastropietro, 1991).

The book's formal structure is itself a cultural statement. Mastropietro does not write a manual. He compiles lectures, in the fullest and most academic sense of the term: presentations delivered in 1990 for the Exhibition Design and Museography course at the Faculty of Architecture in Milan, contributed by ten different speakers. The lecture format conveys a specific message: that exhibition design deserves the same academic standing as architecture, industrial design, and typographic composition; that it requires teachers capable of explaining, transmitting knowledge, and engaging with critical questioning.

In constructing his conceptual framework, Mastropietro develops - drawing on Nicola Marras's *Breviario strumentale*, published in the same volume as Polano (Marras, 1988) - an elementary grammar of exhibition design: the path, the base, the panel, the display case, and the lighting. These five physical tools recur as a cross-cutting interpretive key throughout all the lessons, from the analysis of Achille Castiglioni's exhibition designs (Ferrari, 1991) to Carlo Viano's systematic reflections (Viano, 1991), from Maurizio Di Puolo's operational memoirs to the broad theoretical perspective with which Luca Basso Peressut concludes the volume. "The design of a museum does not depend solely on the quality of the objects on display," Basso Peressut quotes from Brawne; "it is the totality of the experience that becomes the event in itself" (Basso Peressut, 1991, p. 163; Brawne, 1982). This is the challenge that Mastropietro's book successfully identifies and preserves. The selection of ten different authors - architects, designers, theorists, and professors - reflects the conviction that exhibition design is, by nature, a discipline of synthesis, one that does not belong to any single profession but rather cuts across them all. Castiglioni represents the master designer, Di Puolo the seasoned practitioner, Vidari contributes expertise in information technology, Forti in restoration, Origoni in visual communication, and Basso Peressut in theory. Together, they construct not a single answer but a field of productive tensions

within which the designer must learn to operate. The book's enduring presence - three editions over a period of twenty years, from 1991 to 2007 - is perhaps the most eloquent measure of its success. Yet Mastropietro's cultural project does not end with the book. In 2006, together with Pierluigi Cerri, Maurizio Di Puolo, Franco Origoni, and others, he founded IDEA - Associazione Italiana Exhibition Designers, with the mission of disseminating the culture of exhibition design and building a professional community organized around it.

In 2007, in collaboration with the Politecnico di Milano and POLIdesign, IDEA launched the Master's Program in Exhibition Design - The Architecture of Display. The full scope of this initiative - the publishing house, the magazine, Polano's historical text, the Master's program, and the Association - is documented and celebrated in the exhibition and catalogue *Mostrare il progetto. The Paths of a Publisher* (Mastropietro, 2024), whose very existence attests to how Lybra Immagine's work constitutes, within the landscape of Italian design culture, an unprecedented system for the production and transmission of knowledge centered on a single design discipline.

The Meaning of an Undertaking

Rereading *Progettare mostre* today means, first and foremost, recognizing the boldness of a wager: that of building a critical body of work around a discipline that had not yet found a clearly defined name. The authors selected by Mastropietro do not belong to a single school or a unified front, yet the book functions as a coherent system precisely because it holds differences together rather than flattening them. Paolo Ferrari opens with Achille Castiglioni and the distinction between "showing" - the exhibition as a service to the object - and "showing oneself" - the exhibition as the designer's self-representation (Ferrari, 1991, p. 14): a polarity that runs throughout contemporary exhibition design discourse. Carlo Viano offers the most systematically theoretical contribution, developing the concept of "direction" as a synthesis of all the exhibition designer's operational tools (Viano, 1991), a term that recurs almost obsessively in conversations with the designers featured in this new volume.

Among the ten authors included by Mastropietro is Franco Origoni, whose contribution addresses the relationship between graphics and space in Milan's Galleria Vittorio Emanuele (Origoni, 1991). This new book consciously revives that presence, entrusting Origoni Steiner - the studio founded by Franco Origoni

together with Anna Steiner in the late 1970s - with one of the collection's central chapters. This continuity is no accident; it is a critical choice. It entails recognizing that certain design approaches - the integration of two- and three-dimensional elements, the principle of "not touching the walls," and the systematic use of standard technical systems as a compositional matrix - are not merely slogans of the contemporary era, but practices consolidated over decades. The question that Franco Origoni recalls repeatedly asking himself at the conclusion of a project - "where do things end up?" (Franco Origoni, personal communication, June 10, 2025) - was already present thirty years ago, articulated not yet in ecological terms but as an expression of a craftsman's sense of proportion. Origoni Steiner appears in both books because demountable and modular structures, reversible flooring systems, and images mounted on reusable rigid supports were choices that did not originate from an ecological manifesto, but from a construction-site culture that regarded the "after" as an integral part of the "during," anticipating with remarkable consistency the sustainability issues that this volume seeks to place at the center of discussion.

What Has Changed, Thirty Years Later

This book builds upon Mastropietro's work and fully embraces his method: the lecture format, the plurality of voices, and the focus on concrete practice. At the same time, it stems from the awareness that the field of exhibition design, in the thirty years since the first edition of *Progettare mostre* (Mastropietro, 1991), has undergone transformations so profound as to require a substantial updating of the critical tools through which it is interpreted and taught. The community that Mastropietro helped to establish - through *Lybra Immagine*, *Exporre*, *Mostrare* (Polano, 1988), *IDEA*, the *POLIdesign* Master's program, and, more recently, the exhibition *Mostrare il progetto* (Mastropietro, 2024) - is now a well-established reality, with its own history, literature, and disciplinary consciousness. The purpose of this volume is to engage that community with the questions that define it in the present.

The decisive difference lies in the theme of sustainability. Not as a rhetorical accessory, nor as an additional chapter appended to an already completed project, but as a constitutive dimension of contemporary exhibition design. In 1991, the question "where does this exhibition end up after it closes?" was rarely asked. Today, it is the question that precedes all others. The global exhibition apparatus

- temporary pavilions, museum installations lasting only a few months, and the broader system of producing and consuming space - is now confronted with the urgent need to rethink its own life cycle. The most perceptive designers - such as those whose work animates the pages of this volume - understood this necessity well before regulations began to require it.

The introduction of sustainability as a foundational design category is not merely a matter of adding environmental parameters to an already established process; it constitutes an epistemological transformation that demands a systemic approach to exhibition design. Designing sustainably means simultaneously reconsidering materials, time, supply chains, and relationships with places and audiences. It entails moving beyond the logic of the project as a self-contained event and embracing that of the project as a node within a broader system, where decisions made on site have consequences that extend far beyond the duration of the exhibition. It is this movement toward systemic thinking - toward a complexity that resists simplification - that makes sustainability not simply another topic, but a lens through which the entire discipline of exhibition design is compelled to reassess itself.

The academic context within which this volume is situated is the Sustainable Exhibition Design course launched by Davide Crippa at the IUAV University of Venice in 2021. Just as Mastropietro's book emerged from university lectures in Milan and remained closely tied to them, so this new volume is inseparable from the Venetian teaching experience: a space of research in which sustainability is treated not as an external regulatory constraint, but as a cultural issue to be constructed, tested, and communicated in all its complexity. The connection with Mastropietro is direct in this respect as well: both books are educational tools, conceived for those who aspire to become exhibition designers - and today, above all, for those who wish to do so consciously.

The Ten New Authors

The selection of the ten authors interviewed for this book - Francesco Librizzi, Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri (gambardellarchitetti), Dotdotdot, Calvi Brambilla, Cino Zucchi, Migliore+Servetto, Alessandro Colombo, Alessandro Scandurra, Origoni Steiner, and Ghigos - follows a pluralistic logic similar to that adopted by Mastropietro (1991): no single school, no common manifesto, but rather a variety of approaches and scales reflecting the complexity of the field.

Each addresses sustainability from a different perspective - poetic, technical, institutional, or critical - and explores it through different tools. The common thread that unites them is, paradoxically, precisely the refusal to treat sustainability as a separate parameter. In every case, environmental reflection emerges from within the design practice itself: as a consequence of linguistic choices, as an effect of economic constraints, or as a question posed by the material to the design process, rather than as an additional checklist to be applied once a project has already been defined.

Francesco Librizzi brings a radically tectonic poetics to the discussion. He works with lines rather than surfaces, reducing material consumption to the minimum required to support the architectural presence he seeks to evoke, and designs structures conceived from the earliest sketch to be preserved by institutions, loaned to other museums, and reused across multiple exhibitions. “Doing more with less” is not a sacrifice but a cultural choice: the project as a multiplier of value, capable of adding quality to the object without increasing material consumption (Francesco Librizzi, personal communication, May 20, 2026). The framework developed for La Grande Brera - used for three successive exhibitions, with more than fifty percent of the structures becoming part of the Pinacoteca’s permanent collection - is not an isolated virtuous exception. Rather, it demonstrates that designing for reuse is possible without compromising quality and, indeed, that new forms of quality can emerge from this very condition.

Gambardellarchitetti, through Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri, embody the concept of democratic beauty: the capacity to create spatial quality through the use of common materials - resin, drywall, OSB, and fir wood - without the luxury of abundant resources. “Sustainability is first and foremost economic” (Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri, personal communication, May 26, 2025), they state with the pragmatism of those who have had to balance the figures on every occasion. The numbers work because the use of a single material simplifies supply chains, reduces processing requirements, and clarifies construction details. The metal structure of Divina Sezione at the Royal Palace of Caserta - left exposed following an on-site inspection because the industrial profiles were already aesthetically compelling in their own right - stands as an emblematic example of how a limitation can become a compositional rule.

Dotdotdot shifts the focus toward digital narrative environments, raising a question that Mastropietro could not yet have posed: what does sustainability mean when the principal component of an exhibition consists of software, projections, and algorithms? Digital technology does not automatically make an exhibition

sustainable, just as its absence does not automatically make it virtuous. The studio's response is methodological: sustainability and accessibility function as cross-cutting filters accompanying the process from the outset rather than as final checks applied at the end (Dotdotdot, personal communication, June 3, 2025). The Earth Bits - Sensing the Planetary project at MAAT in Lisbon demonstrates how climate data can be transformed into a sensory experience, contributing cognitively to the ecological transition in ways that extend beyond the simple reduction of physical waste.

Calvi Brambilla brings the clarity of professionals deeply familiar with the inner workings of the trade fair industry. Commercial exhibition design falls within the advertising budget rather than the architecture budget; acknowledging this reality is not an act of resignation but a prerequisite for exercising responsibility. The two stands designed for Quadro Design - where the modular rental structure is deliberately left visible, in dialogue with the industrial world that produces the displayed faucets - demonstrate a precise shift: from trade fair illusionism to illusionism consciously revealed (Calvi & Brambilla, personal communication, February 20, 2025). Consistency is not a slogan; it is the cumulative result of a sequence of small sacrifices.

Cino Zucchi develops perhaps the most nuanced distinction across the entire conceptual field, proposing a tripartite division between the ethical dimension, the dimension of effectiveness, and that of the communicative model. Confusing these levels, he argues, generates hypocrisy (Cino Zucchi, personal communication, June 17, 2025). What exhibition design can concretely accomplish - and what Zucchi achieved in Sempering at the Milan Triennale, through a balloon-frame system in which all the wood was recycled after the exhibition - lies in the selection of techniques and materials endowed with a recognizable second life. His formulation is particularly incisive: the sustainability of an exhibition project is embedded in the choice of language even before it is embedded in the choice of materials.

Migliore+Servetto introduce the notion of cognitive sustainability: an exhibition that employs certified materials yet produces incomprehensible communication devices ultimately wastes visitors' attention. "Communication does not coincide with what the designer intends to say, but with what the visitor actually understands" (Ico Migliore, personal communication, June 5, 2025). The ADI Design Museum project - a dense, navigable archive conceived to be updated over time without requiring radical redesign with each new acquisition - represents the most complete embodiment of this principle. The museum is conceived not as a

container but as a seed: a dynamic system capable of activating long-term processes within both the local context and its public (Ico Migliore, personal communication, June 5, 2025).

Alessandro Colombo articulates sustainability across five dimensions: environmental, technological, material, financial, and, above all, temporal. The latter is the most neglected and perhaps the most significant: “once an exhibition is inaugurated, attention shifts elsewhere” (Alessandro Colombo, personal communication, November 12, 2025). The exhibition system designed for Pier Luigi Nervi - conceived as a two-dimensional structure requiring minimal transportation and dismantled and reassembled across approximately a dozen venues - provides the clearest demonstration of how a well-designed system can accommodate what was unforeseeable at the time of its conception. It is not simply an exhibition, but an infrastructure.

Alessandro Scandurra presents the concept of exhibition design as a machine: not a cold mechanism, but a device designed to function, activate relationships, and render its own operation legible (Alessandro Scandurra, personal communication, June 6, 2025). For him, the distinction between an exhibition installation and an exhibition system is far from merely formal: an installation exhausts its value within the event itself, whereas a system preserves and multiplies that value over time through successive reassemblies. The RICU modular system developed for the Gold Medal for Italian Architecture - packable into two 2×4 metre crates and reassemblable elsewhere in different configurations - constitutes its most precise operational translation. Likewise, the project for schools in Ukraine, featuring a kit dimensioned for truck transport and rubble from bombed buildings transformed into gabion facades, demonstrates how the logic of the modular system can extend across architectural and urban scales without losing coherence.

Origoni Steiner, featured in this volume as it was in Mastropietro’s book (Origoni, 1991), closes one circle while opening another. The recurring question, “where do things end up?” (Franco Origoni, personal communication, June 10, 2025), is not an expression of moral anxiety but a design principle: designing systems rather than objects; abandoning the idea of every installation as a unique and unrepeatable entity and instead developing technical and compositional repertoires that can be adapted, dismantled, and reactivated. The lineage that runs from Albe and Lica Steiner to Max Huber and the broader tradition of socially engaged Italian graphic design points to something specific: responsibility toward time and space is not a recent invention. It was already present thirty years ago, embodied in the decisions made on construction sites by designers who had learned to re-

gard the life cycle as an integral component of the project.

Ghigos brings to this volume a position radically different from all the others, and perhaps the most challenging: that of a practice that does not claim a poetics and has made that very renunciation its method. The firm - three partners trained as architects, each with deliberately divergent expertise - works through the systematic deconstruction of the client's brief before formulating a response. "Less material, more intelligence" is the expression used to describe this approach (Davide Crippa, personal communication, April 23, 2026): not as an environmental slogan, but as a design logic in which economy of means becomes the engine of invention. The paradigmatic case is Gang City at the Venice Architecture Biennale: three weeks between the initial phone call and the opening, an almost nonexistent budget, and a single material - 3-millimetre corrugated cardboard, laser-cut with the graphics engraved directly into the surface rather than applied to it. The installation subsequently underwent more than ten recontextualizations through a sharing platform, reappearing over a decade later in new configurations. Sustainability had not been declared; it was an intrinsic property of the construction system, activated repeatedly after the event through a series of subsequent uses. Ghigos also introduces into the discussion a theme that rarely appears in current debates: the energy and climatic impact of immaterial devices. The extensive use of video projectors in the Rovello 2 space caused temperatures to rise within a historic building, generating a heat dissipation problem - a limitation that the studio chooses to acknowledge openly rather than conceal within a reassuring narrative.

A Dialogue Between Generations

Reading this volume alongside Mastropietro's (1991) reveals how many questions have remained unchanged over time and how many others have undergone radical transformation. The question of what it means to present an object - the one Pierluigi Nicolin posed to the young Cino Zucchi during a late-night working session at the Triennale in 1985 (Cino Zucchi, personal communication, June 17, 2025) - has remained substantially unchanged across three decades of exhibition practice. The relationship with the site, the centrality of the exhibition route as both a physical and psychological experience, and the artisanal dimension of the project: these constants have not disappeared. Readers moving from the pages of 1991 to those of the present volume will encounter them once again,

transformed yet still recognizable.

What has changed is the weight attributed to materiality - not only to the expressive qualities of materials, but also to their destiny. None of the authors selected by Mastropietro explicitly asked what became of the honeycomb panels, the Innocenti tubes, or the giant posters mounted on aluminium sheets once the exhibition had closed. Today, that question has become unavoidable, and the designers featured in this volume pose it - with different answers, varying degrees of awareness, and diverse practical solutions - even before it is raised by the client.

Readers approaching these ten chapters in search of a manual on environmentally sustainable exhibition design may be disappointed. Those willing to engage with something more complex - a plurality of approaches, each rooted in a specific practice and each capable of situating the question of sustainability within a different domain - will find in this volume one of the richest bodies of reflection produced by contemporary Italian exhibition culture. It is not a manifesto, but rather ten voices that, speaking in different registers, reveal the breadth of the field.

This dialogue between generations is not an exercise in nostalgia. Rather, it is a way of acknowledging that the present has roots, and that many of the sustainability practices that appear novel in contemporary discourse often have distinguished precedents in construction decisions that were never identified as such. Building a culture of sustainable exhibition design also means understanding where we come from: from the lessons of those who, thirty years ago, understood that exhibition design is not the sum of objects carefully arranged in space, but the totality of an experience (Basso Peressut, 1991). Mastropietro preserved that lesson, as the recent exhibition *Mostrare il progetto. I percorsi di un editore* (Mastropietro, 2024) also demonstrates. This volume seeks to extend it.

Author Contributions

Davide Crippa: Conceptualization, §§ 1, 2 e 5. Massimiliano Cason Villa: §§ 3 e 4, final review.

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CALVI BRAMBILLA & PARTNERS

*“Cultured Professionals”: A Balance Between Technical Skill and a
Sense of Craftsmanship*

D. Crippa | IUAV University of Venice
Department of Culture del Progetto



CALVI BRAMBILLA & PARTNERS

“Cultured Professionals”: A Balance Between Technical Skill and a Sense of Craftsmanship¹

There is a paradox in Calvi Brambilla's work that becomes apparent from the very outset of the conversation. Their practice does not identify with any particular aesthetic: it explicitly rejects the idea of a repeatable personal language, an authorial signature recognisable at a glance, or a style that can be applied to different subjects like a label. Yet their projects are nonetheless recognisable in the eyes of the press and some of their clients. External observers point this out; the practice itself acknowledges it with a certain honesty, though without being able to identify precisely what, exactly, makes its work so recognisable. It is from this discrepancy - between the rejection of a 'poetics' and the persistence of a recognisable character - that any interpretation of their work should begin. The firm's response to the question, 'what is your poetics?', is not a stylistic formula but a shift in perspective: it proposes that they be regarded as cultured professionals. The term should be taken literally. It means being aware of everything that is designed, avoiding gratuitous gestures, possessing a thorough understanding of the history of design and exhibition design, and drawing upon this knowledge as an operational repertoire rather than an album of quotations. It is an approach that overturns

Fig. 1. Photograph of Fabio Calvi e Paolo Brambilla. Photo: Lea Anouchinsky

the conventional order of architectural discourse, replacing the question ‘what do we want to say?’ with another, more concrete one: what needs to be done, here and now, with these means and for this subject? The practice was founded in Milan through the convergence of two well-established professional trajectories. Fabio Calvi trained at the Politecnico di Milano and Brunel University in West London, graduating in architecture in 1996. He took his first steps in the fields of interiors and exhibition design, including a solo exhibition for the photographer Albert Watson at the Rotonda della Besana, where the relationship between light, space and image was placed at the centre of the project from the outset. Paolo Brambilla studied architecture at the Politecnico di Milano, following a period at the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya in Barcelona, and combined his design practice with teaching at the Scuola del Design and service on the Council of the Milan Order of Architects. Since 2006, the two have signed projects as a joint practice; since 2023, the firm has operated as Calvi Brambilla and Partners, following the addition of engineer Marisa Rotolo and interior designer Maurizio Diraco. Their work encompasses interiors, exhibition design and product design, with a particular focus on design-related environments - exhibition stands, showrooms, temporary installations and event settings - developed for a wide range of Italian manufacturers, including Alcantara, Antonio Lupi, Barovier & Toso, B&B Italia, Cassina, Ceccotti Collezioni, Desalto, Elica, Flos, FontanaArte, Olivari, Pedrali, Quadro Design, Tecno, Varaschin and Zanotta, alongside international commissions for Beko, Deutsche Telekom and LG Signature Kitchen Suite. Alongside its exhibition design activities, the studio has progressively assumed broader creative leadership roles: for four years it oversaw design direction at Flos, coordinating product design, exhibition concepts and communication tools; subsequently, it took on the artistic direction of Dooor and Zanotta. The breadth of its portfolio reveals a pivotal position at the intersection of design culture and brand communication strategies. The paradox mentioned at the outset - the studio rejects a poetic approach, yet its projects remain recognisable - finds its first methodological explanation here. Observers note clearly defined layouts, a bold use of colour and highly legible volumes. This formal assertiveness is not claimed by the studio as an expressive choice but interpreted as a technical response to the conditions of trade fair work: a stand attracts attention for only a few seconds, must stand out in a crowded environment, and competes with dozens of other pavilions. In this context, clarity of form is a function of the setting rather than a signature. It is also important to note the economic dimension of these choices: for clients, the practice operates within a marketing budget rather than an ar-

chitectural one. In the designers' reasoning, this observation is neither dismissed nor resisted, but accepted as a starting point: recognising that commercial exhibition design forms part of the communication apparatus means relinquishing any nostalgia for a disciplinary autonomy that does not exist, while simultaneously assuming responsibility for imbuing it with cultural depth. From this derives the metaphor through which the practice describes its craft: the display is the stage set; the product is the protagonist. The object on display - a lamp, a chair, a tap, a kitchen - is what must ultimately be seen; the space is the device that enables it to be seen. When this order is reversed, and the exhibition design is remembered more vividly than the product itself, the device has failed in its task. This theatrical formulation clearly reaffirms the mistrust of the authorial gesture declared at the outset: exhibition design is not a small authorial work containing a collection of products, but a device subordinate to a subject that precedes it. The culture of the cultured professional serves precisely this purpose: to interpret the subject - product, brand or occasion - with accuracy and to construct around it an appropriate spatial grammar, capable of recognising when a chosen language is not arbitrary but necessary. Added to this is a claim that functions as a methodological statement: Calvi Brambilla describe their way of working as the ability to alter their design language from project to project, depending on the client and the product. This form of fluid contemporaneity should not be interpreted as a renewed nineteenth-century eclecticism, nor as an album of interchangeable styles, but rather as adherence to the specific requirements of each project. The studio's hallmark, in this interpretation, is not a style but an approach: rigorous in planning, attentive to economic constraints, cultured in its references, and capable of adaptation without sacrificing coherence. It is a position that carries a recognised critical cost: temporary installations, and exhibition stands in particular, struggle to find a place within the established narratives of design history, which remain predominantly oriented towards products and permanent architecture. The studio regards this marginality as one of the defining conditions of its work and, at the same time, as a space in which to experiment with narratives, materials and modes of representing design that do not enjoy the same freedom elsewhere. It is from this constellation of concepts - cultured professionals, the necessary sign, the centrality of the product, the fluidity of language, and the conscious acceptance of the communicative dimension - that the design process described in the following pages becomes intelligible. It is a process in which the timeframe of the fair, budgetary constraints and relationships with stand builders count for at least as much as formal invention, and in which sustainability emerges not as a

programmatic declaration but as a gradual adjustment to a system that is, by its very nature, disproportionate.

Designing with the Opening Date in Mind

Calvi Brambilla's design process for exhibition stands takes shape from a constraint that cannot be circumvented: the fair opens on a fixed date. The public will arrive regardless, journalists have their press day, buyers have their appointments, and there is no possibility of postponing the opening, as can sometimes occur in permanent architecture. This seemingly trivial fact affects the entire process: it imposes a clearly defined sequence of stages, requires rapid decision-making, and demands rigorous management of uncertainty. Conceiving exhibition design as a small-scale architectural project means recognising that it is, in effect, a time-limited construction site, where quality is measured by the ability to reconcile formal research, technical feasibility and economic viability within a timeframe of only a few weeks. The project begins with a highly practical listening phase centred on functional requirements. Before developing the concept, the practice gathers detailed information about the client's needs: the number and type of meeting rooms, catering areas, access and reception arrangements, back-office management, circulation routes for staff and visitors, and the need for private or open areas. These may appear to be basic questions, yet the actual layout of the stand depends upon them: an additional room alters the proportions; making catering visible or concealed changes the character of the spaces; a closed or semi-open technical area affects the overall openness of the environment. It is at this stage that the most stringent constraints emerge - those that cannot be overridden in the name of an abstract formal idea. The implicit lesson, which runs consistently throughout the studio's reasoning, is that the programme precedes the concept, and that the programme of an exhibition stand is no less complex than that of a small public building. Only at this point does the phase begin that the studio describes as the most interesting aspect of the work: the psychological and symbolic interpretation of the brand. The questions assume a different character. How does the brand wish to present itself at that specific edition of the trade fair? Which aspects of its identity does it intend to reaffirm, and which to redefine? It is here that the cultivated professional comes into play. References to the history of design, contemporary art and the installations of acknowledged masters are not employed as literal quotations, but as a repertoire of devices - ways of using

colour, articulating solids and voids, and constructing spatial sequences - that can be reinterpreted within a specific context. The intersection of functional and symbolic interpretation generates the concept. In the studio's practice, this process must be completed within a very short timeframe - two or three weeks. The concept is therefore not a suggestive sketch but a structure already validated in terms of plausible technologies, structural typologies and material families. It functions as a narrative framework, holding together the programme of use, the brand image and the construction methods, and becoming the foundation upon which the subsequent stages are built. Once this framework has been defined, the project remains deliberately flexible in certain respects. The studio is aware that fit-out contractors are not interchangeable: some firms possess greater expertise in joinery, others in metalwork, and others still in modular systems or graphic applications. Depending on the contractor selected by the client, certain solutions are recalibrated - including at an aesthetic level - in order to make the most of the available expertise. It is at this stage, identified as crucial to the success of the stand, that the project is not simply executed but renegotiated within controlled parameters, taking into account commercial formats, modular rental systems, and the integration of standard panels and finishes. This point deserves particular attention: conceiving a project as sufficiently structured to maintain coherence, yet sufficiently open to incorporate the specific expertise of those who build it, is a skill that has more to do with direction than with design. It is perhaps the least discussed aspect of the studio's work and, in their own view, probably the most decisive. Cost assessment constitutes a further structural stage. Budgets are almost always highly restrictive and, in practice, multiple versions of the same project are developed in order to bring the concept within the available financial limits. Sustainability acquires a meaning here that the studio identifies as a third category alongside environmental and material sustainability: economic sustainability. Reusable structures and modular systems may prove more expensive in the initial construction phase, yet become cost-effective when deployed across multiple projects. Conversely, measures perceived as virtuous - such as the widespread elimination of carpet - can produce ambiguous outcomes if existing recycling chains are not taken into account, or if carpet is replaced by short-lived hard flooring. Once concept and budget have been aligned, the practice develops a highly detailed architectural design but deliberately stops short of producing structural working drawings. Calculations, certifications and construction documentation for the various contractors are prepared by the fit-out specialists on the basis of preliminary drawings that are already highly precise. Calvi Brambilla maintains

close oversight - variations are discussed on a case-by-case basis and every detail is verified - but recognises that operational responsibility for joints, installation methods and dismantling procedures lies with those managing the construction process. Within this chain, the effectiveness of a reuse strategy depends as much on the quality of the design as on the quality of its execution. At the heart of this process lies the most important - and far-reaching - consideration to emerge from the discussion: the question of durability. Their experience as creative directors at Flos and Zanotta has led Calvi Brambilla to deepen their understanding of methods for assessing the environmental impact of products. Lamps and sofas, for example, must be easy to dismantle at the end of their service life, avoiding the use of adhesives wherever possible so that their constituent materials can be correctly separated and disposed of. At the same time, high-quality products of significant aesthetic value generally enjoy long lifespans; when the entire life cycle of such products is taken into account, their environmental impact is consequently reduced. Trade fair stands, by contrast, involve substantial consumption of materials, energy and labour concentrated over only a few days. It is precisely this disproportion - which the studio identifies as the principal critical issue of temporary installations - that compels a reconsideration of the approach: a shift towards rental structures, demountable systems, materials integrated into recycling chains, and the application of durability as a criterion of evaluation even over very short timescales. The studio's approach to temporary exhibition design can therefore be understood as the result of the interaction of three key elements: detailed functional planning; a sophisticated understanding of the brand, directed towards precise communication objectives; and an ongoing operational dialogue with exhibition contractors within strict temporal and financial constraints. Considerations of sustainability do not appear as a final verification stage but are integrated from the outset into decisions regarding structures, materials and formats, without eliminating the inherent contradictions of the exhibition apparatus itself. The operational lesson running throughout this chapter is singular: designing with the opening date in mind means relinquishing the role of the designer-author in favour of a more complex, and less celebrated, figure - that of the director capable of holding together programme, image, material and time.

Three projects as a laboratory

Taken together, the stands designed for Quadro Design (2022, 2024), Elica

(2024), and Pedrali (2019) allow us to observe, across different scales, how the studio approaches the relationship between setting, product, and sustainability within the specific context of the trade fair. In the first case, what emerges is an attempt to align the stand's structure with a corporate position strongly oriented towards environmental concerns; in the second, the focus is placed on structural and material integrity; in the third, the emphasis falls on an earlier phase in which maximum visibility within a trade fair environment still dominated by the logic of spectacle constituted the primary objective. Taken together, the three projects form a field of experimentation in which concerns relating to reuse and durability intertwine with highly pronounced representational requirements.

Quadro Design. Radical consistency and the revelation of the trick

In the two stands designed for Quadro Design - at the 2022 Salone del Mobile (Figs. 60-61) and the 2024 edition (Figs. 3-4, 14-16) - the themes of sustainability and corporate identity are closely intertwined. The company operates within the Lake Orta tap-manufacturing district, an area that has suffered from pollution-related issues for decades. The studio refers to this condition as the biographical and cultural backdrop of the company's creative director, who is portrayed as genuinely committed to a sustainable approach rather than merely

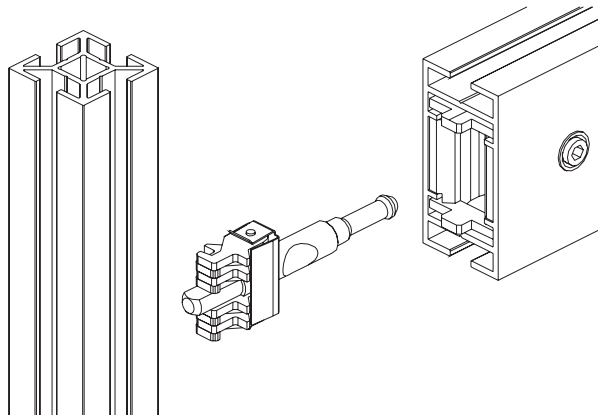


Fig. 3. Technical details of the metal profile locking system - Quadro Design 2024 Booth - Salone del Mobile 2024 - Milan. Redesign: S. Centinaro, D. D. Soriben - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2024-25

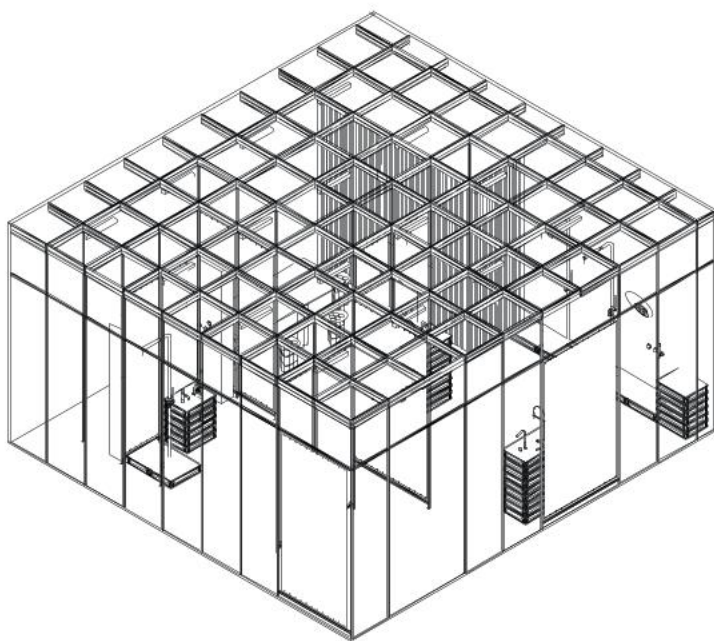


Fig. 4. Axonometric view - Quadro Design Booth - Salone del Mobile 2024 - Milan. Redesign: S. Centinaro, D. D. Soriben - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2024-25

adopting it as a promotional strategy. The client's position is particularly rigorous with regard to materials and finishes: it includes, for example, the refusal to paint taps - contrary to recent market trends - based on the conviction that steel should be treated as a material of intrinsic nobility and that additional finishing processes are both unnecessary and environmentally detrimental. When the studio received the commission, the brief was explicit: to create the most sustainable exhibition stand possible, while acknowledging that the very nature of trade fairs inevitably entails a degree of ambiguity.

The 2024 stand is based on a rented modular Syma-type structure, deliberately left recognisable. The aluminium system - normally concealed behind cladding panels - becomes a visible component of the installation; the proximity of the warehouse in which the structure is stored, located only a few hundred metres away, is also considered significant from a logistical perspective. However, the decision to display the structure without modification involves an additional cost: in order

to avoid signs of wear accumulated through previous cycles of use, the company must purchase a new batch, which will subsequently be reused for conventional internal stand construction. This is a detail that the studio does not attempt to conceal; on the contrary, it highlights it as an example of one of the most common ambivalences within the sector. Sustainability does not automatically imply impact reduction; rather, it entails making choices and forms of waste visible so that they can become subjects of discussion.

Elements sourced directly from the company's production facilities are incorporated within this framework. The large counters are created by stacking industrial crates previously used in the company's warehouse; tables and stools are constructed from reusable steel tubes; the eyeleted plastic sheeting, reminiscent of that used on lorries, is made from recycled and recyclable material; while the totems and flooring are produced from plywood intended to re-enter shredding and reuse supply chains as raw material. The installation takes the form of an assemblage of existing elements rather than a collection of bespoke components: its aesthetic quality derives from the arrangement of these materials rather than from the addition of decorative features. The principle of stage design for a star assumes an almost literal form - the protagonist is the steel tap, while the backdrop is the industrial world that produces it.

The 2024 stand both continues and departs from the approach adopted in 2022, when the rented structure was concealed behind milky polycarbonate panels tailored to standard commercial dimensions. In that case, the logic of reusing metal "American-style" truss structures was already present, yet a significant proportion of the project's value remained concentrated in finishes - such as aluminium laminate panels - ultimately destined for disposal. The company's critical response to this waste contributed to steering subsequent decisions towards greater exposure of the structure and the use of elements with more clearly defined secondary lives. Viewed sequentially, the two installations reveal a precise trajectory: from concealment to coherence, from trade fair artifice to the unveiling of that artifice. This does not represent a radical transformation of the model, but rather a gradual refinement of strategies aimed at reducing the gap between infrastructure and image, between the company's industrial reality and its representation within the exhibition setting. It constitutes one of the clearest examples of the principle of the "cultured professional" applied to stand design: coherence is not a slogan, but rather a sequence of small sacrifices and small revelations of what would ordinarily remain hidden.

Elica. Structural honesty and an industrial palette

The stand designed for Elica at EuroCucina FTK 2024 (Figs. 5, 21-24) develops in parallel with that of Quadro Design and shares several of its structural principles. Here too, the project is based on a rented modular structure of the Syma type, or a comparable system, intentionally left visible as the framework organising the volume. Unlike the previous case, however, the structure assumes a more neutral chromatic role, functioning primarily as a support for the surfaces and panels that define the actual exhibition environment. The design focus centres on the notion of structural honesty, understood as the rejection of disguises intended to simulate materials other than those actually employed.

Within the structural frame, the most prominent elements are large marine plywood panels, a robust material designed for demanding conditions of use. The surfaces are treated with brightly coloured aniline-based stains - reds, yellows, greens, and blues - which collectively form a kind of industrial palette. The wood is not presented as a natural material to be celebrated for its eco-symbolic value, but rather as a technical substrate that can be easily dismantled, resized, and reused. Because the aniline penetrates the fibres instead of forming a superficial coating, the panels are better suited to repeated cycles of sanding and reuse. From the outset, the design takes into account possible future configurations, including showrooms, other exhibition stands, and interior spaces. Modules and dimensions are calibrated to the standard commercial sizes of the material in order to minimise waste and simplify post-exhibition logistics. In the studio's interpretation, this approach is not presented as evidence of a structural transformation within the sector, but rather as a sensible use of resources that, in the absence of such considerations, would effectively risk reaching the end of their life cycle upon dismantling.

Compared with other projects developed by the studio, the design for Elica explicitly marks a departure from an earlier phase characterised by installations based on purely scenographic effects or material oxymorons - structures simulating concrete, deliberately incongruous volumes, and highly theatrical solutions. Here, the declared objective is to respect the authenticity of materials without sacrificing visual impact, while seeking to achieve this through consistency between the appearance and the nature of the elements employed: metal appears as metal, a panel as a panel, and colour does not attempt to imitate other substances. The stand also provides an opportunity to examine explicitly certain ambivalences inherent in practices commonly regarded as virtuous. The elimination of carpet,

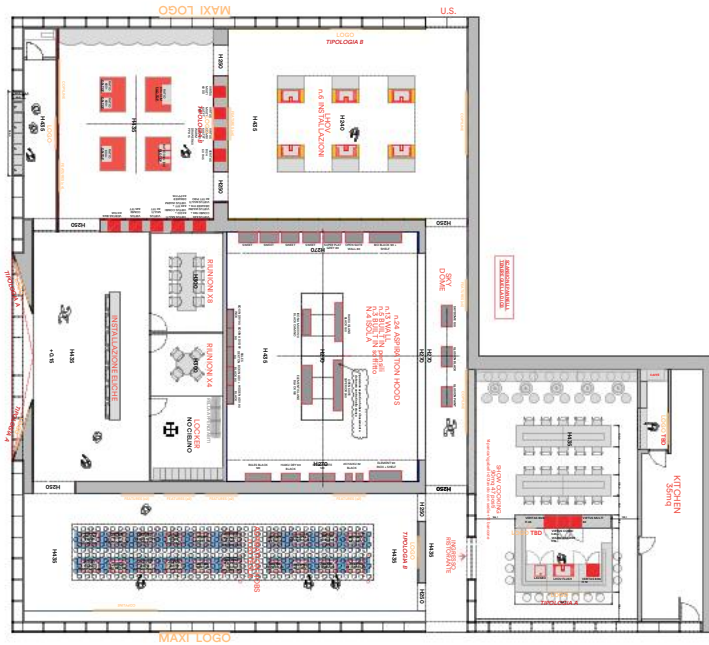


Fig. 5. Original floor plan - Elica Booth - Euro Cucina FTK 2024 - Milan.
Image: Calvi Brambilla

for example, is often perceived as an obvious environmentally responsible choice; however, the existence of dedicated recycling streams involving grinding and material recovery may render the overall impact less straightforward, particularly when rigid alternatives are reproduced in their entirety for each edition. The same consideration applies to other panel systems: apparently humble materials may, under certain circumstances, prove more sustainable than solutions that are formally “green” but difficult to dispose of. Here too, the underlying lesson is clear: sustainability is not an intrinsic property of materials; it is a characteristic of their life cycle, and that life cycle is designed from the outset.

Pedrali, Palace of Wonders. Pop density before the transition

The Palace of Wonders stand (Figs. 6, 26-28), designed for Pedrali at the 2019

Salone del Mobile, belongs to an earlier phase of the studio's activity, when sustainability had not yet been adopted as a systematic design parameter. The context is that of a highly competitive Salone del Mobile, in which the primary objective for companies is to establish a recognisable presence within an extremely crowded environment. The stand was conceived as a genuine piece of temporary architecture: an external façade conveys an image of solidity and centrality for a rapidly expanding company seeking to position itself as a permanent actor on the international stage, moving beyond the perception of being merely a seating manufacturer.

Inside, the design language changes significantly. The spatial composition is based on saturated colours, intense chromatic combinations, and a high density of products, consistent with the identity of a brand whose strength derives from the breadth of its styles and finishes. The design assumes a distinctly pop character, in which the variety of the product range becomes the principal visual focus. The company's ability to address different market segments and uses is immediately evident, although this approach carries the risk of considerable visual and physical

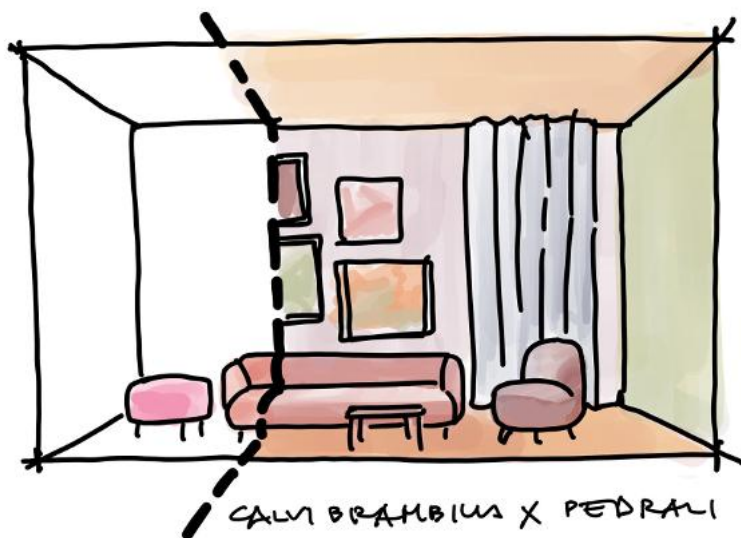


Fig. 6. Original drawing - Pedrali "Palace of Wonders" booth - Salone del Mobile 2019 - Milan. Image: Calvi Brambilla

congestion. This gives rise to a key issue for large-scale exhibition stands: the management of visitor flows. During the busiest days of the fair, the most popular stands become difficult to navigate; product visibility risks being compromised precisely when attendance reaches its highest levels. The design team addresses this issue through a solution that is simultaneously technical and theatrical: some seating elements are displayed on platforms raised by approximately fifty centimetres, ensuring visibility from a distance above the crowd. Each product family is presented both in an elevated, more iconic display version and in a floor-level version accessible for direct testing. This dual presentation enables a balanced integration of communication objectives and hands-on user experience.

With regard to sustainability, the studio describes this stand as representative of a period in which a structured approach to the environmental impacts of exhibition design had not yet been developed. Materials, structures, and finishes were selected primarily for their visual impact and consistency with the brand image, while considerations relating to life-cycle management - including reuse and post-exhibition treatment - remained secondary. It is precisely for this reason that the Palace of Wonders constitutes a useful point of comparison: it allows us to observe how a successful exhibition stand was conceived at a time when the overriding priority was maximum visibility within the exhibition environment. The studio's contemporary interpretation of the project is both appreciative and critical: the stand was successful, yet it represents an era that the studio itself could neither - and would not wish to - replicate today using the same resources.

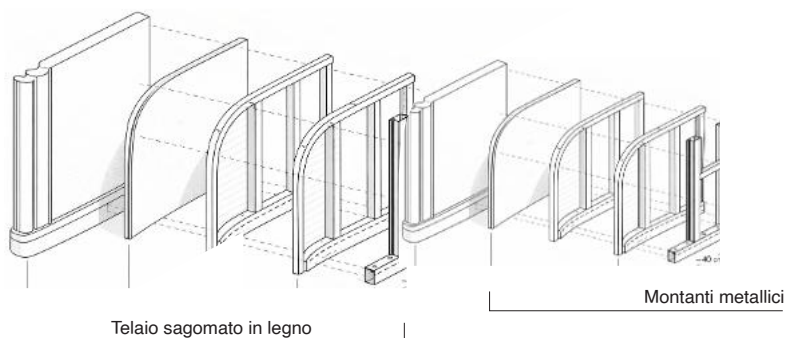


Fig. 7. Technical Details of Soft Walls - Flost Soft Walls Booth - EuroLuce 2017 - Milan. Image: I. Tartaglia - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2025-26

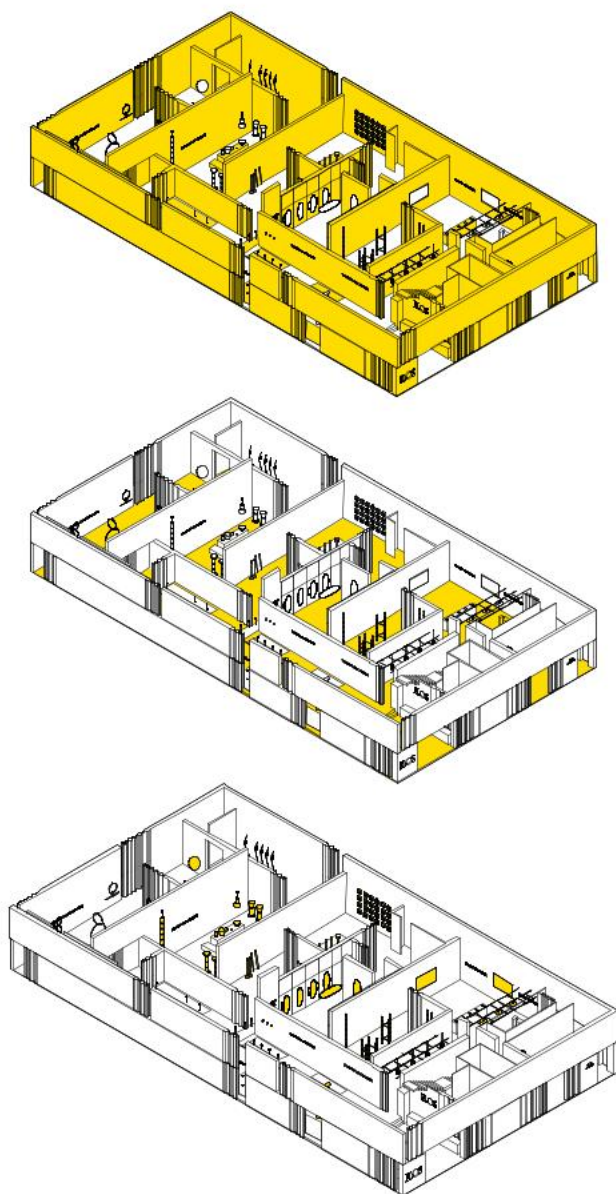


Fig. 8-9-10. Background, layout, and object codes - Flost Soft Walls Booth - EuroLu-
ce 2017 - Milan. Redesign: I. Tartaglia - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2025-26

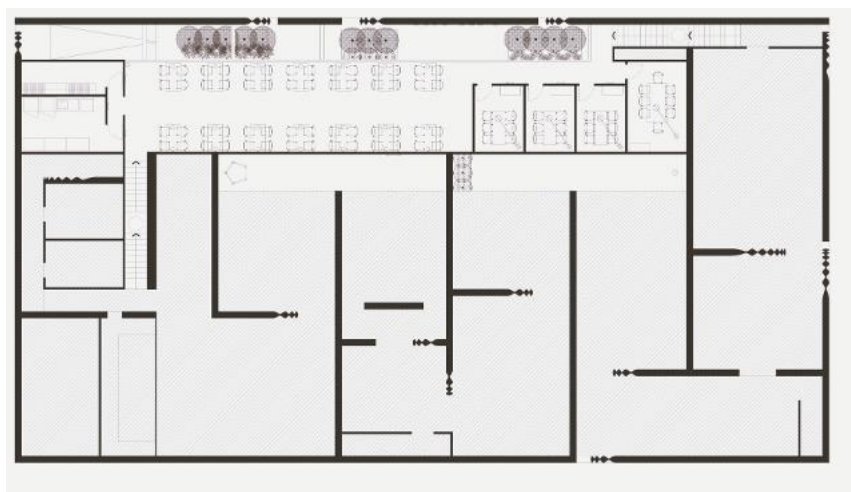


Fig. 10. Floor Plan PP - Flost Soft Walls Exhibition Setup - Euroluce 2017 - Milan.
Image: Calvi Brambilla



Fig. 11. Floor Plan - Flos Booth - Euroluce 2022 - Milan. Image: Calvi Brambilla



Fig. 12. Graphic representation of the exhibition design - Flos Euroluca 2023 - Milan. Image: Calvi Brambilla

Other Projects Mentioned

In addition to the stands analysed in detail, a number of recurring projects in the studio's narrative help to complete the picture of its work. In particular, the installations for Flos in 2017 and at Euroluca 2023, the large stand for Design Holding at the Salone del Mobile 2019, and the work on Flos packaging demonstrate how the themes of scale, process control, and sustainability extend well beyond the confines of the individual stand.

Flos 2017 and Euroluca 2023

The 2017 Flos stand (Figs. 7-11, 29-34) represents a key milestone in the studio's trajectory. It is, in fact, a pavilion covering more than 1,200 m², conceived as a self-contained architectural structure within the exhibition centre: a volume that simulates a reinforced concrete building, yet is constructed using a hybrid system of timber and plasterboard, meticulously finished to convey the impression of a monolithic structure. The interior atmosphere is characterised by a clear detachment from the exhibition context: controlled lighting, subdued acoustics, and circulation routes more reminiscent of a museum than a commercial stand. The



Fig. 13. Floor Plan - Flos Booth - EuroLuce 2023 - Milan. Image: Calvi Brambilla

studio describes this space as capable of inducing in visitors a behaviour akin to that experienced in a library, in stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of the exhibition - a quality of silence created through exhibition design. The space assumes an almost suspended role, designed to place the lamps at the centre and to treat them as works of art within an environment that encourages visitors to slow the pace of their visit. It is in this project that the studio definitively refines its concept of exhibition design as a behavioural device: not merely a backdrop for the product, but a structure that guides the pace, gestures, and modes of perception. From the perspective of the studio's portfolio, this stand - awarded the prize for best exhibition design at the 2017 edition of the Salone del Mobile - represents one of the most successful projects in its long-standing collaboration with Flos,

which began in 2005 and led to the studio assuming the brand's creative direction from 2019 onwards. From an environmental perspective, however, the project still appears fully embedded in an era in which issues of reuse and material life cycles were not yet decisive. The primary objective was consistency with the brand's identity and expressive effectiveness, supported by a level of investment and built mass that would be difficult to replicate today. A few years later, the Flos stand at Euroluca 2023 (Figs. 11-12, 42-52) presents a different picture. While maintaining a strong focus on perceptual quality, the installation is described as being made entirely of wood, with internal structures based on modular systems. The reusable frames, similar to those employed for other clients, indicate a shift towards lighter configurations designed to be dismantled and reused, with a smaller material footprint. The monumentality of the faux concrete gives way to a construction approach that takes greater account of assembly and reuse cycles. A comparison of the two installations highlights an internal trajectory within the studio itself: from a pavilion model centred primarily on the power of the image to a structure that more fully integrates criteria of repeatability and waste reduction, without compromising the creation of a recognisable exhibition experience.

Design Holding 2019

The stand for Design Holding at the Salone del Mobile 2019 represents a further extreme in terms of scale. It is described as one of the largest installations ever created at the fair, to the extent that it required full-scale construction work, with all the regulatory requirements associated with a temporary building. The pavilion housed several of the group's brands - including Flos and B&B Italia - and took the form of a micro-city of design, with pathways, internal squares, viewpoints, and façades interacting with one another. Despite its size, the framework was entirely based on a modular steel structural system for the walls and a standardised beam structure for the mezzanines. All materials were pre-used and reusable and could be sourced from warehouses located not far from the fairgrounds. Painted wooden panelling was fitted to this structure and intended to be shredded and reused after the event.

The use of a standardised framework introduces an element of continuity that partially reduces the inefficiency typical of one-off installations, but it does not eliminate the vast quantity of short-lived finishing materials. This project highli-

ghts a contradiction that is also evident elsewhere: on the one hand, the reusable structural system appears to be a relatively virtuous solution, as it helps limit the production of new structures; on the other hand, the demand for brand-new surfaces in contexts where the frame remains visible can lead to the hire of newly manufactured components, resulting in increased consumption of virgin material. This duality - a structure designed to last across multiple cycles, yet finishes intended for a single edition - is one of the sector's most critical issues and also highlights an intrinsic limitation. In this sense, Design Holding 2019 can be interpreted as an indicator of the end of a cycle: temporary pavilions on this scale, with costs and complexity comparable to those of permanent architecture, are now difficult to replicate. A combination of rising costs, changing sensibilities, and the transformation of the marketing strategies of brands participating in trade fairs makes the repetition of such projects increasingly implausible.

Flos Packaging and Continuity Between Product and Installation

A final group of projects, less visible to the public but highly significant from the perspective of sustainability, concerns the work carried out as design curator for Flos. Following various assessment methods defined by specialist bodies in the sector, the company introduced an evaluation system that assigns each product a minimum sustainability index; if this threshold is not met, the design must be modified. This process has led, among other things, to a comprehensive review of packaging aimed at eliminating plastic and adopting exclusively paper-based solutions. This transformation involves production chains, suppliers, and logistics, and demonstrates how the awareness developed through exhibition installations - attention to material quantities, assembly and disassembly cycles, and opportunities for reuse - is also reflected in the design of the product's supporting systems, with a view to extending its life cycle.

Within this context, the issue of durability becomes a decisive factor. The example of the famous Arco lamp is emblematic: its production requires the quarrying of a block of marble, with a significant initial environmental impact; however, the object's useful life extends over decades, often spanning several generations. If the impact is considered over this timescale, the ratio between resources consumed and benefits derived from use becomes favourable overall. Trade fair stand construction, by contrast, concentrates substantial consumption of materials, energy, and labour into only a few days. It is precisely this disparity that is identified

as one of the most critical issues within the system. This has led to increasing attention being paid to hire structures, reusable panels, the selective elimination of carpet, and the use of elements drawn directly from production chains, as in the case of Quadro. Taken as a whole, the interventions on exhibition stands and packaging demonstrate how sustainability is integrated into the studio's work not only through individual projects, but also as part of a broader transformation in the way design is understood: from the product to its context, from the monumental pavilion to the lightweight structure, and from the less controlled museum environment to the exhibition process managed with greater care.

Discussion and Conclusion

Taken together, the materials analysed portray a practice operating within a grey area: on the one hand, design culture, with explicit references to the history of Italian design and a cultivated professional approach; on the other, the logic of the trade fair machine, with its extremely tight deadlines, budgets, and expectations of visibility. The decision not to claim a style that is immediately recognisable, and instead to define themselves as cultivated professionals, can be interpreted as an attempt to preserve a space for mediation: not a rigid authorial identity, but a way of drawing upon the disciplinary repertoire in order to respond to rapidly changing situations and commissions. This position has specific consequences. It means accepting that commercial exhibition design belongs more to the realm of marketing than to that of architecture; it means relinquishing the authorial gesture as an end in itself and using it instead as a means; above all, it means replacing the question "What are you trying to say?" with "What needs to be done, here and now, with these resources and for this client?", thereby restoring the project to its role as a cultivated service.

The design process described in the preceding pages reveals a relatively stable structure: an initial phase of highly concrete functional definition, a second phase of brand interpretation, and a third in which concept, technical feasibility, and economic constraints are interwoven from the outset. The central importance of relationships with stand builders and modular hire systems highlights how process control is an integral part of the project. It is not merely a matter of designing spaces, but of orchestrating a chain of stakeholders and resources within strict deadlines. From this perspective, exhibition stand design appears as a field in which operational management carries at least as much weight as formal invention.

The three principal case studies - Quadro Design, Elica, and Pedrali - allow us to examine comparatively how this approach translates into specific design choices. “Palace of Wonders” for Pedrali reflects a phase in which the priority is maximum visibility within a trade fair conceived as a grand stage: a dense array of products, bold colours, and design elements intended to ensure clarity even under highly crowded conditions. The theme of sustainability remains in the background; what is explored instead is the management of quantity - of objects, people, and stimuli - and the construction of a strong image for an expanding company. With Quadro and Elica, a shift in emphasis can be observed. In the first case, the connection between the company’s history, its environmental stance, and its exhibition design choices is particularly close: the visible use of a rented structure, the incorporation of elements from the production environment, and the search for new uses for components and materials all point to an attempt to bridge the gap between exhibition spectacle and industrial reality. In the second case, the emphasis on the authenticity of materials and the clarity of the structure points in the same direction, but through an approach more closely linked to design language. The effectiveness of the exhibition is sought through the harmony between the nature of the materials, their colour, and the way they are assembled, rather than through disguising effects. In both cases, the theme of reuse is incorporated from the planning stage onwards, while remaining subject to the requirements of presentation and the temporary nature of the installation.

A cross-cutting analysis of these projects suggests that, for the studio, sustainability does not boil down to a single measure - such as removing carpet or using a certified material - but rather takes the form of a series of gradual adjustments within a framework that remains, to a large extent, unchanged: a modular rental structure, attention to standard commercial dimensions in order to minimise waste, and the search for elements that can be given a second life in showrooms or interior spaces. At the same time, certain ambivalences emerge. The demand for “perfect” surfaces can lead to the hire of new structures, resulting in increased use of virgin materials; the replacement of components perceived as problematic, such as carpet, does not in itself guarantee a better environmental balance if the alternatives have shorter life cycles or less established recycling chains. This is a conundrum that the studio does not claim to resolve. The very act of making it explicit - bringing it into the discussion rather than concealing it behind a “green” label - is one of the clearest ways in which the stance of the informed professional manifests itself in practice.

Larger-scale projects - Flos 2017, Euroluca 2023, and Design Holding 2019 - re-

present, in this context, borderline cases. The 2017 Flos pavilion and the stand for Design Holding at the 2019 Salone demonstrate the extent to which exhibition design can approach an almost architectural dimension, with complex structures, extensive finished surfaces, and high costs. In these examples, the focus is on the quality of the experience and the construction of a strong image for brands and corporate groups, while the issue of material life cycles remains secondary. The studio's subsequent reflections - and the difficulty of imagining similar projects today - suggest, however, that this phase is now regarded, in retrospect, as ill-suited to current economic and environmental conditions. The Flos stand at Euro-luce 2023 and the work on products help to define a shift in a different direction. In the first case, the choice of structures made entirely of wood and supported by reusable modular frames suggests greater integration between exhibition design and technical solutions intended to last across multiple cycles. In the second, the introduction of a minimum sustainability index for each product and the transition to packaging made entirely of cardboard extend this reasoning beyond the confines of the stand to encompass industrial and logistical processes. In both cases, attention to durability - of the lamp in relation to its initial impact, and of the stand in relation to the materials employed - becomes a tool for evaluating choices and comparing different dimensions of the project.

Overall, the picture that emerges is not one of abrupt transformation, but rather of gradual adaptation. The exhibition stand remains an inherently ephemeral structure, in which the disproportion between resources consumed and lifespan is difficult to eliminate. Within this constraint, the studio appears to employ the tools at its disposal - hire structures, design for reuse, attention to the authenticity of materials, and integration with product and packaging considerations - to limit some of the most obvious forms of waste and to make the relationship between image, process, and material more coherent. The move towards sustainability takes place through incremental steps: small shifts in the way structures are conceived, in relationships with production chains, and in the criteria used to assess impacts, rather than through programmatic declarations or exemplary solutions. The lesson that runs through Calvi Brambilla's work - and that may be worth drawing from this discussion - can be summarised in three points. The first concerns the designer's stance: the display is scenography, not a work of art; the product is the protagonist, and the quality of the design is measured by its ability to remain less visible than the product itself. The second concerns the nature of the project: retail fit-out belongs to the field of communication, and recognising this is not a concession but a starting point. What makes the difference is the

ethos with which this communicative nature is practised, namely the ability to hold together the functional programme, the interpretation of the brand, and responsibility for the process. The third concerns sustainability, understood in its broadest sense: not as a label to be attached to a project, but as a criterion of durability applied to every decision - from the modular structure to the panelling, from the carpet to the packaging - and as a willingness to acknowledge openly the contradictions inherent in exhibition stands rather than concealing them behind reassuring rhetoric. This is perhaps the most concise statement of method that the studio offers the reader: technical and cultural expertise placed at the service of an avowedly ephemeral installation, in which economy of means is regarded as a measure of craftsmanship rather than a virtue to be displayed, and in which consistency between what is said, what is built, and what remains after dismantling becomes the true measure of quality.

Notes

¹ From a conversation with Calvi & Brambilla on February 20, 2025



Fig. 14. Set-up photo - Booth entrance - Quadro Design
Salone del Mobile 2024 - Milan. Photo: Luca Caizzi



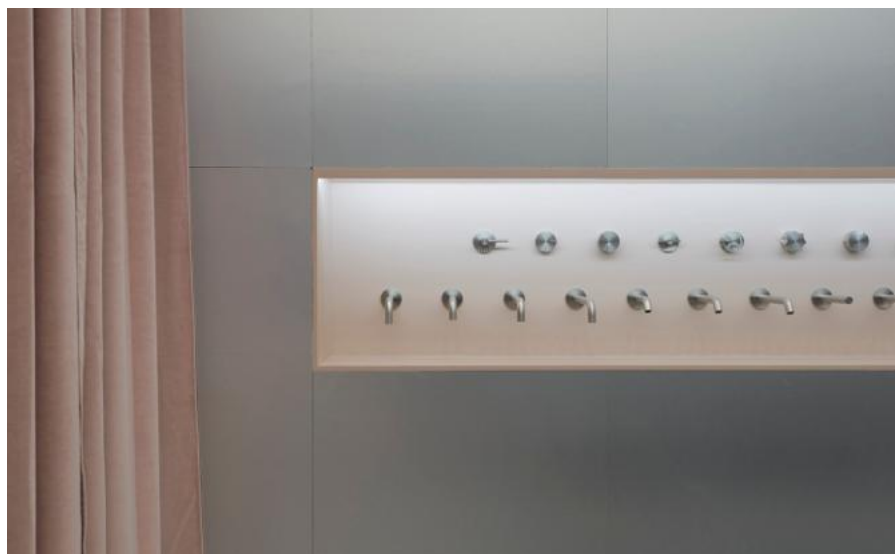
Fig. 15. Hollow-core wood display stand used to showcase wall-mounted faucets - Quadro Design - Salone del Mobile 2024 - Milan. Photo: Luca Caizzi



Fig. 16. Display unit consisting of stackable polypropylene bins, used to showcase built-in faucets for sinks or shower rods. - Quadro Design - Salone del Mobile 2024 - Milan. Photo: Luca Caizzi



Fig. 17. Photo of the outdoor booth - Quadro Design - Salone del Mobile 2022 - Milan. Photo: Marcello Maranzan



Figs. 18-19-20. Photographs of details from the exhibition design - Quadro Design - Salone del Mobile 2022 - Milan. Photo: Marcello Maranzan



Fig. 21. Photo of outdoor booth - Elica EuroCucina FTK 2024
- Milan. Photo: Elica



Fig. 22. Photo of the stand entrance, close-up of range hoods - Range hood installation - EuroCucina FTK 2024 range hood - Milan. Photo: Elica



Fig. 23. Photo of the booth, room with red aniline paint - Elica EuroCucina FTK 2024 - Milan. Photo: Elica



Fig. 24. Photo of the booth, room with blue aniline paint - Aspiration Hobs - Elica EuroCucina FTK 2024 - Milan. Photo: Elica



Fig. 25. Exterior photo of the booth - Pedrali - Palace of Wonders
- Salone del Mobile 2019 - Milan. Photo: Pedrali



Fig. 26. Photo of the booth entrance - Pedrali exhibition design - Palace of Wonders - Salone del Mobile 2019 - Milan. Photo: Pedrali



Fig. 27. Photo of the booth - Remind - Design by Pedrali - Palace of Wonders - Salone del Mobile 2019 - Milan. Photo: Pedrali



Fig. 28. Stand photograph - Buddy Sofa - Pedrali exhibition - Palace of Wonders - Salone del Mobile 2019 - Milan. Photo: Pedrali



Fig. 29. Exterior view of the booth - Flos Soft Walls - Flos EuroLuce 2017
- Milan. Photo: Germano Borrelli



Fig. 30. Photo of the booth entrance - Flos Soft Walls - Flos Euro luce 2017 - Milan.
Photo: Germano Borrelli



Fig. 31. Close-up photograph of the installation - Flos Soft Walls - Flos Euroluca 2017 - Milan. Photo: Germano Borrelli

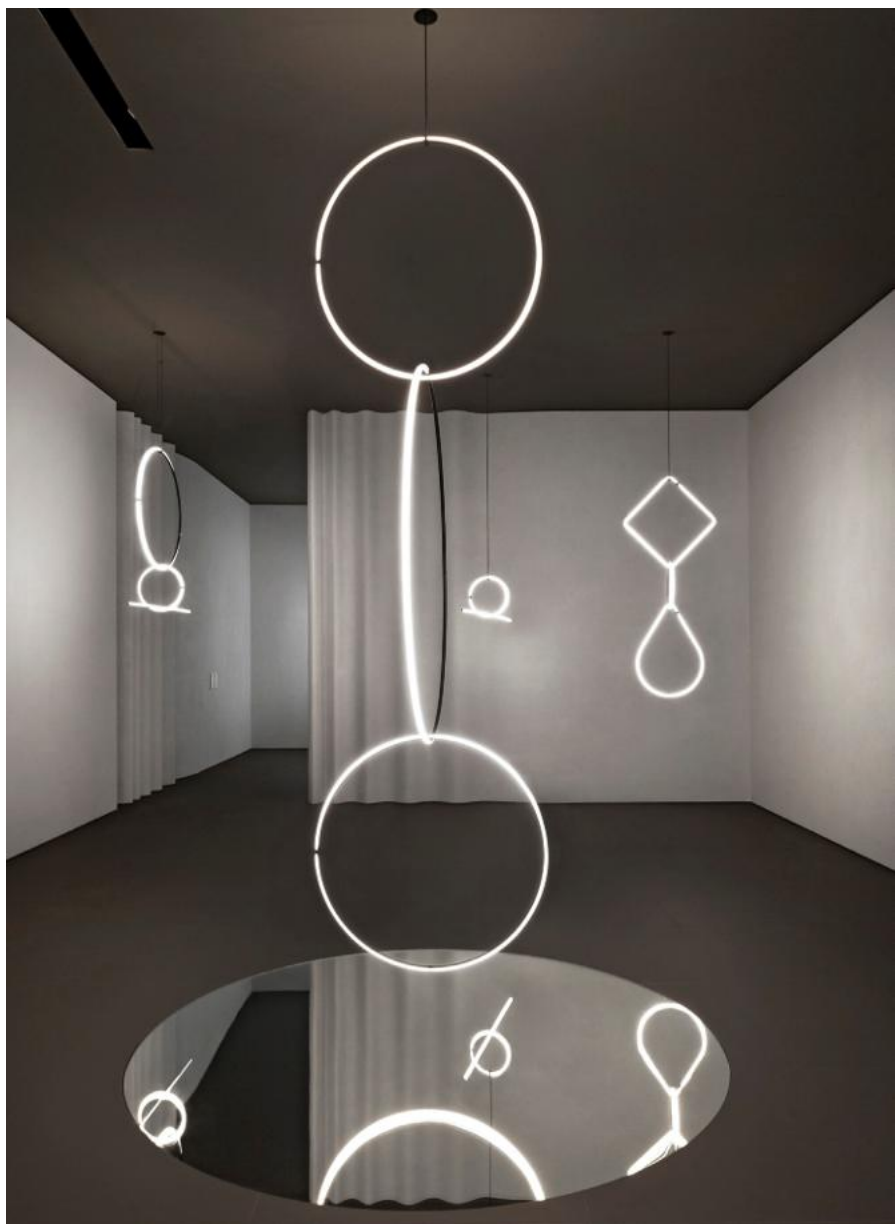


Fig. 32. Close-up photograph of the exhibition installation - Flos Euroluce 2017 - Milan. Photo: Germano Borrelli



Fig. 33. Close-up photo of the exhibition installation - Flos Euroluce 2017 - Milan.
Photo: Germano Borrelli



Fig. 34. Close-up photograph of the installation, Nendo exhibition at Flos Euroluce 2017 in Milan. Photo: Germano Borrelli



Fig. 35. Exterior photo of the booth - Flos Euroluce 2022
- Milan. Photo: Francesco Careda



Fig. 36. Photo of the entrance - Flos EuroLuce 2022 - Milan. Photo: Francesco Carreda



Fig. 37. Close-up photo of the exhibition setup - Flos Euroluce 2022 - Milan. Photo: Francesco Caredda

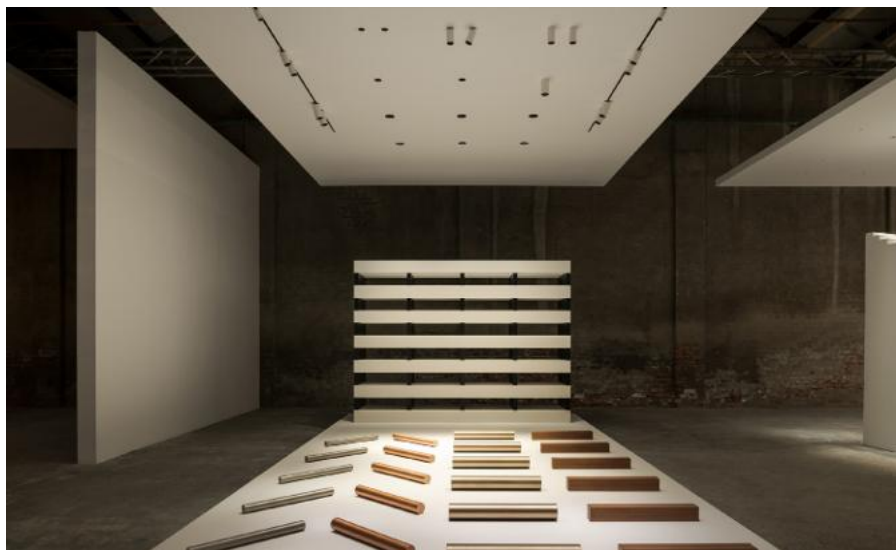


Fig. 38. Close-up photograph of the exhibition installation - Flos Euroluce 2022 - Milan. Photo: Francesco Caredda



Fig. 39. Close-up photograph of the exhibition installation - Flos Euroluce 2022 - Milan. Photo: Francesco Caredda

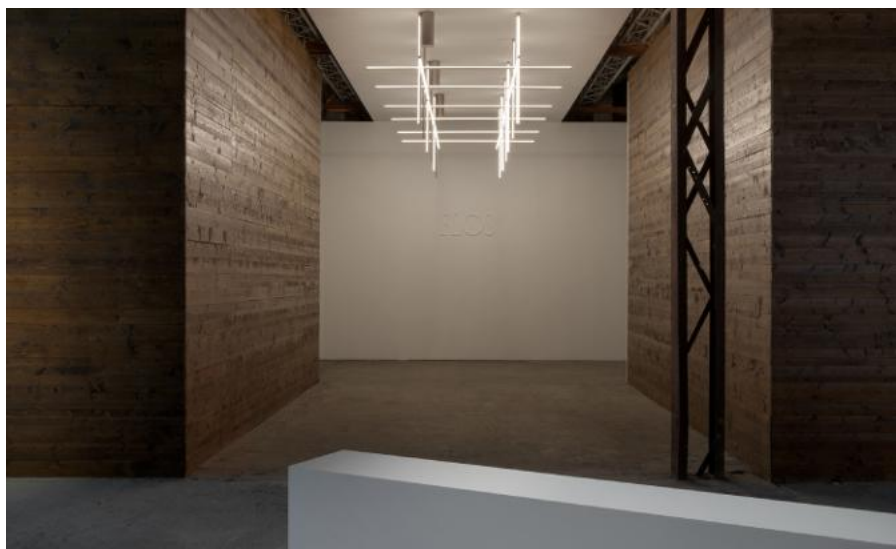


Fig. 40. Close-up photo of the installation - Flos Euroluce 2022 - Milan. Photo: Francesco Caredda



Fig. 41. Close-up photograph of the exhibition installation - Flos Euroluce 2022 - Milan. Photo: Francesco Caredda



Fig. 42. Photo of the booth entrance - Flos Euroluce 2023
- Milan. Photo: Gianluca Bellomo



Fig. 43. Construction site photo - Flos Euroluce 2023 - Milan. Photo: Calvi Brambilla & Partners



Fig. 44. Construction site photo - Flos Euroluce 2023 - Milan. Photo: Calvi Brambilla & Partners



Fig. 45. Close-up photograph of the installation, "Taccia Matt White" exhibition - Flos Euro luce 2023 - Milan. Photo: Gianluca Bellomo



Fig. 46. Photo of the booth, monitor exhibition hall - Flos Euroluca 2023 - Milan.
Photo: Gianluca Bellomo



Fig. 47. Close-up photograph of the installation, “Black Flag White Flag” exhibition hall - Flos Euroluca 2023 - Milan. Photo: Gianluca Bellomo



Fig. 48. Close-up photograph of the installation - Erwan Bouroullec, Emi - Flos Euroluca 2023 - Milan. Photo: Gianluca Bellomo



Fig. 49. Close-up photograph of the installation, Ceramique exhibition hall - Flos Euroluca 2023 - Milan. Photo: Gianluca Bellomo



Fig. 50. Installation photograph, Ceramique exhibition hall - Flos Euroluce 2023 - Milan. Photo: Gianluca Bellomo

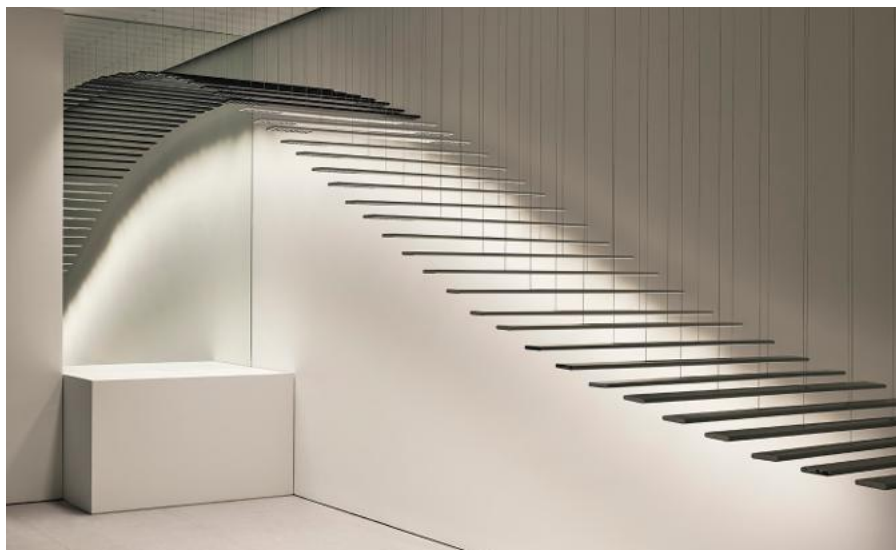


Fig. 51. Installation photograph, Workmates exhibition hall - Flos Euroluce 2023 - Milan. Photo: Gianluca Bellomo



Fig. 52. Close-up photograph of the installation - Gino Sarfatti, 2097 MATTE WHITE - Flos Euroluce 2023 - Milan. Photo: Gianluca Bellomo

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ALESSANDRO COLOMBO

Project systems, duration, and responsibilities

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*Project systems, duration, and responsibilities*¹

“A good design is already sustainable.” The phrase is uttered almost in passing, with the nonchalance of someone who ceased debating the issue long ago. It is neither a provocation nor a cliché; rather, it encapsulates a way of working that Alessandro Colombo, together with Studio Cerri & Associati and Studio Terra, has developed over decades of installations, exhibitions, and trade fair pavilions. It strips the topic of its rhetoric and returns it to practice: sustainability is not a separate chapter within the design process, nor a label to be applied at the end; instead, it is a quality that permeates the entire project - environment, technology, materials, economics, and, above all, time. Viewing an installation through this lens means asking not how striking it appears at its opening, but how effectively it endures over the years, how easily it can be dismantled, reused, and regenerated. Underlying this position is a clearly defined professional trajectory. Alessandro Colombo trained at the Politecnico di Milano, where he graduated in Architecture in 1987 under the supervision of Marco Zanuso. Following classical and musical studies, and with a thesis dedicated to the “Fabbrica di Vegetali,” he began a professional collaboration with Pierluigi Cerri in 1989 at Gregotti Associati

Fig. 1. Photograph by Alessandro Colombo, Architect. Photo: Alessandro Colombo <http://www.alcolombo.it/chi-siamo/>

International, becoming a partner between 1995 and 1998. These were the years during which a design practice took shape that systematically encompassed architecture, exhibition design, museum installations, interiors, visual identity, and product design. In 1991, together with Paola Garbuglio, he received the Osaka City Mayor's Prize for the project "Terra: Instructions for Use," and, alongside Bruno Morassutti, he participated in numerous international architectural competitions.

In 1998-99, he became a founding partner of Studio Cerri & Associati, Studio Cerri Associati Engineering - together with Pierluigi Cerri - and Terra - with Paola Garbuglio - firms that integrated exhibition design, graphic design, and architecture within a unified professional practice. From this nucleus emerged a body of work spanning several decades: the overall exhibition design and corporate identity for Saloni Worldwide in Moscow and New York; the interiors of Trussardi at Palazzo Marino alla Scala; the public spaces and temporary structures for Expo '98 in Lisbon; the restoration and museum design of the Arnaldo Pomodoro Foundation; and exhibitions at the Triennale, Palazzo Reale, the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. In 2004, the Compasso d'Oro awarded to the Naòs System office furniture system, produced by Unifor, affirmed a design philosophy that extends beyond the individual object to create adaptable systems. In the same year, the group to which he belongs won the international competition for the restoration of the Villa Reale in Monza.

Alongside his professional practice, Colombo has pursued extensive teaching and critical activities. He has taught at the Politecnico di Milano, the Politecnico di Torino, NABA, and within the IDEA Master's programme in Exhibition Design. Since 2016, he has served as Ambassador of Italian Design to the World, undertaking assignments in Vancouver, Jakarta, Asunción, Rovaniemi, Tripoli, Kyiv, Sydney, Amman, and Abu Dhabi. He acts as a consultant to the Salone del Mobile in Milan and the Diocesan Museum of the same city, while also contributing regularly to *Il Giornale dell'Architettura*, where his reflections on installations, major trade fairs, museums, and international exhibitions are accompanied by a continuous assessment of the cultural and process-related dimensions of design.

The firm explicitly distances itself from the notion of "poetics." If a poetics exists, it is argued, it emerges from work already completed and work still in progress, and is perhaps more readily perceived from the outside than articulated from within. An alternative formulation, recurring throughout the interview, replaces the term "poetics" with "method": a way of working that consistently begins with the specific case, the concrete problem, and the identification and imple-

mentation of appropriate solutions. The “poetic signature,” insofar as it exists, emerges only subsequently, as a consequence of the project’s capacity to respond not only to functional or programmatic requirements but also to expressive ones. A direct consequence of this approach is the designer’s deliberate “stepping aside.” Colombo states that he always places himself at the service of the space or, in the case of exhibition design, of the works to be displayed and the concepts to be communicated, avoiding the imposition of his own personality or signature. If visitors to an exhibition remember the artworks, the message, and the underlying concepts rather than the exhibition design itself, the Studio considers this a successful outcome. As the interviewee himself acknowledges, this represents a deliberately anti-historical position within a cultural context in which strategies of authorial affirmation tend to prevail. This choice, also attributed to the character and personality of the designers, is regarded as a constitutive characteristic rather than a tactical stance. It entails precise consequences: renouncing a strong visual signature means, in practice, leaving greater space for the exhibited object and thus for its symbolic longevity, while reducing that margin of “design gesture” that typically becomes the first element to be redesigned in subsequent iterations. From an external perspective, this position has equally precise implications in terms of language. The distinction between “object code,” “exhibition design code,” and “background code” - a didactic category employed by the interviewer to interpret different exhibition strategies - is confirmed by Colombo as an interpretative framework consistent with his own approach. In the Studio’s projects, one can identify considerable respect for both the object code and the background code, with the installation adopting a more restrained role and accepting that it is not the dominant vertex of the triangle. One may therefore speak of a “retrospective” poetics, which external interlocutors - critics, scholars, and researchers - can reconstruct through observation of the projects, but which the Studio itself does not claim as an explicit programme.

The same retrospective interpretation applies to the theme of the system. When asked whether systems constitute a poetic approach for the Studio, Colombo initially responds in the negative, only later acknowledging that, when considering the body of work as a whole, the observation is to some extent justified. The Studio has developed numerous systems without deliberately setting out to do so, identifying them each time as appropriate solutions to concrete problems: an exhibition that must travel to multiple venues, a trade fair pavilion that must adapt to different scales and contexts, or an exhibition identity that must accommodate highly diverse objects. This observation is particularly significant because

it is precisely along the axis of the system - and its relationship with time - that the possibility of a durable and repeatable installation emerges, capable of accommodating what could not have been foreseen at the moment of the initial design, as will be discussed in the following sections.

Time as the Subject Matter of the Project

The starting point from which Colombo develops his argument on sustainability is a provocation and should be understood as such. To assert that a good project is already sustainable does not imply downplaying the issue; rather, it means rejecting the reduction of sustainability to a media catchphrase, a declarative accessory, or a label attached to solutions justified on other grounds. In this formulation, sustainability is a quality assessed through practices and outcomes rather than declarations. This position reflects the distinction - repeated throughout the interview - between the “profession of communicators” and that of the designer. The pragmatism of the process derives from this premise. The studio’s operational sequence invariably begins with the programme, the space, and - in the case of an exhibition - the artwork or content to be displayed. Even in competitions, where a direct client is not yet present, these three elements together provide the framework to be followed: the design proposal is developed from them rather than from a predetermined formal matrix. This approach is rooted in a broadly “modernist” conception of design, in which the concrete problem - functional, spatial, or expressive - precedes and guides the choice of language. Within this framework, sustainability is neither a separate stage of the process nor a final verification, but rather a transversal quality of good design, embodied in the solutions provided to real-world problems.

Hence the decision to articulate the concept rather than simply defend or reject it. Sustainability is broken down into five dimensions: environmental, technological, material, financial, and temporal. Financial sustainability is regarded as an integral and unavoidable component of the project, since a good project must be capable of being realised without compromising any of the parties involved. Technological and material sustainability concern the coherence between available tools, materials, and processes and the desired formal outcomes. Environmental sustainability refers to the ecological impacts associated with production, assembly, and disposal. Finally, there is the fifth dimension, which Colombo identifies as the most neglected and perhaps the most significant: the sustainability of time.

With regard to time, the position is unequivocal. Once a building or installation is inaugurated, attention generally shifts elsewhere, whereas returning to project sites and finding them still in good condition years later is recognised as one of the principal merits of design work, irrespective of cases of poor maintenance and beyond the recent debate surrounding the closure of certain public installations. The paradigmatic example cited is the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The building is regarded as an extraordinary work and a landmark in the history of architecture and exhibition design; however, the fact that, forty years after its inauguration, it requires a third renovation is interpreted as evidence of a design era in which durability was not considered a project parameter. This is not intended as a criticism of that specific building, but rather as a reflection on contemporary conditions: today, it no longer seems realistic to assume that many buildings like the Pompidou can simply be “restored,” and durability therefore becomes a parameter that influences decisions from the outset.

The sustainability of time is recognised as an increasingly important concern, not so much among clients as among designers, in proportion to their responsibility and to the growing difficulty of financially supporting new interventions and renovations. Clients, even within the field of exhibition design, tend to focus their attention on the opening phase, while the subsequent life of the project almost invariably remains beyond their horizon. Designers are therefore confronted with a dual task: addressing the immediate moment while simultaneously creating the conditions for the project to endure, be maintained, and, where necessary, be dismantled and reassembled elsewhere. Even in ephemeral installations, whether they last a day, a month, or ten years, there is always a “time problem”: the time of making, which in installation design is a demanding constraint given that the opening date is non-negotiable, and the time of lasting, which depends on how the work has been constructed. Time is thus described as a genuine dimension of the project, to be considered on a par with scale or space: the “how” makes the difference.

The temporal dimension is closely linked to the issue of disposal. The question “what happens next?” - whether in terms of recycling, dismantling, disassembly, or reuse - is recognised as central, yet it is often addressed only partially, as it depends on costs and budgets rather than on a methodological aspiration. The case of trade fair schedules, where there are often many days allocated for installation and typically half that time or less for dismantling, is presented as emblematic of a structural problem: if the time available for dismantling is excessively compressed, demolition becomes the only viable option. Only the availability of adequa-

te time makes genuine disassembly possible and therefore enables planning for future phases. In this interpretation, time is not merely an external variable but a design variable that must be incorporated from the outset into sustainability-related reasoning.

This leads to a particularly clear observation concerning budgets. Over the past two or three decades, especially in the field of stage design, investment has declined substantially. This trend is viewed ambivalently. On the one hand, it represents a limitation, because larger budgets, if used intelligently, could generate higher-quality solutions, as demonstrated by the major productions of twentieth-century masters. On the other hand, the reduction of resources “sharpens the wits”: it encourages the reduction of waste, promotes reuse, and reintroduces a form of “old-fashioned thriftiness” that had been partly forgotten during years in which consumption was prioritised. Economic and environmental sustainability, in the interviewee’s account, therefore end up partially overlapping: even for purely economic reasons, less is discarded and greater attention is paid to reuse. Yet this overlap is also regarded as “cold comfort”: ideally, ample budgets would be available and used effectively, as was the case in the major installations of the twentieth century. The example cited is the truss-and-cable exhibition system designed by Albini and Helg, discovered during the restoration of Palazzo Rosso in Genoa. Although considered obsolete at the time of its discovery, it remains entirely functional and usable.

A clear position regarding clients remains central. Awareness of sustainability - in the broad sense outlined above - tends to be difficult to communicate to clients, who continue to focus primarily on the timelines and costs associated with construction and opening phases, while subsequent impacts remain secondary considerations. In this sense, it falls to the project itself to introduce into the client’s reasoning an assessment of the costs and benefits associated with the phases that follow the opening. The lesson that emerges is clear: genuine sustainability is not found in the dedicated sections of project reports, but in the construction details that determine whether a booth, an exhibition system, or an exhibition itself can have a second, third, or tenth life. It is these details - the type of joint, the cladding material, the way a wall is dismantled - that ultimately distinguish a sustainable project from one that merely claims to be so.

Three projects as a laboratory

If time is the decisive dimension of the project, the system is the operational tool through which the Studio attempts to manage it. The emphasis on the “system” is one of the dimensions that most clearly runs through the set of projects analyzed. Although the Studio does not describe the system as a programmatic poetics, the frequency with which its installations adopt systemic devices - modular elements, repeatable articulations, and possibilities for disassembly - indicates a recurring methodological choice. This section analyzes three projects that, when examined comparatively, illustrate how the systemic theme is applied in very different contexts: the traveling exhibition on Pier Luigi Nervi, the installation for the Paolo Grassi centenary with its “trunk” versions, and the ADI Index exhibition system based on the square-meter module. In all cases, the economic factor constitutes one of the driving forces behind the project, not in a punitive sense but as a factor that guides long-term construction choices. The transport factor, and thus the volume and quantity of material moved, also becomes an explicit design parameter.

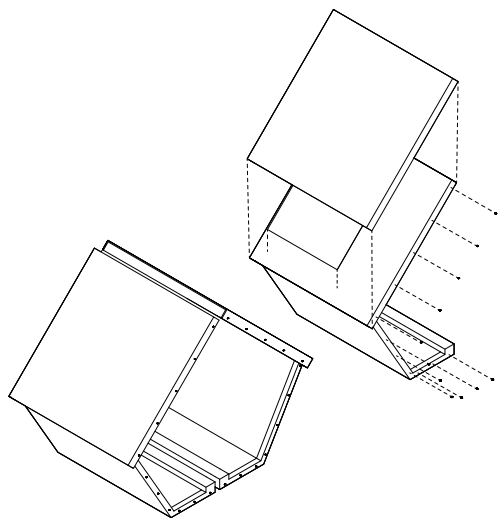


Fig. 2. Graphic representation of the exhibition module - Pier Luigi Nervi. *Architecture as a Challenge* - Brussels, CIVA 2010. Redesign: M. La Barbera - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2025-26

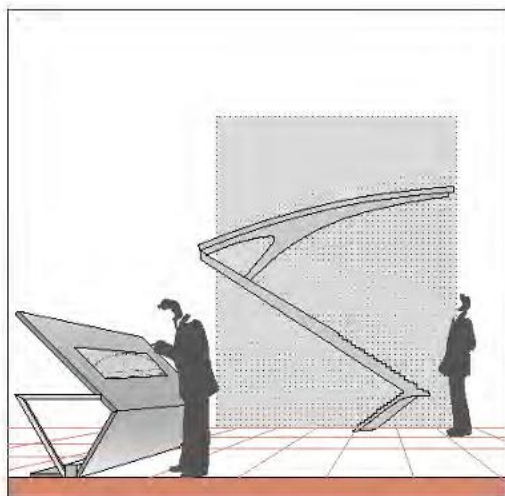


Fig. 3. Original drawing - Exhibition design view - Pier Luigi Nervi. Architecture as a Challenge - Brussels CIVA 2010 - Edited by Carlo Olmo. Image: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio

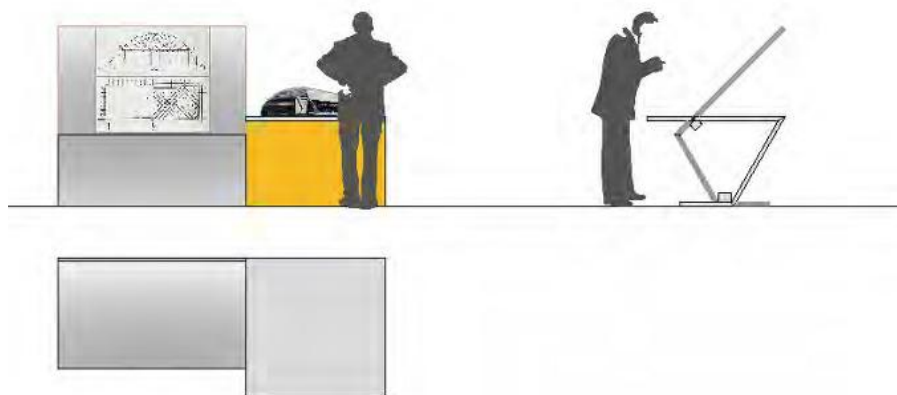


Fig. 4. Original drawing - Exhibition design for the display element - Pier Luigi Nervi. Architecture as a Challenge - Brussels, CIVA 2010 - Edited by Carlo Olmo. Image: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio

Pier Luigi Nervi Exhibition

The exhibition system dedicated to Pier Luigi Nervi (Figs. 2-4) originated as an exploration of the two-dimensional element. The decision to begin with flat components, which could be disassembled into low-volume packages, stemmed from a very specific operational condition: the intention to create a series of exhibitions dedicated to Nervi in locations that had not yet been defined. When work began, the Studio did not yet have a precise idea of the path the exhibition would take, nor of its duration. The system was conceived as a “design intention” rather than as a response to a defined program: the goal was a system capable of adapting to different contexts, although those contexts were not yet known.

The first test came completely unexpectedly. While the exhibition was in Brussels (Figs. 8-14), at the architecture center, the opportunity arose to bring it to Venice (Figs. 15-16) for the Architecture Biennale on very short notice. Without a system that could be loaded onto a single truck and transported from Brussels to Venice in two days, the operation would not have been feasible because of cost, complexity, and time constraints. The physical lightness of the system thus became an enabling factor: it made possible a move that, without that design choice, would simply have been unimaginable. This point deserves attention because it demonstrates how an apparently incidental technical decision - the transport volume - can, in reality, open up or foreclose entire exhibition possibilities, thereby influencing the very trajectory of the project.

Following this first relocation, the system was tested in many other venues. The exhibition continued to travel, following a research cycle conducted with Carlo Olmo and a group of young scholars who had gathered around the project and contributed their own investigative expertise to the work of the “distant and forgotten” master. The stages followed specific themes: in Turin, the focus was on industrial commissions; in Florence, on the Berta Stadium; in other venues, on works created for the Rome Olympics or major infrastructure projects. The twelve icons initially identified with Carlo Olmo remained the “foundation” of the project, but new additions were progressively incorporated, tailored to the specific venue and featured theme: the Burgo Paper Mill, the Pirelli Building, the stadiums, and the conference halls. The system expanded through addition and adaptation. In some cases, the number of pieces increased; in others, elements of special dimensions were produced. This was the case with the drawing of the Verona Bridge, two and a half meters long, for which a display case of corresponding dimensions was created; once incorporated into the system, it in turn became a

resource available for future exhibitions.

The assembly was designed to be accessible. All screws have the same Allen head; if components are lost, the screws can be purchased at any hardware store, as they are standard commercial parts. With two Allen wrenches, even a non-specialist could theoretically assemble the installation, although professional installers remain faster and more precise. The reference to self-assembly furniture, with the Allen key included in the package, illustrates the principle: the installation is designed to be disassembled and reassembled as a repeated series of simple operations, accessible in a wide range of contexts.

An unintended consequence is that, after several iterations, the system has effectively become a permanent installation, permanently housed in a single location. Without claiming any particular credit, the Studio notes that this was possible precisely because the system was well designed from the outset, beyond the initial information available. The robustness of the system's design - capable of adapting to new situations, accommodating variations, and incorporating unexpected discoveries such as Nervi's autographed pencil drawings of the earlier version of the Florence Stadium, found in the home of one of his grandsons - has proven, in retrospect, to be a successful choice not only for addressing the various situations encountered, but also for making them possible in the first place. Without the system, some of those situations could not even have been considered.

The lesson highlighted by the Nervi case is counterintuitive: in the design of modular systems, the goal is not to foresee everything, but to create the conditions under which the unforeseeable can still be accommodated. According to the interviewee, this is an exercise in "design humility" and "economy of means": the more essential the system, the more capable it is of accommodating variation. The key is simplicity, which here becomes not an aesthetic quality but an operational parameter: fewer components, clearer assembly rules, and the possibility of intervention in many different contexts.

Paolo Grassi Exhibition

The exhibition dedicated to Paolo Grassi (Figs. 5, 17-22), created for the anniversary celebrations organized by the Paolo Grassi Foundation, constitutes a second instance in which economic constraints are translated into a systemic choice. The Foundation was strongly committed to staging a commemorative exhibition dedicated to Grassi but had very limited resources. The Studio revisited a methodo-

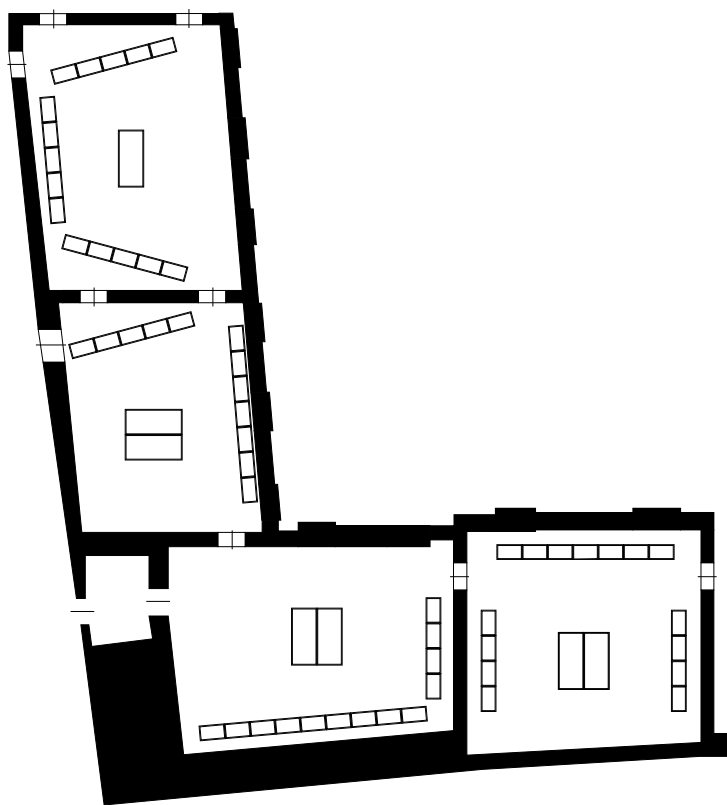


Fig. 5. Floor plan - Paolo Grassi - Palazzo Reale exhibition layout - Palazzo Reale - Milan 2019. Redesign: V.Turi - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2025-26

logical approach previously employed on other occasions - the “famous Bauhaus exhibition scheme,” which emphasizes the plurality of possible exhibition planes - and applied it as a framework for the new exhibition, having already used it for the exhibition on La Rinascita in Asti and for an exhibition on Gehry in Milan. The design challenge of the exhibition layout for Paolo Grassi lay in asking whether it was possible to create an entire exhibition using a single object, itself composed of assembled linear elements. The Studio’s answer was the “K”: a wooden element, formed by joining linear pieces, capable of assuming different roles within the space (Fig. 6). Depending on how it was assembled, the same “K”

became a canopy, a vertical wall, a display case, a table, or a support for images, videos, and objects. The unified design language generated a variety of exhibition functions from a single repeated element. The fact that the system functioned within the required time and cost constraints is cited as one of the project's most important achievements, even before consideration of the visual result.

The choice of wood is explicitly linked to its durability over time. Wood, whether marked or scratched, does not lose its quality; it remains acceptable even when bearing signs of use. A lacquered or painted metal element, by contrast, "immediately looks old": every scratch or mark is visible, and a worn surface immediately conveys the idea of diminished value. The choice of wood anticipates traces of use and accepts them as a natural part of the object's life. It is a material choice with precise consequences for the system's life cycle: wood remains reusable over multiple cycles, whereas painted surfaces would require frequent restoration to maintain an acceptable appearance. In other words, the choice of material is also, and above all, a choice concerning durability and therefore sustainability.

Once established, the K system was used for three large-scale exhibitions - in Milan, Florence, and Puglia, Grassi's home region - with exhibition spaces of 400, 500, and 600 square meters. The modular logic made it possible to manage the-

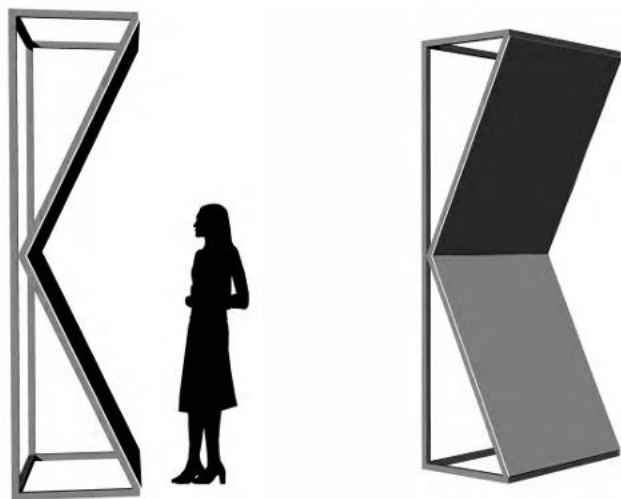


Fig. 6. Original drawing - Zero K Exhibition System. Image: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio

se spaces through a consistent construction approach, adjusting the number of K units employed according to the scale of the specific venue. The fact that the system is demountable, with metal nodes, standard joints, and screwed linear elements, means that it can theoretically be reduced to a pallet of components and a box of joints; in practice, the Ks can be stacked and transported either vertically or horizontally, reducing assembly times in different settings.

A further development, underway at the time of the interview, consisted of creating a “subsystem” intended for a much smaller version of the exhibition. The practical requirement was for a setup that could fit into a trunk, be transported even in a van, and be installed directly in theater foyers. The Studio therefore designed a trunk containing cardboard elements that, once opened and assembled, formed a small, self-contained installation sufficient to create an experience for the audience. The first planned venues included Naples and Florence, followed by Paris and Milan. The progression within the same system - from the large-scale exhibition to the theater installation, from a configuration spanning hundreds of square meters to one contained within a single transportable container - does not entail a compromise, but rather a coherent reduction of the setup achieved through work on the basic element and its decomposition. It constitutes a concrete demonstration of a principle: if the system is well conceived, it can operate at very different scales without losing coherence, and an exhibition in a suitcase is not an impoverished exhibition, but a recalibrated one.

The ADI Index System

The exhibition system designed for the ADI Index (Figs. 7, 23-30) operates within an entirely different framework. In this case, the Studio begins with a clearly defined basic unit: the square meter, embedded within a geometry consistent with the golden ratio system. The exhibition structure, which annually hosts the major showcase of objects, products, and projects selected for the ADI Index, is built upon this module. The choice of the module as the basic unit introduces a fundamental uniformity that allows very different objects to be displayed without requiring the design of new dedicated supports each time.

The system has been tested in a significant way. Originally designed for installation in Milan and Rome, it now follows the Italian cities designated as Capitals of Culture: it has been installed in Agrigento, will next be presented in L'Aquila, and subsequently in Pordenone. This trajectory could not have been foreseen at the

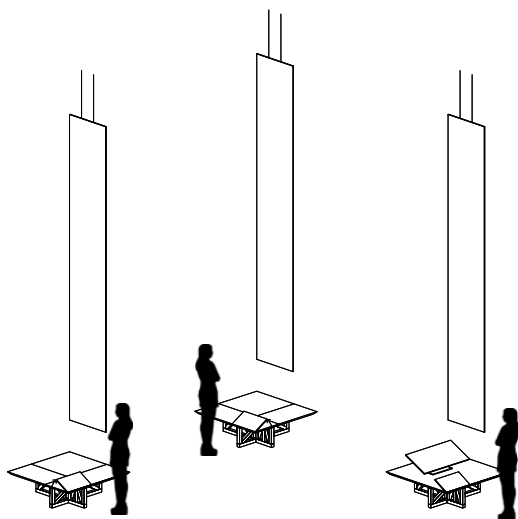


Fig. 7. Original design - Display module with graphics and monitor. Image: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio

time of the initial design, since the strategy of following the Capitals of Culture was defined later. The fact that the system has been successfully installed in highly diverse contexts, characterized by different spatial geometries, is regarded as a positive outcome of the decision to design it as a modular device with a coherent underlying framework.

The relationship with the “object code,” which is particularly heterogeneous in the case of the Index, constitutes one of the most significant tests for the system. On the one hand, the exhibition includes immaterial objects - design understood as systems, services, experiences, and interfaces - that lack their own physicality. On the other hand, it includes objects with a very high degree of physicality, such as a two-by-two-meter home swimming pool, a “large object” that required the system to be adapted to its dimensions. Managing such distant extremes within the same modular system was possible precisely because the basic unit, the square meter, allows for a very broad range of configurations.

Here too, wood proved to be the most effective choice. The wooden surface, although susceptible to minor scratches or stains, maintains an acceptable appearance, especially when compared with painted or metallic surfaces that would

immediately reveal signs of wear. For the coming year, the Studio is considering introducing a color variation to further extend the system's lifespan while maintaining its contemporary appearance. Even a well-designed system, after a certain number of years, faces pressure to renew itself; this may be interpreted both as a legitimate need for updating and as an effect of the symbolic wear generated by the logic of trade fairs and cultural events. Conceiving a new system after the previous one has functioned successfully is described as a "happy problem": a positive problem, indicating the success of the original system. The response to this problem, however, must be carefully designed so that renewal does not simply result in the disposal of the existing system and its replacement with a new one.

Other projects mentioned: from the fair to the trunk

Alongside the three main systemic cases, the interview highlights two additional projects that extend and test the same methodological hypotheses in different contexts: the system for the Salone del Mobile in Moscow, used for more than fifteen years by the same installer with a practice of partial component regeneration; and the more recent exhibition on Dante Bini in Milan, in which material reduction is taken to an extreme through a system composed of printed sheets rolled onto aluminum tubes. These are two cases that differ in scale, duration, and context, yet are united by the same attention to the relationship between material, transport, and time.

Moscow Furniture Fair

The system created for the Moscow Furniture Fair was used by the Studio for more than fifteen years, until 2019. Production ceased first because of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently because of the war; however, during that long period the system served as a highly effective operational laboratory for addressing the reuse and regeneration of the physical components of pre-built exhibition stands. It consisted of an aluminum structure with a series of cladding elements and exemplified a recurring challenge in trade fair culture: how to reconcile the client's desire for a stand perceived as "new" with the technical possibility of reusing most of the components.

The solution adopted, described in the interview as the result of a "collaborative

effort” with the stand builder, consisted of a controlled rotation: each year, approximately 20-30% of the parts were replaced or refurbished, while the remainder were retained. In this way, the stand maintained a renewed image without requiring a complete reconstruction for every edition. Economically and environmentally, the advantage was twofold: retaining 70-80% of the components drastically reduced both the use of virgin material and the production of waste compared with an entirely new system; and the periodic updating of a minority of parts helped prevent the “wear-and-tear fatigue” that would result from reusing the entire pre-built structure unchanged for many years. What initially appears to be merely a maintenance strategy reveals itself, upon closer examination, to be a genuine operational model: an intermediate condition between “all new” and “all used,” in which both extremes are neutralized through a carefully calibrated percentage.

The Moscow system also demonstrated remarkable flexibility in terms of scale. Over the years, the occupied area fluctuated from five, six, or seven thousand square meters to twenty or twenty-two thousand square meters. This variability was managed by adjusting the quantity of components employed, without modifying the structural logic of the system. International logistics further confirmed the robustness of the system: the firm consistently assembled the booth using local workers who received brief training, thereby avoiding the need to transport personnel from Italy. Only the materials were transported, while operational knowledge of the system was transferred on site through a local manager and through procedures embedded in the component design.

This case clearly illustrates the cultural dimension of sustainability in exhibition booths. The principal difficulty is not technical: reusable modular systems exist, are robust, and are economically advantageous over the long term. The difficulty is cultural and psychological: “we want new things” - the shiny car, the jacket without holes. A used object, even when it fully retains its functional characteristics, is perceived as devalued. In this context, accepting reuse and partial regeneration requires a change in the client’s perspective, not merely a technical modification of the project. This is one of the main issues recognized by the other firms interviewed in this book: the client’s reluctance to accept previously used materials and components, even when their technical performance remains fully intact.

The case is also useful for discussing the role of the fit-out contractor. A strategy of partial regeneration requires workers willing to dismantle and reassemble components carefully, to separate reusable elements from those that must be replaced, and to carry out targeted interventions rather than rebuilding from scratch. The

Studio observes that some stand builders are capable of and willing to work in this way, while others are primarily oriented toward maximizing revenue through complete reconstructions. This constitutes a structural issue: the sustainability of exhibition stand construction depends not only on the quality of the design, but also on the quality of the relationship with the production chain and on the stand builder's willingness to integrate reuse practices into its business model.

The emphasis on existing systems reappears in a methodological observation. The Studio notes that many of the very large stands at the Salone del Mobile - designed as architectural structures with plastered walls and high-quality finishes - often conceal standardized modular systems behind the scenes. Faced with the need to build thousands of square meters within extremely tight deadlines, stand builders resort to modular systems for reasons of cost and constructability, even when the designer does not explicitly specify them. Some of these aluminum systems have been in use for forty years and have been amortized many times over, yet in most cases they remain invisible to the public because clients do not want them to be recognized as such. The proposed approach that emerges from this observation is to integrate the modular system explicitly into the design, rather than concealing it behind new finishes: even in a one-off exhibition, it is possible to conceive the installation through the use of existing market systems, appropriately "dressed" in a manner consistent with the exhibition content.

Dante Bini in Milano

A second case mentioned by the Studio in passing during the interview is the exhibition dedicated to Dante Bini, held in Milan at the ADI Design Museum in May prior to the interview. Here again, the thread is that of the progressive reduction of materials and transportability, but pushed to a further threshold of lightness. The installation consists entirely of ultra-light printed fabric panels that roll up around aluminium tubes. Once rolled up, each element occupies a very small volume: it may not fit in a suitcase, but it certainly fits in a car.

Formally, the design prioritises graphic and textile elements over traditional structural ones: the installation does not rest on walls, but on printed surfaces that can be unrolled and stretched during assembly, conveying images and content without requiring bulkier rigid structures. The aluminium tube serves both as a transport support (it wraps the fabric) and as an assembly element (it keeps it taut in place), following a dual-function logic typical of devices designed to

reduce the number of components.

Although the interviewee treated this case as a brief mention rather than a structured exposition, it completes the picture of the systems developed by the Studio. If Nervi represents the two-dimensional system designed to travel by truck, and Grassi in its “suitcase” version is the system reducible to a cardboard box, Bini occupies a further threshold: the installation reduced to the fabric-tube pair, capable of fitting in a car trunk and being assembled with a very limited number of steps. Here again, the operating principle is the same - reducing components, reducing transport volume, maintaining communicative effectiveness - but expressed through a different material vocabulary. This confirms that “simplicity,” as Colombo defines it, is not a stylistic formula but a working approach that can be applied to very different scales and languages.

Discussion and Conclusion

The body of materials analysed paints a picture of a studio that takes a clear stance on the theme of sustainable design: a stance that starts from the pragmatism of the individual problem, recognises sustainability as a cross-cutting quality of good design, and identifies the dimension of time - both in terms of making and duration - as the decisive parameter for evaluation. The absence of a declared poetics, replaced by a reference to “method” and the designer’s “stepping aside,” should be interpreted not as a neutralisation of language, but as a precise cultural choice: allowing the space, the object, and the message to emerge, reducing the presence of the installation to what is strictly necessary to create the conditions for legibility.

The systemic approach, recognised in hindsight as one of the studio’s defining characteristics, constitutes the practical application of this philosophy. The three cases analysed - Nervi, Grassi, ADI Index - show how the system is designed in different ways depending on the context: as a two-dimensional device with low transport volume for the travelling exhibition; as a single object composed of linear elements, the “K,” for the medium-scale exhibition; as a minimal geometric module, the square metre, for the large, heterogeneous exhibition. In all three cases, modularity is not asserted as a style, but as a response to real conditions: limited budgets, the need for rapid transport, heterogeneity of content, and longevity across multiple cycles. The other projects mentioned - the system for Moscow and the exhibition on Dante Bini in Milan - confirm this trajectory, introducing

further variations: the controlled regeneration of components as an operational model for trade fairs, and the extreme reduction of the installation down to the level of a rolled-up sheet as the ultimate limit of this same reasoning.

A cross-cutting analysis of the projects suggests that for the Studio, sustainability does not coincide with individual technical measures, but with a design approach that integrates durability, disassembly, and the possibility of reuse from the very beginning. The concept of “broad sustainability” - environmental, technological, material, financial, and temporal - functions as both a framework for interpretation and an operational tool. The temporal dimension, in particular, is used as a parameter to evaluate seemingly disparate choices: a lamp with a useful life spanning decades and a trade fair booth lasting only a few days are compared on the same ground - that of the relationship between resources used and time of use. This comparison leads to a push towards designing durable devices, even for temporary use, through the reusability of their components.

Some explicitly acknowledged ambivalences remain. The first concerns the “variability of sustainability”: what is sustainable today may not be so tomorrow, simply because external conditions change, such as stock availability, transport options, and energy costs. This variability necessitates the development of flexible strategies, such as the pre-deployment of systems across multiple locations - a solution that is seemingly paradoxical but potentially effective for managing unforeseeable scenarios. The second ambivalence concerns the relationship with the culture of the new: clients’ reluctance to see previously used materials introduces an objective limit to reuse practices, which can be partially mitigated - as in the case of Moscow - but not entirely eliminated.

A third issue concerns the relationship between form and structure. The interviewee identifies the divergence between these two dimensions as one of the most problematic deviations in contemporary architecture: the pursuit of “impossible” forms that then require structural engineers, engineers, and set designers to build “theatrical machines” to realise them. The Studio explicitly distances itself from this approach, which it considers flawed even when it yields successful results in the media. The alternative proposal, summarised in the phrase “we pursue impossible forms that someone must build for us,” reframes the problem in terms of responsibility: the designer cannot limit themselves to defining the form and leaving the task of bringing it to life to others. Structures and forms must be conceived together, and this conjunction is identified as a specific task of the project. The notion of “responsibility” recurs as the final keyword of the interview. Sustainability, as formulated by the Studio, is not primarily an environmental issue,

but a matter of the designer's responsibility towards the space, the work, the public, the client, and the production chain. This notion translates into attention to the project's overall life cycle, mediation between conflicting needs, and the choice not to shift the formal consequences of one's own decisions onto others. The distance from "press releases" - evoked at several points as examples of sustainability that is declared but not practised - clearly marks the Studio's position regarding the current rhetoric of sustainable design. A final aspect, common to all the cases analysed, concerns the role of collaboration with manufacturers, workers, and suppliers. The Studio insists on the idea that good projects are created side by side with stakeholders in the supply chain, in a practice that is less vertical and more horizontal, where form is not imposed from above but built together with those who understand systems, materials, and opportunities for innovation. It is also in this dimension - and not merely in programmatic statements - that the concrete possibility of creating more sustainable installations is played out today.

Notes

¹ From a conversation with Alessandro Colombo on November 12, 2025



Fig. 8. Exhibition photograph - Pier Luigi Nervi. Architecture as a Challenge
- Brussels, CIVA 2010. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 9. Exhibition photograph - Pier Luigi Nervi. *Architecture as a Challenge* - Brussels, CIVA 2010. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 10. Exhibition photograph - Pier Luigi Nervi. *Architecture as a Challenge* - Brussels, CIVA 2010. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 11. Exhibition photograph - Pier Luigi Nervi. Architecture as a Challenge - Brussels, CIVA 2010. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 12. Photograph of the interior exhibition design - Pier Luigi Nervi. Architecture as a Challenge - Palazzo Giustinian Lolin - Venice 2010. Photos: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 13. Photograph of the interior exhibition design - Pier Luigi Nervi. Architecture as a Challenge - Palazzo Giustinian Lolín - Venice 2010. Photos: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio

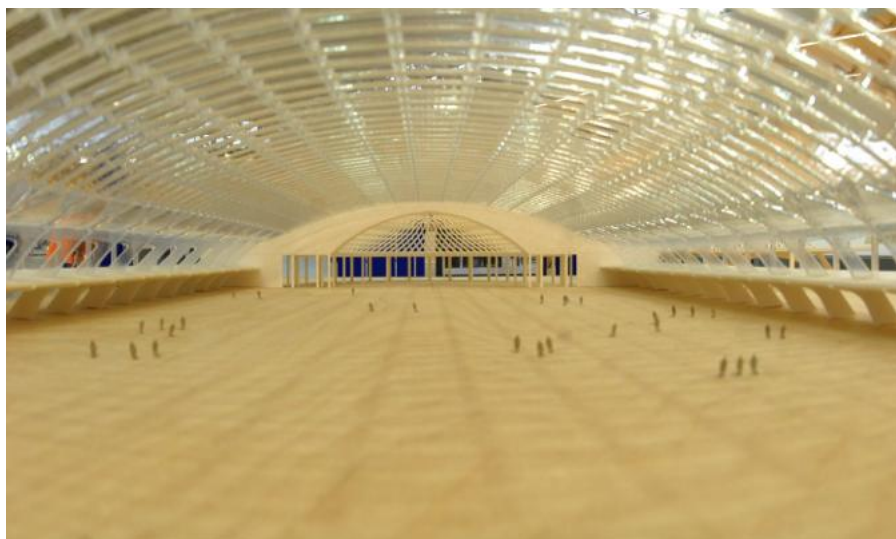


Fig. 14. Model photograph - Pier Luigi Nervi. Architecture as a Challenge - Exhibition Hall, Pavilion C - Turin 2011. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 15. Detail photograph of the exhibition design - Pier Luigi Nervi. Architecture as a Challenge - Exhibition Hall, Pavilion C - Turin 2011. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 16. Detail photograph of the exhibition design - Pier Luigi Nervi. Architecture as a Challenge - Exhibition Hall, Pavilion C - Turin 2011. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 17. Exhibition view - Paolo Grassi - Palazzo Reale with exhibition installation - Palazzo Reale - Milan 2019. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 18. Exhibition photography - Paolo Grassi - Palazzo Reale with exhibition installation - Palazzo Reale - Milan 2019. Photos: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 19. Exhibition photography - Paolo Grassi - Palazzo Reale with exhibition installation - Palazzo Reale - Milan 2019. Photos: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 20. Close-up photograph of the Zero K exhibition system - Paolo Grassi - Palazzo Reale, as installed - Palazzo Reale - Milan 2019. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 21. Detail photo of the exhibition installation - Paolo Grassi - Palazzo Reale with exhibition installation - Palazzo Reale - Milan 2019. Photos: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 22. Close-up photograph of the Zero K exhibition system - Paolo Grassi - Palazzo Reale, as installed - Palazzo Reale - Milan 2019. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



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Fig. 23. Photograph of the exhibition entrance - ADi Index 2023. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio

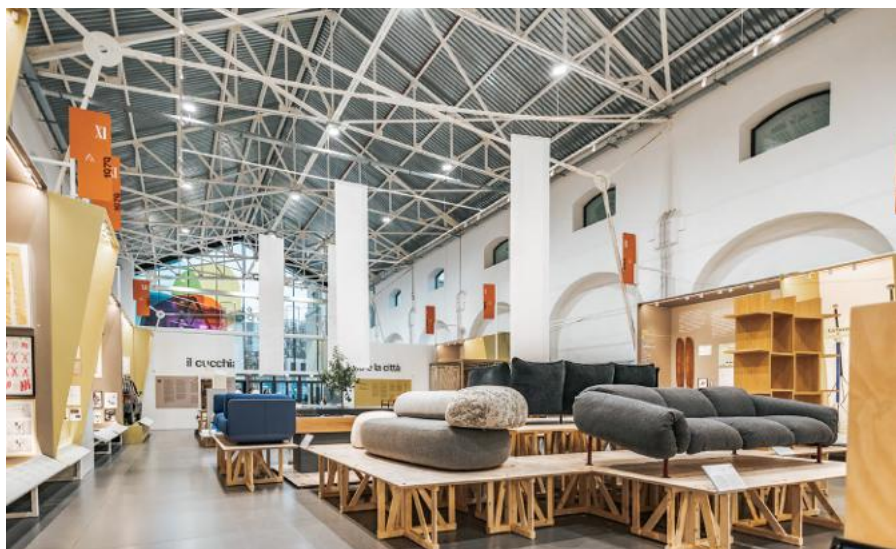


Fig. 24. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - ADi Index 2023. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio

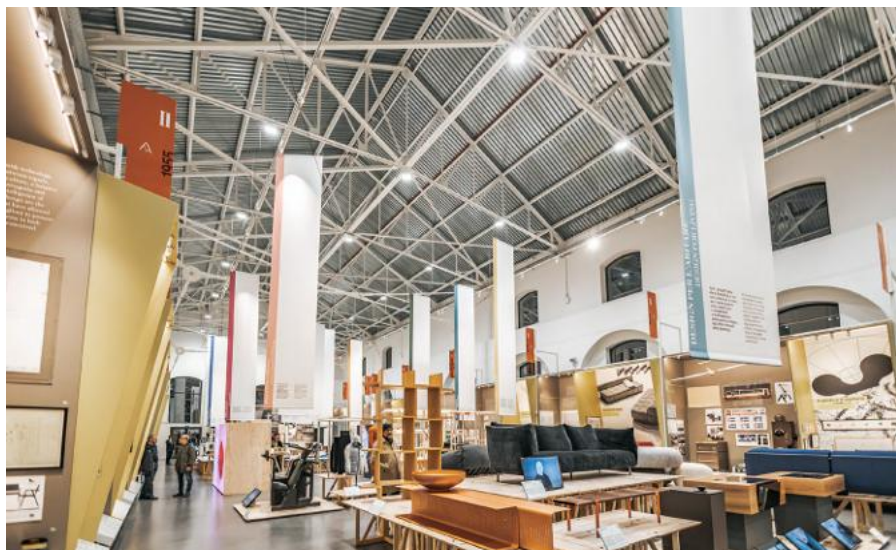


Fig. 25. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - ADi Index 2023. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 26. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - ADi Index 2023. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 27. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - ADi Index 2023. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio

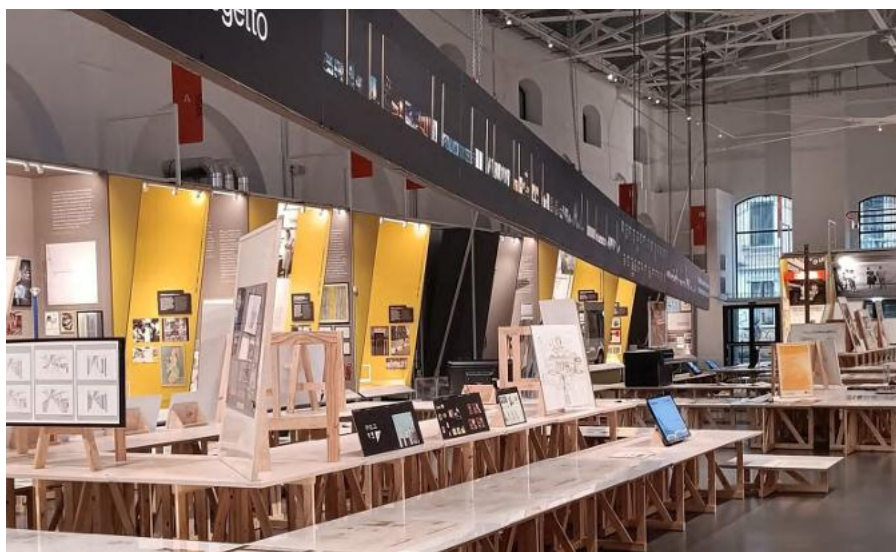


Fig. 28. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - ADi Index 2023. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 29. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - ADi Index 2023. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio



Fig. 30. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - ADi Index 2023. Photo: Alessandro Colombo, Paola Garbuglio

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DOTDOTDOT

Narrative spaces at the intersection of digital technology, urban renewal, and “life-centered” design

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DOTDOTDOT

Narrative spaces at the intersection of digital technology, urban renewal, and “life-centered” design¹

“We’d like an exhibition with AI, with augmented reality...” These are words that, according to Dotdotdot, arrive in the studio with some regularity. The response usually does not begin with the requested technology, but with a counter-question: what do you want to convey, to whom, and why? It is in this small gesture - shifting the focus from the medium to the content - that much of the Milan-based studio’s philosophy is articulated. Founded in 2004 by two architects, a philosopher/interaction designer, and a designer, the studio has, from the very beginning, operated in that borderland where exhibit design, interaction design, and service design cease to be separate disciplines and begin to be understood as parts of the same problem.

Dotdotdot defines its work as the design of “narrative environments”: physical and digital spaces in which architecture, content, interfaces, and technologies are integrated to create guided experiences, rather than isolated installations. From this perspective, the unit of the project is not the device, but the visitor’s overall journey. The studio’s client network confirms this hybrid positioning. The studio works with museums, cultural institutions, archaeological parks, and corpo-

Fig. 1. DotDotDot photograph - Portrait of the Founders. Photo: DSL Studio, Piercarlo Quecchia

rate museums, as well as with entities active in the energy, research, healthcare, and communications sectors. In these contexts, the studio is often asked to intervene not only on the form of the exhibition design but also on the definition of exhibition content, modes of engagement, and, at times, the construction of the site's narrative identity itself. The curatorial and spatial dimensions thus tend to overlap.

Three terms recur in the studio's discourse: storytelling, co-design, and technological innovation. The project is described as the construction of experiential "journeys" that must be engaging yet inclusive, capable of addressing audiences diverse in age, background, and expertise. Exhibition design is conceived as an integrated orchestration of light, sound, text, data, interactive devices, and architecture, with the aim of facilitating the understanding of complex themes - from climate to physics, from archaeology to data - without reducing them to mere spectacle.

In this context, technology is presented primarily as a means. Requests framed as a "technological showcase" are systematically reframed as questions about objectives, content, and audiences. Digital components are treated as a layer that enables multiple levels of interpretation, content updates, and partial customization of visitor pathways - not as an end in themselves. For this reason as well, interaction design is developed in parallel with spatial design from the earliest stages, rather than being added later. The firm states that it is shifting from a human-centered design perspective toward a position defined as life-centered. This shift involves considering, in addition to the immediate needs of visitors, the social and environmental implications of design choices. The user experience remains central, but is framed within a broader context: the relationship with local communities, with the cultural policies of institutions, and with the physical and digital impacts of the adopted solutions. Sustainability is thus described not as an additional "phase," but as a cross-cutting filter comparable to accessibility, permeating the process from start to finish.

An important role in this approach is played by OpenDot, a fab lab founded in 2014 and later transformed into an ETS Foundation. OpenDot is presented as an operational extension of the studio: a place for prototyping and 1:1-scale testing of interfaces, sensors, and devices, but also a space for experimentation on topics such as health and care, education and training, inclusion, the circular economy, and open-source technologies. The close link between Dotdotdot and OpenDot allows for the integration into exhibition work of issues traditionally associated with service design and social innovation, such as user involvement in co-design

processes and the assessment of the medium-term impact of technological choices.

Within this framework, sustainability acquires a dual dimension. On the one hand, it concerns materials and structures: the studio expresses a preference for simple, standardized systems - such as drywall frames and lightweight metal structures - “enhanced” through overall design rather than through sophisticated finishes. The focus is on possibilities for disassembly, reuse, and adaptation over time, particularly in long-term projects. On the other hand, the issue of the “immaterial” is addressed: the fact that a significant portion of installations relies on software, projections, and data does not automatically imply a lower environmental impact, as energy consumption, hardware obsolescence cycles, and server management must be considered. On this point, the studio participates in dedicated research aimed at developing more precise assessment tools.

From the perspective of expressive language, there is a tendency to use technical and industrial materials as an expressive foundation, limiting emphasis on detail in favor of focusing on the relationships between form, light, sound, and content. Interfaces are designed to conceal technological complexity, translating it into simple, accessible gestures. The studio’s distinctiveness does not appear to stem from a single formal signature, but rather from a set of approaches: close integration between space and media, attention to content legibility, and the use of technology to support narratives intended to be updatable and, at least in part, adaptable.

In summary, Dotdotdot presents itself as a studio that uses exhibition design to explore the relationship between space, data, and technology through a narrative lens. Within this framework, material, digital, and social sustainability are treated as intertwined dimensions of a single challenge: how to construct narrative environments that meet the needs of institutions and audiences while simultaneously reducing waste, unmanageable technological dependencies, and forms of spectacle devoid of educational value. The lesson the studio appears to offer in this regard is, at its core, simple: technology does not make an exhibition sustainable, nor does its absence automatically make it virtuous. It is the way in which space, content, and devices are made to interact - and the discipline with which their duration is managed - that determines whether a project will still make sense two years later, in a different context.

When space, content, and interaction are born at the same table

The project process described by Dotdotdot is based on an explicit organizational structure: the studio is organized into teams operating in a fully transdisciplinary manner. Developers, spatial designers, storytellers, and interaction designers work together from the concept phase onward, sharing vocabularies and tools and developing a cross-disciplinary understanding of the problems. Each professional maintains a defined role but is also called upon to evaluate the project from the perspective of others: those responsible for interaction must account for the spatial implications of their choices; those working on architecture must consider software and hardware constraints; and those managing content must understand how it will be presented in space and through devices.

A recurring workflow is structured on this basis. The initial phases involve an analysis of the context: the nature and mission of the institution, audience characteristics, economic, logistical, and technical constraints, and the state of existing infrastructure. This phase is accompanied by the definition of objectives and key messages, which are then translated into an overarching narrative structure. This structure is often developed in dialogue with curatorship, but in some cases the studio directly assumes a curatorial role, contributing to the selection and organization of content. The result is a form of “journey” for the visitor, with sequences, shifts in pace, more intense moments, and moments of pause already defined at the conceptual level.

Starting from this framework, the work proceeds in parallel across multiple intertwined levels. On the one hand, the design of space in the strict sense: layout, pathways, hierarchies between primary and secondary areas, lighting and acoustic systems, and the relationship with existing architecture. On the other hand, the design of interactions - both physical and digital - which are not “added on” after the fact, but designed as an integral part of the spatial structure. In the studio’s description, interaction design and architecture are not separate fields, but rather components that influence one another: what shapes people’s experience of space - light, sound, graphics, devices - is conceived in conjunction with volumes, surfaces, and environmental sequences.

A step described as “crucial” concerns prototyping. OpenDot, established about ten years after the studio with the stated purpose of prototyping the most complex installations, is described as the operational link between idea and realization. Here, interactions, pathways, interfaces, and accessibility devices are tested both from a technical standpoint - robustness, reliability, maintenance, wiring -

and from the perspective of user experience, namely the intuitiveness of gestures, response times, and the readability of displays. For projects ranging from spaces dedicated to quantum physics to immersive climate environments, the fab lab allows for 1:1-scale verification of sensor and actuator behavior under conditions similar to real-world scenarios, reducing the risk of solutions that are difficult to manage in operation.

In this context, sustainability and accessibility are identified as areas in which the studio invests in research, but without introducing a new “phase” into the project diagram. The general workflow - analysis, concept, development, prototyping, production, commissioning - remains essentially unchanged; what changes is the way it is interpreted. Sustainability and accessibility function as cross-cutting filters, parameters against which every decision is evaluated, from materials to the choice of interaction type, from content creation to site organization. In this sense, they do not constitute an additional check at the end, but criteria that accompany the process from the very first hypotheses.

Within this framework, increasing attention is being given to the distinction between the short and long term. For temporary exhibitions, the emphasis is primarily on minimizing waste: the aim is to work with materials and systems that can be repurposed and reused, proposing solutions to clients that offer structures and components at least a second life. The answers are not yet fully established, but the questions are now incorporated into the way narrative spaces are conceived, designed, and evaluated.

Three Projects as a Laboratory

The interplay between space, narrative, and digital technologies is particularly evident in three projects: the digital exhibition “Raffaello e la Domus Aurea” for Electa (2021), the “Rodin e la danza” exhibition at MUDEC, and the installation “Data Bugs - AI is a Mirror” (2024), presented at the studio’s headquarters during Milan Design Week 2024. In all three cases, digital technology is not treated as a mere illustrative tool, but as a component of narrative environments in which light, sound, images, data, and architecture work together to construct a specific relationship between content and visitors, with explicit attention to issues of material and “immaterial” sustainability.

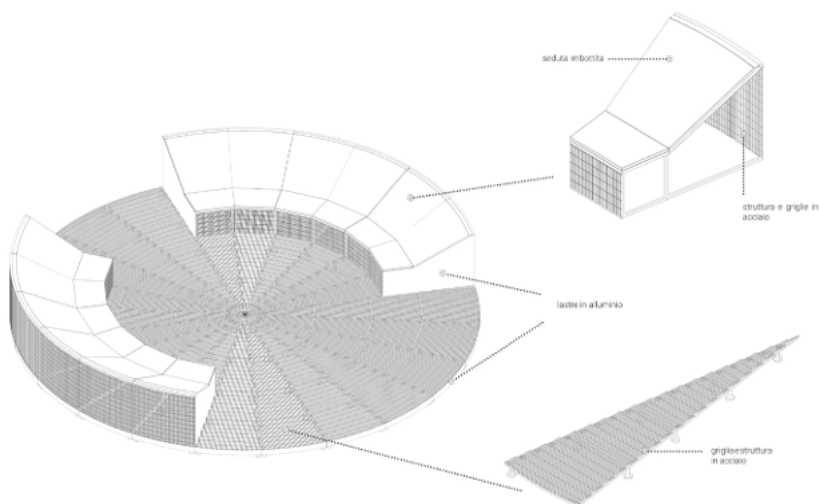


Fig. 2. Graphic representation, axonometric view of the central seating area in the Octagonal Hall - Raphael e la Domus Aurea - Rome 2021. Redesign: A. Neri - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2023-24

Electa - Raffaello e la Domus Aurea

The exhibition “Raffaello e la Domus Aurea” (Figs. 2, 8-13) focuses on a specific challenge: how to render perceptible, within a fragile and highly evocative archaeological site, the history of the invention and dissemination of grotesques originating from the “caves” of the Domus. The exhibition is described as an almost entirely digital multisensory experience, organized into six multimedia installations complemented by a design of light and sound that connects historical episodes separated in time.

The exhibition begins in the Octagonal Hall, which functions as a statement of intent. On the vaulted ceiling, a rotating video projection reinterprets the sky imagined by Nero: constellations, trajectories, and trails of light echo the motif of the globe from the Farnese Atlas, while in the center of the room a replica of the sculptural group is placed on a circular seat that invites visitors to recline and look upward. The lighting alternates between “nocturnal” phases and openings to natural light filtering in from the skylight, simulating the day/night cycle and evoking the Domus’s original relationship with the open sky, prior to its transformation into an underground space.

The digital soundtrack operates through the layering of registers: instruments evoking ancient and Renaissance timbres intertwine with sounds of water, echoes, and rustling that intensify the cavernous perception of the space. The sound levels vary in relation to the presence and movement of the public, so that visitors' presence in the room becomes part of the soundscape.

In the subsequent rooms, the narrative unfolds on two levels: the artistic history of the grotesques and that of the Domus as a site of exploration, collapse, rediscovery, and reopening. In one of the first rooms, the visitor is placed in the position of Renaissance artists who "descend" into the grottoes: the passage of bodies activates sensors that illuminate sections of the wall, revealing silhouettes of Raphael, Pinturicchio, and other artists, along with close-ups of pictorial details that are normally barely visible.

Other installations offer mediated access to works that are difficult to view. A dynamic triptych reconstructs, through animations, Cardinal Bibbiena's *Stufetta*: decorative fragments are enlarged and set in motion, allowing for close-up examination that would otherwise be impossible. In another room, the story of Laocoön is narrated through a continuous morphing of interpretations of the sculptural group from the 16th century to the present, projected onto a screen behind a cast placed at the center of the room: the physical copy becomes the focal point of a network of images that records its transformations and reinterpretations. The final section of the exhibition is dedicated to the dissemination of grotesques. An interactive timeline projected onto a large screen allows visitors to select buildings, places, and geographical contexts; the projection visualizes the propagation of the decorative lexicon from Raphael's Rome to the 19th century, in dialogue with 20th-century references - from the monstrous figures of the Surrealists to "cadavre exquis" compositions that can be played on an oversized sphere.

Regarding the relationship between digital technology and architecture, the project adopts a measured approach: projections and interactive surfaces do not directly intervene on vaults and masonry but are supported by canvases, veils, and backdrops that evoke Renaissance scenography. In this way, the Domus remains legible, while the digital element acts as a reversible layer that amplifies its scenographic potential without altering historic surfaces. Sustainability is thus articulated on two levels: on the one hand, the reduction of physical invasiveness and the use of removable technological equipment; on the other, the enhancement of immaterial content - data, iconography, reconstructions - that can be updated without altering the structure of the installation.

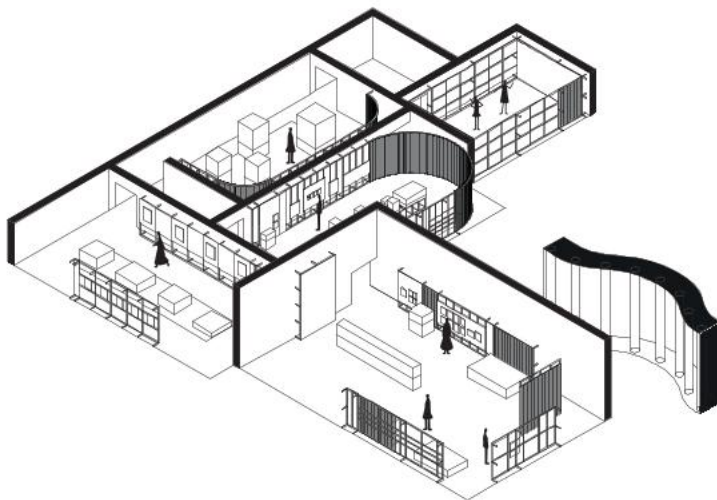


Fig. 3. Axonometric view - Rodin e la danza - Mudec - Milan 2023. Redesign: G. Iurilli - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2025-26

Rodin e la danza (MUDEC, Milan)

With “Rodin e la danza”, hosted at MUDEC, Dotdotdot works on a very specific iconographic core: the studies of the body in motion conducted by Auguste Rodin, beginning with the dancers of the Belle Époque (Figs. 3, 14-18). The exhibition design translates the theme into a sequence of spaces that alternate between darkness and light, silence and acoustic density, static and dynamic states, constructing a coherent perceptual field around bronzes and drawings.

The route is punctuated by movable screens and suspended veils, which redesign the museum halls into small thematic rooms: each one focuses on an aspect of the relationship between sculpture and movement. The light, precisely modulated, isolates the most significant pieces and distinguishes them from accompanying graphic elements and projections. Sound operates through the accumulation of traces: footsteps, breaths, and the rustling of fabric are sampled and transformed into sound sequences that suggest the idea of a bodily memory dispersed throughout the space.

In the finale, the exhibition design explicitly incorporates the visitor’s body. A

reactive projection captures silhouettes and renders them with a slight delay, producing “shifted” shadows that decompose movements into successive frames; the logic of Rodin’s fragment is thus extended to those traversing the exhibition. At the exit, a digital poster activated via QR code extends the experience beyond the museum: by scanning the poster, the reproduced statuette comes to life on the smartphone screen in a brief animation, re-enacting the tension between the static nature of sculpture and the flow of gesture.

In terms of sustainability, *Rodin e la danza* demonstrates a moderate use of material resources despite a strong scenographic component. The metal framework is based on standard elements; the fabrics and panels are modular and removable; and lighting and sound systems are configured for reuse in other projects. The digital component - projections, video content, interfaces - is concentrated on reusable surfaces and media, with the aim of avoiding solutions too tightly bound to the exhibition context alone. In this case, the work on the “memory” of the experience relies more on the configuration of light, sound, and movement than on physical objects that are difficult to transfer.



Fig. 4. Original axonometric view of the installation - Data Bugs - Milan Design Week - Milan 2024 - DotDotDot. Image: DotDotDot

Data Bugs - AI is a mirror

With “Data Bugs” (Figs. 4, 19-22) - AI is a Mirror, presented in the studio’s spaces during Milan Design Week 2024, Dotdotdot directly addresses the theme of artificial intelligence as a field of design inquiry. The installation demonstrates the functioning of a generative model trained on data produced by the studio itself - visual archives, texts, and graphic renderings - showing how the output depends strictly on the nature, consistency, and limitations of the initial dataset. The title alludes to a play on words: “bugs” are not merely system errors, but visible symptoms of a kind of genetic code embedded in the data, revealing its gaps and distortions.

The space is organized as a nearly empty room in which visitors stand before projection surfaces where images, graphic fragments, and texts generated in real time continuously flow. The dramaturgy is based on the alternation between moments of apparent coherence, in which the system produces legible compositions, and moments of deviation, in which images become distorted, overlap, and generate unexpected graphic monsters. A small interface allows users to prompt the model, modify its parameters, and intervene in the flow: AI is thus presented as a mirror of the material that feeds it, rather than as a neutral oracle.

In material terms, the installation is deliberately understated. The space is the studio itself, reconfigured through minimal interventions; the projections use existing hardware, avoiding the introduction of dedicated scenographic elements; and the content is, by definition, immaterial. The project, however, explicitly subverts the discourse on “dematerialization”: an installation that appears to consist almost entirely of light in fact relies on computing infrastructures, servers, and models whose energy and environmental costs are difficult to render visible. It is precisely this dual condition - an apparently lightweight exhibition built upon a dense infrastructural substrate - that Data Bugs takes as its object of reflection, transforming technology into narrative material rather than a mere attraction.

A Constellation of Projects Spanning Climate, Energy, and Circularity

Alongside the three cases analyzed in detail, a series of projects illustrates how the approach to “narrative environments” extends across different contexts: from climate data communication to science outreach, from energy facilities to digi-

tal museum platforms, and ultimately to circular economy initiatives developed with OpenDot. Taken together, these examples demonstrate how sustainability is addressed through interconnected material, cognitive, digital, and social dimensions.

Earth Bits - Sensing the Planetary (MAAT, Lisbona)

“Earth Bits - Sensing the Planetary”, a permanent installation at MAAT in Lisbon, represents a case in which the language of narrative environments is applied to the climate crisis through the systematic use of data. The exhibition is described as a “data-driven journey” that employs scientific data provided by ESA, IEA, and EDP Innovation to measure and visualize humanity’s carbon footprint through graphic and digital content, animated videos, and an interactive station. The exhibition path is structured around a variety of interactive elements. A “CO₂ mixer” enables visitors to manipulate emissions scenarios and observe how specific indicators change as parameters vary; a series of visualizations makes otherwise abstract curves, thresholds, and trends perceptible; and a “digital wallpaper,” created using ESA satellite data, displays transformations in global environmental parameters over time. The stated objective is to transform data into a sensory experience, bringing global issues within the realm of immediate perception.

From an exhibition design perspective, the project may be regarded as a paradigmatic expression of the studio’s aesthetic approach: numbers are not presented as isolated values, but become visual material, luminous rhythm, and sonic presence. In this context, sustainability concerns both the cognitive dimension - the construction of tools for interpreting climate complexity - and the relationship between physical infrastructure and digital content, designed to be updated over time without requiring substantial modifications to the exhibition layout.

Quanto. La rivoluzione in un salto (INFN e MUSE, Trento)

The exhibition Quanto. La rivoluzione in un salto, produced by INFN and MUSE and hosted in Trento between December 2023 and June 2024, approaches quantum mechanics as a subject of public engagement and science communication. The exhibition is presented as the “story of a theory that changed scien-

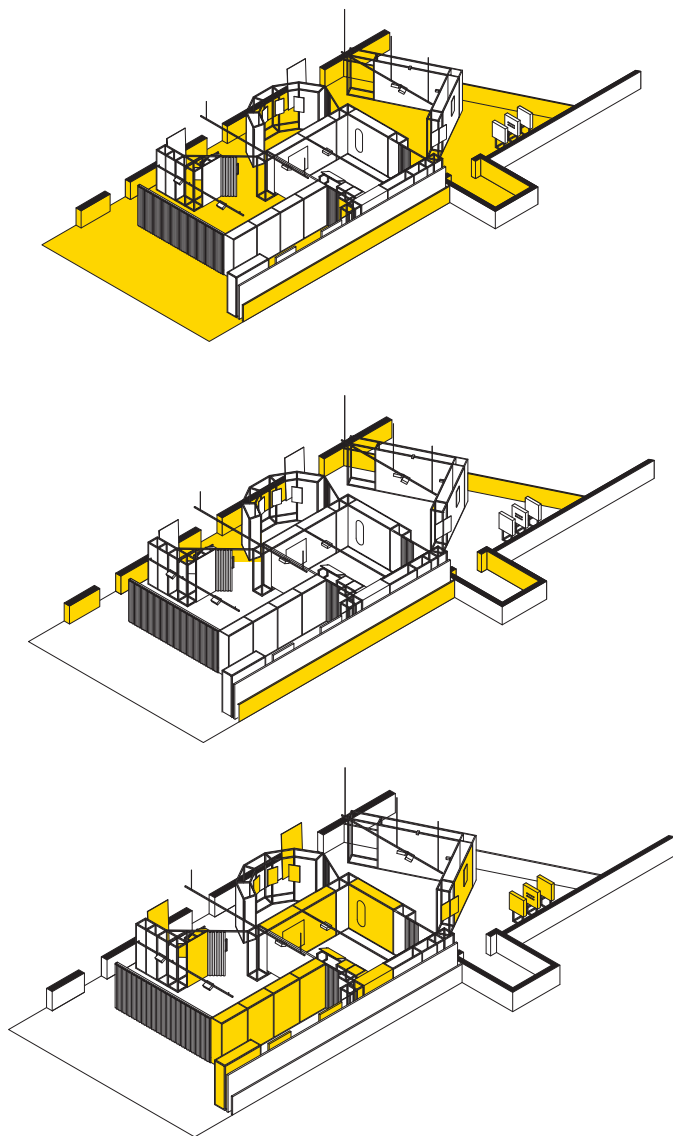


Fig. 5-6-7. Background, installation, object - “Quanto” installation - Muse di Trento 2024 - Trento. Redesign: S. Modenese - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2023-24

ce and our lives,” guiding visitors from the classical paradigm to the paradoxes of the quantum world and its technological applications (Figs. 5-7, 23-27).

Dotdotdot curated the multimedia and interactive installation, conceived as a system of exhibits that “construct and deconstruct” the discoveries of physics “one leap at a time.” The exhibition space is divided into successive scenes, each dedicated to a key conceptual node: from wave-particle duality to entanglement, from the uncertainty principle to applications in computing and cryptography. The exhibition design combines projection surfaces, scientific objects, and interactive stations, employing visual analogies and simple gestures to translate abstract concepts into perceptible experiences.

Here too, sustainability is understood as a twofold issue: on the one hand, material choices oriented toward reuse - lightweight structures, modular supports, and reconfigurable panels - and, on the other, a cognitive dimension linked to the possibility of making knowledge accessible that would otherwise remain confined to laboratories and formulas. Making quantum physics comprehensible to a broad audience is, in this interpretation, a way of broadening the cultural foundation upon which major contemporary technological transitions rest, with quantum phenomena constituting one of their lesser-known underlying dimensions.

Enel Green Power: : Interactive Power Plants and the Story of Energy

For “Enel Green Power” (Figs. 28-33), Dotdotdot is developing a series of “interactive” power plants in which energy production facilities are equipped with visitor routes and narrative elements designed to make their processes understandable. The stated objective is to transform traditionally closed and highly technical sites into spaces of storytelling, where visitors can understand how renewable energy is generated, distributed, and integrated into a broader system.

The installations combine data visualizations, video content, interactive devices, and visitor pathways designed not to interfere with plant operations. The intervention is conceived as an evolving infrastructure: digital platforms that can be updated over time, hardware designed for future integrations, and content that can be revised without altering the physical architecture. In this sense, the project’s sustainability is also measured by its capacity to endure and adapt to developments in the energy sector, avoiding the constraint of tying the installation to a specific technological or market moment.

Luigi Rovati Foundation: A Digital Platform as an Extended Exhibition

For the Luigi Rovati Foundation, Dotdotdot is developing a digital museum platform conceived not merely as an online complement to the physical exhibition, but as a structural extension of the narrative environment. The platform gathers content related to the collection, research activities, and the foundation's programmes, organizing it into thematic pathways that can be explored before, during, and after the visit.

The digital architecture is designed in a modular manner to allow continuous updates and the incorporation of new materials, temporary exhibitions, and external contributions over time. Here too, the studio emphasizes the distinction between a digital infrastructure designed for longevity - with a coherent content architecture, restrained technological choices, and predictable maintenance - and an "event" website tied to a single occasion. The former approach requires a greater initial investment in design, but distributes costs over the long term and reduces the development waste that characterizes many digital cultural initiatives

OpenDot and Projects on the Circular Economy

The projects developed through "OpenDot" demonstrate how a focus on sustainability extends beyond the strictly exhibition-oriented domain. Unwanted Furniture, created for AMSA - A2A Group, combines a catalogue and an exhibition to raise awareness about furniture reuse. It proposes ten circular design strategies aimed at extending the life cycle of furniture, suggesting ways to transform objects discarded for functional or aesthetic reasons into valuable resources.

The Biomaterioteca, by contrast, serves as an introductory guide to biomaterials, targeting entrepreneurs, startups, urban stakeholders, and students interested in developing more circular products. Through fact sheets, material samples, and technical information, the initiative seeks to democratise access to knowledge about bio-based materials and their potential applications. It has also been presented in contexts such as Percorsi Urbani Circolari.

Although not installations in the traditional sense, these projects retain the logic of narrative environments: spatial devices and storytelling tools designed to influence behaviours related to waste, material use, and urban production. At the same time, they can be understood as the "civic" dimension of the joint Dotdot-

dot/OpenDot initiative, in which themes addressed within museums - ecological transition, circularity, and social innovation - are tested in everyday contexts involving citizens, local authorities, and businesses.

Taken together, Earth Bits, Quanto, Enel Green Power's interactive centres, the digital platform for the Luigi Rovati Foundation, and OpenDot's circular economy projects outline a framework in which sustainability does not emerge as a separate sphere but rather as a pervasive field of experimentation: climate data transformed into sensory experience; scientific theories made accessible; energy infrastructures rendered transparent from within; digital systems designed for longevity and adaptability; and materials and objects reimaged through a circular perspective. This constellation of practices provides the context within which broader reflections on the role of narrative environments in the ecological transition of exhibition design can be situated.

Bringing Together the Visible and the Invisible

Across the cases analysed, it emerges that in Dotdotdot's work the digital dimension is not an additional layer superimposed upon a pre-defined exhibition design, but rather a structural component of the exhibition concept itself. Narrative environments developed for museums, archaeological parks, power plants, or museum platforms are conceived as integrated systems in which architecture, content, and technologies collectively shape the experience. In this context, discussing sustainability necessarily entails bringing together the "visible" elements - structures, finishes, and furnishings - and the "invisible" ones - digital infrastructures, platforms, algorithms, and datasets - which often constitute the most enduring and pervasive components of the project.

This centrality of the "immaterial" highlights an initial tension. On the one hand, there is a conscious tendency towards reducing the physical mass of installations through the use of lightweight, standardised structures, removable drapes and veils, rental systems, and a reduction in highly customised components. Exhibitions such as Raffaello e la Domus Aurea rely on reversible supports that do not interfere with historic surfaces, while Data Bugs is described as a low-material-impact installation based almost entirely on projections and reusable hardware. On the other hand, this very reduction in materiality shifts attention towards infrastructural complexity: content-management servers, energy consumption, the obsolescence cycles of screens and projectors, and the maintenance of software

and tracking systems. Sustainability therefore does not automatically coincide with “dematerialisation”; rather, it depends on how these infrastructures are managed over time.

From a methodological perspective, sustainability and accessibility are treated as cross-cutting lenses rather than distinct project phases. The process remains that of a transdisciplinary workshop in which storytelling, space, and interaction are intertwined from the outset. What changes is the nature of the questions guiding decision-making: how long what is being built will last; which components can be reused, updated, or repurposed; and which costs remain “invisible” because they are linked to energy consumption or digital maintenance. In long-term projects - such as Earth Bits, Enel’s interactive centres, or the digital platform for the Luigi Rovati Foundation - the focus is placed on the capacity of installations to function as evolving infrastructures intended to be reprogrammed multiple times. In temporary exhibitions - *Rodin e la danza*, *Quanto*, and certain AI-related installations - the priority becomes minimising waste through the planned dismantling and reuse of components from the earliest design stages.

A significant dimension of sustainability is situated at the cognitive and social levels. Projects such as Earth Bits and *Quanto* seek to make complex phenomena - the climate crisis and quantum mechanics - accessible through environments that transform data and abstract concepts into tangible experiences. *Data Bugs* addresses bias and representation in artificial intelligence, making visible the ways in which outputs depend upon the datasets used to train models. Enel’s interactive centres focus on fostering understanding of energy processes, while OpenDot’s initiatives on furniture reuse and biomaterials aim to influence everyday practices related to waste and material use. In these cases, sustainability is also understood as the creation of tools for critically engaging with climate issues, technology, and the circular economy, rather than merely as a reduction in the quantity of materials employed.

However, the measurability of these effects remains largely unexplored. Confidence in the capacity of narrative environments to influence visitors’ awareness currently appears more as a working hypothesis than as a systematically documented outcome. The long-term durability of the perceptual and behavioural transformations induced by installations is difficult to assess, and projects rarely include longitudinal follow-up studies capable of verifying whether installations function as genuine tools for change or primarily operate at the level of immediate engagement. This opens up a field of research requiring evaluation tools and specialised expertise that do not fall entirely within the domain of exhibition

design.

A second issue concerns the use of data and artificial intelligence not only as exhibition themes but also as design tools. The use of scientific datasets in *Earth Bits* and generative models in *Data Bugs* demonstrates how narrative environments can be anchored to up-to-date knowledge and, potentially, how algorithms may be employed to simulate scenarios, analyse flows, or support more informed design decisions. At the same time, these technologies introduce new dependencies: the need for continuous updates, significant energy costs, and highly specialised expertise to maintain complex systems. The sustainability of digital installations therefore appears closely linked to the capacity to manage and contain such complexity through the design of formats that can be simplified, adapted, or deactivated without compromising the overall narrative framework.

At a more strictly material level, the practice of enhancing standard technical systems - plasterboard frames, metal structures, fabrics, and modular panels - appears consistent with the objective of limiting the use of highly customised elements that are difficult to reuse. Exhibitions such as *Rodin e la danza* and *Raffaello e la Domus Aurea* demonstrate how perceptual intensity can emerge from the combination of light, sound, and digital content rather than from the proliferation of complex physical objects. Nevertheless, the question of the life cycle of audiovisual equipment remains unresolved. Extensive reliance on screens and projectors may shift the environmental burden from the construction phase to the replacement and disposal of devices, making it necessary to incorporate these aspects into impact assessments as well.

Overall, the picture that emerges is that of a studio that uses exhibition design as a laboratory for exploring the relationship between material reduction, structural regeneration, and awareness of the impacts associated with the immaterial dimension. The possibility of constructing “light narrative environments” appears to depend as much on material choices as on the design of digital platforms and architectures capable of enduring, adapting, and rendering their hidden costs at least partially transparent. Rather than proposing a definitive model, the projects considered here outline a set of trajectories and open questions concerning how to balance the efficient use of physical resources, the long-term management of technological infrastructures, and responsibility towards the imaginaries that installations generate and disseminate. It is within this evolving interplay that Dot-dot-dot’s work contributes to defining the role of exhibition design in the ecological transition of the field.

Notes

¹ From a conversation with DotDotDot on June 3, 2025



Fig. 8. Photograph of the exhibition layout in the Octagonal Hall - Raffaello e la Domus Aurea Contemporanea - Rome 2021 - DotDotDot. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 9. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - Octagonal Hall: "Sculpture of the French Atlas Supporting the Globe" - Raffaello e la Domus Aurea Contemporanea - Rome 2021 - DotDotDot. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna

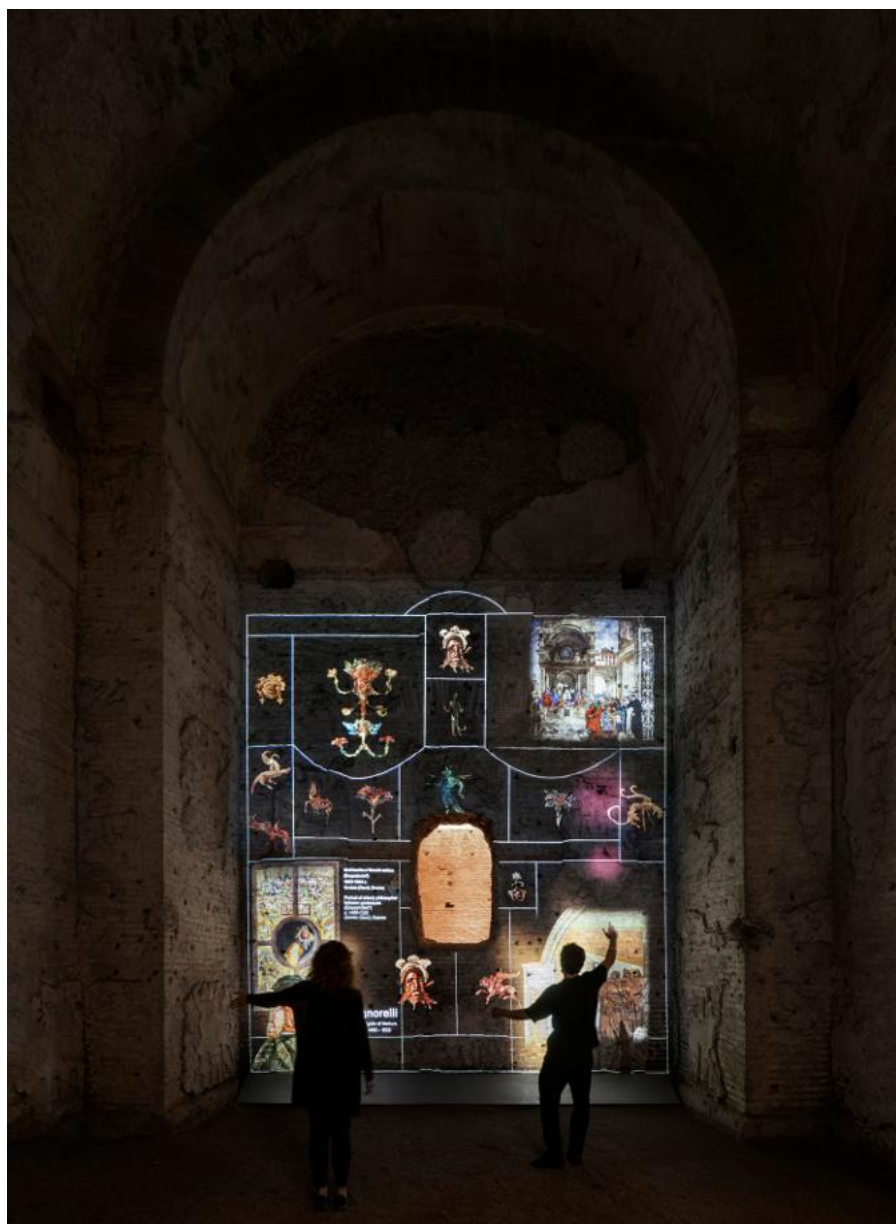


Fig. 10. Detail photograph of the exhibition layout - “Discovery of the Domus Aurea and the Grotesques” Gallery - Raffaello e la Domus Aurea Contemporanea - Rome 2021 - DotDotDot. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 11. Exhibition view - “The Laocoön e la Domus Aurea” Gallery - Raffaello e la Domus Aurea Contemporanea - Rome 2021. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 12. Exhibition view - "The Centrality of Raphael" Gallery - Raffaello e la Domus Aurea Contemporanea - Rome 2021 - DotDotDot. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 13. Exhibition view - "Ritorni Novecenteschi" Gallery - Raffaello e la Domus Aurea Contemporanea - Rome 2021 - DotDotDot. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 14. Exhibition view - Rodin e la danza - Mudec
- Milan 2023 - DotDotDot. Photo: DSL Studio, Melania Dalle Grave



Fig. 15. Exhibition view - Rodin e la danza - Mudec - Milan 2023 - DotDotDot. Photo: DSL Studio, Melania Dalle Grave



Fig. 16. Exhibition view - Rodin e la danza - Mudec - Milan 2023 - DotDotDot. Photo: DSL Studio, Melania Dalle Grave



Fig. 17. Close-up photo of the display - Rodin e la danza - Mudec - Milan 2023 - DotDotDot. Photo: DSL Studio, Melania Dalle Grave



Fig. 18. Close-up photo of the display - Rodin e la danza - Mudec - Milan 2023 - DotDotDot. Photo: DSL Studio, Melania Dalle Grave



Fig. 19. Installation photo - Data Bugs - Milan Design Week
- Milan 2024 - DotDotDot. Photo: DSL Studio, Piercarlo Quecchia



Fig. 20. Installation photograph - Data Bugs - Milan Design Week - Milan 2024 - DotDotDot. Photo: DSL Studio, Piercarlo Quecchia



Fig. 21. Close-up photo of the display - Data Bugs - Milan Design Week - Milan 2024 - DotDotDot. Photo: DSL Studio, Piercarlo Quecchia

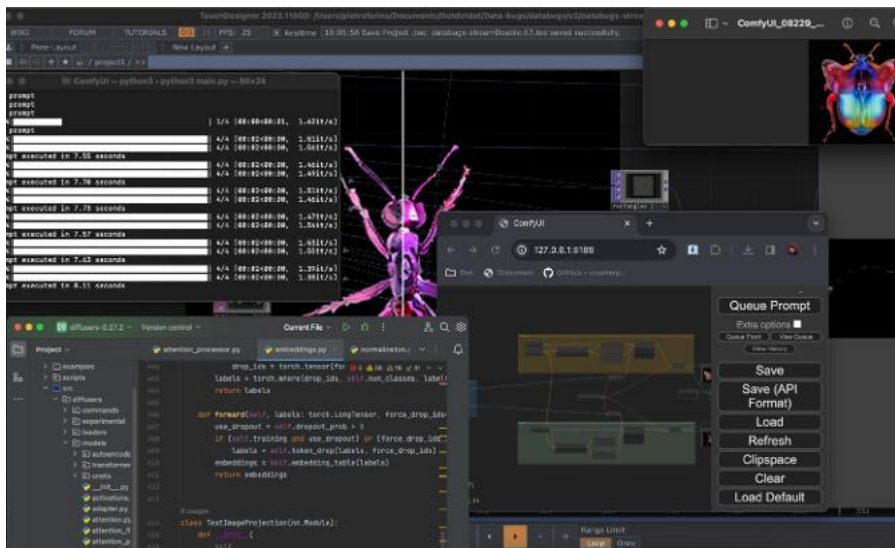


Fig. 22. Backstage photo - Data Bugs - Milan Design Week - Milan 2024 - DotDotDot. Photo: DSL Studio, Piercarlo Quecchia



Fig. 23. Installation photo - Quanto - INFN Muse, Trento 2024
- Trento. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 24. Installation photo - Quanto - INFN Muse in Trento 2024 - Trento. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 25. Installation photograph - Quanto - INFN Muse of Trento 2024 - Trento.
Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 26. Installation photograph - Quanto - INFN Muse of Trento 2024 - Trento.
Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 27. Close-up photo of the display case - “Quanto” - INFN Muse in Trento 2024 - Trento. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna

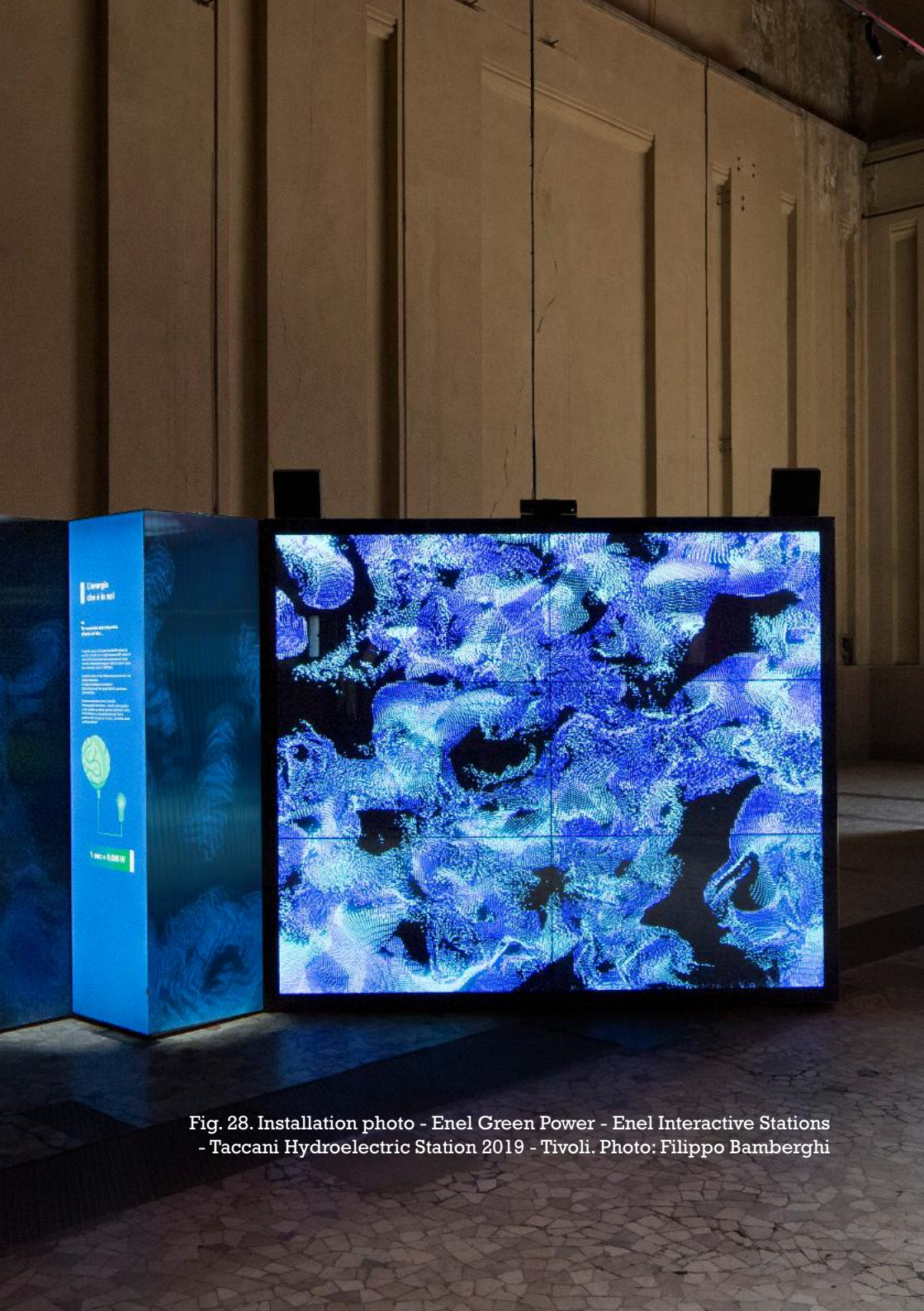


Fig. 28. Installation photo - Enel Green Power - Enel Interactive Stations
- Taccani Hydroelectric Station 2019 - Tivoli. Photo: Filippo Bambergi



Fig. 29. Photograph of the display stand and monitor - Enel Green Power - Enel Interactive Stations - Taccani Hydroelectric Station 2019 - Tivoli. Photo: Filippo Bambergi



Fig. 30. Close-up photo of the installation - Enel Green Power - Enel Interactive Stations - Taccani Hydroelectric Station 2019 - Tivoli. Photo: Filippo Bambergghi



Fig. 31. Detail photo of the installation - Enel Green Power - Enel Interactive Stations - Taccani Hydroelectric Station 2019 - Tivoli. Photo: Filippo Bambergghi



Fig. 32. Detail photograph of the installation - Enel Green Power - Enel Interactive Stations - Taccani Hydroelectric Station 2019 - Tivoli. Photo: Filippo Bambergi

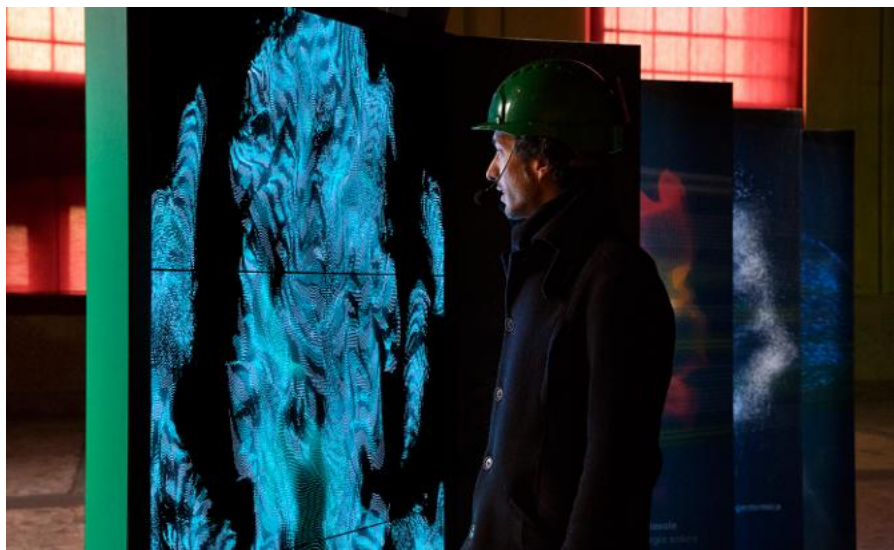


Fig. 33. Close-up photo of the installation - Enel Green Power - Enel Interactive Stations - Taccani Hydroelectric Station 2019 - Tivoli. Photo: Filippo Bambergi

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CHERUBINO GAMBARDELLA AND SIMONA OTTIERI

Democratic Beauty and Single-Material Design in the Displays

D. Crippa | IUAV University of Venice
Department of Culture del Progetto



CHERUBINO GAMBARDELLA AND SIMONA OTTIERI

*Democratic Beauty and Single-Material Design in the Displays*¹

How little is needed, provided the approach is right. This commitment - not in the sense of luxury, but rather its exact opposite - has been a hallmark of nearly two decades of projects by gambardellarchitetti. Cherubino Gambardella calls it “democratic beauty,” and it is not merely a slogan: it is a method, a design practice repeatedly tested through the relationship between ordinary resources and recognizable outcomes. Simona Ottieri, who has shared the firm’s operational leadership for many years, knows this well and is the first to point out that such beauty always entails a technical cost that someone must calculate.

The gambardellarchitetti studio was founded in the late 1980s as an atelier by Cherubino Gambardella and has gradually evolved into a practice in which theoretical reflection, drawing, and design activity are closely intertwined. With its main office in Naples and a second office in Milan, the firm operates across multiple scales - from residential architecture to interiors, from installations to public and commercial spaces, and even object design - while maintaining a consistent focus on the relationship between form, perception, and the emotional dimension of space, even under highly variable budget constraints.

Fig. 1. Photograph of Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri. Photo: Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri

Since 2004, operational management has been entrusted to Simona Ottieri Gambardella. An architect, a specialist in bioarchitecture since 1998, and holder of a PhD in Materials Engineering, she coordinates projects ranging from interiors to installations, from workspaces to interventions in urban contexts. Her profile, centred on technical and performance assessment - particularly regarding materials, life cycles, and energy-related aspects - combines with Gambardella's more distinctly figurative and narrative approach. The result is a practice in which the development of recognizable forms coexists with systematic attention to construction details and systems efficiency. This internal tension is, in part, deliberate: Gambardella tends to downplay the importance of technical detail ("there is almost no detail," in his words), whereas Ottieri asserts its necessity as a prerequisite for quality execution. This is not a contradiction but rather a division of roles that permeates the firm's entire practice.

Cherubino Gambardella (Naples, 1962) is an architect and full professor of architectural design. He teaches at the University of Campania Luigi Vanvitelli and has carried out academic and research activities at various Italian and international institutions. His theoretical reflection has long centred on the idea of democratic beauty, understood as the possibility of producing spatial quality through common materials and non-elitist solutions rather than through precious resources or exclusive gestures. This notion, developed through writings, competitions, exhibitions, and participation in the Venice Biennale, provides a useful framework for interpreting the installations developed together with Ottieri.

The studio functions as an open laboratory, bringing together consultants, designers, and young collaborators who are invited to engage with diverse contexts and themes. Within this framework, exhibition design is not a separate field but one of the areas in which democratic beauty is explored in a particularly evident manner: spaces for contemporary art, temporary exhibitions, installations in historic sites, and exhibition displays for museums and festivals are approached as opportunities to test spatial forms and strategies with limited means. There is frequent use of a dominant material - lime yellow and resin, white drywall, raw OSB, golden fir wood - pushed towards strong recognizability.

In many projects, articulated or complex forms are supported by relatively basic and widely available technologies. Construction details - screws, joints, metal profiles, and cuts in panels or boards - are not concealed but rendered legible and integrated into the construction of the overall image. The transformation of standard systems into recognizable languages requires precise control over implementation and careful attention to the regulated repetition of elements, thereby

integrating the two visions of the project, in which the strength and control of the overall design form are accompanied by simple detailing solutions consistent with the general design choices.

The studio's approach to exhibition design can be described, at first glance, as the construction of additional spaces. Projects such as the Yellow House for Contemporary Art in Scala, the single-material structures of Divina Sezione, the ephemeral city of Gusto! at the M9, and the golden line of Volando sulla megalopoli in the cloister of Santa Maria la Nova demonstrate a tendency to introduce a second autonomous spatial figure within the host architecture. This second architecture stands alongside both the historical or neutral backdrop and the exhibited content, seeking a balance between distinction and dialogue with each. The importance of the exhibition design code within the studio's poetics is explicit and represents a constant throughout the design interventions analysed here.

The additional space introduced by the installations often assumes a narrative dimension. The Paradiso-Purgatorio-Inferno triad of Divina Sezione directs the gaze upward, towards the horizon, or downward; La Casa Gialla brings together diverse works within a chromatically uniform shell in which colour functions as atmosphere; the food exhibition at M9 is conceived as a small city complete with squares, monuments, labyrinths, and textile architecture. In these cases, the installation does not remain neutral but instead proposes urban or domestic metaphors that help render often fragmentary or heterogeneous content legible.

Finally, the studio's geographical location plays a significant role. Its Neapolitan roots emerge in the frequent selection of historically layered contexts: cloisters, deconsecrated churches, apartments in historic buildings, and archaeological museums. In these environments, exhibition design engages with strongly characterized backdrops; the strategy adopted appears to consist of superimposing light, monochromatic figures - golden lines, metal grids, folded white walls, and ephemeral cities - capable of entering into dialogue with the existing context without camouflaging or erasing it. This dialogue prioritizes the relationship between the background code and the exhibition design intervention and, even in spaces lacking specific connotations, consistently employs the interpretative vision of the exhibition design code as the project's guiding principle.

The exhibition projects discussed in the following sections are rooted in this interplay: democratic beauty, monomateriality explored in an expressive key, construction details presented with simplicity, and attention to historical context and economic constraints.

The construction site as a space of discovery

In Gambardella and Ottieri's account, exhibition design is not described as the application of a standard procedure but rather as a sequence of four recurring operations: a close reading of the site; the definition of a strong spatial figure; the selection of a dominant material, often conditioned by budget and supply availability; and the transformation of technical requirements into language through the design of details.

The first step, in almost all cases, consists of an analysis of the site conducted simultaneously at both the physical and symbolic levels. In Scala, the future Casa Gialla is perceived first and foremost as a rural house that remains inhabited in memory; at the Royal Palace of Caserta and Palazzo Trinci, for Divina Sezione, the double-height spaces, frescoed vaults, and monumental fireplaces become the focal elements; in the cloister of Santa Maria la Nova, for Volando sulla megalopoli, it is the regular sequence of arches that suggests the idea of a continuous line guiding the observer along the perimeter. This initial phase is not purely analytical: it is already a design act because it selects, from among the characteristics of the site, those that will become the material of the project, leaving everything else in the background. The choice of what to observe already determines, to a large extent, the direction of the project.

Once the dominant characteristics of the context have been identified, the next step is the definition of a synthetic spatial concept that can be reduced to a simple figure capable of organizing the project. In Divina Sezione, the response takes the form of three archetypes associated with Dante's canticles: the rotunda of Paradise, the wing of Purgatory, and the rocks of Hell. At M9, for Gusto!, the guiding concept is formulated as a city of emotions, organized into squares, monuments, labyrinths, and textile architectures. In all these cases, there is a tendency to condense a complex narrative programme into a legible spatial framework that precedes - and, in part, transcends - the precise definition of the content.

From the outset, this figurative core is accompanied by the choice of a dominant material: drywall and metal profiles for Divina Sezione, wooden panels for M9, OSB for the Ama Festival, fir timber for Volando sulla megalopoli, and resin and lime for Casa Gialla. This is not an abstract preference but the result of the intersection between expressive aims and supply constraints. For M9, for example, the exhibition designer noted that only panels of specific dimensions and thicknesses were available: the horizontal joints thus became a continuous line running along all the walls, creating an internal horizon, while the vertical joints were emphasi-

zed like vertebrae accommodating graphics and signage. The compositional rule derives directly from the industrial standard. As Gambardella observes, elements initially dictated by material availability became a stylistic and expressive choice arising from a concrete necessity imposed by the material itself. This way of thinking fits within the history of the ALTA project, where designers consistently transform constraints into opportunities.

The fourth operation - the transformation of technical necessities into language - is the point at which the tension between the two designers becomes most productive. In *Divina Sezione*, the decision to leave the metal structure exposed emerged from an on-site assessment: the drywall profiles, initially conceived as a substrate to be clad, were perceived as aesthetically valuable and became a primary visual component. "Why should we hide them?" is the question posed by Ottieri, who oversaw the construction details of that exhibition with technical support from Knauf. In Simona Ottieri's *Ama Festival* as well, the OSB joints contribute to defining the proportions of the modules; in Cherubino Gambardella's *Volando sulla megalopoli*, the fir timber framework openly reveals its assembly logic.

This ability to read the construction site as a space of discovery constitutes, for the studio, a structural component of its method. Unlike permanent architecture - where construction schedules allow for prolonged checks, corrections, and revisions - exhibition design requires rapid, often irreversible decisions under conditions in which materials have already been installed and the opening is imminent. It is precisely under this pressure that certain formal choices find their origin: not in a desk-based study but in the moment when something unforeseen reveals itself on site to be more interesting than what had originally been planned. The metal structure of *Divina Sezione* is the most eloquent example, but it is not the only one: in the *Ama Festival*, the depletion of panels and the makeshift joints of the final element become a detail that no observer perceives from a distance as a temporary expedient. The construction site, in this sense, is not merely the place where the project is realized but also the place where it reaches fulfilment.

The account provided by the authors reminds us that the exhibition installation is certainly a training ground for designers because it allows experimental solutions to be tested and verified rapidly, but it is also the place where speed compels designers to think quickly and effectively.

The relationship with curators and institutions introduces a further dimension. In several projects - *M9*, *Divina Sezione*, and *Casa Gialla* - the materials to be exhibited arrive late or in heterogeneous forms. In these circumstances, the exhibition design is conceived as a device possessing its own narrative autonomy: the

spatial configuration, the use of a single material, and the sequence of spaces must be capable of holding together a potentially fragmented body of work, ensuring a basic legibility even in the absence of a fully preordained and unified narrative. This approach led, for example, to the adoption of reusable and modular display cases and of generic yet distinctive supports: structures designed to accommodate the unpredictable without losing coherence.

Three Projects as a Laboratory

In gambardellarchitetti's exhibition design projects, the method described thus far assumes different forms while remaining recognizable through certain constants: a clearly defined spatial figure, a dominant material, and a close relationship with the site hosting the project. The Yellow House for Contemporary Art in Scala, the Divina Sezione exhibition between the Royal Palace of Caserta and Palazzo Trinci in Foligno, and Gusto! at M9 in Mestre may be regarded as three cases in which these elements are tested under different conditions: a domestic interior transformed into a micro-museum, two historically significant buildings characterized by a high degree of decorative density, and a contemporary museum called upon to accommodate heterogeneous materials.

Casa Gialla for Contemporary Art, Scala

Casa Gialla was established in Scala (Figs. 2-5, 14-19), a small town on the Amalfi Coast, within the basement of a municipal building that had in fact been inhabited until only a few years earlier. The initial survey revealed an interior characterized by rural domesticity: a wood-fired kitchen, an oven, tiny rooms with low ceilings, chalky plaster, and objects left almost exactly where they had been found. The project takes this condition as its point of departure: the aim is not to erase the house but to superimpose upon it a new museum layer while preserving the legibility of the original structure.

The first decision concerned colour and material. The entire interior is coated with a yellow epoxy resin applied continuously to floors, walls, ceilings, and archways: a monochrome surface that neutralizes the distinctions between old and new and creates a unified, saturated volume. The reference to the light and lemons of the Amalfi Coast is explicit; yellow functions simultaneously as a percep-

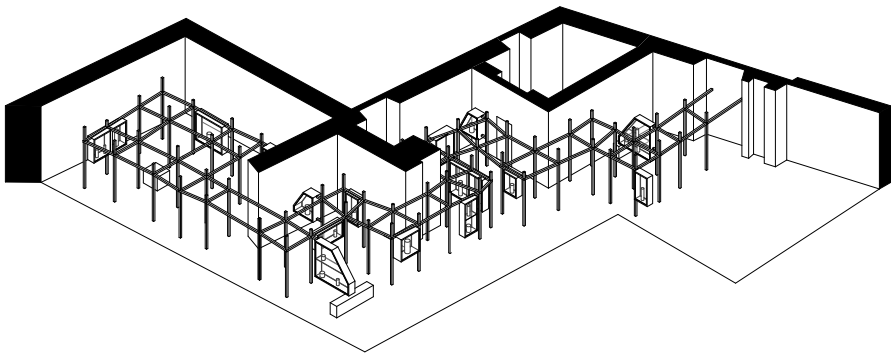


Fig. 2. Axonometric view of the exhibition design - Yellow House - Scala 2002.
Exhibition design by Cherubino Gambardella with Simona Ottieri. Redesign: A. M. Lomabardo, S. Rossi, C. Vignati, A. Visentin - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2025-26

tual atmosphere and as an organizing device, enabling works of different natures and origins to be perceived against a common and recognizable backdrop.

Within this uniform shell, a metallic micro-architecture is inserted: a welded grid, assembled and painted on site, that traverses the spaces and defines supports and pathways. Integrated into this structure are glass display cases of varying polygonal forms, some projecting and others semi-recessed. The exhibition layout extends across three rooms in a sequence of contractions and expansions: narrow passages alternate with wider openings, changes in level, and intersecting viewpoints. This elastic quality has been associated in critical commentary with Gianni Colombo's perceptual experiments, yet it is achieved solely through the arrangement of the display cases and uprights, without the use of movable devices.

The project resolves, through a single operation, two issues that are generally treated separately in conventional museums: the creation of atmosphere and the arrangement of the works. The yellow resin does not constitute the background against which the contents are displayed; rather, it is itself part of the content - or, more precisely, the device that makes a particular experience of that content possible. In this sense, the Yellow House may be interpreted as a case in which exhibition design does not merely accompany the displayed works but creates the perceptual conditions within which those works become legible in a specific manner. The polygonal display cases, with their non-standardized forms and asymmetrical projections, are not neutral containers but elements that establish relationships of proximity, tension, and distance between the artwork and the visitor's body, regulating the speed and direction of the gaze in a manner analogous to the way

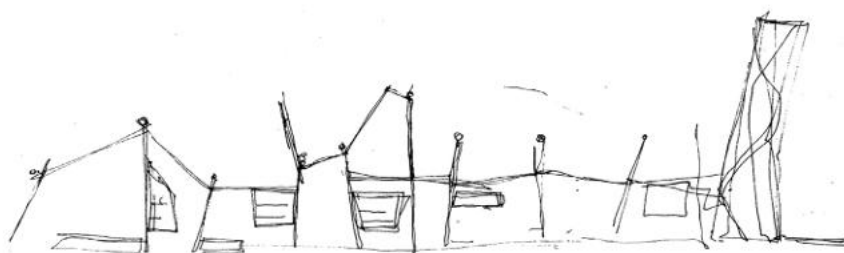


Fig. 3-4-5. Original graphic representations - Yellow House - Scala 2002. Images: Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri

an architectural sequence punctuates movement through space.

The entrance constitutes an episode in its own right. At the corner of the building, a small opening is emphasized by a shaped, sandblasted, hot-dip galvanized, and white-enamelled steel plate mounted vertically like an added façade overlapping the front of the town hall. The panel incorporates a decorative design that integrates lighting and produces a subtle luminous relief. With the door closed, only an external display case bearing the name Musca hints at the function of the interior; upon opening, one enters a space that overturns the ordinary image of a public building and presents itself as a welcoming and intensely distinctive sanctuary.

The Yellow House connects multiple levels of meaning: the house remains recognizable in its proportions and in the memory of its former use, yet it is simultaneously transformed by the monochromatic palette and the metal grid; the installation assumes immersive qualities while maintaining a rigorous exhibition structure, with display cases tailored to the works and a controlled sequence of views. The welded metal structure is potentially reusable, while the continuous surface treatment protects and unifies supports made of different materials.

Divina Sezione. Archetypes for Dante

Divina Sezione (Figs. 6-8, 20-27) engages with a theme deeply embedded in the collective imagination - the Divine Comedy - and with two monumental venues: the historic apartments of the Royal Palace of Caserta and the halls of Palazzo

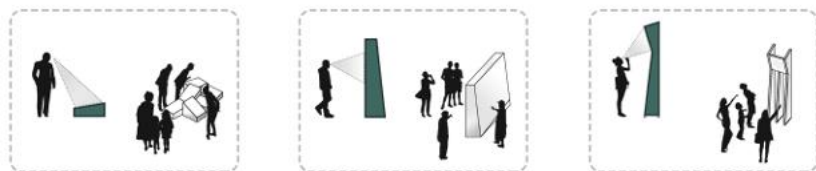


Fig. 6. Original Artwork - Divina Sezione: Italian Architecture for the Divine Comedy - Hall of the Halberdiers and Guards - Royal Palace 2018 - Caserta. Image: Simona Ottieri

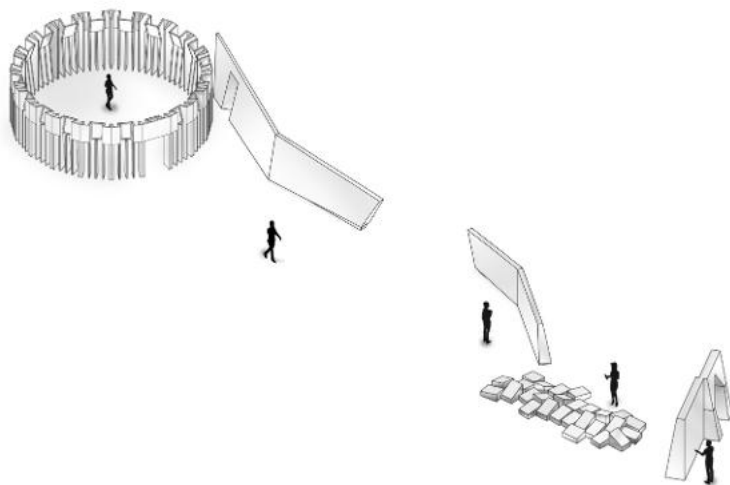


Fig. 7. Original Graphic Representation - Divina Sezione: Italian Architecture for the Divine Comedy - Hall of the Halberdiers and Guards - Royal Palace 2018 - Caserta. Images: Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri

Trinci in Foligno. More than seventy original drawings, highly diverse in style and approach, were to be exhibited within spaces already densely decorated with stucco, fireplaces, frescoes, and pictorial elements. Every visitor arrives with an image - even if only a vague one - of Dante's world; the challenge is to translate this shared memory into architecture without reducing the exhibition design to a merely illustrative backdrop.

The solution focuses on two decisions: working with essential geometric forms and employing a single industrial material. The exhibition design adopts a monochromatic white scheme achieved through Knauf gypsum-board panels mounted on a metal framework, with rivets and profiles intentionally left partially exposed. The construction system typical of the building site becomes the basis for an additional layer superimposed upon the historic rooms. Three classical architectural forms - the rotunda, the wing, and a series of irregular volumes resembling rocks - are associated with the three canticles: Paradise as a circular structure directing the gaze upward, Purgatory as a linear sequence at eye level, and Hell as elements emerging from the floor and drawing the gaze downward.

In Paradise, a circular structure is inserted while maintaining a measured distance

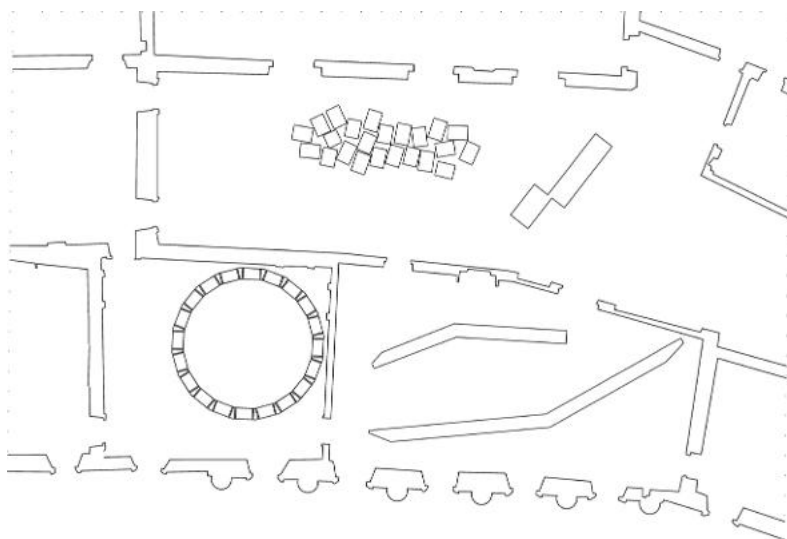


Fig. 8. Original Floor Plan of Palazzo Trinci in Foligno - Divina Sezione: Italian Architecture for the Divine Comedy - Hall of the Halberdiers and Guards - Royal Palace 2018 - Caserta. Image: Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri

from the historic walls. From the exterior, it appears as a solid volume articulated by horizontal and vertical bands defined by metal profiles that are not entirely concealed. Inside, diffused and controlled light creates a uniform atmosphere; the drawings are arranged along the curved wall, while precisely positioned openings frame fragments of frescoes and windows. In Purgatory, a plasterboard wing organizes the route along a principal axis. In Hell, a series of elements emerging from the floor introduces a more telluric dimension, with forms reminiscent of roots or fragments of rock.

A specific role is assigned to thresholds. The entrance and several interior passages are marked by plasterboard portals that frame the adjacent space and simultaneously highlight portions of the existing rooms, including fireplaces, vaults, and staircases. The sightline diagrams demonstrate how each contemporary form is designed to be interpreted together with a historical element in the background. From a construction perspective, the decision to leave the metal profiles exposed emerged from an assessment conducted on site: the industrial system is not merely a structure but part of the language articulating the assembled and reversible

nature of the installation.

Divina Sezione demonstrates how the use of a single material serves not to neutralize the context but to introduce an additional layer that organizes the gaze: the three sections are conveyed through directions, heights, and relationships with the body rather than through direct iconographic representations.

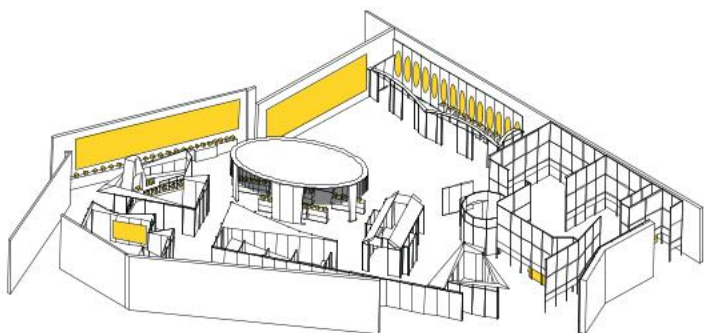
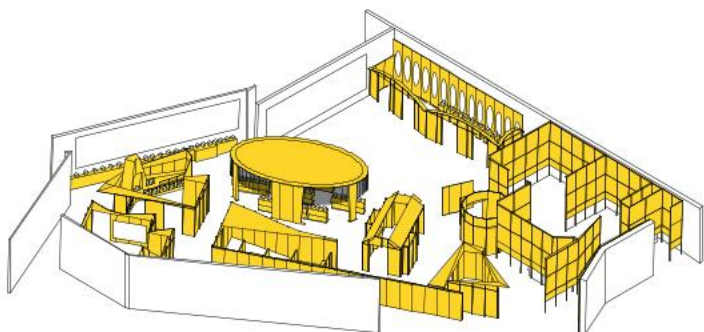
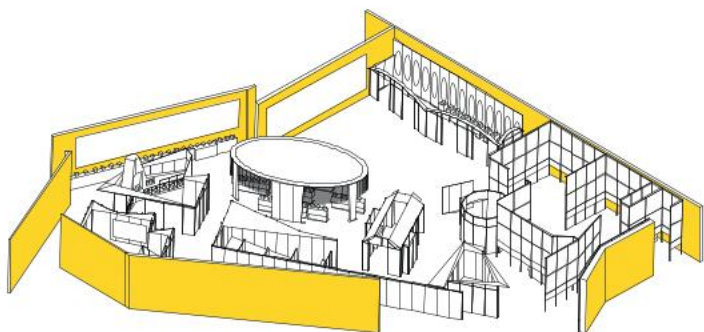
Gusto! Italiani a tavola. 1970-2050. A City for Food at the M9

Gusto! (9-11, 28-37), dedicated to Italian culinary culture since 1970, occupies several large halls of the M9 Museum in Mestre. The exhibition material is described as particularly heterogeneous and, in part, late-arriving: photographs, objects, documents, and installations that reached the venue at different times. The exhibition design is therefore conceived as a narrative device capable of maintaining its own coherence even in the presence of content that is not entirely predictable. The same logic had already emerged in the Biomediterraneo cluster for Expo, organised around a large central plaza with pavilions facing onto it: there, the idea of the exhibition as an urban fragment was first brought into focus, with pathways, views, and focal points structured according to a spatial rather than a purely exhibition-based logic.

The project text identifies the guiding concept: a city constructed through successive layers, composed of squares, monuments, labyrinths, textile architecture, and more compact volumes; at its centre, a resilient core evokes the archaeological density of an early settlement. White dominates the exteriors of the volumes, while the interiors feature a range of colours associated with different themes related to food and conviviality.

The city is constructed entirely from wooden panels supplied by the exhibition contractor that won the competition. Due to the overlap with the Biennale's construction schedule, the company stated that only panels of predetermined dimensions and thicknesses were available and that these had to be used without substantial modifications. This constraint was adopted as a compositional rule: the horizontal joints create a continuous line running along all the walls, marking a constant height, while the vertical joints are emphasised as bands onto which graphics, text, and signage are applied.

The graphics, designed by Marco Camuffo, systematically occupy these bands and the partition panels, helping to define visual hierarchies and connections between the various thematic areas. The relationship between the studio's spatial



Figs. 9-10-11. Background, Exhibition Design, Object - Gusto! - M9 Museum of the 20th Century - Mestre 2022. Exhibition design by Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri. Redesign: A. Capuano - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2025-26

structure and Camuffo's graphic work is particularly close in this case: the vertical bands are not neutral surfaces onto which text is applied, but elements already endowed with their own rhythmic texture, which the graphics amplify and direct. Some areas assume the character of squares - central open spaces hosting collective installations - while others function as labyrinthine corridors. The taller, more compact volumes act as monuments, housing iconic materials or thematic hubs; textile architecture appears in the section dedicated to the future, where fabric panels purchased online and mounted on wooden structures introduce a lighter and more ethereal element.

The wooden panels, standardised and easily disassembled, are intended to be reused in other contexts; the joints, rather than being filled, remain visible and become part of the design, reducing the need for additional work. The ephemeral city constructed inside the M9 can thus be understood as a laboratory in which relatively simple spatial devices, based on standard elements, support a complex narrative concerning food, society, and territory.

Taken together, these three projects demonstrate how the categories discussed in the previous sections - strong spatial form, monomateriality explored in an expressive key, and attention to contextual and supply constraints - are articulated differently according to scale and programme. *La Casa gialla* explores the relationship between domesticity and the museum, *Divina Sezione* addresses the orientation of the gaze within complex historical settings, and *Gusto!* experiments with the idea of an ephemeral city developed under stringent technical conditions.

Other projects: selected with the authors

Alongside the three cases identified by the curators, other projects are introduced through dialogue with the authors, allowing a clearer understanding of the continuity of Gambardella and Ottieri's exhibition language across different contexts: the *Thalassa* exhibition at the MANN in Naples, the *Volando sulla megalopoli* installation in the cloister of Santa Maria la Nova, and the *Ama Festival* in Maddaloni. These examples were generously shared by the authors to provide a better understanding of the project's behind-the-scenes dimensions, offering a perspective closer to the design process and therefore more useful to readers.

Thalassa, MANN Naples

Thalassa, a major exhibition of underwater archaeological finds housed in the Meridiana Hall of the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, is the first example cited by Ottieri when the topic of sustainability is introduced. The exhibition material is extensive and of considerable scale, situated within a space strongly characterised by the presence of the statue of Atlas holding the globe from the Farnese collection.

The chosen design approach involves the systematic reuse of existing display cases that had been decommissioned from previous museum exhibitions. These are heterogeneous elements in terms of dimensions, proportions, and finishes: horizontal and vertical display cases, bases of varying heights, and structures with non-uniform frames. The installation reassembles them into a unified whole inspired by the decorations engraved on the surface of the globe supported by Atlas - constellations, trajectories, and lines enveloping a sphere - thus constructing a system that organises the hall around this iconic focal point.

The choice of Atlas as the generative centre is not merely a tribute to the room's most significant work but a compositional principle: the lines radiating from the sphere become the trajectories along which the display cases are arranged, transforming a collection of disparate objects into a system endowed with its own geometry. The work of stitching together is, in this sense, an act of projection: it begins with an image engraved on a spherical surface and extends that logic across the entire available space, ensuring that each display case, regardless of its original form, participates in a broader constellation. The challenge was not to conceal the differences between the display cases but to render them irrelevant: the visitor perceives a system rather than a collection of salvaged pieces.

The reuse of existing museum assets reduces the need to produce new structures, but this choice requires particular attention to overall coherence. The pathways, heights, and distribution of the artefacts work together to integrate differences and inconsistencies into a coherent layout. Thalassa anticipates approaches that re-emerge in other projects: confidence in the possibility of reorganising pre-existing systems, the construction of visual order from fragments, and the idea that intelligent assembly can be more valuable than creating something entirely from scratch.

Volando sulla megalopoli, Santa Maria la Nova, Naples

The installation *Volando sulla Megalopoli* (Figs. 12-13, 38), created in the cloister of Santa Maria la Nova, belongs to the same linguistic constellation as *Divina Sezione* and the *Ama Festival*. The layout is dominated by a linear structure of fir wood arranged in a lattice pattern, running along one side of the cloister and transforming the regular sequence of arches into a continuous figure.

The system is composed of a single material: fir strips nailed together and painted with gold enamel. The vertical lattice is reinforced by a large horizontal plane that functions as an exhibition table; the surfaces accommodate models, while drawings and bas-reliefs are placed on the vertical planes. A series of projecting elements - the rostrums - integrate artificial lighting, contributing to the depth of the structure and preventing it from being perceived as a mere technical rack.

The character of the installation is twofold: the structure clearly appears as an addition to the cloister, without interfering with the historical fabric; yet the golden line engages with the existing architectural order, guides the visitor's path, and re-defines perspectives and spatial depth. The choice of colour - gold enamel applied to low-grade construction timber - is paradigmatic in this respect: the expressive quality resides not in the material itself, but in the treatment that imbues it with intention. Fir becomes gold, the lattice becomes ornament, and the technical structure becomes a landscape element. It is one of the most precise expressions of what Gambardella means by democratic beauty: a visually rich result achieved not through expensive materials, but through an interpretive gesture applied to the available material.

One particularly noteworthy aspect concerns durability. Although conceived as a temporary installation, the structure remained in the cloister for more than fifteen years, effectively becoming a nearly permanent fixture that is now partially degraded. This unforeseen outcome raises a question that concerns not only this project but the entire category of long-lasting installations. A structure designed for a short lifespan, built with inexpensive materials and reversible assembly methods, finds itself confronted with the same questions posed by permanent architecture: maintenance, progressive deterioration, and the issue of who assumes responsibility for its upkeep over time. The democratic beauty of humble materials - which constitutes an advantage in a temporary context (it is inexpensive, quick to assemble, and easy to dismantle) - becomes a vulnerability as soon as the lifespan of the work extends beyond expectations. In this sense, *Volando sulla Megalopoli* remains an open case: not an example of unsustainability, but an

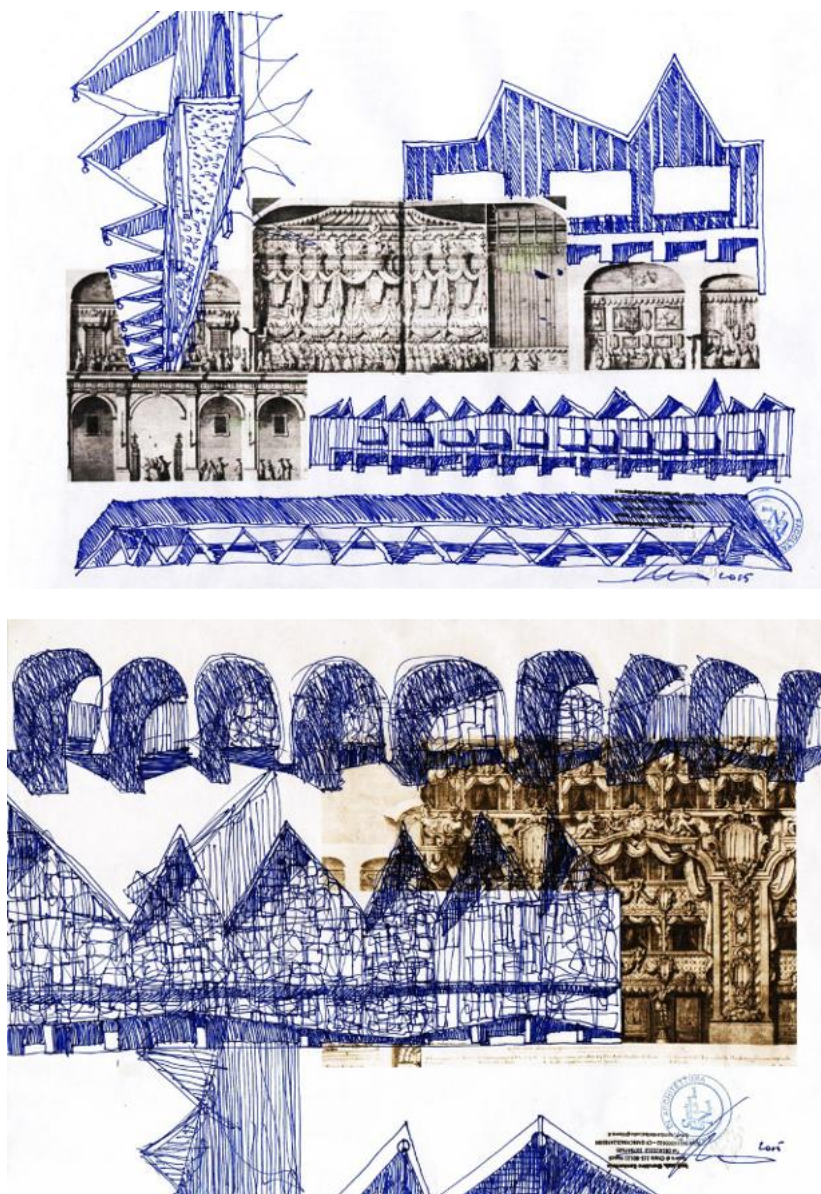


Fig. 12-13. Original drawings - Volando sulla megalopoli - Naples 2013. Images: Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri

indication of how fluid and unpredictable the boundary between temporariness and permanence can be.

Festival Ama, Maddaloni

The Ama Festival, held in Maddaloni, is one of the cases in which the relationship between economic constraints and design choices is most explicit. Simona Ottieri's installation was created on a very limited budget and is built entirely from OSB panels, selected for their cost, availability, and potential for reassembly. The festival spaces are organized into a series of islands or archipelagos: slender vertical elements that define an interior landscape of projections, voids, and passages. The panels are cut to create soaring forms; the offcuts, rather than being discarded, are used to construct bases, plinths, and reinforcements. From a technical standpoint, the use of OSB raises issues related to stability. Ottieri notes that panels of the standard commercial height of 250 cm were employed and that only in the final elements - when the available material was running out - were more complex joints adopted: a double-sided panel, joined horizontally on the front and vertically on the back, capable of ensuring structural integrity while remaining perceptually invisible from a distance.

The installation is dismantled with particular care because the structures are intended to be reused in subsequent editions of the festival. OSB - a material often associated with temporary applications - assumes a central role here: the irregular texture, the visible edges, and the joints become part of a deliberately explicit language that does not seek to conceal the humble origins of the materials. The strength of the installation derives not from masking its constraints, but from the capacity to transform joints, variations in height, and adjustments to the material into coherent components of the design.

Discussion and Conclusion

Considering the analysed projects as a whole, it can be argued that sustainability in the work of the gambardellarchitetti studio does not take the form of an explicitly declared programme, but rather emerges from a recurring combination of factors: formal research, attention to place, and discipline in the use of materials. "Sustainability is first and foremost economic," as Ottieri puts it; and the hone-

sty of this statement does not diminish its practical value, because the practices that derive from it also produce significant material outcomes: a reduction in the number of newly manufactured elements, attention to durability and disassembly, and the simplification of supply chains.

The idea of democratic beauty developed by Gambardella translates, in the context of exhibitions, into several recognisable practices: the use of humble or standard materials elevated to a high degree of expressive intensity, the prevalence of easily legible single-material structures, and the emphasis placed on construction details. The systematic use of a single dominant material - resin and lime, drywall, OSB, fir, wood panels - simplifies supply chains and manufacturing processes, shifting complexity from the number of materials employed to the way they are assembled in space.

The expression “making do with what you have,” frequently invoked by the designers themselves, can be interpreted as the essence of a precise working approach: not the art of making do in a generic sense, but the capacity to transform supply constraints, delivery errors, or rigid formats into compositional rules. In the Ama Festival, offcuts and joints become part of the design; in *Gusto!*, the lines where panels meet structure the grid that runs through the halls. The scarcity of resources is not merely a limitation, but the starting point for a process of formal control aimed at bringing coherence to what was originally fragmented.

A second axis concerns the relationship with host contexts. In cases where the studio intervenes in strongly characterised historical environments - the Yellow House, *Divina Sezione*, *Volando sulla Megalopoli*, and *Thalassa* - the installation does not attempt to blend in with or erase the background, but introduces a second architecture that overlays the existing heritage and interprets it. The result is a conception of sustainability that may also be defined as cultural: the addition of legible and potentially reversible layers, rather than the neutralisation of previous stratifications or their reduction to mere backdrops.

However, certain tensions emerge that appear to be an integral part of the overall picture. The fact that installations conceived as temporary - such as the golden lattice of *Volando sulla Megalopoli* - remain in use for many years highlights both the robustness of the designed single-material structures and the ambivalence of this unexpected longevity: on the one hand, the capacity to withstand the passage of time; on the other, the issue of maintenance, the degradation of inexpensive materials, and the fate of works created to be ephemeral. The grey area between temporariness and permanence appears to be one of the terrains on which the studio's concept of installation sustainability lends itself to critical discussion.

The lesson to be drawn from the work of Gambardella and Ottieri cannot be reduced to a technique or a formal repertoire; it is first and foremost an attitude. Working with humble materials does not mean sacrificing quality, but rather shifting the locus in which quality is produced - from the cost of materials to the precision of the gesture, from the richness of supply to the coherence of the system. Every budget constraint, every imposed industrial format, and every on-site error can become, if interpreted appropriately, a compositional rule. This is perhaps the most transferable contribution of their practice: the demonstration that formal control is not the privilege of abundant resources, and that the democratic beauty of which Gambardella speaks is not a resignation to scarcity, but a conscious choice. A choice that requires rigour, the ability to read context, and, above all, the willingness to recognise in limitation not an obstacle, but the very point from which the project begins.

Notes

¹ From a conversation with Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri on May 26, 2025

Fig. 14. Photograph of the Maisto Staircase (exterior) - Yellow House - Scala 2002, an installation project by Cherubino Gambardella in collaboration with Simona Ottieri. Photo: Peppe Maisto





Fig. 15. Photograph showing a detail of the exterior entrance to Yellow House - Scala 2002. Photo: Peppe Maisto



Fig. 16. Interior photograph of the exhibition installation - Yellow House - Scala 2002. Photo: Peppe Maisto



Fig. 17. Set design photograph - Yellow House - Scala 2002. Photo: Peppe Maisto



Fig. 18. Photograph of a detail from the installation - Yellow House - Scala 2002.
Photo: Peppe Maisto



Fig. 19. Photograph of the display case system in the exhibition - Yellow House - Scala 2002. Photo: Peppe Maisto



Fig. 20. Photograph of the exhibition installation - Divina Sezione - Italian Architecture for the Divine Comedy - Hall of the Halberdiers and Guards - Royal Palace - Caserta 2018. Exhibition design by Simona Ottieri with Concetto Tavoletta and Maria Gelvi. Photo: Mario Ferrara



Fig. 21. Exhibition photograph - Divina Sezione - Italian Architecture for the Divine Comedy - Hall of the Halberdiers and Guards - Royal Palace - Caserta 2018. Photo: Mario Ferrara



Fig. 22. Exhibition photograph - Divina Sezione - Italian Architecture for the Divine Comedy - Hall of the Halberdiers and Guards - Royal Palace - Caserta 2018. Photo: Mario Ferrara



Fig. 23. Exhibition photograph - Divina Sezione - Italian Architecture for the Divine Comedy - Hall of the Halberdiers and Guards - Royal Palace - Caserta 2018. Photo: Mario Ferrara



Fig. 24. Exhibition photograph - Divina Sezione - Italian Architecture for the Divine Comedy - Hall of the Halberdiers and Guards - Royal Palace - Caserta 2018. Photo: Mario Ferrara



Fig. 25. Exhibition photograph - Divina Sezione - Italian Architecture for the Divine Comedy - Hall of the Halberdiers and Guards - Royal Palace - Caserta 2018. Photo: Mario Ferrara



Fig. 26. Exhibition photograph - Divina Sezione - Italian Architecture for the Divine Comedy - Hall of the Halberdiers and Guards - Royal Palace - Caserta 2018. Photo: Mario Ferrara



Fig. 27. Exhibition photograph - Divina Sezione - Italian Architecture for the Divine Comedy - Hall of the Halberdiers and Guards - Royal Palace - Caserta 2018. Photo: Mario Ferrara



Fig. 28. Exhibition photograph - *Gusto! Italiani a tavola* - M9 Museo del '900 - Mestre 2022. Exhibition design by Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri.
Photo: Marco Cappelletti



Fig. 29. Exhibition photography - Gusto! Italiani a tavola - M9 Museum of the 20th Century - Mestre 2022 - Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri. Photo: Marco Cappelletti



Fig. 30. Exhibition photography - *Gusto! Italiani a tavola* - M9 Museum of the 20th Century - Mestre 2022 - Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri. Photo: Marco Cappelletti



Fig. 31. Exhibition photography - *Gusto! Italiani a tavola* - M9 Museum of the 20th Century - Mestre 2022 - Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri. Photo: Marco Cappelletti



Fig. 32. Exhibition photography - *Gusto! Italiani a tavola* - M9 Museum of the 20th Century - Mestre 2022 - Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri. Photo: Marco Cappelletti

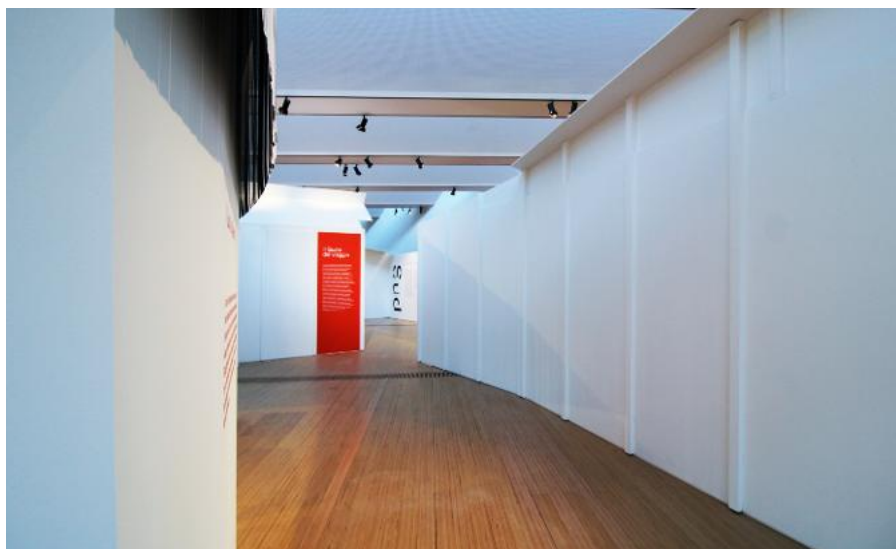


Fig. 33. Exhibition photography - *Gusto! Italiani a tavola* - M9 Museum of the 20th Century - Mestre 2022 - Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri. Photo: Marco Cappelletti



Fig. 34. Exhibition photography - *Gusto! Italiani a tavola* - M9 Museum of the 20th Century - Mestre 2022 - Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri. Photo: Marco Cappelletti



Fig. 35. Exhibition photography - *Gusto! Italiani a tavola* - M9 Museum of the 20th Century - Mestre 2022 - Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri. Photo: Marco Cappelletti



Fig. 36. Exhibition photography - *Gusto! Italiani a tavola* - M9 Museum of the 20th Century - Mestre 2022 - Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri. Photo: Marco Cappelletti

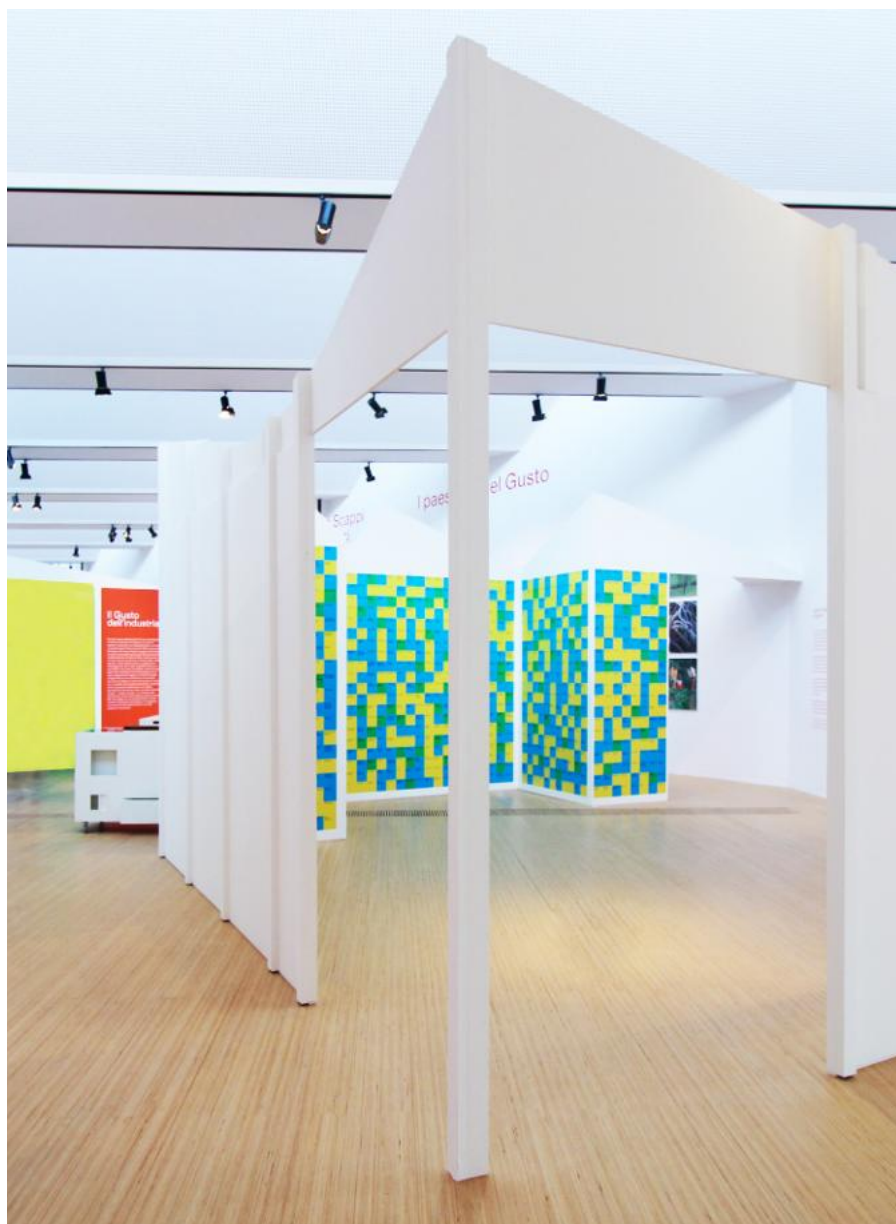


Fig. 37. Exhibition photography - *Gusto! Italiani a tavola* - M9 Museum of the 20th Century - Mestre 2022 - Cherubino Gambardella and Simona Ottieri. Photo: Marco Cappelletti



Fig. 38. Exhibition photograph - Volando sulla megalopoli - Naples 2013.
Exhibition design by Cherubino Gambardella. Photo: Mario Laporta

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GHIGOS

Anti-disciplinarity, Constraints, and Process Intelligence

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GHIGOS

Anti-disciplinarity, Constraints, and Process Intelligence¹

The firm does not simply answer the client's question. First, it deconstructs it. It is from this reversal of approach that everything Ghigos does begins - from exhibition design to master planning, from websites to buildings - and from this also derives, almost as an inevitable consequence, what Ghigos does not do: cultivate a style. Five partners, all trained architects, and no recognizable stylistic signature: not by omission, but by design. This is a method that reveals itself more clearly in moments of crisis than in manifestos, and in Davide Crippa's account there is at least one crisis that stands out as an extreme case: three weeks between a phone call and the opening of Gang City at the Venice Architecture Biennale, with almost nothing at their disposal - neither time, nor budget, nor freedom. It is there, under maximum pressure, that a practice reveals its underlying structure. The partners are all trained architects, but each has developed distinct competencies, pursuing different trajectories: large-scale buildings and subdivisions, villas and apartments, installations and interactive devices, design objects, strategic projects ranging from urban planning initiatives to those developed for design firms, communication, websites, and consulting on trade fair environments. This

Fig. 1. Ghigos - Mirco Facchinelli, Davide Crippa, Barbara Di Prete. Photo: Ghigos Archive

diversity functions not as a sum of services but as a cross-cutting field: in many cases, projects are undertaken as “complex projects,” within which the firm accompanies the client from architecture to graphics, from the website to the building, from the subdivision plan to the installation, without shifts in scale becoming shifts in method.

Method, in fact, is what Ghigos prioritizes over style. It is a method applicable across all project scales and one that allows each new commission to be approached from a deliberately lateral perspective, drawing on tools from diverse disciplines and explicitly seeking to incorporate an element of innovation into processes that becomes a defining feature in its own right. From this emerge two characteristics that run throughout the narrative. The first is the collective nature of the work: projects emerge from a multi-voiced dialogue, processed through brainstorming and clustering techniques that possess their own internal discipline. The first thing we do when faced with a design question is not to formulate an answer, but to break down the question itself: to determine whether it is the right question, whether other questions are possible, to construct a system of alternative answers, and to analyse them using tools similar to SWOT analysis, ultimately selecting the option best suited to the situation. This approach overturns a common practice in professional design firms, where designers respond with their own formal repertoires to what clients have already defined. Here, on the contrary, a significant portion of the work consists in reformulating the request. The second characteristic concerns how the project engages with materials. Since the firm opened an in-house division functioning as a fab lab - following the lead of other firms, such as Dotdotdot, that have chosen to prototype internally - digital fabrication has become part of the designer’s cultural repertoire rather than a service purchased elsewhere. This proximity has profoundly altered the way projects are conceived: how to produce, what to produce, how to transport, and how to achieve the best result with the fewest resources. It is a formula that the studio summarises in a single phrase - “less material and more intelligence” - and one that deserves to be taken as a key to interpretation. In this vision, sustainability is not an afterthought added to the project, but an outcome of the constructive and cognitive process: what is decided to be made, how it is made, with what, and how it can be put back into circulation after the event.

A consequence of this interweaving is that the studio, in its narrative, almost never separates formal success from the constraints that made it possible. Constraints - of time, budget, logistics, and client requirements - are not presented as obstacles to be neutralised, but as conditions that drive the search for unconven-

tional solutions and thus as a terrain for learning. The success of some projects, Davide Crippa observes with a certain honesty, also depends on contingent circumstances: tight deadlines, materials selected purely because of their availability, and technological choices dictated by the only viable option. Yet it is precisely in this clear-eyed acceptance of constraints that operational wisdom takes shape: the awareness that the quality of a project, in many cases, is not measured by the freedom granted to the designer but by the intelligence with which that absence is managed.

It is against this backdrop that Ghigos has always operated in the field of exhibition design. The choice is not accidental: among the fields of architecture, and even more so than interior design, exhibition design is described as the most transdisciplinary field of all. Exhibiting means solving a problem that can be approached from many different angles - purely graphic, purely tectonic, constructive in the manner of small-scale architecture, or experiential and multisensory through technology. The studio engages with all of these, selecting each time the approach best suited to the context and the brief. Ghigos's relationship with the theme of sustainability in exhibition making also unfolds within this openness. The theme, Crippa observes, has followed a varied trajectory: in some sectors - fashion in particular, under the pressure of the Green Deal and sustainability reporting - it emerged early and with specific demands; in others, such as art museums, it often remains a proposal initiated by the designer rather than by the client, whose primary concern is economic sustainability. This is an observation the firm does not dismiss: today it is almost impossible not to hear about these issues, yet projects do not always genuinely address them. The diagnosis is clear, and it forms part of the way the firm positions itself: a significant portion of what is seen at trade fairs amounts to greenwashing, and recognising this is a prerequisite for attempting to do things differently.

It is from this constellation - interdisciplinarity as a method, the collective as a cognitive framework, digital fabrication as an operational toolkit, constraint as an opportunity, and sustainability as a choice more often made by the designer than by the client - that the design process described in the following pages can be understood. It is a process in which the decomposition of the question and the economy of materials become the two axes upon which the response is constructed, case by case.

Deconstructing the request, subtracting the material

Ghigos's design process cannot be reduced to a linear sequence of phases. Rather than a workflow, it constitutes a cognitive protocol: a way of approaching commissions that has evolved over time, originating in a practice that is constitutive of the collective and that has more recently been recalibrated around digital fabrication. These two dimensions - thinking together and making with the machine - are not merely juxtaposed. They mutually transform one another, and it is precisely through this reciprocal adjustment that the studio defines its trajectory. The first component of the method is what would today be termed co-design. Long before the term entered common usage, the studio had already been working through sessions of collective reasoning: when a new commission arrives, the first step is not to formulate a response but to deconstruct the question itself. The team verifies whether the question posed by the client is in fact the most pertinent one, whether alternative possibilities exist, and whether it might be preferable to reformulate it. Beginning with this initial inquiry, a range of alternative responses is generated and subsequently analysed through design and management tools - the explicit reference being to SWOT analysis - in order to identify the solution most appropriate to the specific situation. The most significant consequence of this approach is that, within the studio's lexicon, there is no predetermined "register" for the installation: if the question calls for graphics, the response will be graphic; if it calls for tectonics, it will be constructive; if it calls for technology, it will be interactive. The project is the translation of the problem rather than its overwriting.

The second component is digital fabrication, introduced into the studio through the establishment of an in-house fab lab. At an operational level, this has made it possible to prototype and, in some cases, directly produce exhibition components, thereby reducing supply chains and lead times. At a cultural level, it has transformed the way designers think: designing now also entails understanding how a piece will be cut, transported, assembled, and how much material will remain as waste. Production techniques enter the design process from its earliest stages, bringing with them a precise sensitivity to the relationship between resources employed and results obtained. From this interplay emerges the formula adopted by the studio as its guiding principle: less material, more intelligence. The formula clearly carries environmental implications, yet it presents itself first and foremost as an economic and design logic - doing more with less, replacing mass with precision, ornament with geometry, and cladding with joints.

The third component, less readily named but crucial to the firm's narrative, is the acceptance of constraints as the very subject of design. Tight deadlines, limited budgets, difficult logistics, and materials selected on the basis of what is available on the market within a matter of days: at several points in the conversation, Crippa returns to the fact that the initial conditions of many projects were not freely chosen and that the quality of the response largely depended on the manner in which those constraints were addressed. This is not the rhetoric of "the tight budget as a creative stimulus." It is a matter of method: to arrive at an effective solution in a short period of time, it is necessary to abandon one's initial formal repertoire, to accept that the availability of a particular material or technology becomes a design constraint, and to employ that constraint in constructing a coherent system. In practice, this approach translates into highly specific choices: a single material for the entire installation, a single production technology, a construction system composed of a very limited number of recombinable elements, and a unified strategy for logistics and storage.

Within this framework, sustainability is not introduced as a separate set of parameters. When the client explicitly requests it - as often occurs in the fashion sector, where sustainability reporting has become an integral component of the brief - the process remains unchanged, although certain decisions are evaluated more systematically. When the client does not request it - as is more commonly the case in museum contexts, where the dominant concern is economic sustainability - the studio introduces it by proposing strategies and materials that reduce environmental impact. In any case, the firm insists upon a distinction that represents a deliberate cultural choice: economic sustainability, understood as efficiency in the use of resources while achieving the same result, constitutes the constraint that, when taken seriously, almost invariably produces outcomes that are also environmentally consistent. This is not because the two dimensions coincide, but because reducing materials, promoting reuse, enabling disassembly, and employing a limited number of standard elements are, before being virtuous practices, simply intelligent ones.

The aspect that the studio emphasises most consciously in concluding this line of reasoning is the assessment of the energy consumption associated with exhibition installations. The topic is introduced in relation to one of the most complex projects discussed in the conversation - the exhibition programme at the Rovello 2 space - but it functions as a more general warning: the extensive use of video projections, screens, and technological devices has a significant impact on both the microclimate of spaces and overall energy consumption, particularly in histo-

ric buildings that are poorly equipped to dissipate heat. It is a consideration that the studio presents as a form of self-critique, but also as an open question concerning the future: in debates on sustainable exhibitions, attention is only rarely paid to the actual weight of the intangible dimension of the project. Acknowledging this, even at the cost of exposing a limitation, is consistent with the studio's broader position: it is preferable to declare what has not yet been brought under control than to conceal it within a reassuring narrative.

The design process may therefore be described as a non-linear sequence in which the deconstruction of the brief, the choice of production technology, the definition of materials, and logistics are addressed simultaneously, and in which each decision is also evaluated in terms of what will remain after dismantling. The lesson that runs through this reasoning is clear: the quality of an installation is not determined solely during the conceptual phase but rather by the capacity to hold together idea, constraint, and production from the very first sketch, with the awareness that what is decided in the initial stages irrevocably conditions what the material will do throughout its entire life cycle.

Three Projects as a Laboratory

Taken together, the installations by Gang City at the Venice Architecture Biennale, by Fast Architecture at the Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti in Milan, and by the MAF - Museo delle Arti Femminili in Vallo della Lucania - make it possible to observe how the process described in the preceding pages translates into concrete installations in markedly different contexts. In the first case, urgency and logistical constraints compelled the studio to adopt a radical single-material approach that, from today's perspective, stands as one of the most successful examples of Italian exhibition ecodesign. In the second, a poetics of reuse articulated through the curatorial content is translated into a spatial grammar composed of a single industrial object - the plastic jerrycan - which simultaneously becomes structure, play, and aesthetic code. In the third, digital interaction encounters the domestic vocabulary of standardized furniture, generating a clash of registers that, although not conceived as "sustainable" in an environmental sense, demonstrates how economic sustainability can, by extension, produce coherent outcomes on another level as well. Taken together, the three projects illustrate how the acceptance of constraint as a design material can manifest itself in very different choices while maintaining a continuity of method.

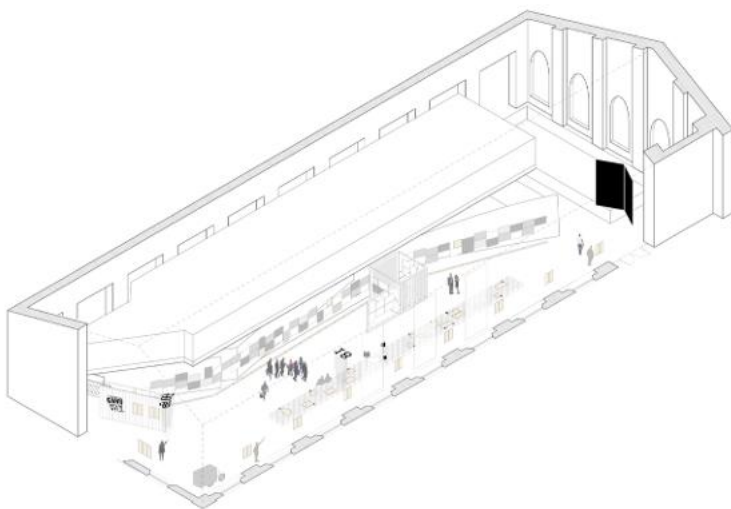


Fig. 2. Axonometric view - Gang City - Collateral event of the 15th Venice Biennale, Spazio Thetis, Arsenale Nord - Venice 2016. Image: Ghigos

Gang City. A Project in Reverse, and the Device That Emerges from It

The Gang City installation (Figs. 2-3, 11-17), set up in Venice as a collateral event of the Architecture Biennale, occupies a distinctive position in this discussion and deserves to be considered an exemplary case of how Ghigos operates within constraints. The genesis of the project, even before its constructive choices are examined, constitutes a small manifesto in itself: the studio had not originally been commissioned to design the installation. Ghigos was curating, within the event, a section dedicated to design and the theme of gangs in his capacity as curator of part of the programme. Only at a later stage, due to an emergency, did the general curator, Fabio Armao, ask for assistance because the person originally responsible for the installation was unable to complete it within the required timeframe. What emerged was therefore what Crippa defines as a “reverse project”: a commission that arrived late, with a very limited budget and extremely tight deadlines.

Under similar conditions, a less reflective approach might have attempted to sal-



Fig. 3. Original drawing - Gang City - Side event of the 15th Venice Biennale, Spazio Thetis, Arsenale Nord - Venice 2016. Image: Ghigos

vage a pre-existing idea, accepting a loss of quality in exchange for meeting the deadline. The studio instead chose to overturn the problem. The conditions - the speed of execution, the availability of an easily obtainable material, the need for a rapid production technology, and the logistics of transport to Venice - became the project's starting point rather than a compromise. The studio explicitly imposed a constraint that was not stylistic but operational in nature: a single manufacturing technology, laser cutting; and a single material, sufficiently simple to source, inexpensive, and easy to transport. The choice fell on 3 mm corrugated cardboard, supplemented in specific areas by OSB panels for the entrance system.

From this constraint, in a manner that was not immediately foreseeable, the design language also emerged. The curatorial theme - the world of gangs, suburbs, and graffiti artists - suggested a reference to stencils and to the cut-out lettering found in the places where gangs operate. The studio therefore decided not to print the graphics but to engrave and cut them directly into the cardboard itself, transforming the stencil from an iconographic reference into a technical operation constitutive of the project. The exhibition graphics ceased to be a layer applied to a support and instead became the support itself, modified by the machine

that cuts into the material. It is a minimalist operation that overturns the conventional order of exhibition language and renders the project consistent with its content: the installation “borrows” a tool from the world it represents, achieving through technical means an identity that other solutions would have pursued through applied graphics.

On this basis, the entire exhibition was realised with very few elements. Eight OSB panels formed the entrance system, onto which the words “Gang City” were spray-painted through a stencil. The subsequent sections were organised through the repetition of cardboard panels nailed to the existing walls or to the entrance wall. The display system for the objects - the section related to ecclesiastical themes and that featuring design products - was created by crossing wooden planks and cardboard sheets, on top of which rested cardboard surfaces containing micro-display cases or items obtained through sharing or rental, a choice also dictated by the lack of time and resources required to produce them from scratch. The section dedicated to photography was resolved in an even more radical manner, suspending the printed panels with nylon so that they floated in space with near-zero material consumption; the captions were entrusted to spacers that performed both a technical function - keeping the public at a measured distance from the work - and a narrative one, providing information on the subject, the author, and the context of the photograph. The entire installation culminated in a large artwork that defined its perspective.

In material terms, Gang City is a predominantly single-material structure: cardboard supplemented in specific areas by OSB. Structurally, it is an interlocking system: no pins and no glue. The result is that the entire installation is both disassemblable and stackable. The exhibition space - more than one thousand square metres - can be reduced, once dismantled, to less than a single pallet. Lightness, in this case, is not a formal quality but the direct consequence of a production choice: laser cuts on flat sheets, geometries designed to fold into themselves, and weight reduced to a minimum. Transport logistics, which initially constituted the problem to be solved, became a structural property of the project.

Only three weeks elapsed between conception and production. It is a timeframe that the studio itself describes as “a race against time” and which, it admits with the same honesty that permeates the conversation, also depended on a considerable degree of luck - particularly with regard to Venetian humidity, an issue addressed only marginally during the design phase and one that could have compromised the stability of the panels. The “crash test” in Venice, as Crippa calls it, proved successful: some slight warping occurred on the surfaces supporting the

objects, but there was no structural failure.

Viewed from today's perspective - and this is perhaps the most important lesson that the project allows us to draw - Gang City stands as an almost ideal example of exhibition ecodesign, achieved not through a programmatic declaration of sustainability but through a lucid examination of a set of operational constraints. The question of environmental sustainability, ecodesign, and reuse had not been raised by the client. What was done, under pressure, was to select a material that could be processed using rapid technology, transported easily, assembled with interlocking joints, and disassembled without damage. The result was a structure that subsequently acquired a second, third, and tenth life: once dismantled and stored in boxes designed for stacking the panels, the installation was placed on a sharing platform and underwent at least a dozen new configurations - furniture fairs and various other uses - until its most recent reuse in the exhibition "100 Things Not to Forget", where nearly all the modules were rented and recontextualised. The sustainability of the project, in other words, is not a declared property; it is a behaviour of the material and of the system that organises it, activated after the event and repeatedly thereafter.

It is here that the lesson running through this case becomes clear. When a constraint is sufficiently severe to render the conventional path impassable - and in Gang City it certainly was - design practice is compelled to choose between two approaches: reducing quality in order to deliver the project nonetheless, or reducing degrees of freedom and using radical economy as a design language. In this project, Ghigos demonstrates that the latter approach - more risky and more disciplined - can produce structures that endure far longer than installations conceived as temporary. The sustainability of Gang City is not an ethical consequence of the choice of materials; it is a technical consequence of the manner in which the materials were assembled. It is a distinction of method rather than of language and deserves to be preserved as one of the most useful operational guidelines emerging from the entire discussion.

Fast Architecture. A Container of Containers

Fast Architecture, a pavilion created to house the results of a workshop led by designer Rodrigo Almeida during one of the first editions of Milan Design Week curated by the Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti, is a project dating back almost twenty years, yet it offers a conceptual framework that the studio still considers

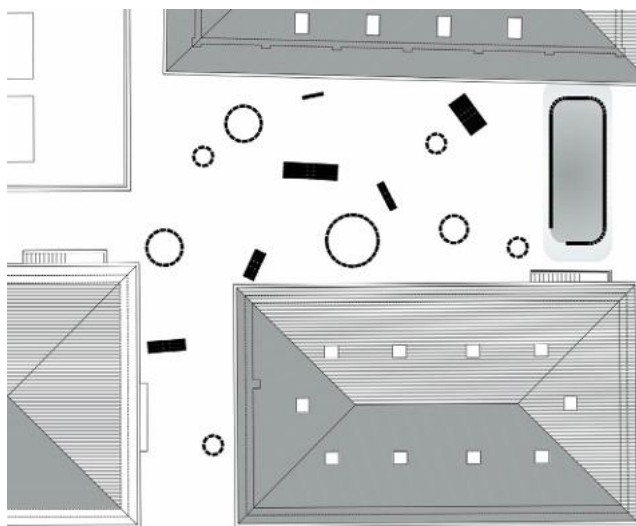


Fig. 4. Original floor plan - Fast Architecture - NABA Milan - Milan 2006. Image: Ghigos

relevant today (Figs. 4-7, 18-23). Here too, the initial conditions were restrictive: compressed timelines - not three weeks as in Gang City, but nevertheless only six months - and a very limited budget. Sandro Guerrieri, who commissioned the studio, asked them to build something unique to accommodate a project that, following the poetics of the Campana brothers, explored reuse, the “re-made”, and the aesthetics of waste materials and objects from the favelas as the basis for a new design vocabulary.

The studio decided to respond to the theme through conceptual translation rather than direct reference. If the workshop produced new objects created through the reuse of containers and waste materials, then the pavilion would become - literally - a container of containers. The figure, developed during one of the brainstorming sessions that are central to the studio’s methodology, plays on the ambiguity of a formula that appears to say many things and perhaps nothing at all; yet it was subsequently translated into a highly precise operational choice. Among the possible containers, the studio selected the water jerrycan: a standard industrial object, transparent and flexible, which, because of its geometry and material properties, could be treated as a large Lego brick.

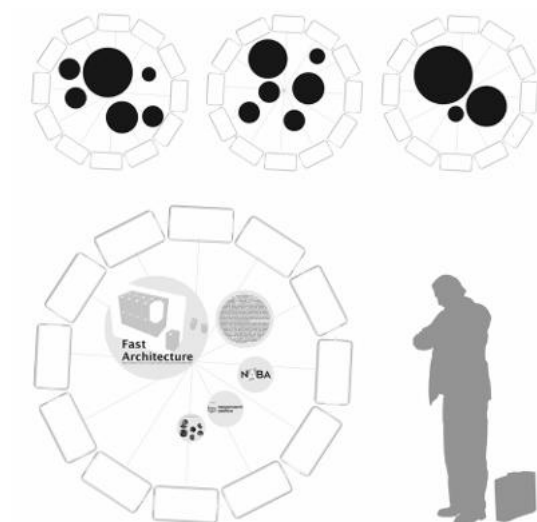


Fig. 5. Disegno originale - Espositore - Fast Architecture - NABA Milano - Milano 2006. Immagine: Ghigos

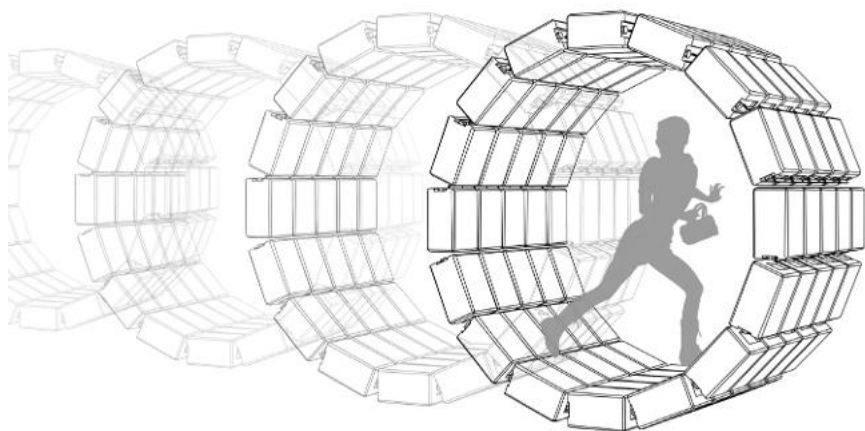


Fig. 6. Original drawing - Playground - Fast Architecture - NABA Milan - Milan 2006. Image: Ghigos

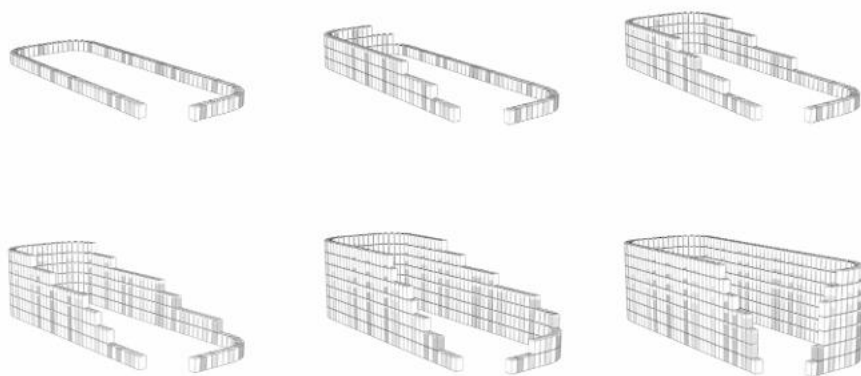


Fig. 7. Installation view - **Fast Architecture** - NABA Milan - Milan 2006. Image: Ghigos

The entire project derives from this single element. The water containers, simply positioned and stacked on top of one another, define the partitions of the exhibition space and a series of unusual objects that function as a sort of playground, a navigable play structure within the campus of the Nuova Accademia. The construction logic is based on a single material and a single object, and this significantly influences the entire visual language of the pavilion: the coherence of the whole is a direct consequence of the repetition of the same element. There is no system of cladding, colours, or finishes; there is only a water container that multiplies and, through multiplication, becomes architecture.

Viewed from a distance, the project reveals two characteristics that the studio openly emphasises. The first is the success achieved by this choice in terms of language: the jerrycan, as an exhibition element, was reinterpreted a few years later at a major event dedicated to electronic music in Berlin - this time with 200-litre jerrycans instead of 25-litre ones - triggering a sort of aesthetic code that, in various forms, can still be traced in many ephemeral installations today. It is a legacy that the project claims with considerable clarity: a drastic economy of means can generate aesthetics that outlast the single occasion and influence design practices in other contexts.

The second characteristic directly concerns the issue of reuse. Once the pavilion was dismantled, the containers were not destroyed: they were simply set aside and compressed and remain available as perfectly intact objects, ready to be returned to the market or reused in new exhibition configurations. The possibility of a second life cycle, in other words, was designed from the outset through an apparently minimal operation: not securing the modules through invasive fastening systems but entrusting their stability to mutual compression. It is a gravity-based disassembly solution, and it says much about how the studio conceives durability: the condition for reusing an object is not only its robustness but also the methodology through which it was constructed.

The lesson that runs through Fast Architecture can be summarised in two parts. In terms of language, a single industrial object, selected for economic and logistical reasons, can - if taken seriously - underpin an entire exhibition grammar and generate a recognisable aesthetic without any investment in finishes or decoration. In terms of sustainability, the reusability of a standard component depends entirely on the way in which it is assembled; an intact object is reusable only if its structural logic has preserved its integrity. These are two principles that may appear obvious in theory, but they become a concrete approach only when they genuinely guide design decisions. Fast Architecture, as described by the studio, represents a case in which this has occurred.

MAF. Interaction, Ikea Hacked, Register Clutch

The Museum of Women's Arts in Vallo della Lucania - MAF - is one of Italy's first interactive museums and is cited by Crippa as a key milestone in the studio's journey toward the world of digital interaction (Figs. 8, 24-31). The project originated in collaboration with the Interaction Institute in Ivrea and with researchers Stefano Mirti and Walter Aprile (who later founded ID Lab Milano), and introduced the studio to a theme - interaction design as a constitutive component of exhibition design - that had emerged only a few years earlier in Ivrea. From the outset, the studio interpreted interaction not as an added layer to the museum, but as a structural device for engaging an audience distant from the major circuits: Vallo della Lucania, a non-central town, needed a perceptual reason to make it worth visiting. Interaction, in this case, became that reason.

The client did not request environmental sustainability, and the studio, in good faith, did not introduce the theme in the environmental terms that would be used

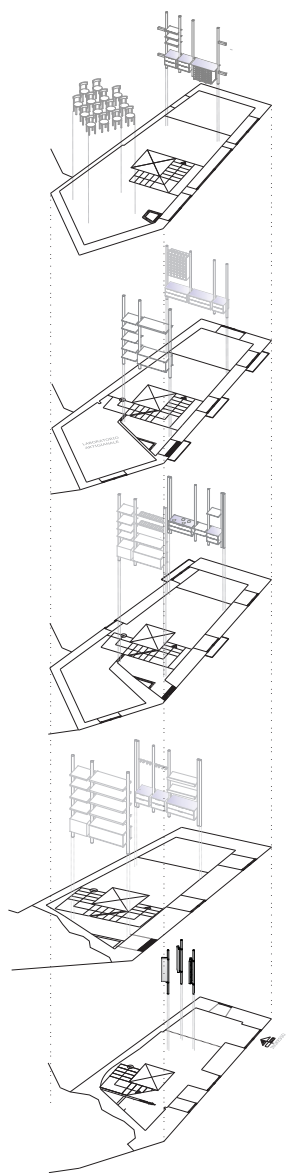


Fig. 8. Original axonometric exploded view - MAF. Museum of Women's Arts - Vallo della Lucania 2008. Image: Ghigos

a linguistic short circuit between the standardized domestic world and the rough architectural container, allowing the tension between the two registers to make visible the same tension between the collection and the collector.

On a technological level, the museum introduces a layering of interactions of different kinds: analog devices - such as decorations featuring quotes from thinkers, repainted with photoluminescent paints that activate at dusk by capturing solar energy during the day - coexist with more traditional digital devices based on sensors and multimedia content. The coexistence of these two registers is not merely rhetorical: it serves to prevent interaction from being confined solely to the realm of the screen, and to create an environment in which light, color, and matter also participate in the active behavior of the space.

In terms of sustainability, the MAF is not a project conceived with an environmental focus. It is, however, a project in which economic sustainability produces, as a side effect, outcomes that are consistent on another level as well. The use of low-cost, standard components - produced on an industrial scale and widely available - reduces the need for custom parts from the outset; the ability to adapt those same components, rather than replace them, extends their useful life well beyond that of a single installation; the coexistence of analog and digital interaction prevents the entire installation from being tied to the lifespan of a single technological device. The lesson here concerns less the individual object and more the approach: when budget constraints prevent designing from scratch, the quality of the project is measured by the ability to interpret, select, and adapt what already exists - and to make it interact with the context in a way that produces an original language.

Other projects mentioned: Rovello 2, Design Hostel, Docva, and the second life of Gang City

Alongside the three main cases, several recurring projects in the studio's narrative help complete the picture of Ghigos's work: the exhibition program at the Piccolo Teatro's Rovello 2 space in collaboration with the Politecnico di Milano, the 2017 installation *A letto con il Design / Design Hostel*, the *Docva* exhibition at the Maxxi, and the latest event at Milan Design Week 2026 with "100 cose da non dimenticare," in which Gang City's construction system returns to the scene after many years.

Rovello 2. Interaction as a system of rotation, and the limits of the immaterial

The Rovello 2 space, managed by the studio for several years in collaboration with the Piccolo Teatro and the Politecnico di Milano, represents an important exploration of the relationship between interaction, exhibition design, and sustainability (figs. 9, 32-36). Here, unlike at the MAF, interaction is not a client's request aimed at engaging the public, but a design choice by the studio in response to an organizational and economic constraint: for a space that had to host at least four rotating exhibitions per year, an exhibition system was needed capable of changing content very quickly, without rebuilding the physical structure from scratch each time.

The answer is a sort of magic box: a space in which, by speaking to it or interacting with appropriate elements, the content changes around the visitor, shaping itself according to the questions and themes relevant to each exhibition. Interaction, in this case, is a design tool for managing rotation: Ronconi's exhibition and those that follow do not require a new installation, but a new programming of content within the same system. In terms of the rationalization of resources and materials, it is a solution that clearly works toward environmental sustainability, even if it is not conceived in those terms.

The project is also, in the studio's account, an opportunity for one of the most precise self-critiques of the entire discussion. The presence of numerous video projectors, necessary to achieve projections extending throughout the space, had an unintended effect: the rise in indoor temperatures during spring, in an historic space lacking adequate air-conditioning systems, made it difficult to use the space freely. It is a consequence that, in hindsight, reveals a limitation of the project and, more generally, a blind spot in the discourse on the sustainability of exhibitions: we often focus on materials and structures, but rarely on the climate and energy impact of lighting devices, projectors, and the immaterial equipment that now constitutes a growing portion of exhibitions. The lesson the studio draws from this case is clear: the sustainability of an exhibition installation is not determined solely by the construction and dismantling phases, but also during its use, and in particular by the energy consumption and microclimate generated by elements that, nominally, appear less "material" than a panel or a structure.

Contemporaneo.doc/DOCVA. An Archive Making Its Mark

The exhibition *Contemporaneo.doc DOCVA*, organized by MAXXI Base in Rome, poses an unusual question: how can one exhibit an archive without betraying it? The project involves relocating the entire Milanese DOCVA archive - the documentation center for Italian contemporary art - to the Roman museum's spaces for six months. Ghigos responds with a choice that embodies a fundamental principle: not to construct an exhibition that mimics an archive, but to reconstruct the archive's very functioning (fig. 37). Shelving units, filing cabinets, multimedia consultation stations, large work tables: the exhibition setup is the archive in operation, relocated and made accessible to the exhibition's public without distorting its original purpose, but rather, if anything, aestheticizing it.

The choice is all the more clear-cut in terms of sustainability because it was declared from the outset as part of the project: upon the exhibition's closure, nearly the entire installation would return to Milan to become the new archiving system for the DOCVA headquarters. The project is, literally, a piece of furniture that hosts an exhibition before returning to its ordinary function. An approach that resolves the issue of the exhibition setup's lifecycle in a single stroke: no waste, no dismantling, no loss.

The visual impact - necessary in a museum context that also serves to engage visitors - is entrusted entirely to graphics, without altering the materiality of the shelving or its reversibility. Using the technique of flat anamorphosis, a film applied to the floor merges the MAXXI and DOCVA logos into a large-scale inscription that, legible in its entirety only from the entrance to the hall, dissolves into graphic fragments as the visitor moves through the space, transforming into environmental décor, almost a work of art. It is a solution that achieves maximum visual impact with minimal use of additional materials: the film is reversible, the shelving remains intact, and the project can be dismantled without leaving a permanent trace.

The lesson this project offers is consistent with that of *Gang City* and *Fast Architecture*, but it is expressed in a different register: not the radicalism of a single material nor the repeated industrial object, but rather the clear distinction between what must remain unchanged - the structure of the archival system - and what can be temporary - the graphics, the effect, the experience. Keeping the two levels separate is the condition that makes reuse possible years later. The MAXXI installation is still in use today at Careoff's headquarters at the *Fabbrica del Vapore* in Milan, as an archiving system for Italian contemporary art.

dio interprets “less material, more intelligence”: the reduction of mass is not an expressive choice, but the result of a consistently applied protocol.

«100 cose da non dimenticare». The Second Life of Gang City

The most recent reference - and in some ways the most revealing - is to the exhibition “100 cose da non dimenticare,” staged a few years ago (fig. 38). The project draws its inspiration entirely from Gang City’s construction system, borrowing nearly all its modules and adapting them to meet the specific needs of the new exhibition. The time gap between the two projects - more than a decade - makes this reuse particularly significant. It is not merely a single reinstallation, but the fact that a system designed for a collateral event in Venice, under emergency conditions, has passed through a sharing platform for more than ten recontextualizations, until returning to a new curatorial life.

Viewed within this framework, this episode takes on specific significance. No one, at the time of Gang City’s design, had imagined a lifespan of this duration. Yet the basic choices - a single material, an interlocking system, packaging onto just a few pallets - allowed that installation to remain available for more than ten years, without requiring renovation or replacement. It is tangible proof of the principle that runs through the studio’s entire body of work: the sustainability of an installation is determined upstream, during the design phase, and is a property of the construction system even before that of the individual materials. When the system is simple enough to be reinstalled without specialists, and clean enough to leave no waste, it can stand the test of time as an operational repertoire, ready to be reactivated whenever needed.

Discussion and Conclusion

The body of materials analyzed paints a picture of a studio operating within a productive contradiction: it rejects the category of poetics, and precisely for this reason constructs a recognizable method. De facto anti-disciplinarity, the collective as a cognitive device, the deconstruction of the brief, internal digital fabrication, the acceptance of constraint as project material: all these components do not coalesce into a style, but into a stance. It is a stance that allows Ghigos to move from a building to a website, from an installation to a subdivision plan, from

strategic consulting to an interactive device, without this transversality becoming dispersion. The thread, in all cases, is the way in which the brief is reformulated and matter is subtracted.

The three main cases - Gang City, Fast Architecture, MAF - demonstrate, through comparison, how this approach translates into very specific operational choices. Gang City represents the extreme case of monomaterial radicalism: a single material, a single manufacturing technology, an interlocking system that allows the installation to endure beyond the single event. Fast Architecture extends the same logic to a single standard industrial object, demonstrating how a market-available component can support an entire exhibition grammar and generate an influential aesthetic. Finally, MAF translates the principle into a different register - that of hacking household products - and shows how economic sustainability can, in turn, foster coherence also in terms of the life cycle of components. Taken together, the three projects demonstrate a methodological coherence that did not stem from strategic planning, but from a way of working consolidated over the years and recognized as such only in hindsight.

One of the most important insights that the conversation allows us to draw concerns the relationship between economic sustainability and environmental sustainability. The study honestly emphasizes that, in many cases, clients' explicit requests are of an economic nature: tight budgets, compressed timelines, and materials chosen based on what is actually available. This observation might seem reductive, yet it contains one of the most productive keys to understanding Ghigos's work. When economic sustainability is taken seriously - that is, when it is treated as a constraint requiring the best possible result with the least possible use of resources - the resulting choices are very often also environmentally sound: single-material construction, interlocking systems, reuse of standard components, reduction of weight and transport volume, and systems designed to be disassembled without damage. Environmental sustainability, in other words, can be a byproduct of economic discipline, provided that this discipline is practiced intelligently and not at the expense of quality.

In this regard, the firm is also capable of precise self-criticism. The Rovello 2 case demonstrates how a virtuous solution in terms of exhibition rotation - a single exhibition system capable of hosting diverse programs - can be undermined, in terms of energy consumption and microclimate, by the extensive use of video technologies and projectors. This is an issue that rarely comes up in the debate on sustainable exhibition design, and one that the studio chooses to bring to light: sustainability is not measured solely during the construction and dismantling

phases, but also in the daily operation of the installations, and in particular in the intangible dimension that now permeates a growing portion of exhibition projects.

A further observation concerns the studio's diagnosis - made without fanfare but with clarity - of the current state of the discourse on sustainability in exhibition design. While sustainability is a constant topic of discussion, many projects - especially those with high media visibility, such as those seen during the weeks of the Salone del Mobile - are permeated by a clear degree of greenwashing. It is an observation that the studio does not dismiss or attempt to refute through its own virtuous communication strategy; rather, it responds to it with a practice that does not claim sustainability credentials but that, in fact, adopts consistent behaviors. Recognizing the difference between the two stances - the one that declares and the one that practices - is one of the most useful contributions the conversation offers.

The lesson that runs through Ghigos's work - and which is worth highlighting in closing - can be condensed into three points. The first concerns the designer's stance: a poetics is not declared, it is practiced, and it is practiced first and foremost through the discipline with which the client's brief is broken down and the few elements truly necessary to respond to it are chosen. The second concerns the nature of constraints: constraints - of time, budget, and logistics - are not the opposite of the project, but its material; when approached with the right rigor, they produce solutions that endure beyond the event for which they were conceived, and in many cases precisely because they were conceived under pressure. The third concerns sustainability: less a label to be affixed to the project, more a property of the construction system, which is decided in advance through very concrete choices - use of a single material, interlocking systems, digital fabrication to reduce waste, and explicit assessment of energy consumption during use. It is perhaps the most concise statement of method the studio offers: in the shift from a poetics of form to a poetics of process, quality is not measured by what the project claims to mean, but by what remains standing, disassembled and reusable, long after the event for which it was conceived has ended.

Notes

¹ From a conversation with Davide Crippa on April 23, 2026



Fig. 11. Installation photograph - Gang City - Side Event of the 15th Venice Biennale, Spazio Thetis, Arsenale Nord - Venice 2016. Photo: Ghigos

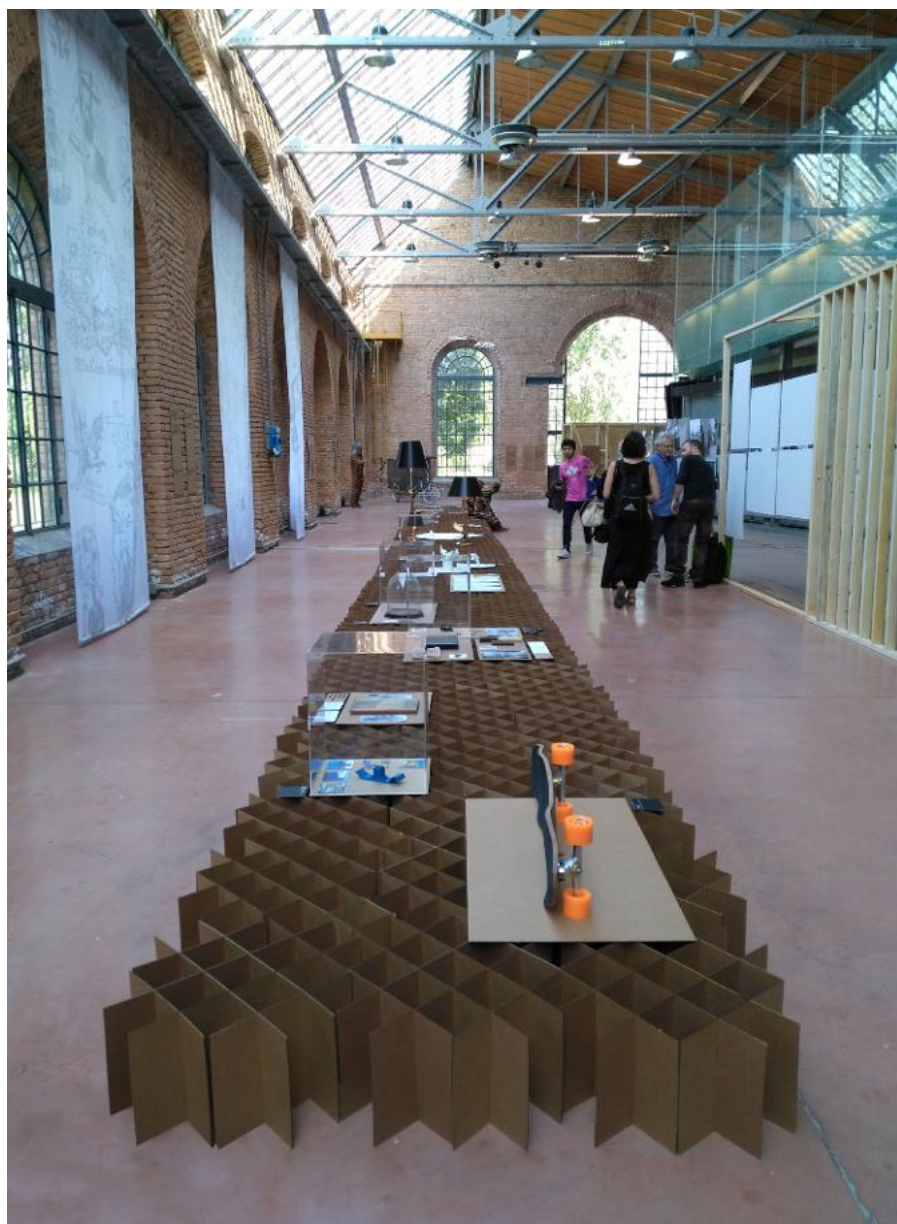


Fig. 12. Detail photograph of the installation - Gang City - side event of the 15th Venice Biennale, Spazio Thetis, Arsenale Nord - Venice 2016. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 13. Detail photograph of the installation - Gang City - side event of the 15th Venice Biennale, Spazio Thetis, Arsenale Nord - Venice 2016. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 14. Detail photograph of the installation - Gang City - side event of the 15th Venice Biennale, Spazio Thetis, Arsenale Nord - Venice 2016. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 15. Detail photograph of the installation - Gang City - side event of the 15th Venice Biennale, Spazio Thetis, Arsenale Nord - Venice 2016. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 16. Detail photograph of the installation - Gang City - side event of the 15th Venice Biennale, Spazio Thetis, Arsenale Nord - Venice 2016. Photo: Ghigos

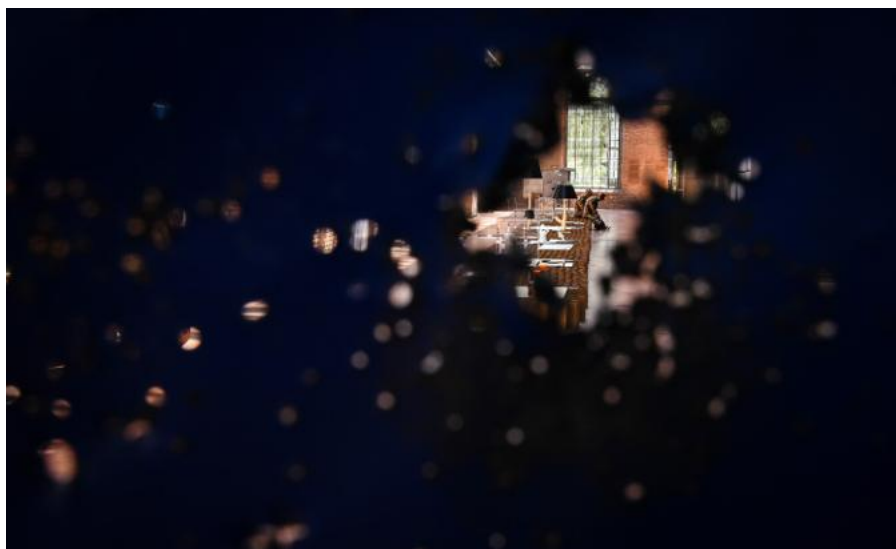


Fig. 16. F Detail photograph of the installation - Gang City - side event of the 15th Venice Biennale, Spazio Thetis, Arsenale Nord - Venice 2016. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 17. Detail photograph of the installation - Gang City - side event of the 15th Venice Biennale, Spazio Thetis, Arsenale Nord - Venice 2016. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 18. Installation photograph - Fast Architecture - NABA Milan
- Milan 2006. Photo: Ghigos

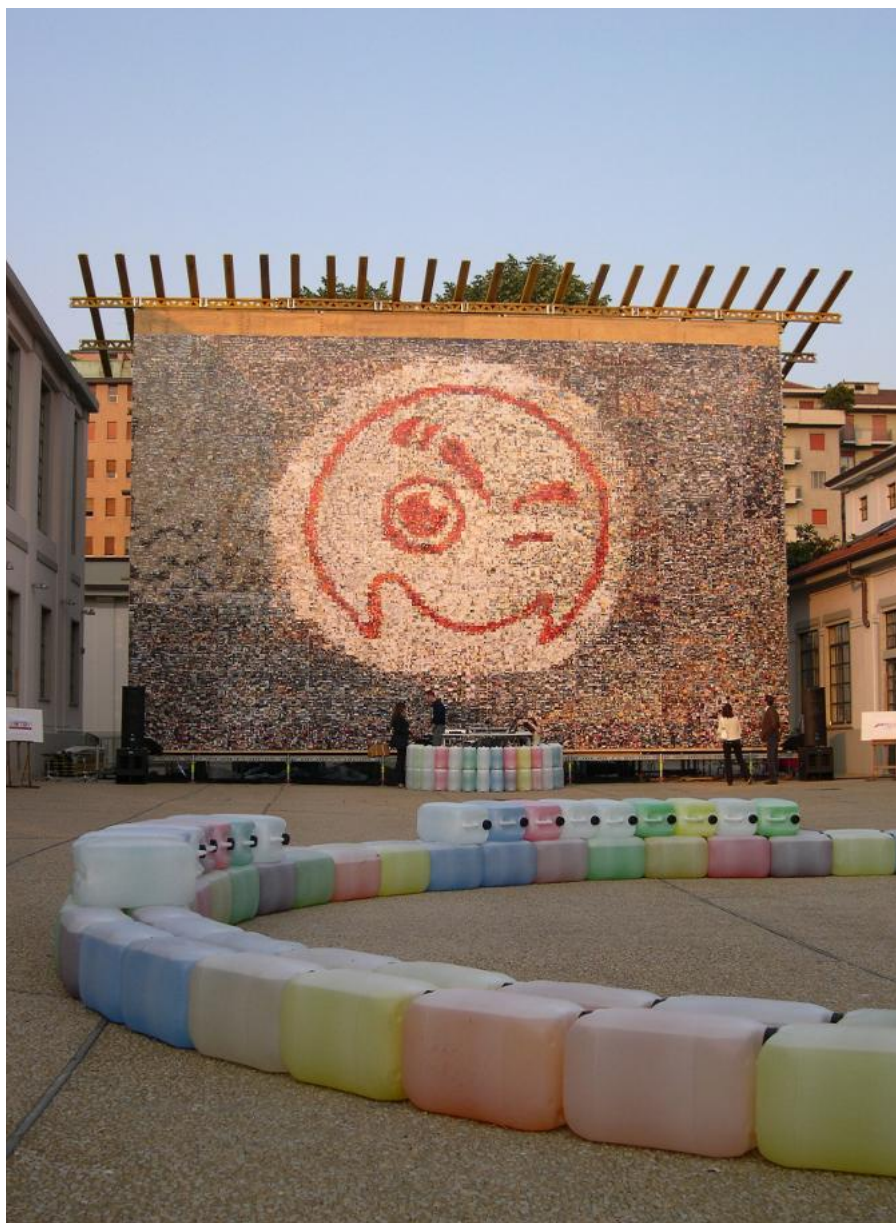


Fig. 19. Photograph of the Blinko event installation - Fast Architecture - NABA Milan - Milan 2006. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 20. Aerial view of the installation for the Milan Design Week presentation - Fast Architecture - NABA Milan - Milan 2006. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 21. Photograph of a mobile signage system - Fast Architecture - NABA Milan - Milan 2006. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 24. Photograph of the exhibition - Fast Architecture - NABA Milan - Milan 2006. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 22. Photograph of the exhibition - Fast Architecture - NABA Milan - Milan 2006. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 24. Exterior photograph of the Museum of Women's Arts (MAF).
Museum of Women's Arts - Vallo della Lucania, 2008. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 25. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - MAF. Museum of Women's Arts - Vallo della Lucania 2008. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 25. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - MAF. Museum of Women's Arts - Vallo della Lucania 2008. Photo: Ghigos

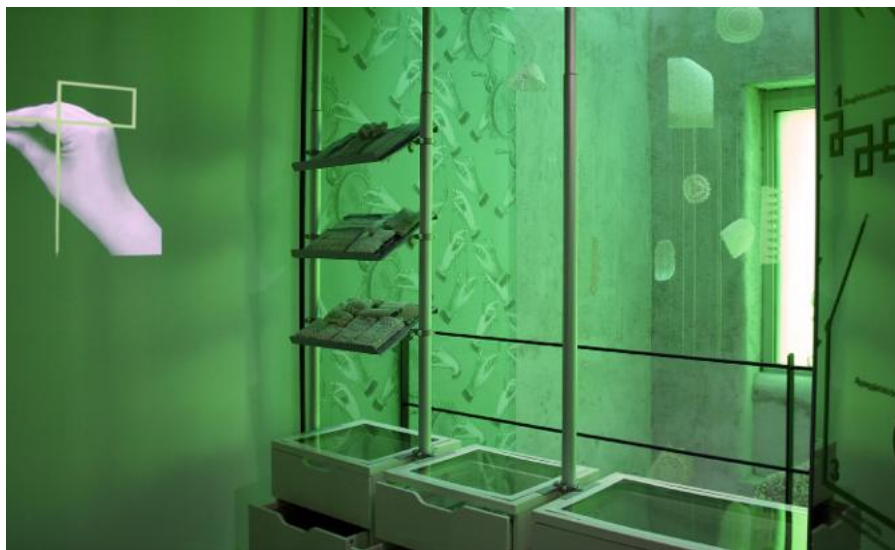


Fig. 26. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - MAF. Museum of Women's Arts - Vallo della Lucania 2008. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 27. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation 1st floor
- MAF. Museum of Women's Arts - Vallo della Lucania 2008. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 28. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - 2nd floor- MAF. Museum of Women's Arts - Vallo della Lucania 2008. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 29. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - 3rd floor - MAF. Museum of Women's Arts - Vallo della Lucania 2008. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 30. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - 4th floor - MAF. Museum of Women's Arts - Vallo della Lucania 2008. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 31. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - MAF. Museum of Women's Arts - Vallo della Lucania 2008. Photo: Ghigos

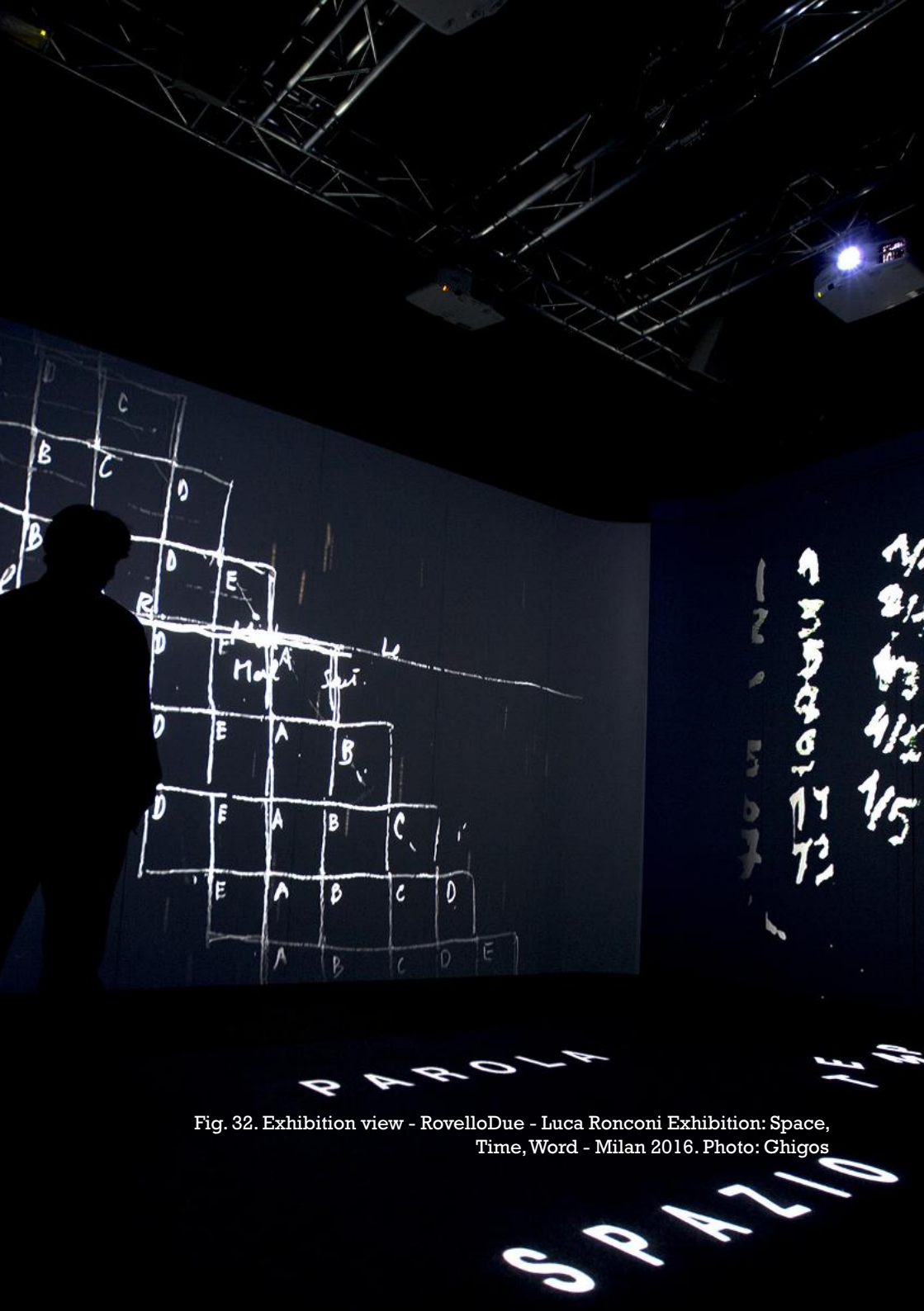


Fig. 32. Exhibition view - RovelloDue - Luca Ronconi Exhibition: Space, Time, Word - Milan 2016. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 33. Exhibition view - RovelloDue - Luca Ronconi Exhibition: Space, Time, Word - Milan 2016. Photo: Ghigos

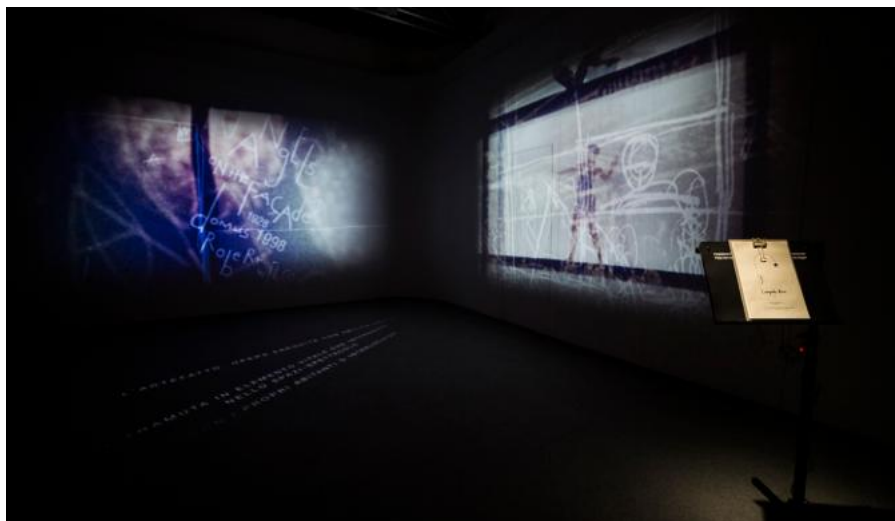


Fig. 34. Exhibition view - RovelloDue - Exhibition "A Calendoscopic Journey: Polytechnic Research and Discoveries" - Milan 2016. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 35. Close-up photograph of the exhibition wall - RovelloDue - Exhibition: "A Calendoscopic Journey: Polytechnic Research and Discoveries" - Milan, 2017. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 36. Close-up photograph of the exhibition wall - RovelloDue - Exhibition "In Line with Marco Zanuso: Projects and Visions Between Utopia and Rationality" - Milan 2018. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 37. Installation photograph - "Contemporaneo.doc/DOCVA" Exhibition - MAXXI Rome - Rome 2016. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 38. Photograph of the installation in the TechneteCA section - "100 Things Not to Forget" - Milan Design Week event - Milan 2026. Photo: Ghigos



Fig. 39. Photograph of the installation viewed from above - A letto con il design - Design Hostel - Milan Design Week - Milan 2017. Photo: Angelo Becci



Fig. 40. Photograph of the installation viewed from above - A letto con il design - Design Hostel - Milan Design Week - Milan 2017. Photo: Angelo Becci



Fig. 41. Photograph of the installation viewed from above - A letto con il design - Design Hostel - Milan Design Week - Milan 2017. Photo: Angelo Becci

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FRANCESCO LIBRIZZI

A lyrical poetics of staging, between archetypes and “doing more with less”

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FRANCESCO LIBRIZZI

A lyrical poetics of staging, between archetypes and “doing more with less”¹

Francesco Librizzi's practice is rooted in the Italian tradition that brings architecture, interior design, and exhibition design together as facets of a single design discipline. Trained as an architect, Librizzi works between Milan and the major national exhibition circuits, with projects ranging from private residences to museum installations, temporary exhibitions, and installations for institutions such as the Triennale di Milano, the Pinacoteca di Brera, the Fondazione Magistretti, MAST in Bologna, Casa Saraceni, and the Bahrain National Museum. This work is complemented by a design practice that includes products created for Italian companies, including FontanaArte, reflecting the coherence of a unified design approach in which the scale of the object, the interior, and the installation are not treated as separate domains but as variations of the same constructive logic.

In the interview, when asked directly about his design philosophy, Librizzi offers a definition that deserves to be regarded as a key to understanding his entire body of work. The studio, in the various forms through which it expresses itself, is primarily concerned with bringing into dialogue the elements that constitute a space: the place, the works that inhabit it, the components that construct it, those

Fig. 1. Photograph of Francesco Librizzi. Photo: Francesco Librizzi

who observe it, and those who pass through it. A house responds to a relatively contained relational logic; an exhibition, by contrast, brings a much broader field into play because it involves the curator, the artist, and a public whose number and composition are unknown, and it almost always takes place, at least in Italy, in venues that are anything but neutral - spaces with a decorative apparatus, a history, and their own architectural identity.

From this stems the idea that exhibition design is first and foremost an act of mediation: between the venue and the works, between the curator and the public, and between the various temporalities at play. The studio's poetics thus focus on the construction of a tectonics, understood as a logic of spatial construction capable of interpreting, revealing, and activating these complex relationships. This tectonics generates, across different projects, a recognizable formal language, which Librizzi describes through a literary analogy: the studio does not write in prose but in verse. Lyrical writing is characterized by a defined rhythm, a finite number of words, a sequence, a concatenation of verses, and a meter that anchors language within a structure. Similarly, the studio's installations take the form of formal, rhythmic structures endowed with an internal meter, far removed from informal or picturesque solutions.

The relationship with the discipline of exhibiting, explored in the second part of the interview, has both domestic and urban roots. Librizzi draws on the tradition of Italian interior architecture, in which the interior does not close in upon itself but engages in dialogue with the city, with the building that contains it, and with the urban context of which it forms a part. The autobiographical reference to his own home, chosen for its view of the Pirellone and Monte Doria, highlights an approach that constantly operates through shifts in scale: interior tiles that echo nearby facades and spatial devices that incorporate fragments of the surrounding context within themselves. This sensitivity to urban relationships is transferred to exhibition design, where an audience of unknown size and flow moves through spaces that must be recognizable in themselves while simultaneously speaking to their surroundings.

The paradox running through the entire discourse is explicit: although he works with elements of strictly limited duration, Librizzi does not construct an ephemeral language but one that draws upon the deep archetypes of architecture. The cella and the peristyle of the temple, the relationship between pillar and entablature, and the articulation of interior and exterior friezes explicitly return as tools for constructing space. It is in this interplay between the ephemerality of the project's purpose and the permanence of the architectural repertoire that the stu-

dio's signature resides: the installation, rather than being a site of stylistic provisionality, becomes the space in which the dynamics of architectural language can be explored with greater freedom, precisely because it is relieved of the complexity and contradictions of permanent building.

The following sections reconstruct this approach in terms of the design process, the main case studies - D1 at the Triennale di Milano, the Erwin Hauer/FLS-Kertesz exhibition at Casa Saraceni in Bologna, and La Grande Brera - and the satellite projects mentioned during the interview, with particular attention to how this formal poetics intersected, almost always in retrospect, with issues of sustainability.

Design Process and Approach

The design process described by Librizzi does not follow a codified scheme with rigid phases but rather takes the form of a working method strongly influenced by the nature of the client, the scale of the project, and, above all, the quality of the site in which the installation is to be realized. What emerges is an approach that can be articulated along three main coordinates: the recognition of the site's value as project material, the adoption of an essential language based on a system of lines, and the design of structures conceived to have multiple lives, even beyond the single exhibition event.

The first phase of the work consists of a careful analysis of the space that will host the exhibition. Librizzi insists that it makes no sense to create an exhibition design in a significant location if one is unable to bring that location into the exhibition itself: a polychrome floor, a seventeenth-century coffered ceiling, a gold-leaf ceiling, or a serliana that floods the space with natural light are not obstacles to be concealed but resources to be embraced as integral components of the exhibition setup. When this is possible, even an exhibition with a limited budget "becomes" a multi-million-euro exhibition because it incorporates elements of the highest architectural value into its visual field - elements that no budget could otherwise afford. If, on the contrary, the exhibition must conceal the venue in order to make its mark, then, as Librizzi observes, the venue was chosen incorrectly. This principle, seemingly very simple, profoundly influences all subsequent choices: the positioning of display cases, the geometry of structures, the chromatic scheme of elements, and the system of supports and finishes are conceived as tools for dialogue with the existing architecture, whether through mimicry, harmony, or

controlled contrast.

The second coordinate concerns the choice of language. The studio works primarily with lines rather than surfaces: pillars, trajectories, entablatures, uprights, and supports constitute the primary vocabulary of the installations. This is a choice that possesses both a poetic dimension and technical and economic value. "Paying for a structure by the linear meter rather than by the square meter," notes Librizzi, "reduces costs by a huge margin: the issue of surfaces involves labor, materials, and finishes; the issue of lines essentially involves assemblies, profiles, and the dimensions of those profiles themselves." The example cited - the installation for Beppe Finessi's *Stanze d'Arte* exhibition at the Triennale - is paradigmatic: an entire room of pillars can be reduced, once dismantled, to a bundle with a cross-section of only thirty centimetres in diameter. The visual lightness of the design thus coincides, not by accident, with material, logistical, and economic efficiency. The material of choice is metal, worked into box-shaped or open profiles, with particular attention paid to tongue-and-groove joints that avoid the need for on-site welding and leave only the clean geometries of the elements visible. Finishes are not treated as additive layers but as transformations of the metal's surface itself: aniline treatments, acid etching, and transparent protective coatings produce a colour that, in Librizzi's words, seems to emanate from the structure rather than being deposited upon it. This focus on materiality translates, once again, into a dual significance: linguistic, because it contributes to constructing the idea of an architecture that "inhabits" its own colour; technical, because elements finished in this way lend themselves to being disassembled, cleaned, and reassembled without losing their visual quality.

The third dimension, the one that most directly addresses issues of sustainability, concerns the way Librizzi approaches the relationship between budget and durability. The firm belongs to a generation of architects who began practising after 2008, in a context in which budgets for installations have been drastically reduced, in some cases to one-fifth of what they had been in the previous decade. The exemplary case cited is that of the Italian Pavilion at the 2010 Venice Biennale, curated by Luca Molinari, with 1,600 square metres of exhibition space and a budget entirely disproportionate to its scale. The solution, in that case as in many that followed, was to ask the exhibition designer to identify the most economical material available on the market - the classic white perforated hardboard found in hardware stores - and to adopt it as the defining element of the entire project, transforming a deliberately humble material into a giant sheet of graph paper that measured the space.

From that point onward, the principle of “doing more with less” - achieving a great deal while demanding little from the material - became a structural pillar of the design process. The most significant consequence is that the design of a single exhibition explicitly extends beyond the event itself. Librizzi repeatedly describes how a significant portion of the museum’s budget was used, in many projects, not to create a “disposable” installation but to build permanent exhibition fixtures: display cases, tables, frames, and supports that remain in use in subsequent years and, in some cases, are loaned to other institutions as part of collaborative networks among museums. More than fifty per cent of the structures created, as the author himself acknowledges, are retained by the institutions and become part of their permanent holdings. This shifts the economic meaning of the installation from an expense associated with a temporary event to a long-term investment and introduces a parameter for evaluating the project that extends beyond the duration of a single exhibition.

In this context, dialogue with exhibition designers and craftsmen plays a decisive role. Librizzi describes instances in which a technical insight shared with a draftsman or a workshop foreman - for example, in the case of a lamp for FontanaArte designed so that no screws were visible, thanks to an assembly sequence in which each element conceals the head of the previous screw - allows for the addition of inestimable value to the project without incurring any material costs. The same approach is evident in installations, where the ingenuity of the design compensates for a limited budget, not as a stopgap but as a deliberate working method. Within this process, sustainability never presents itself as a separate phase of verification or as a grid of environmental parameters to be imposed upon the project. Rather, Librizzi regards the issue as a potentially rhetorical one, in which a dangerous misunderstanding can lurk: confusing the ephemeral nature of an installation with its environmental quality. Creating something that is easily disposable can diminish the significance of the project, whereas the actual principle - not moving large quantities of material destined to disappear immediately after the event - translates, in his work, into durable, reusable structures donated to institutions and into the decision not to rely on commercial prefabricated systems, considered overused and incapable of supporting the curatorial quality of the exhibitions. This, in summary, is the methodological framework through which the case studies analysed below should be read.

Three Projects as a Laboratory

Three installations, considered together, allow for a comparative examination of the studio's approach: D1 at the Triennale di Milano, the Erwin Hauer/FLS-Kertesz installation at Casa Saraceni in Bologna, and the framework for La Grande Brera. The three projects encompass different scales, contexts, and typologies - a manifesto room, a site-specific installation within a historic building, and a large permanent exhibition infrastructure - and demonstrate how the same design logic, consisting of lines, engagement with the site, and design for multiple lives, can be applied to very different situations, with outcomes that are broadly consistent with the theme of sustainability.

D1 - Triennale di Milano. A Manifesto Room on the Threshold of the Interior

The D1 installation (Figs. 2, 8-14), created as part of one of the first exhibitions explicitly dedicated by the Triennale to interior architecture, is described by Librizzi as a project in which the firm had the rare opportunity to work on its own "manifesto," during a period when it was possible to devote considerable time to research, drawing, and model-making. The starting point raised a question of discipline even before one of form: where does architecture end and interior architecture begin? When does an interior begin to exist as such?

The proposed answer does not derive from a founding myth but from a myth of recognition. Librizzi rejects the idea of architecture emerging from a line drawn on the ground, from the enclosure of walls, and subsequently from their contents, and instead proposes the image of a clearing: the place where the first human being, ceasing to be nomadic and becoming sedentary, recognized himself and set down what he carried with him. In this vision, the first room is neither a cave nor an enclosure, but a configuration of elements that define space and make it recognizable to those who pass through it. Hence the decision to translate the room into a sequence of concentric entablatures: three orders of pillars, each with its own height and chromatic identity, traversed by a thin line that organizes their sequence.

The first order, blue, signals the end of the landscape and the beginning of architecture. The second, red, positioned at a certain distance from the first, marks mass, thickness, and the transition from the exterior to the interior of architectu-



Fig. 2. Original drawing - D1 - 21st Milan Triennale - Palazzo della Triennale - Milan 2016. Image: Francesco Librizzi

re - that is, the point at which architecture ends and interiors begin. At the centre, a table following the same formal logic constitutes an even more internal threshold: the end of the world of humans and the beginning of the world of objects. Viewed in reverse, the same table becomes an altar upon which idols, tools, and fruits are placed: a configuration that reveals how the origin of the domestic and the origin of the sacred coincide in the same act of placement and recognition.

At a technical level, the project adopts a highly controlled structural language. All elements, contrary to what their visual lightness might suggest, are made of metal rather than lightweight materials such as polystyrene or drywall. The ceiling structure, in particular, does not mirror the geometry of the ground plan: it is treated as a fragment of another architecture, larger than what the ground floor could contain. The ceiling, in Librizzi's interpretation, never belongs to the room but always refers to another architecture, and this independence is made spatially perceptible through an autonomous geometry. In terms of colour, the metal structures were pickled, treated with aniline dyes, and protected with clear varnishes, so that the colour would not appear superimposed on the metal but rather emanate from the metal itself. For Librizzi, a red structure must appear to radiate red: it must be that red, not merely possess it as an incidental finish.

The connections are made using box profiles and tongue-and-groove joints, thereby avoiding on-site welding and leaving only the clean sections of the components visible. The Studio naturally interprets the language of metal as a grammar of assembly: in this case, the choice of box sections - rather than the more common open sections - was dictated by the desire to conceal the joint entirely within the section itself. Hence the impression of formal clarity that characterizes the project images and that students, in an educational context, attempted to interpret by hypothesizing the interlocking solutions.

Viewed from the perspective of sustainability, D1 does not present itself as a project with low material impact in the literal sense: it is, in fact, an installation with a strong physical presence, constructed in metal, with carefully controlled finishes and marked linguistic coherence. Its value, from this point of view, lies elsewhere. On the one hand, it resides in its ability to translate a disciplinary theme - the origin of the interior - into a lexically essential device composed of lines, rhythm, and proportions, in which material consumption is reduced to the minimum necessary to support the presence of the architecture it evokes. On the other hand, it lies in the possibility, inherent in the adopted language, of dismantling the structure - reducing it to a "bundle" of tubular elements contained within a section approximately thirty centimetres in diameter - and reassembling it el-

sewhere without any loss of meaning, because its identity does not reside in a surface finish but in its constructive logic. In this sense, D1 constitutes the most explicit manifestation of the lyrical and tectonic language that the Studio has continued to pursue in subsequent installations.

Erwin Hauer/FLS-Kertesz at Casa Saraceni. The Room as Exhibition Architecture

The exhibition design for the André Kertesz exhibition at Casa Saraceni in Bologna (Figs. 3-4, 15-18), created in 2019 as part of the Photography Biennial directed by Francesco Zanot, constitutes a paradigmatic case study of how the Studio interprets its relationship with the site. The assigned space featured two architectural elements of strong presence: a polychrome marble floor constructed with perspective-effect inlays and a deeply coffered ceiling possessing considerable material intensity. In a situation of this kind, any solution that sought to conceal the existing architecture would, in Librizzi's words, merely have highlighted the inadequacy of the location. The project was therefore conceived in precisely the opposite direction: to incorporate the floor and ceiling into the exhibition, en-

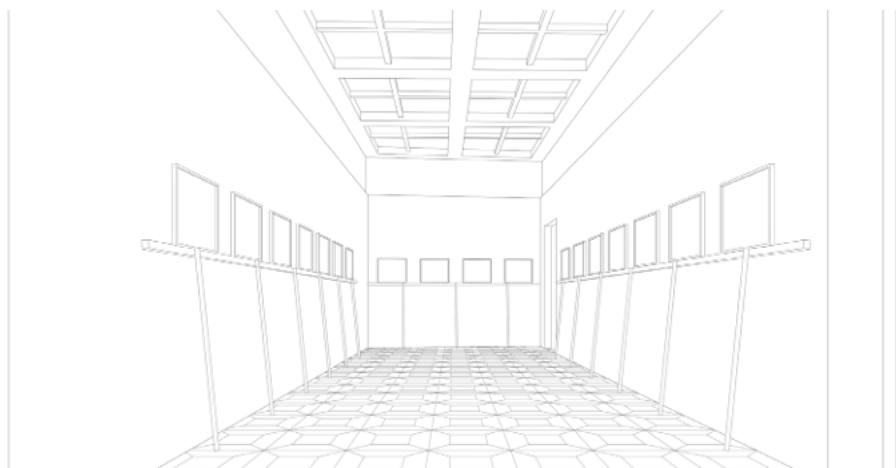


Fig. 3. Original drawing - TIRES / VISCOSE Exhibition, André Kertesz - Casa Saraceni - Bologna 2019. Image: Francesco Librizzi

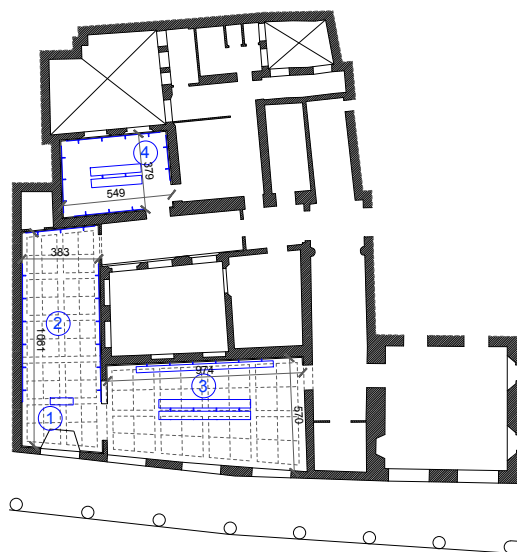


Fig. 4. Original floor plan of TIRES / VISCOSE, André Kertész - Casa Saraceni - Bologna 2019. Image: Francesco Librizzi

sureing that visitors perceived the extraordinary quality of the architecture as an integral component of the exhibition design.

The works to be exhibited consisted of two series of black-and-white photographs by André Kertész, of modest dimensions - forty by forty centimetres. This was exceptional material from an artistic standpoint, yet on a minimal scale when compared to the spatial power of the hall. Displaying the photographs directly on the walls, in the conventional manner, would have removed them from the visual field offered by the space. The design solution consisted of constructing a large continuous entablature, supported by inclined vertical elements, upon which the photographs appear to “rest,” even though they are physically hung on the wall like any other photographs. The spatial image of the installation is that of a room that “supports” the photographs, an exhibition infrastructure that brings them into the architecture of the building.

The device that makes this interpretation possible is both geometric and chromatic. The inclined vertical supports of the entablature are aligned with the lines of the floor decoration: their position is not arbitrary but derives from the geometric pattern of the existing inlay. The colour scheme of these supports, in turn, exactly

matches that of the floor. In this way, the installation does not merely coexist with the building's architecture: it is specifically tied to it, deriving both its geometry and its colour from the floor itself. The exhibition, as Librizzi observes, belongs to the floor; the floor belongs to the room; and all the elements become a unified whole. The photograph, isolated on the walls, is transformed into something that the room itself assumes and presents to the viewer.

At a poetic level, the installation puts into practice a principle that Librizzi describes as the return of the ephemeral to the permanent. The part - the temporary exhibition - enters into dialogue with the whole - the historic room - not through mimicry nor through pure contrast, but through a calibrated combination of assonances and spatial assertions: the mimetic colour scheme of the floor, the rhythm of the supports, and the entablature that asserts an autonomous presence. The photograph does not stand on its own; it must be supported in order to be brought into the room. It is this assertion, constitutive of the exhibition design, that justifies the structure.

Viewed from the perspective of sustainability, the intervention stands as an exemplary practice of what might be defined as "sustainability through the recognition of pre-existing value." Librizzi emphasizes that the available budget could never have afforded a perspective-effect marbled inlay floor, nor an eighteenth-century wooden coffered ceiling. By recognizing the value of the site and incorporating it into the exhibition, the installation was able to operate within a limited budget while achieving a spatial impact equivalent to that of a much larger intervention. This is a redistribution of value: what cannot be purchased through materials is demanded of the design, and the design obtains it from the context.

At a structural level, the installation employs the linear and tectonic language characteristic of the Studio. The entablature and the slanted supports are lacquered wooden elements, precisely dimensioned and independent of the existing architecture, since the church-palace could neither be perforated nor painted. This structural autonomy of the elements, in addition to satisfying the requirements for the preservation of the historic property, inherently guarantees the possibility of disassembly: the structure can be dismantled without leaving any trace. The fact that the installation was designed for a specific room has not prevented it from being interpreted as part of a broader repertoire of exhibition solutions, in which a self-supporting object detached from the architecture acts upon a minimal portion of space while assuming responsibility for expressing the meaning of an entire exhibition.

The case of Casa Saraceni forms part of a long-standing reflection that the Stu-

dio has pursued, particularly in the early editions of the Bologna Photography Biennial, on the ways in which photography may be exhibited. Bringing the photographic object back before an audience now accustomed to hyperabundant iconographic consumption required spatial adjustments and devices that contradicted the standard arrangement of the white wall with a photograph hanging upon it. In some editions this meant turning the photograph so that it was viewed horizontally; in others, as in the present case, it meant constructing a room that assumed the task of bringing the images into a meaningful architectural context. This is a historically determined issue, linked to the circumstances and period in which the Studio began to operate; yet it is precisely this historicity of the response that illuminates its documentary value.

La Grande Brera. The Frame as a Transversal Device

The project for the exhibition La Grande Brera (Figs. 5-7, 19-31) is, among the three cases analysed, the one in which the theme of sustainability manifests itself most explicitly - and most measurably - even though the project's genesis arose not from environmental concerns but from a challenge of institutional representation. The exhibition sought to restore a unified image of a complex institutional system, La Grande Brera, which brings together the Pinacoteca, the Astronomical Observatory, the Botanical Garden, and the Braidense Library. An identity composed of multiple entities requires, when represented, a unifying figure capable of embodying the identity of the whole. Hence the decision to construct a unified, single-material exhibition infrastructure with a strong rhythmic quality, capable of traversing all the exhibition spaces through a coherent language.

This need for unity was compounded by a second complexity inherent in the exhibited materials. The exhibition brought together objects of profoundly heterogeneous nature, format, craftsmanship, period, and value: original eighteenth-century paintings alongside photocopies, manuscripts alongside reproductions, scientific instruments alongside documents. Whereas in a book, once printed, everything participates in the same narrative without distinctions of status, in physical space objects with radically different values coexist. The creation of a strong infrastructure that brought all these materials together within a single framework helped visitors perceive those objects as parts of the same exhibition and, consequently, as elements of the same institutional identity.

The structural form of this framework also emerged from a third set of considera-



Fig. 5. Original floor plan - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio - Milan 2025. Image: Francesco Librizzi

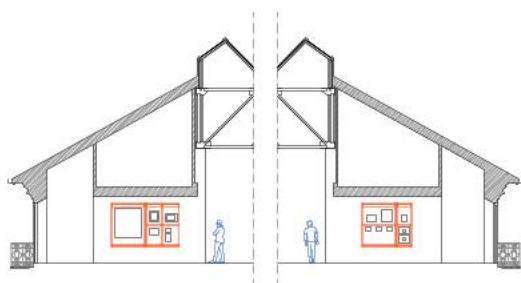
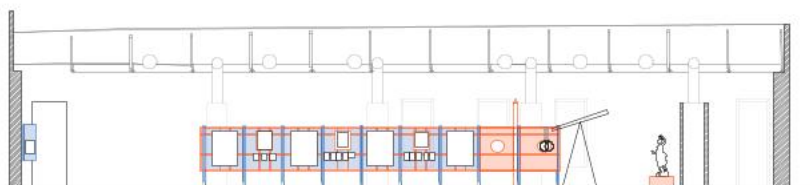


Fig. 6. Original Cross-Sections - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio - Milan 2025. Image: Francesco Librizzi

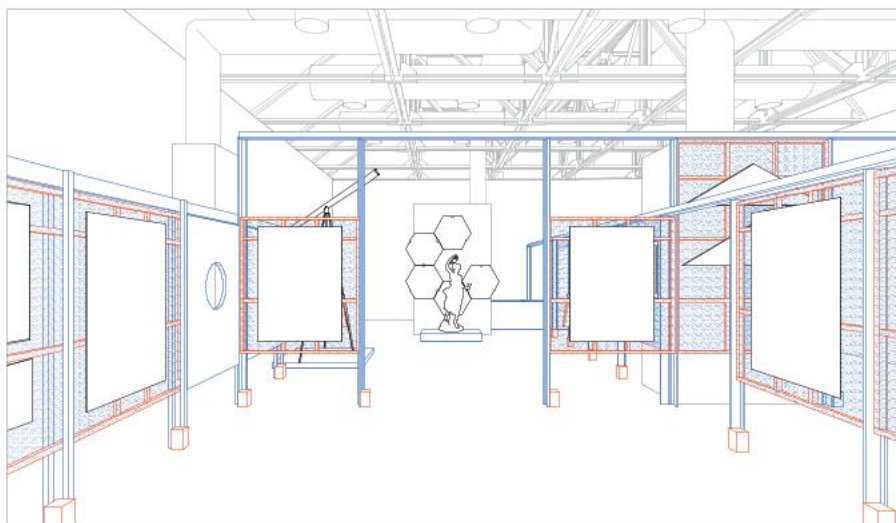


Fig. 7. Original drawing - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio - Milan 2025. Image: Francesco Librizzi

tions. The site, originally conceived as offices for the Pinacoteca di Brera and later transformed into an exhibition space, features a highly complex geometry, with heavy infrastructural elements and exposed services. The frame designed by the Studio was conceived precisely to overcome these spatial limitations by establishing a controlled reference plane within a challenging space and providing the museum with a reusable exhibition device.

It is at this level that the project demonstrates its effectiveness in terms of sustainability. Over time, the same framework has hosted three exhibitions: La Grande Brera, an exhibition dedicated to Lisetta Carmi, and a third exhibition dedicated to a painter and organised independently by the museum without the involvement of the Studio. The fact that the frame was conceived as a structural element of the space, rather than as a set design for a single exhibition, has allowed the museum to reuse it for exhibitions featuring entirely different themes and objects, thereby proportionally reducing the impact of the initial cost. In addition, a large portion of the elements of the same frame (particularly the display cases and horizontal elements) was retained even after the vertical support structure was decommissioned, becoming a permanent component of the Pinacoteca's exhibi-

tion system.

The calculation proposed by Librizzi during the interview is clear: by dividing the initial cost across three exhibitions and considering that fifty per cent of the structures remained as permanent fixtures of the museum, the actual “lost” cost of the installation is reduced to approximately fifteen per cent of the initial cost. This is an assessment of economic sustainability rather than environmental sustainability, yet the figures clearly convey the essence of a design conceived to be reused multiple times and subsequently reintegrated into the institution’s permanent exhibition systems.

At the design level, La Grande Brera draws upon and extends the spatial framework of the twentieth-century Italian masters (Albini, BBPR, Scarpa), while innovating through the adoption of a single-material, modular construction system with a contemporary interpretation. The framework does not merely support the exhibited objects; it becomes a narrative device in its own right because its rhythm, colour scheme, and cross-section “declare” the presence of a single institutional system behind the plurality of exhibited materials. The sustainability of the project does not reside in a specific material choice (certified wood, recycled metal), but in the structure of the project itself: a durable, modular, demountable, and reusable frame capable of accommodating different contents over time. It is a case in which formal language, construction logic, and life-cycle logic coincide.

Other Projects Mentioned

Alongside the three main case studies, the interview presents a constellation of projects that, taken together, help define the Studio’s longer-term trajectory. These projects differ in scale and client base but are united by the same underlying logic: design through lines, attention to dialogue with the site, and the construction of structures capable of multiple lives, both within the same institution and through loan circuits between different institutions.

Italian Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2010, and the Lesson of Faesite

The Studio’s first major commission, the design of the Italian Pavilion at the 12th Venice Architecture Biennale (curated by Luca Molinari), is also the project in which the method of “doing more with less” - which would become the Studio’s

hallmark - first took explicit form. One thousand six hundred square metres of floor space, a severely disproportionate budget, and unchanged expectations on the part of the client. The design response began with a question posed to the installer concerning the most economical material available: the white, perforated hardboard commonly found in traditional hardware stores. Adopted as the unifying element of the entire installation, this deliberately humble material transformed the pavilion into a vast, walkable grid of graph paper, in which the pattern of dots became a system for measuring space. It is a case in which the radical economy of materials paradoxically produces a very strong visual identity and in which the language of the line - measuring space rather than filling it - establishes itself as the primary design tool.

Magistretti Foundation and MAST. Installations as Permanent Fixtures

Two subsequent cases make explicit the principle of design for multiple lives. For the Magistretti Foundation, the Studio used the budget allocated for an installation to design a system of display cases and tables that enabled the Foundation to stage three successive exhibitions using the same setup. The Foundation also established a loan network with other institutions, which in turn used the same exhibition system for their own exhibitions. Similarly, at MAST in Bologna, some structures designed by Librizzi for a specific exhibition were subsequently used in other exhibitions at the same institution, some of which were not designed by the Studio (for example, the exhibition dedicated to Arvid Linke or the one on Ando Gilardi, whose tables were derived from a previous installation). More than fifty per cent of the structures created, according to the author's estimate, are thus retained by the institutions and become part of their permanent exhibition systems. The conceptual shift is significant: it is no longer a matter of designing an event, but of designing the museum's exhibition services, funded through budgets originally intended for individual occasions.

Surfing Collector / A Certain Collector B and the Intelligence of Addition

The exhibition design for Yusuke Bandai's A Certain Collector B (Collector, part

of a series of eleven simultaneous exhibitions in Bologna) reveals another facet of the same logic. Faced with a fixed overall budget and a multitude of exhibitions, the Studio opted for a differentiated allocation of resources: some installations created with significant resources and others built with almost nothing, within the same series, so as to maintain meaning in all cases. The specific structure of this installation - a slender vertical framework held together by calendered elements at regular intervals and resembling a gasometer in its lightness - was created using cross-shaped electrical cable ties as joints, a choice that the author openly dislikes ("I don't use ready-mades") but acknowledges as ten times cheaper than the welded alternative and fifty times cheaper than the option involving custom-made joints. It is a technical choice that, according to Librizzi, highlights a principle of design flexibility: in personal life one never contradicts oneself, but in design the ability to contradict oneself precisely - accepting details one does not love in the name of the project's core - can be worth ten times as much as a principled attachment.

Reggio Emilia. A Thousand Square Metres with Four Sticks

The installation created in Reggio Emilia - an exhibition spanning nearly one thousand square metres - is cited as an extreme example of the principle that design, rather than material, constitutes the primary source of meaning. The entire installation is based on a sequence of a few linear elements ("four sticks," in Librizzi's words), made of different types of wood (mahogany, fir, okoumé) and arranged in a sequence that varies in cross-section and colour. The deliberate simplicity of the materials (minimal sections of standard timber) is offset by the precision of the design: the arrangement, the sequences, and the rhythms of the materials acquire inestimable value, while the material impact remains minimal. This is a case in which the principle of "doing more with less" manifests itself in its most explicit form: little material, a great deal of design, and high perceived value.

Bahrain National Museum. Thirty Euros in the Travertine Lobby

A final example mentioned in the interview is that of a small exhibition held in the central hall of the Bahrain National Museum on the occasion of an Italian Design Day. The spatial constraints were extreme: a fifteen-metre-high travertine wall to

be “filled” with fifty A3 sheets of drawings in red and blue lines. The solution was to construct a system of easels that appeared to support the drawings from below, rather than simply hanging them, at a total declared cost of thirty euros. Here too, the quality of the installation did not derive from material investment but from the quality of the curatorial concept, capable of holding its own against monumental architecture and producing a striking exhibition setting. Episodes such as this, according to Librizzi, also served as opportunities for professional development: works that were “not very demanding in terms of material handling” but “highly significant in terms of design” enabled the Studio to build international recognition even from the smallest opportunities.

A Lamp for FontanaArte. The Project as a Multiplier

Although this was a product design rather than an installation, it is worth briefly recalling the episode of the lamp designed for FontanaArte during the Studio’s years of artistic direction. Faced with a limited corporate budget that would not have permitted the creation of the desired mould, Librizzi and the technical office opted for a zero-cost design solution: redesigning the assembly sequence so that each element covered the screw head of the preceding one, thereby concealing all the screws without any additional material cost. This episode, cited as a message for future generations, reaffirms what may be regarded as the core of the Studio’s method: design as a tool, a vehicle, and a generator of value, capable of adding quality to an object without increasing material consumption.

Discussion and Conclusion

The body of material analysed presents a picture of a studio that has engaged with the discipline of exhibition design from an explicitly architectural and linguistic premise, and that has found, almost retrospectively, a profound coherence with the themes of sustainability. This trajectory is the reverse of that followed by many other contemporary practices, where sustainability is treated as a framework of environmental parameters to be imposed upon the project: in Librizzi’s case, sustainability emerges as a secondary - although not accidental - effect of a design approach founded on different premises. This position merits discussion because it offers a non-reductive interpretation of the relationship between design and

sustainability and because its conclusions are not self-evident.

The first element highlighted by the analysis of the case studies is the centrality of adopting an essentially linear language. Working with lines rather than surfaces and masses has immediate consequences at the material level: it implies a drastic reduction in material consumption per unit of occupied space. The example of the two-by-four-centimetre pillars in Beppe Finessi's installation - which can be reduced to a bundle thirty centimetres in diameter - immediately illustrates the difference in scale. Similarly, the entablature of Casa Saraceni and the framework of the Grande Brera are devices that generate a powerful spatial effect with minimal material impact. This choice does not arise from concerns regarding sustainability but from a poetics of form and rhythm; nevertheless, when systematically adopted, it produces installations whose material footprint is structurally low.

The second element concerns the way in which the Studio interprets its relationship with the site. The principle that "it makes no sense to create an exhibition in a significant place unless one takes something from that place" introduces a *sui generis* form of reuse: the reuse of pre-existing architectural value, incorporated into the exhibition as an integral part of the installation. The polychrome floor of Casa Saraceni, the coffered ceiling, and the spatial quality of the Braidense Archive itself form part of a sort of "free endowment" of the project, which considerably enriches its effect without requiring additional material consumption. It is a form of reuse that does not translate into the literal recycling of components but rather into a systematic recognition of the contribution that pre-existing architecture can make to the quality of exhibition design.

The third element concerns design for multiple lifespans, and it is here that Librizzi's argument becomes more explicitly "measurable" from a sustainability perspective. The decision not to use commercial prefabricated systems (considered overused in commercial contexts and potentially detrimental to the exhibition's research themes) and not to rely on easily degradable materials is accompanied by an explicit strategy: to design structures intended to be preserved by the institution, reused in subsequent exhibitions, and loaned to other institutions through museum collaboration networks. The case of the Grande Brera, with its transparent cost breakdown (one-third of the cost allocated to each of the three exhibitions, half of the materials absorbed as permanent assets, and a net loss of approximately fifteen per cent), demonstrates in explicitly numerical terms the difference between an exhibition installation conceived as an event and one conceived as a permanent museum asset.

The fourth element, of a more methodological nature, concerns the idea that the

project itself constitutes a resource for sustainability. Librizzi strongly emphasises this point: the project can add infinite value to architecture without requiring a corresponding increase in the value of materials. The example of the Fontana-Arte lamp (an assembly sequence redesigned to conceal the screws without any increase in cost) and that of the exhibition in Bahrain (a system of thirty-euro trestles capable of holding its own against fifteen metres of travertine wall) are the most explicit cases, but the principle runs throughout all the projects analysed. This formulation has an important cultural implication: it shifts the focus of the discussion on sustainability from the exclusive realm of materials (certified materials, recycling chains, environmental labels) to the realm of design as a discipline, understood as the capacity to generate substantial value with minimal material means.

This position is accompanied by an explicit critique of what Librizzi refers to as the “rhetoric of sustainability”, particularly prevalent in more international institutional contexts and among clients most exposed to communicative pressures concerning environmental issues. The misunderstanding identified is that which equates sustainability with disposability: according to Librizzi, creating something that can be easily discarded afterwards may significantly diminish the result. The principle of not moving large quantities of materials destined to be lost immediately after the event is meaningful, but its correct interpretation lies not in the perishability of materials but rather in the generosity of the installation towards the institution hosting it: durable, reusable structures donated to the permanent exhibition system. This observation challenges many current approaches within the debate on sustainable exhibitions and deserves to be read in dialogue with the positions adopted by other practices examined in this study.

One further implication of Librizzi’s argument, of a more generational nature, remains to be considered. The Studio belongs to that generation of Italian architects who began practising after 2008, in a context in which exhibition budgets had been drastically reduced. This historical shift, which compelled many practices to devise modes of operation characterised by high design intensity and low material intensity, has produced a wealth of solutions that, when viewed today, often align with the principles of sustainability despite never having been conceived in those terms. This fact serves as recognition of a legacy: an entire generation of Italian designers has developed, out of economic necessity, an aptitude for “doing a lot with little” that can now be reinterpreted as a repertoire of sustainable practices. In this sense, the case of Studio Librizzi does not represent an individual exception but rather the defining feature of an era.

Overall, the analysis of the projects suggests that, in the case of the Studio, sustainability does not present itself as a declared objective or as a final evaluative criterion but rather as a coherent consequence of a design approach founded upon different premises. Four of these are central: an essentially linear and tectonic language that structurally reduces material consumption; an active relationship with the site, which incorporates pre-existing value as part of the installation; the design of structures intended for multiple lifetimes, which become permanent components of the exhibition system; and the assertion that the project acts as a multiplier of value disproportionate to material consumption. This position raises certain unresolved questions - in particular concerning the reproducibility of a method so strongly rooted in the authorship of the individual studio, and the operational limits of a language that, by its very nature, does not lend itself to all exhibition programmes - but it offers a clear contribution to the debate on exhibition sustainability: sustainability is not measured solely by the materials of the installation, but also by the quality of the project that constructs it and by the duration of its presence within the institution that hosts it.

Notes

¹ From a conversation with Francesco Librizzi on May 20, 2026



Fig. 8. Photograph of the D1 installation - 21st Milan Triennale - Palazzo della Triennale - Milan 2016. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 9. Installation photograph - D1 - 21st Milan Triennale - Palazzo della Triennale - Milan 2016. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 10. Installation photograph - D1 - 21st Milan Triennale - Palazzo della Triennale - Milan 2016. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 11. Installation photograph - D1 - 21st Milan Triennale - Palazzo della Triennale - Milan 2016. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 12. Installation photograph - D1 - 21st Milan Triennale - Palazzo della Triennale - Milan 2016. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 13. Installation photograph - D1 - 21st Milan Triennale - Palazzo della Triennale - Milan 2016. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 14. Installation photograph - D1 - 21st Milan Triennale - Palazzo della Triennale - Milan 2016. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 15. Photograph of the TIRES / VISCOSE exhibition installation - André Kertész
- Casa Saraceni - Bologna 2019. Photo: Alberto Moncada



Fig. 16. Photograph of the TIRES / VISCOSE exhibition installation - André Kertész - Casa Saraceni - Bologna 2019. Photo: Alberto Moncada



Fig. 17. Photograph of the TIRES / VISCOSE exhibition installation - André Kertész - Casa Saraceni - Bologna 2019. Photo: Alberto Moncada



Fig. 18. Photograph of the TIRES / VISCOSE exhibition installation - André Kertész - Casa Saraceni - Bologna 2019. Photo: Alberto Moncada



Fig. 19. Exhibition view - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio
- Milan 2025. Photo: Delfino SI, DSL Studio



Fig. 20. Close-up photo of the display stand - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio - Milan 2025. Photo: Delfino SI, DSL Studio



Fig. 21. Installation photograph - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio - Milan 2025.
Photo: Delfino SI, DSL Studio



Fig. 22. Close-up photo of the display stand - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio - Milan 2025. Photo: Delfino SI, DSL Studio

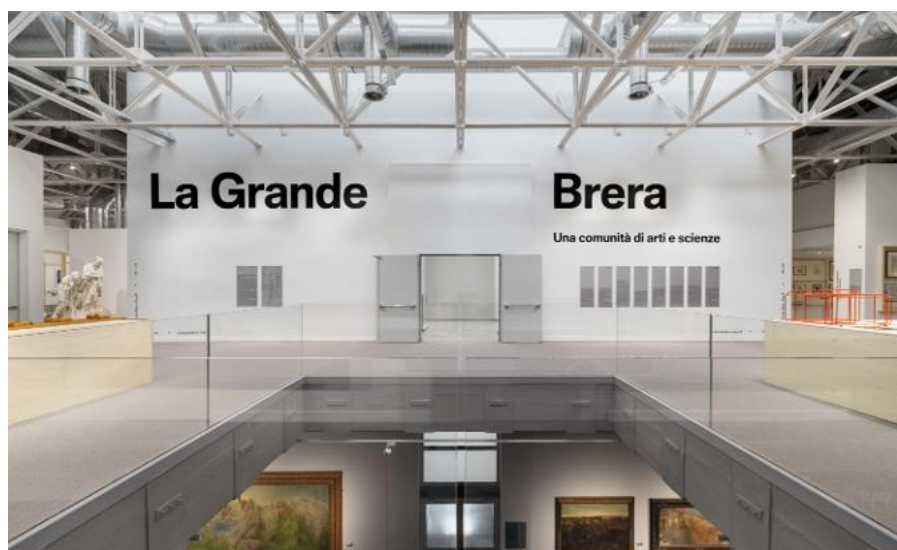


Fig. 23. Installation photograph - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio - Milan 2025.
Photo: Delfino SI, DSL Studio



Fig. 24. Installation photograph - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio - Milan 2025.
Photo: Delfino SI, DSL Studio



Fig. 25. Installation photograph - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio - Milan 2025.
Photo: Delfino SI, DSL Studio



Fig. 26. Installation photograph - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio - Milan 2025.
Photo: Delfino SI, DSL Studio



Fig. 27. Installation photograph - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio - Milan 2025.
Photo: Delfino SI, DSL Studio



Fig. 28. Installation photograph - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio - Milan 2025.
Photo: Delfino SI, DSL Studio



Fig. 29. Installation photograph - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio - Milan 2025.
Photo: Delfino SI, DSL Studio



Fig. 30. Installation photograph - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio - Milan 2025.
Photo: Delfino SI, DSL Studio



Fig. 31. Installation photograph - La Grande Brera - Palazzo Citterio - Milan 2025.
Photo: Delfino SI, DSL Studio

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MIGLIORE+SERVETTO

“Exhibition Landscapes” Between Space, Time, and Behavior

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MIGLIORE+SERVETTO

“Exhibition Landscapes” Between Space, Time, and Behavior¹

There is a term that Ico Migliore uses to describe his practice: “archigraphic.” It is not an innocuous neologism. Rather, it expresses a deliberate distrust of disciplinary labels - neither architect nor graphic designer, but something situated at their intersection - and, above all, it reflects a fundamental conviction: that the design of environments and the design of information constitute two aspects of the same problem. This perspective informs the work of Migliore+Servetto, a firm founded in Milan in 1997 by Ico Migliore and Mara Servetto, both former students and assistants of Achille Castiglioni. Castiglioni’s legacy is invoked not as a matter of pedigree but as a guiding principle: exhibition design understood as an overarching “structure,” rather than as the sum of decorative elements.

In more than twenty-five years of activity, the studio has developed over 1,000 projects in 22 countries, receiving three Compasso d’Oro awards, thirteen Red Dot Design Awards, and two German Design Awards. However, the significance of its work is not measured in quantitative terms; rather, it is evident in the consistency of an approach that spans highly diverse scales and contexts - architecture and interiors, exhibition design, environmental graphics, wayfinding, urban

Fig. 1. Photograph of Ico Migliore and Mara Servetto. Photo: Stefano Ferrante

installations, retail environments, and architectural-scale lighting interventions. Within this framework, exhibition design is not treated as a separate sector but as one of the principal fields of application of an integrated design approach that connects space, graphic elements, and visitor behaviour.

A young, international, and multidisciplinary team works alongside the two founders, comprising architects, designers, graphic designers, lighting designers, developers, museologists, and interaction design specialists. This multidisciplinary character is not conceived as a simple aggregation of competencies; rather, it arises from the need for different “codes” - spatial, graphic, luminous, and sonic - to be activated simultaneously, avoiding a linear sequence (first architecture, then graphics, then technology) and favouring an iterative process of project development.

It can therefore be argued that the studio’s approach places particular emphasis on the notion of “narrative spaces,” defining its work as the design of environments - museums, exhibitions, public spaces, retail settings, and cultural venues - conceived as interfaces for multisensory communication between institutions, businesses, and people. In these projects, light, materials, graphics, and multimedia technologies are presented as coordinated components of a narrative system rather than as additional layers superimposed upon a neutral architecture. The focus is not exclusively on the exhibited objects but on the relationships established among objects, space, and the public.

Another recurring theme is the design of the immaterial: light, darkness, sound, acoustics, and the rhythm of circulation paths. The studio describes technology as a useful instrument, particularly when it allows designers to “delve into the darkness,” organise the dramaturgy of space, and modulate visitors’ attention through the selective illumination and dimming of specific portions of the environment. From this perspective, technological innovation is not presented as an end in itself but as a means of defining precise perceptual scenarios, in which the digital component is integrated into the spatial structure rather than superimposed as a spectacular element.

A shift in focus from objects to behaviours is clearly discernible. Museums, archives, public spaces, and temporary installations are described as devices that must be evaluated not only in terms of their formal configuration but also according to what they prompt visitors to do: dwell times, modes of interpretation, opportunities for orientation, and the nature of their relationships with both the exhibits and other visitors.

Alongside professional practice, the studio has for many years pursued a theoretic

tical reflection on cultural spaces. A central reference is the concept of Museum Seed, which lies at the core of the book of the same name published in 2024 and is presented as a proposal for rethinking the contemporary museum. The Museum Seed is defined in opposition to the Museum Box, namely the museum conceived as a predominantly conservative nineteenth-century institution. In the authors' view, the museum-seed constitutes a dynamic system that is simultaneously a physical space and an infrastructure of relationships, capable of triggering "slow-release" processes within local communities and among visitors.

The book is organised as a form of "open magazine," structured around an eight-point manifesto and enriched by contributions from curators, museum directors, designers, psychologists, and neuroscientists, primarily from Italy and the Korea-Japan region, where the studio has been active for many years. The topics addressed range from the museum as a producer of content and as a tool for urban development to its relationship with technology and its role as a healing environment. What emerges is the idea that the value of a cultural institution is determined not solely by the quality of its collection but also by the quality of the relationships it is capable of establishing with the public.

This set of elements - the organisation of the studio, the multidisciplinary nature of the team, and the centrality attributed to relationships with audiences - constitutes the framework within which the projects analysed in the following sections should be interpreted, particularly with regard to the relationship between exhibition design, time, and sustainability practices.

Designing from Within: Behaviours, Codes, and Life Cycles

An analysis of the design approach reveals a conception of process that is not described as a rigid sequence of phases but rather as an operational field in which certain constants recur: the centrality of behaviours, the continuous movement between the overall vision and the detail, collaborative teamwork, and attention to time and life cycles.

The starting point is almost always an interpretation of context that extends beyond basic parameters (location, client, budget) to include the ways in which a space is or will be inhabited: who arrives, where they enter, how long they might remain, and what expectations they hold regarding the museum or exhibition.

In Migliore's accounts, the project is rapidly translated into a sequence of situations: entrance, threshold, the moment in which one understands "how the

exhibition works,” areas in which one may linger, rapid transitions, and points of rest that are either more intimate or more exposed. Exhibition design is thus conceived as a mechanism that organises these passages rather than as a collection of well-designed objects that merely “occupy the space.”

To address this dimension, the studio emphasises continuous movement between the general and the particular. The available materials reveal a systematic use of diagrams and models - both physical and digital - through which the overall structure is initially verified: flows, masses, voids, relationships between heights and depths, and lines of sight. Only subsequently does the work focus on details such as the form of a display case, the typography of a title, or the type of lighting fixture.

This approach requires the early involvement of the entire team. Architects, graphic designers, lighting designers, technicians, curators, and, where appropriate, sound and interaction specialists are therefore engaged from the outset rather than at separate stages. It is noteworthy, for example, that graphic designers, accustomed to working on uniformly illuminated surfaces, must confront issues of darkness, thresholds of illumination, and actual viewing distances. Similarly, light is not regarded as a final finishing element but as a structural component that contributes to the definition of rhythm, hierarchies, and dwell times.

Within this context, technology is likewise considered a code to be integrated rather than a layer to be added subsequently. The example of electroluminescence in the installations for About Boffi (Milan, 2003) is particularly significant: the lighting device coincides with the graphic support and the spatial element, thereby reducing the layered logic of “making an object, illuminating it, and then placing informational panels upon it.” The stated objective is to minimise autonomous layers and ensure that different elements - space, light, graphics, and sound - are designed as parts of a single coherent system.

Within this approach, time assumes the role of a design material: not only in terms of the technical duration of an installation, but also with respect to assembly and disassembly times, the duration of the visit, and the lifespan of materials. Decisions concerning structures, finishes, and equipment are therefore considered in terms of life cycles: how long does a given solution endure? Is it designed for a single event, or can it be dismantled, compressed, and reassembled elsewhere? What maintenance will it require over time? At various points, the text refers to experiences in Japan and South Korea as contexts in which the planned lifespan of buildings and installations is explicitly defined from the outset, through temporal horizons (for example, thirty years) that directly influence design decisions.

This focus on time leads to a relatively clear position regarding two extreme models that Migliore summarises as the “Luna Park Museum” and the “Nail-and-Wall Museum.” The former refers to situations in which technological spectacle, large-scale projections, and immersive installations tend to become ends in themselves, producing strong immediate impact but limited understanding and fragile memory. The latter refers to museums in which the exhibition apparatus is reduced to a bare minimum, characterised by isolated objects and dense texts - often difficult to read - apparently designed more for those who write them than for those who visit.

The analysed material indicates that the studio systematically seeks intermediate positions in which experiential intensity is placed at the service of legibility. In this sense, Migliore formulates a definition of communication that also functions as a design criterion: communication does not coincide with what the designer intends to convey but with what the visitor actually understands. This principle gives rise to several practical implications: attention to textual hierarchies (headings, subheadings, and short paragraphs), calibration of the amount of information presented in each room, and the use of light to emphasise specific areas and reduce perceptual “background noise.”

Within this framework, sustainability is not addressed as a separate chapter but rather as the outcome of a series of decisions concerning the life cycles of exhibits and the quality of the visitor experience. In the original chapter, a certain caution is evident with regard to the purely rhetorical use of the term. The selection of a certified material is considered meaningful only insofar as it forms part of a system that guarantees an adequate useful life and, whenever possible, more than one use. Instead, attention is directed towards experiences in which structures, graphic elements, or components of the installation are designed from the outset to possess second lives, to be resized, relocated, or transformed.

At the same time, the studio introduces an important extension of this concept: cognitive sustainability. An exhibition that employs “correct” materials but produces excessively complex communication devices, illegible texts, or confusing circulation paths is regarded as problematic because it wastes visitors’ attention and risks alienating the very audiences it seeks to engage. From this perspective, attention to graphic hierarchies, textual legibility, and the balance between the amount of information and the duration of the visit becomes an integral component of the reflection on sustainability, on a par with the reuse of materials.

Overall, the design process developed by Migliore+Servetto appears as a set of relatively stable practices: designing on the basis of behaviours, working with an

integrated team that activates different codes from the outset, employing models and simulations to test scenarios of use, considering time both as a constraint and as a resource, and reflecting on second lives and forms of sustainability, including at a cognitive level. It is within this framework that the case studies examined in the following sections should be interpreted, as they demonstrate the implementation of these principles in different contexts and at different scales.

Three Projects as a Laboratory

Among the materials analyzed, three projects recur most frequently as reference cases: the ADI Design Museum, Wallpaper Urban Addiction, and Leonardiana. Each highlights a different aspect of the studio's approach: the concept of a museum as a rich archive that can be expanded over time; the transformation of a technical constraint into an essential exhibition element; and the use of technology to make an otherwise impractical monographic exhibition possible. In all three cases, issues of time, reuse, and sustainability emerge as outcomes of design choices driven by concrete problems, rather than as objectives declared a priori.

ADI Design Museum. A rich, navigable archive

In the project for the ADI Design Museum in Milan (Figs. 2-4, 10-15), the theme of time is explicit from the outset: the aim is to shape a permanent institution that must tell the story of the Compasso d'Oro today, but also be able to accommodate new objects and new narratives over time.

The firm recalls that the project originated from a 2014 competition, with an initial concept more radical than the one ultimately realized: a large, multi-level archival "belly," complete with walkways, elevated paths, and visual "periscopes" toward the underground storage areas, designed to showcase even what normally remains in storage.

This vision was scaled back due to economic and operational constraints (a doubling of the available space against a reduced budget), but the underlying principle - an expandable archive rather than a gallery of icons - remained at the heart of the project.

The permanent exhibition, designed in collaboration with Italo Lupi, takes the form of a kind of habitable three-dimensional shelf. The Compasso d'Oro's hi-

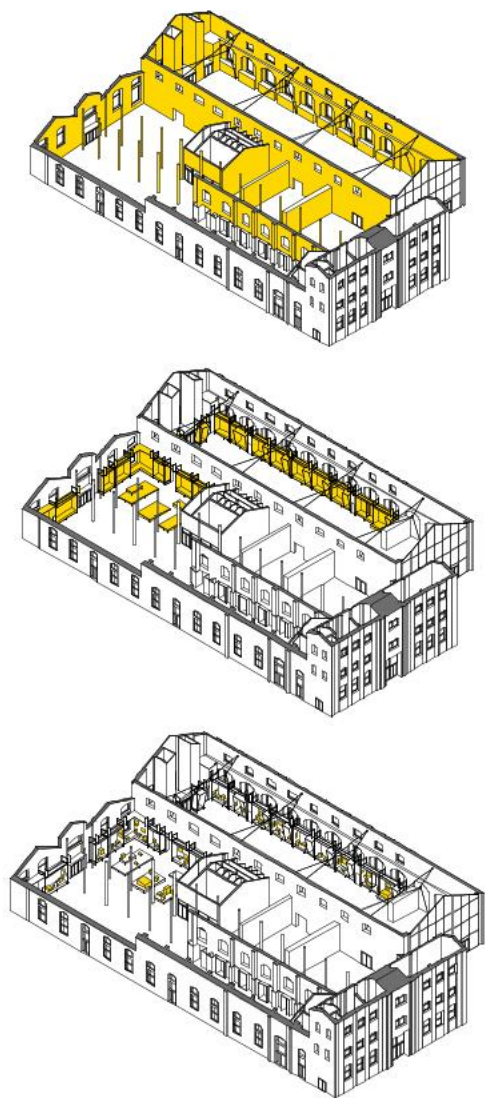


Fig. 2-3-4. Background, installation, and object codes - Compasso d'Oro Permanent Exhibition - ADI Design Museum - Milan 2021. Redesign: I. Carus Peroglio - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2023-24

historical collections are organized into groups that can be interpreted in multiple ways: by chronological sequence, by product type, or by thematic families. The density does not appear as a side effect of the quantity of pieces to be displayed, but as a conscious choice: to convey the idea of a structured system of objects, prototypes, and experiments, rather than a series of isolated, self-contained pieces.

The material and construction choices are consistent with this logic. Metal structures, wood, and recyclable composite panels are used in a modular system of display cases and volumes, designed to be moved, reconfigured, and adapted to objects of different kinds. The emphasis is not so much on the “virtuosity” of individual materials as on the system’s ability to accommodate new needs over time without requiring a radical redesign at every update of the collection. In this sense, sustainability is understood as the robustness and adaptability of the exhibition architecture, rather than as the sum of specific measures.

An equally important aspect concerns legibility. The risk of a dense archive is that it becomes opaque, perceived as a space “for experts.” The graphics and texts are therefore designed according to a logic that Migliore compares to that of a newspaper page: clearly visible titles, subtitles, brief introductory texts, and optional levels of further detail.

The museum is also conceived in relation to the city. The texts in the original chapter emphasize that the building is not conceived as a “closed treasure chest,” but as a segment of an urban boulevard, traversable even without a complete visit to the collections. Visual openings, threshold spaces, and ancillary functions (bookshop, events) allow for partial and daily use, with potentially significant effects on the “life” of the exhibition space: a space that can be experienced in different ways has a greater chance of justifying, over time, the resources used to build and maintain it.

Finally, the idea of combining the temporary and the permanent emerges: some elements are conceived as more permanent (the main structure, certain volumes), others as devices that can be updated, replaced, or used to host temporary exhibitions within the overall framework. The whole can be interpreted as a case in which attention to life cycles - of objects, systems, and content - translates into a form of sustainability that is not so much declared as it is implicit in the museum system’s capacity for transformation.

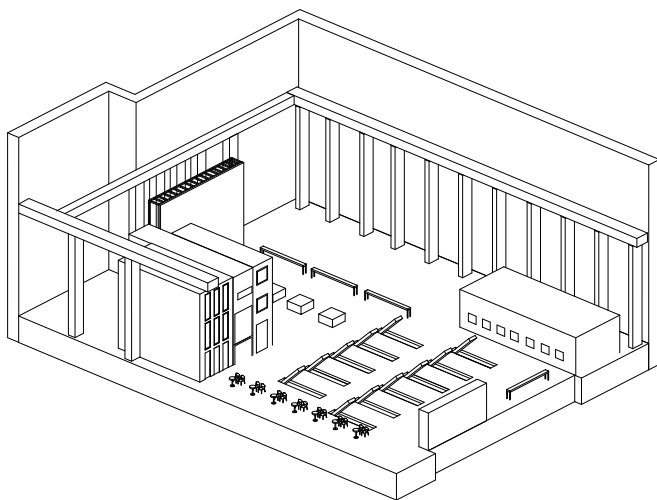


Fig. 5. Axonometric view - The Wallpaper Urban Addiction - Hogan Space - Milan 2001. Redesign: L. M. Pezzali, M. A. M. Ranieri, R. Lipparini - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2024-25

Wallpaper Urban Addiction. F Doing It All with a Floor

The case of Wallpaper Urban Addiction at Milan Design Week 2001 (Figs. 5, 16-21) is often cited in the study as an example of a project born literally out of necessity. The location is a large warehouse with a very high ceiling, situated in an industrial area that has since been transformed.

The decision to install a floating floor thus emerged as the most efficient technical solution to make the space usable. Once this option was chosen, however, the floor also became the focal point of the installation: instead of introducing walls or additional volumes, the project concentrated almost all resources on this continuous surface, transforming it into a support for the exhibits and a staging device.

The display elements are integrated into the thickness of the platform. In cross-section, they take the shape of an “L”: the horizontal part, recessed into the floor, houses the illuminated products; the vertical part, covered in mirrors, reflects their image at eye level, allowing visitors to view the objects without having to constantly bend down. This solution demonstrates how the entire installation is built around the flooring: first, an accessibility issue is resolved; then, that structure itself becomes the focal point of the viewing experience.

The rest of the space is deliberately left in shadow. The high ceiling, with its exposed systems, is not subject to “correction”: once the general lighting is turned off, it becomes a kind of dark backdrop that defines the volume without competing with the exhibition layout. The light is concentrated on the floor and the niches housing the display units: the overall effect is that of a horizontal landscape punctuated by luminous cavities, where the gaze is guided by the contrast between darkness and spotlighting.

In terms of sustainability, the installation is not presented as a “model case” in the strict sense: it is a temporary intervention, with consumption of materials, energy, and labor consistent with the logic of *Fuorisalone*. However, several significant aspects can be noted. The first is economy of means: instead of multiplying objects, backdrops, and decorative elements, the project concentrates the budget on a single structural element - the flooring - which resolves a technical constraint and, simultaneously, generates the overall image of the installation.

The second aspect concerns demountability. The floating flooring and display units are conceived as relatively autonomous components, potentially reusable in other configurations. There are no elements that are overly specific or tied solely to the warehouse’s geometry; the same principles - raised floor, light cuts, use of darkness as a backdrop - could be transferred, with appropriate adaptations, to other spaces. In this sense, the project demonstrates how a local constraint (an unusable floor) can give rise to a solution that, at least in part, transcends the specific case.

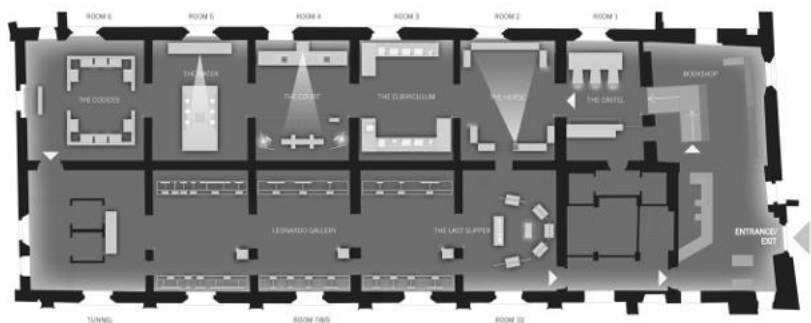


Fig. 6. Original illustration - Leonardiana - Vigevano Castle - Vigevano 2018. Image: Migliore+Servetto

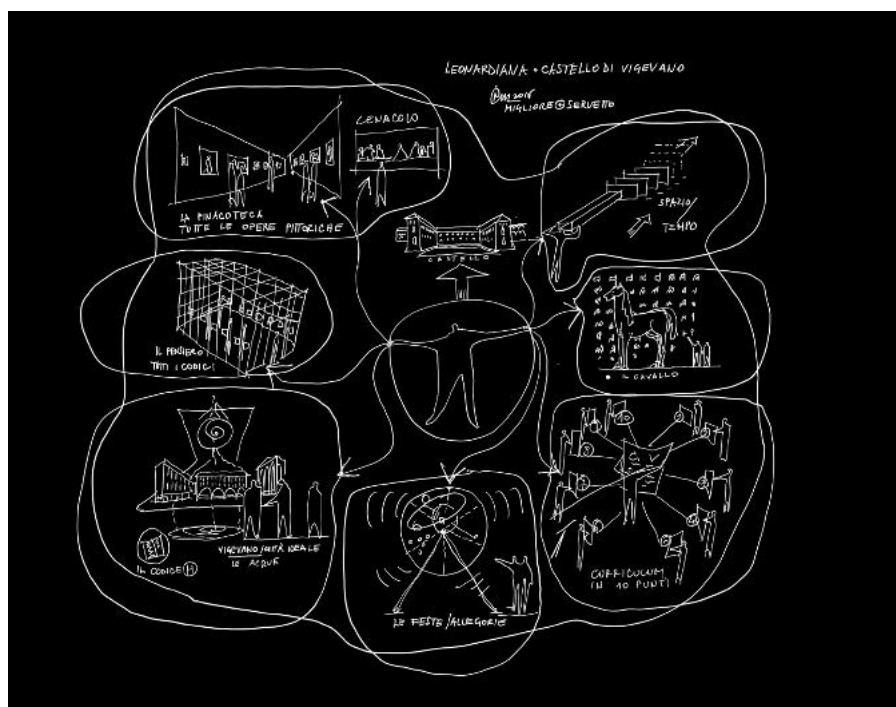


Fig. 7. Original illustration - Leonardiana - Vigevano Castle - Vigevano 2018. Image: Migliore+Servetto

More generally, Wallpaper Urban Addiction offers a glimpse into a working method that recurs elsewhere: not “erasing” the existing space, but accepting its limits as a starting point, focusing the intervention on a few structural elements capable of simultaneously organizing both experience and the use of resources.

Leonardiana. A Grid for Leonardo’s Thought

With Leonardiana, at the Castle of Vigevano (Figs. 6-7, 22), the central theme is not so much the location as the nature of the subject: creating a monographic exhibition on Leonardo da Vinci means grappling with an extremely dispersed body of work, held in museums around the world, which is difficult to concen-

trate in a single venue. The decision to employ a robust digital framework stems primarily from this challenge: the use of technology is described as a response to the need to make “present” works that cannot be physically moved, enabling comparisons and sequences that would otherwise be impossible.

From this need emerges the idea of a modular grid that serves simultaneously as a spatial structure and a conceptual device. The grid is interpreted as a sort of “schema of thought” in the style of Leonardo, a matrix of points in which to place high-definition reproductions, details, variations, and studies, in addition to the original works on display. The project does not merely multiply screens, but seeks to translate into space the logic of a body of work organized in series, successive attempts, and comparisons between solutions.

In this system, the distinction between original and reproduction is problematized, without being eliminated. The original retains a clear role when present; at the same time, reproductions allow for enlargements, overlays, and juxtapositions that make processes and transformations legible. Technology allows, for example, works that are now far apart to be placed side by side, for the evolution of a detail to be shown, and for relationships between drawing and painting to be highlighted. The exhibition can be interpreted as an attempt to transform the physical dispersion of the collection into a field of relationships that can be understood in a single location.

Leonardiana is also the case where the ambivalences of digital sustainability emerge most clearly. On the one hand, the dematerialization of part of the experience reduces the need for transportation, insurance, and custom protective display systems; it also allows, at least in theory, replication of part of the content in other contexts, with lower marginal costs compared to a traditional exhibition based on physical loans. On the other hand, the system itself involves managing a technological infrastructure - hardware, software, control systems - that consumes energy, requires maintenance, and must be updated over time.

In the research materials, the exhibition is defined as a “case of proven sustainability”: the technological choice did not arise with the primary goal of “creating a sustainable exhibition,” but to solve a content-related problem - making a monographic exhibition on a widely known author possible - and to give shape to a project idea (the grid as a representation of thought). The fact that this solution enables, as a secondary effect, the replication of content, the updating of sequences, and the reduction of certain material components is interpreted as a consequence of a project designed in a manner consistent with its objectives.

A final element concerns the system’s reformatability. The grid is designed to

evolve over time: digital works can be replaced, sequences rewritten, and reading paths modified without dismantling the framework. In this sense, Leonardiana is not merely an exhibition but a platform that operates on the logic of a programming schedule: a relatively stable framework that accommodates various narrative configurations over time, in response to new research, restoration campaigns, and outreach needs.

Other projects

An analysis of the materials reveals how certain themes that emerged in the key projects - the relationship with the city, time management, and a predisposition toward reuse - are reinterpreted in a series of other projects, which vary greatly in scale and client base but are united by similar underlying principles. Notably significant are: Look of the City for Turin 2006, the exhibition The Perfect Density for B&B Italia, the installation for Boffi, the traveling exhibition Coats! for Max Mara, and the exhibition of Risorgimento artifacts in Turin (Rileggere il Risorgimento. Turin / Italy: 1884-2024).

Look of the City Turin 2006

When examining the studio's work in the urban context, Look of the City (Figs. 33-39), designed together with his friend and mentor Italo Lupi for the 2006 Turin Winter Olympics, can be considered a paradigmatic case. The project does not concern a single building, but rather the creation of a widespread visual identity for the city during the event: totems, steel structures, signage systems, large banners, and light installations form a sort of "temporary skin" that guides the flow of visitors.

The installation operates through layering: the existing city remains fully legible, while the system of graphic and lighting elements temporarily overlays routes and hierarchies, making Olympic venues and main connections recognizable. The project does not aim to turn the urban space into a spectacle, but to make it navigable, transforming environmental graphics into an informational infrastructure. Particularly significant is the management of the "aftermath." Analysis of the project narratives reveals that a significant portion of the materials is not simply discarded: steel enters reuse or recycling cycles, while PVC banners are

transformed into bags and other objects, produced with the involvement of the local prison system. The life of the installation thus continues in altered forms, preserving a trace of the event in everyday objects.

It can therefore be said that Look of the City foreshadows an approach that recurs in other projects: working with lightweight elements capable of temporarily altering the perception of the city, while simultaneously establishing reuse pathways that extend both the material and symbolic value of the intervention over time.

The Perfect Density for B&B Italia

In the project The Perfect Density (Figs. 8-9, 40-46), dedicated to B&B Italia's 50th anniversary at the Triennale di Milano (which later became a permanent in-

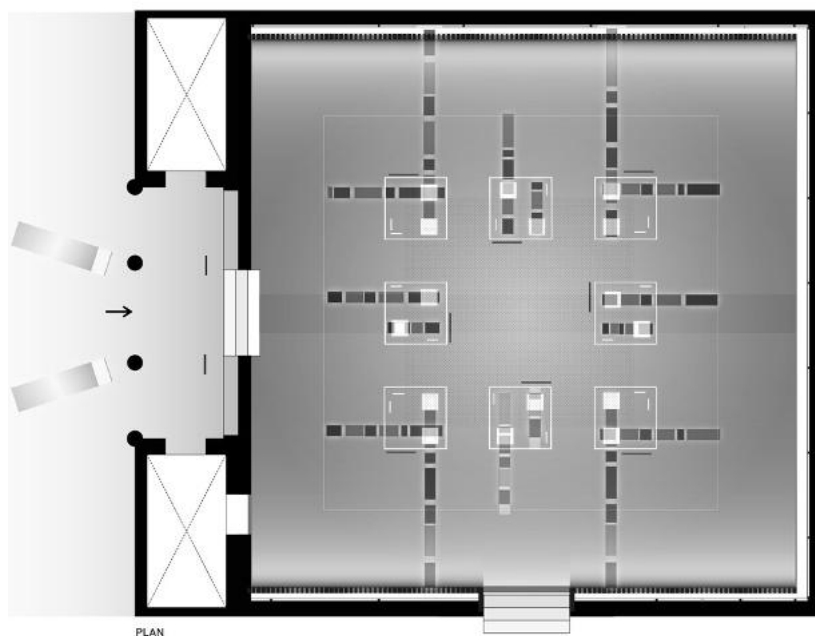


Fig. 8. Original floor plan - The Perfect Density B&B Italia - Triennale di Milano - Milan. Image: Migliore+Servetto



Fig. 9. Original graphic representation - The Perfect Density, B&B Italia - Triennale di Milano - Milan. Image: Migliore+Servetto

stallation and is currently on display at the company's headquarters in Novedrate, in the province of Como), the theme of controlled density - already evident in the ADI Design Museum - returns, but is interpreted from a corporate perspective. The installation is organized around eight large central metal structures that house content, including static and dynamic images of products and prototypes; a sort of "narrative machine" that makes visible, in condensed form, the company's layers of research, experimentation, and production.

Starting with an analysis of the project, it becomes clear that the structure is not conceived as an ephemeral set, but as a true dual-purpose device. From the very first stages, it is designed to be disassembled and reassembled at the company's headquarters: dimensions, joint systems, and assembly methods are calibrated to allow for transfer, with resizing but without any redesign.

From this perspective, the installation at the Triennale constitutes the "first configuration" of a system intended for a longer-term presence within the company. The transition from temporary exhibition to permanent installation is not an afterthought but is built into the concept. This gives rise to a notion of sustainability deeply rooted in life-cycle design: the same structure, with appropriate

adaptations, is adapted to different times and contexts, reducing the need for entirely new installations.

Modular Systems for Boffi

A similar approach applies to About Boffi (Milan, 2003), the traveling installation developed for the company: a system designed to be assembled and disassembled multiple times in different locations and contexts, adapting to varying spaces and constraints without losing its recognizability.

Observing the installation reveals a consistent strategy: the installation is conceived as a kit of parts rather than a unique, non-replicable entity. Frames, panels, lighting elements, graphic surfaces, and display volumes are designed to be reassembled in different configurations while maintaining a common language. The use of electroluminescence - thin panels that combine light, graphics, and surface - should be understood in this context: reducing the number of separate layers (support, light, information panel) and concentrating different functions into single, easily reassembled elements.

In terms of sustainability, there is a dual benefit. On the one hand, reconfigurability reduces the production of “disposable” structures tied to a single location; on the other, the consistency of the design language maintains a continuous visual identity even as venues, compositions, and dimensions change over time, improving the overall efficiency of the investment. The traveling installation is thus approached as a long-term system rather than a succession of isolated events.

Chopin Museum in Warsaw

Looking at the studio’s work in monographic museums, the case of the Fryderyk Chopin Museum in Warsaw (Figs. 47-53) highlights the “measured” use of interactive media. Here, the focus is not on an extensive collection of physical objects, but on a heritage consisting primarily of sound, manuscripts, and documents: the exhibition design is tasked with giving form to something inherently immaterial.

One can observe how digital devices are integrated in a discreet, almost camouflaged manner: drawers that, once opened, activate musical pieces or textual content; surfaces that allow visitors to explore sheet music; localized listening points, closer to the logic of “triggering” than to that of spectacular effect. Technology

serves micro-situations linked to visitors' actions, rather than a continuous audio-visual overload.

In this context, it can be said that the Chopin Museum represents an exemplary manifestation of the “design of the immaterial”: light, darkness, and acoustics define distinct perceptual microclimates, while interaction is calibrated to guide the timing and mode of listening without falling into the “Luna Park Museum” model. Sustainability here is not so much a matter of materials as of the selective use of technological and cognitive resources: a few targeted interventions that organize attention and make complex content accessible without overwhelming either the space or the visitors.

Exhibition of Risorgimento artifacts in Turin. The exhibition “Rileggere il Risorgimento. Turin/Italy: 1884-2024”

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the display of Risorgimento artifacts in Turin (Figs. 54-61) offers an example of an intervention with low material intensity but high interpretive intensity. In this case, the starting point is not a blank slate, but rather a long technical shelving unit installed in the space for the occasion.

Instead of replacing the structures with new, custom-designed display cases, the project opts to work with what already exists, as in a ready-made: the shelves become the backbone of the exhibition, transformed into supports for objects, documents, panels, and audio devices, thus imbued with a new narrative. Simple additions - shelves, supports for the pieces, graphic frames - allow the narrative to unfold without radically altering the character of the space. Particularly significant is the reuse of old telephone handsets as listening stations: these are already “dated” objects that, when placed within the space, introduce a sense of familiarity and recognizability, as well as precise control over acoustics (the experience is individual, localized, and non-invasive). The textual content is displayed on lightweight, reversible supports, installed in a way that does not compromise the original structures.

Starting from this case, it is possible to observe an approach to sustainability that relies less on technological innovation and more on the ability to interpret and enhance what already exists. The installation is conceived as an assemblage operation built upon the existing structure, which reduces the use of new materials and, at the same time, creates a new way of understanding the exhibited heritage.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the cases analyzed, the idea that Migliore+Servetto's work tends to conceive exhibition design as a device centered on behaviors rather than objects is reaffirmed. It is not simply a matter of "displaying well" a collection or a series of products, but of defining spatial conditions that guide the experience in a legible way: how one enters, where and how long one stays, and what one truly understands of what is shown. The ADI Design Museum, with its traversable archive; Wallpaper Urban Addiction, with the floor transformed into a perceptual machine; Leonardiana, with the grid organizing a dispersed corpus, all seem to confirm this trend: the project is not evaluated solely on the form of its exhibition elements, but on the quality of the relationships it manages to activate between people, objects, information, and context.

From this perspective, the central role of time re-emerges. Time cannot be reduced to the mere technical duration of the exhibition: in all the cases considered, at least three temporal scales emerge. The first is the time of the visit, that is, the actual sequence of gestures and pauses that the installations make possible (or impossible): the dense ADI archive is designed to be traversed by levels, the flooring of Wallpaper induces a bottom-to-top reading, and the grid of Leonardiana structures slower moments of engagement. The second scale is the time of the event or campaign: the Olympics, trade fairs, temporary exhibitions, with durations of days or months. The third is the long-term lifespan of the installations: structures that, as in the case of *The Perfect Density* or Boffi, are designed to be repurposed in other venues, or systems such as Leonardiana that allow subsequent content updates. In this context, sustainability seems to coincide with the ability to design installations that are not limited to a single "occurrence," but are conceived from the outset to have multiple life cycles, even at the cost of renouncing more spectacular but less adaptable formal solutions.

A further aspect concerns the implicit distinction between material sustainability and cognitive sustainability. On the material side, the projects analyzed highlight rather concrete strategies: the integration of existing objects, imbued with a new narrative and a genuine dramaturgical dimension (technical shelving in the case of *Risorgimento* artifacts), the design of transferable modular elements (the frame of *The Perfect Density*, the kits for Boffi), and explicit reuse pathways (the Turin 2006 banners transformed into bags and objects). These are not "miracle solutions," but rather design habits: the focus shifts from individual certified materials to the design of conditions that enable a second life. On the cognitive

side, the emphasis on legibility - hierarchical texts, calibrated information load, selective use of light to highlight what is relevant - indicates that a formally “correct” exhibition design can still be unsustainable if it makes engagement difficult, laborious, or selective. In other words, a museum that uses virtuous materials but remains incomprehensible to most of its audiences still produces waste: of resources, time, and learning opportunities.

The relationship with technology is consistent with this approach. The cases discussed suggest that the use of digital media should not be viewed as an end in itself, but rather as a solution to specific problems: the dispersion of works in Leonardiana, the need to translate a predominantly intangible heritage into physical space at the Chopin Museum, and the necessity of integrating lighting, graphics, and architecture at Boffi. Where technology makes it possible to reveal otherwise invisible connections (such as comparisons between distant works), to organize the listening experience (as in the Chopin exhibition), or to reduce the accumulation of technical layers (support, lighting, text), it appears as a coherent component of the overall design; when it risks becoming an excess of unnecessary stimuli, it is instead explicitly problematized in discussions about the “Museo Luna Park.” The issue, only briefly touched upon, of the energy impact and obsolescence cycles of digital infrastructure remains open: the choice to focus on relatively modest and localized solutions (specific triggers, integrated systems) seems to reduce certain risks, but does not replace the need for more rigorous impact assessment tools.

Projects working on an urban scale or with itinerant formats also help clarify this position. Look of the City demonstrates how an ephemeral intervention in the city can be conceived in continuity with the “aftermath”: materials do not end up in landfills but enter transformation cycles that extend the life of the signs, shifting them from urban supports to everyday objects. Itinerant or adaptable installations, such as *The Perfect Density* or the systems for Boffi, point instead toward a direction in which the project aims to stabilize formats and infrastructure, while leaving contingent configurations variable. In both cases, sustainability does not take the form of an explicit manifesto, but materializes in operational decisions regarding weight, transport modes, assembly times, and compatibility with different venues.

The concept of Museum Seed offers a possible synthesis of these trajectories. Thinking of the museum - and, by extension, exhibition design - as a “seed” rather than a “box” means recognizing that the measure of success is not limited to the opening of an exhibition, but includes what happens afterward: visitor practices,

shifts in use, repurposing of structures, circulation of signs, and the potential transferability of formats. From this perspective, sustainability appears less as a separate goal and more as the consequence of a design discipline that takes time, behaviors, and the quality of attention seriously.

The lesson to be drawn from the work of Migliore+Servetto does not concern a technique or a formal solution: it concerns a method of thinking. Designing an exhibition layout means, first of all, asking a precise question: what will remain, and in what form, when the exhibition closes? Not as a rhetorical exercise, but as an operational constraint that informs choices regarding structure, materials, technology, and communication from the very earliest stages. It is this question that distinguishes a project that is exhausted in its first occurrence from one that generates value over time - for the spaces it inhabits, the audiences it encounters, and the institutions that host it.

The second lesson is more subtle, and perhaps more radical: sustainability is not a category separate from the project, but an emergent property of its internal coherence. When space, light, graphics, and technology are designed as parts of a single system - and not as layers added sequentially - the result naturally tends toward the essential: fewer elements, more relationships; fewer effects, more legibility; less material, more durability. The projects analyzed do not constitute a closed model, but rather provide a repertoire of tools - designing for second lives, working with what exists, calibrating the digital, intertwining the material and the cognitive - that can be critically examined, adapted, or challenged in other contexts. In this sense, the Migliore+Servetto case offers not so much a recipe as a stance: that of those who consider every design choice also a choice of responsibility toward time, space, and the people who inhabit them.

Notes

¹ From a conversation with Ico Migliore on June 5, 2025

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Fig. 10. Exhibition view - Compasso d'Oro Permanent Exhibition
- ADI Design Museum - Milan 2021. Photo: Leo Torri, Martina Bonetti

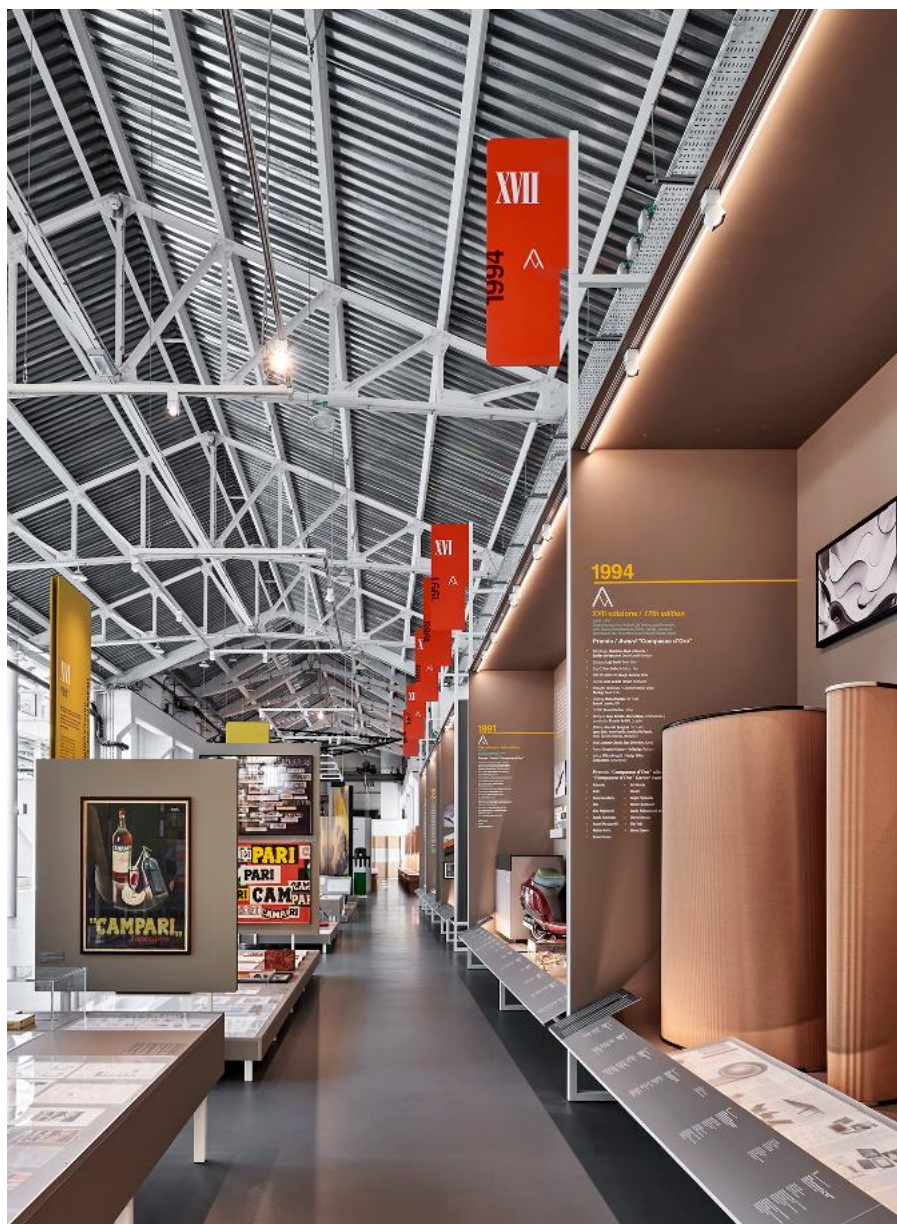


Fig. 12. Exhibition set design photograph - Compasso d'Oro Permanent Exhibition - ADI Design Museum - Milan 2021. Photos: Leo Torri, Martina Bonetti



Fig. 13. Exhibition set design photograph - Compasso d'Oro Permanent Exhibition - ADI Design Museum - Milan 2021. Photos: Leo Torri, Martina Bonetti

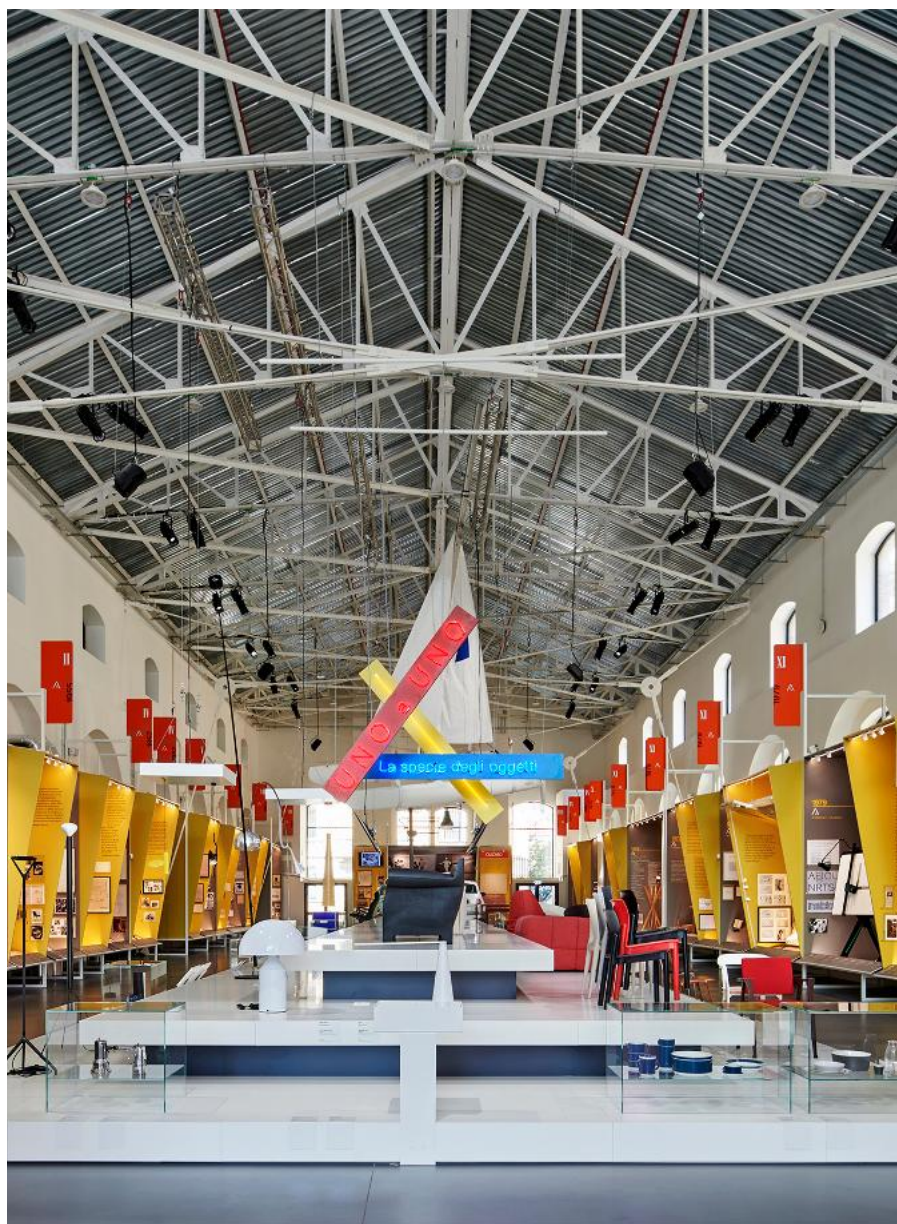


Fig. 14. Exhibition set design photograph - Compasso d'Oro Permanent Exhibition - ADI Design Museum - Milan 2021. Photos: Leo Torri, Martina Bonetti



Fig. 16. Installation photograph - The Wallpaper Urban Addiction
- Hogan Space - Milan 2001. Photo: Migliore+Servetto



Fig. 17. Installation photograph - The Wallpaper Urban Addiction
- Hogan Space - Milan 2001. Photo: Migliore+Servetto



Fig. 18. Installation photograph - The Wallpaper Urban Addiction - Hogan Space - Milan 2001. Photo: Migliore+Servetto

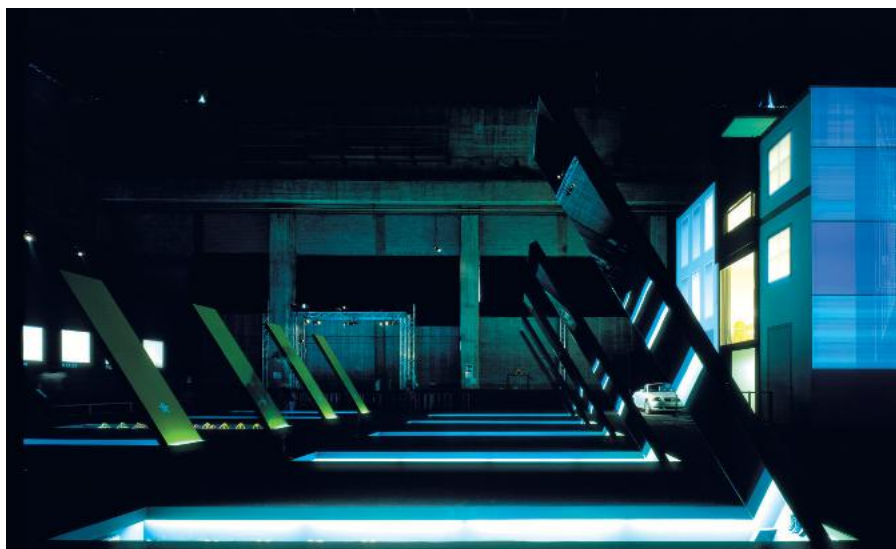


Fig. 19. Installation photograph - The Wallpaper Urban Addiction - Hogan Space - Milan 2001. Photo: Migliore+Servetto



Fig. 20. Installation photograph - The Wallpaper Urban Addiction - Hogan Space - Milan 2001. Photo: Migliore+Servetto

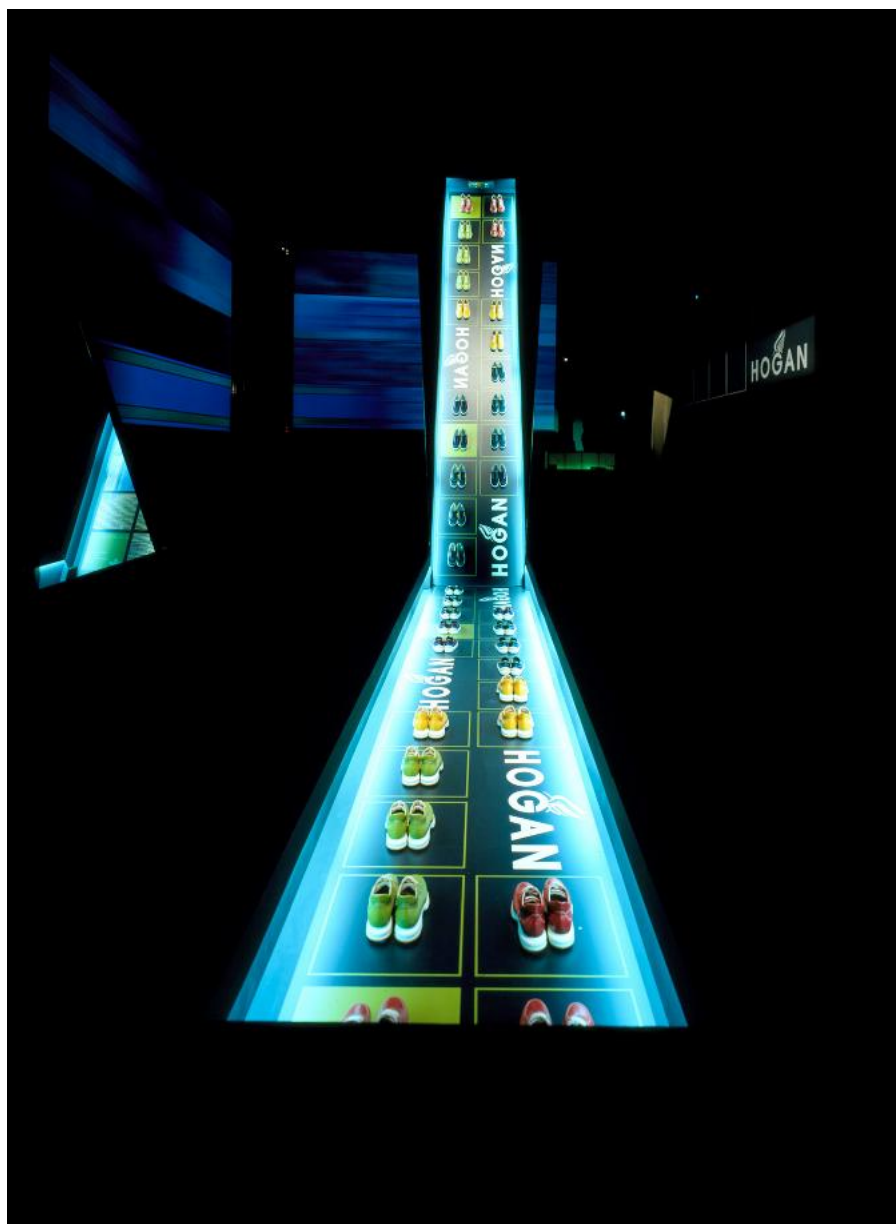


Fig. 21. Installation photograph - The Wallpaper Urban Addiction - Hogan Space - Milan 2001. Photo: Migliore+Servetto



Fig. 22. Exhibition photograph - The Codices - Leonardiana - Vigevano Castle
- Vigevano 2016 - Photo: Andrea Martiradonna / BAMSphoto-Rodella



Fig. 23. Exhibition photograph - The Codices - Leonardiana - Vigevano Castle - Vigevano 2016 - Photo: Andrea Martiradonna / BAMSphoto-Rodella

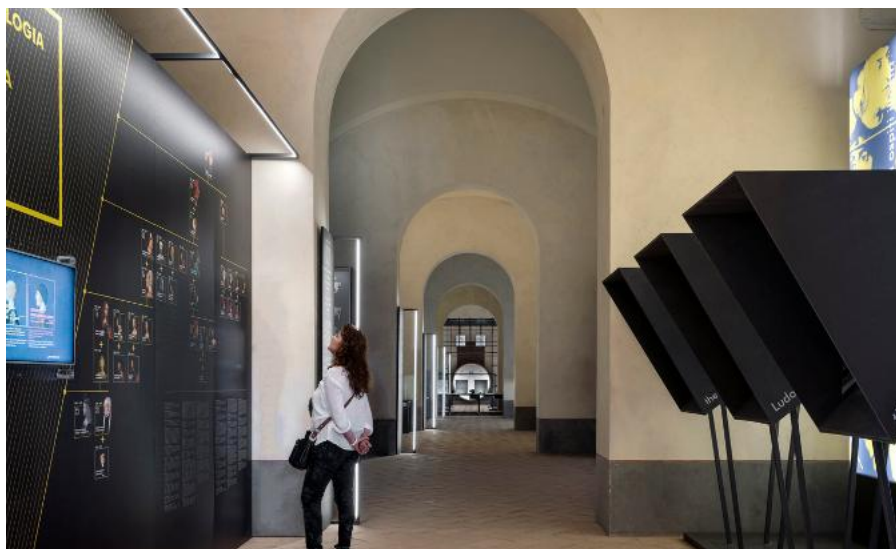


Fig. 24. Exhibition photograph - The Castle of the Dukes - Leonardiana - Vigevano Castle - Vigevano 2016 - Photo: Andrea Martiradonna / BAMSphoto-Rodella



Fig. 25. Exhibition photograph - The Castle of the Dukes - Leonardiana - Vigevano Castle - Vigevano 2016 - Photo: Andrea Martiradonna / BAMSphoto-Rodella



Fig. 26. Exhibition photograph - Leonardo's Curriculum Vitae - Leonardiana - Vigevano Castle - Vigevano 2016 - Photo: Andrea Martiradonna / BAMSphoto-Rodella



Fig. 27. Exhibition photograph - Man of Court and Theater - Leonardiana - Vigevano Castle - Vigevano 2016 - Photo: Andrea Martiradonna / BAMSphoto-Rodella



Fig. 28. Installation photograph - An Ideal City of Water - Leonardiana - Vigevano Castle - Vigevano 2016 - Photo: Andrea Martiradonna / BAMSphoto-Rodella



Fig. 29. Exhibition photograph - The Great Horse: Two Dreams That Merge - Leonardiana - Vigevano Castle - Vigevano 2016 - Photo: Andrea Martiradonna / BAMSphoto-Rodella



Fig. 30. Exhibition photograph - Leonardo's Last Supper - Leonardiana - Vigevano Castle - Vigevano 2016 - Photo: Andrea Martiradonna / BAMSphoto-Rodella

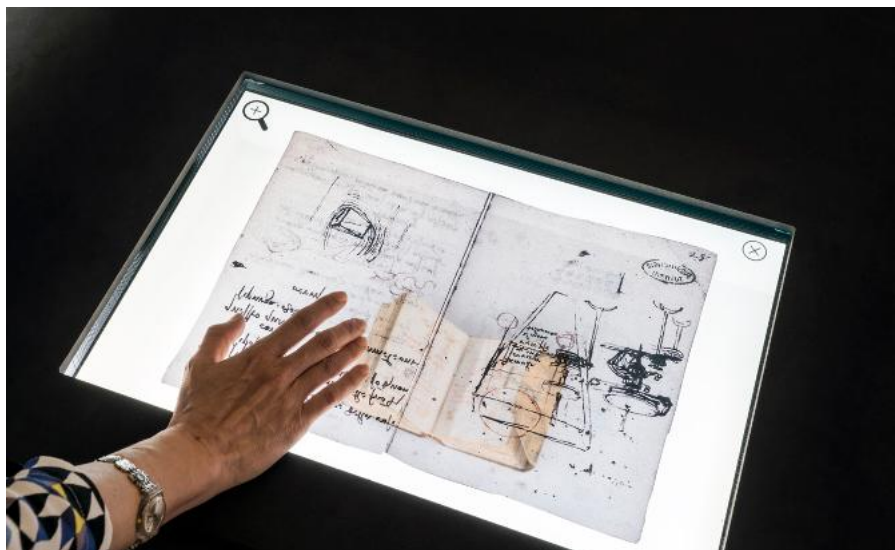


Fig. 31. Close-up photo of the exhibition setup - Leonardiana - Vigevano Castle - Vigevano 2016 - Photo: Andrea Martiradonna / BAMSphoto-Rodella



Fig. 32. Exhibition photograph - Leonardiana - Vigevano Castle - Vigevano 2016 - Photo: Andrea Martiradonna / BAMSphoto-Rodella



Fig. 33. Installation photograph - Look of the City
- Turin 2006. Photo: Migliore+Servetto



Fig. 34. Installation photograph - Shanghai - Porta Susa - "Look of the City" - Turin 2006. Photo: Migliore+Servetto



Fig. 35. Installation photograph - Shanghai - Porta Susa - Look of the City - Turin 2006. Photo: Migliore+Servetto



Fig. 36. Installation photograph - Shanghai - Via Garibaldi - Look of the City - Turin 2006. Photo: Migliore+Servetto



Fig. 37. Installation photograph - Shanghai - Via Garibaldi - Look of the City - Turin 2006. Photo: Migliore+Servetto



Fig. 38. Installation photograph - Anemometers - Murazzi, Lungo Po Diaz - Look of the City - Turin 2006. Photo: Migliore+Servetto



Fig. 39. Installation photograph - Anemometers - Look of the City - Turin 2006.
Photo: Migliore+Servetto



Fig. 40. Installation photograph - The Perfect Density - B&B Italia's headquarters - Novedrate (CO) 2017. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 41. Installation photograph - The Perfect Density - B&B Italia's headquarters - Novedrate (CO) 2017. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna

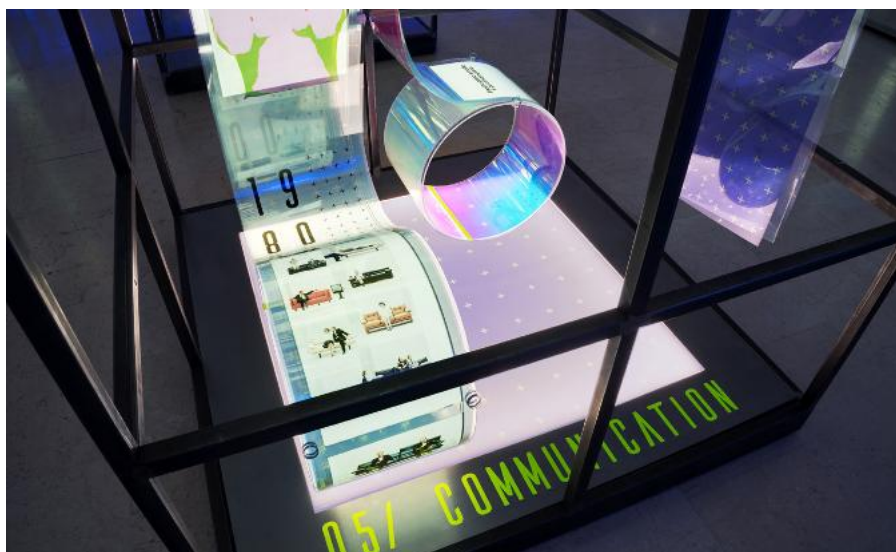


Fig. 42. Installation photograph - The Perfect Density - B&B Italia's headquarters - Novedrate (CO) 2017. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna

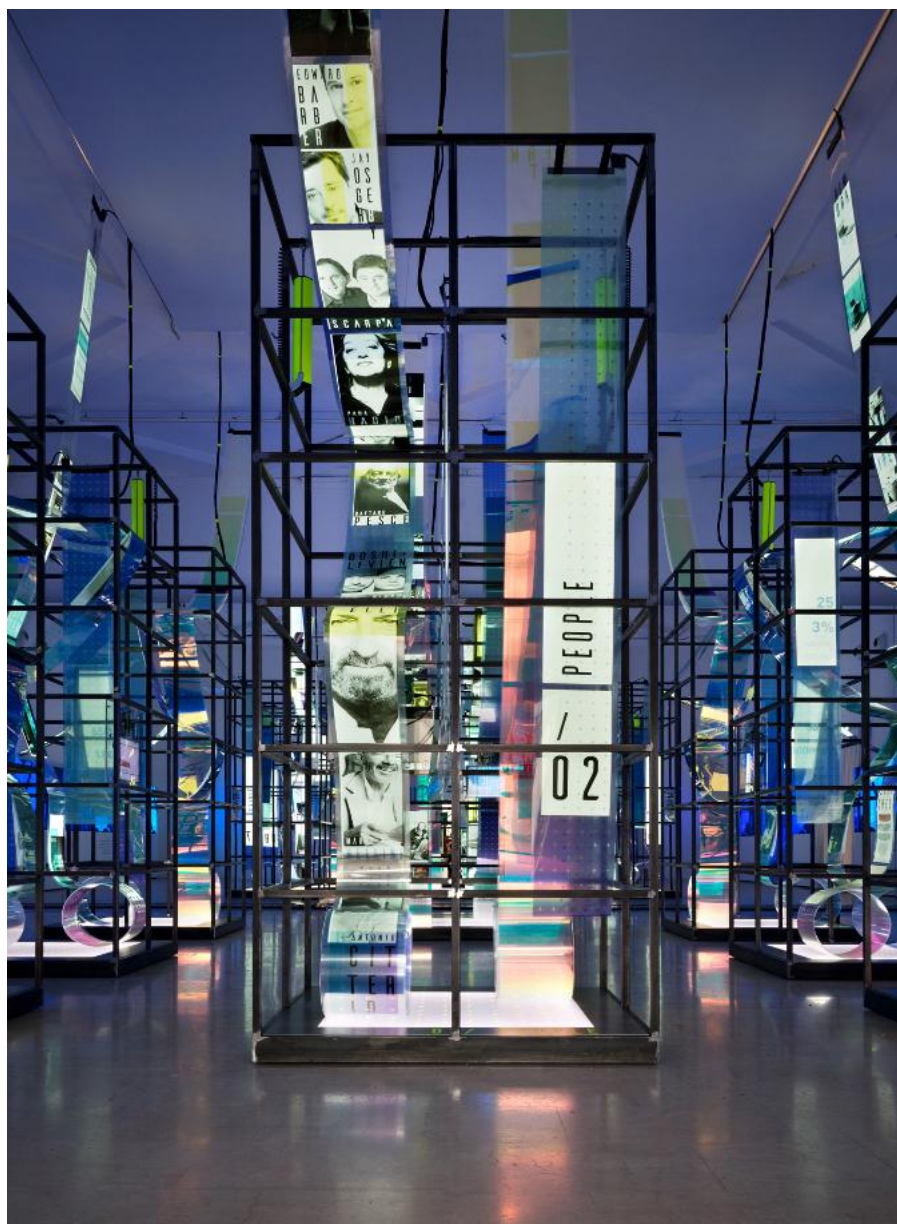


Fig. 43. Installation photograph - The Perfect Density - B&B Italia's headquarters - Novedrate (CO) 2017. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 44. Installation photograph - The Perfect Density - B&B Italia's headquarters - Novedrate (CO) 2017. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 45. Installation photograph - The Perfect Density - B&B Italia's headquarters - Novedrate (CO) 2017. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna

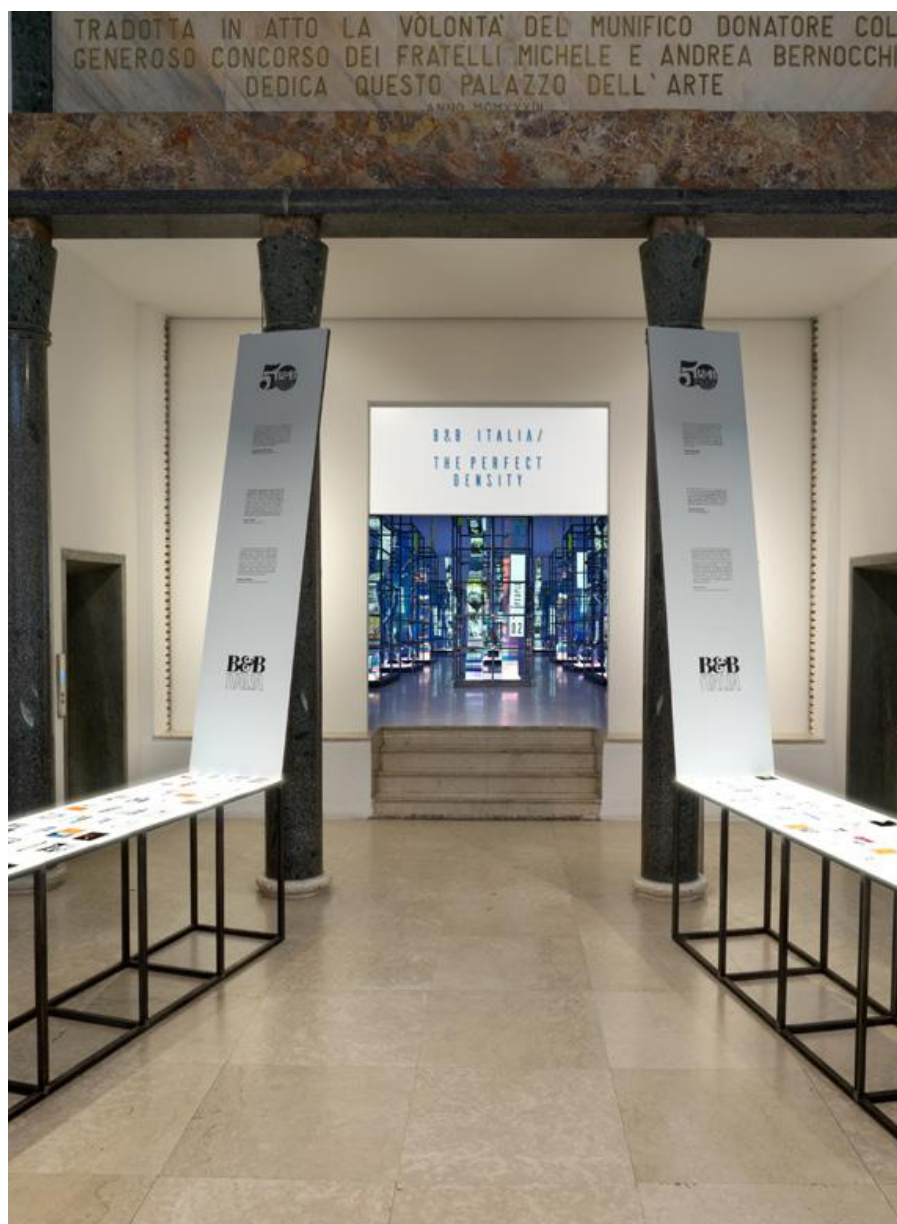


Fig. 46. Installation photograph - The Perfect Density - B&B Italia's headquarters - Novedrate (CO) 2017. Photo: Andrea Martiradonna



Fig. 47. Exhibition photograph - Chopin Museum, Warsaw - 1st Prize in the Competition - Ostrowski Palace, Warsaw, 2010. Photo: Marcin Czechowicz



Fig. 48 Photo of the entrance - Chopin Museum, Warsaw - 1st Prize in the Competition - Ostrowski Palace, Warsaw, 2010. Photo: Marcin Czechowicz



Fig. 49. Exhibition photograph - The Composer - Chopin Museum, Warsaw - 1st Prize in the Competition - Ostrowski Palace, Warsaw, 2010. Photo: Marcin Czechowicz



Fig. 50. Exhibition photograph - Zelazowa Wola - Chopin Museum. Warsaw - Competition 1st Prize - Ostrowski Palace. Warsaw - Varsovia 2010. Photo: Marcin Czechowicz



Fig. 51. Exhibition photograph - Chopin Museum, Warsaw - 1st Prize in the Competition - Ostrowski Palace, Warsaw, 2010. Photo: Marcin Czechowicz



Fig. 52. Exhibition photograph - The Pianist - Chopin Museum, Warsaw - First Prize in the Competition - Ostrowski Palace, Warsaw, 2010. Photo: Marcin Cze-
chowicz

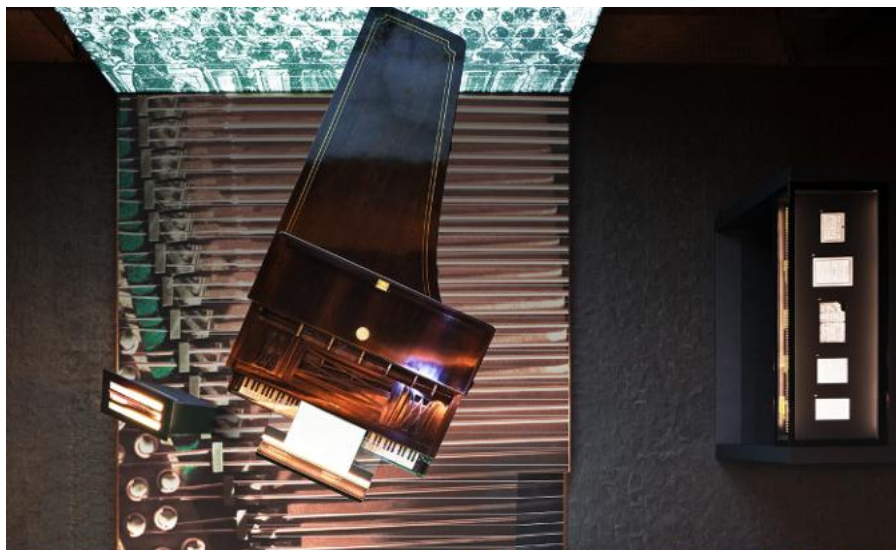


Fig. 53. Exhibition photograph - The Pianist - Chopin Museum, Warsaw - First Prize in the Competition - Ostrowski Palace, Warsaw, 2010. Photo: Marcin Cze-
chowicz



Fig. 54. Exhibition setup photo - Rileggere il Risorgimento
- Turin 2024. Photo: Michele D'Ottavio



Fig. 55. Exhibition setup photo - Rileggere il Risorgimento - Turin 2024. Photo: Michele D'Ottavio



Fig. 56. Exhibition setup photo - Rileggere il Risorgimento - Turin 2024. Photo: Michele D'Ottavio



Fig. 57. Exhibition setup photo - Rileggere il Risorgimento - Turin 2024. Photo: Michele D'Ottavio



Fig. 58. Exhibition setup photo - Rileggere il Risorgimento - Turin 2024. Photo: Michele D'Ottavio



Fig. 59. Exhibition setup photo - Rileggere il Risorgimento - Turin 2024. Photo: Michele D'Ottavio



Fig. 60. Exhibition setup photo - Rileggere il Risorgimento - Turin 2024. Photo: Michele D'Ottavio



Fig. 61. Exhibition setup photo - Rileggere il Risorgimento - Turin 2024. Photo: Michele D'Ottavio

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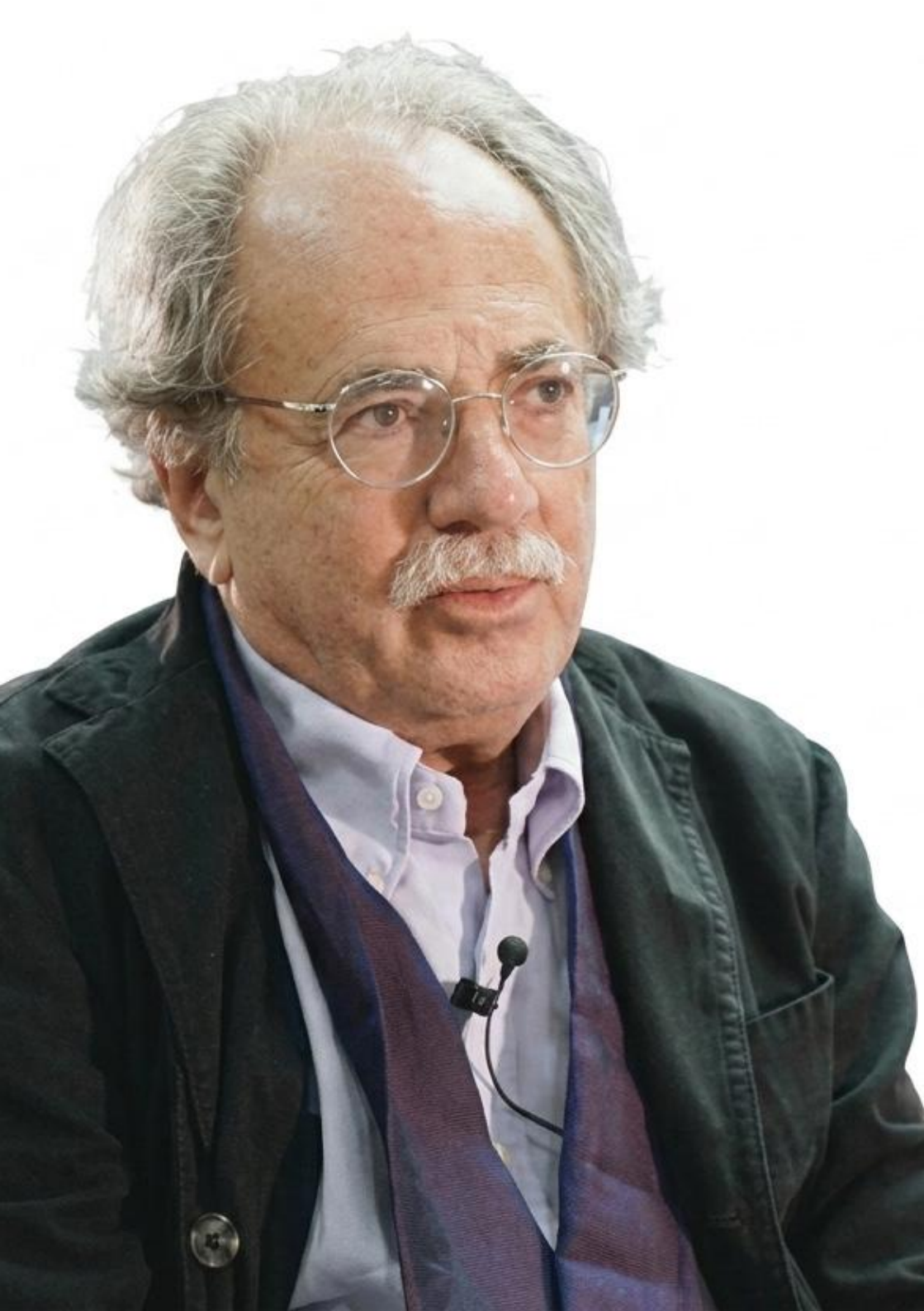
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ORIGONI STEINER

Graphics, Installations, and Materials: Between 2D and 3D

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Department of Culture del Progetto



ORIGONI STEINER

*Graphics, Installations, and Materials: Between 2D and 3D*¹

There is a question that Franco Origoni says he has asked himself many times, almost like a refrain at the conclusion of a project: “Where do things end up?” It is a question that concerns honeycomb panels, Innocenti tubes, and giant posters mounted on aluminum sheets - but also, in a more subtle way, a particular understanding of graphic design as space, and of space as text. The Origoni Steiner studio was founded in Milan in the late 1970s by Anna Steiner and Franco Origoni, in an explicit continuation of the work of Albe and Lica Steiner. As architects and graphic designers, both deeply rooted in the tradition of late twentieth-century Italian graphic design, the two founders oriented the studio’s practice from the outset toward a specific idea: visual communication and exhibition design are not two parallel disciplines, but a single design problem.

This integration of two-dimensional and three-dimensional design is also recognized externally as one of the most consistent hallmarks of Origoni Steiner’s work. The interview repeatedly highlights the studio’s ability to transform two-dimensional images - photographs, logos, posters, and drawings - into three-dimensional elements, not simply printed or projected, but constructed as volumes, back-

Fig. 1. Photograph of Franco Origoni.

drops, and surfaces through which visitors can move. This approach is evident in a variety of projects, ranging from urban installations such as *Italia Oggi* in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele to temporary façades for La Rinascente, as well as major thematic exhibitions such as *Ricostruzioni* at the Milan Triennale and installations for Alfa Romeo.

A second focus concerns the relationship with the tradition of modern Italian graphic design. Origoni emphasizes the connection to Albe and Lica Steiner and to Max Huber: from these influences, the studio derives both its attention to content and the legibility of the message, and its freedom in the use of colour, typography, and composition. In this retrospective account, Max Huber's iconic "LR" logo for La Rinascente - rotated and suspended on the façade of the Rome store - becomes the symbol of an explicit lineage: graphic design is not merely applied to surfaces but becomes a perceptual structure that defines the relationship between the building, the city, and the public. Origoni recalls having always appreciated Albe Steiner's "columns of text" - more concerned with content than form, in contrast to Max Huber's more formal approach - and having had the good fortune to work with both, finding in this tension one of the fundamental driving forces behind his own design philosophy.

In this context, the exhibition is conceived as a multisensory experience rather than a simple sequence of panels. In the interview, Origoni is explicit: all five senses must be engaged within the communication system. The exhibitions created with Renzo Piano are the most frequently cited example - never isolated panels, but tables on which objects can be viewed, leafed through, and touched; tables designed to accommodate both images and three-dimensional models, compelling visitors to change their perspective and distance from the object. While remaining predominantly rooted in analogue devices, Origoni Steiner's projects aim to engage the body and movement through inclined planes, walkable surfaces, and traversable volumes.

An important constant is the attention paid to the architectural container. Origoni repeatedly emphasizes the idea of "not touching the walls": the exhibitions at the Triennale, for example, were staged for fifty years without ever hanging anything on the walls, keeping the windows open and the spatial dimensions clearly legible. Exhibition design is conceived as a second, autonomous architecture, composed of self-supporting structures, tables, scaffolding, supported surfaces, and temporary flooring, all of which allow the original volume, openings, and proportions of the space to remain clearly visible. This approach translates into a preference for standard construction systems - Dalmine scaffolding, Innocenti

tubes, and timber planks - and for standard hollow-core panels, elevated to the status of exhibition materials through the overall design and graphic treatment rather than through sophisticated finishes.

The use of scaffolding as an exhibition device is one of the firm's most distinctive features. The firm frequently employs Dalmine scaffolding and Innocenti tubes, both indoors and in urban spaces, to the point that - in the view of the interviewers - they have become a true hallmark of its identity. Scaffolding is interpreted as a "stable yet temporary" structure, one that can be continuously re-assembled and is capable of suggesting the idea of a temporary installation while conveying remarkable visual solidity. In the projects for Alfa Romeo at the Ottogono della Galleria, for example, the black-painted tubes used for the concealed parts, the Alfa-red uprights, and the joints left gold-coloured because they were new produced a structure that no one recognized as reconfigured standard scaffolding: "It was the standard structure as it was originally built," recalls Origoni, "it wasn't 'real' as a special construction, and yet no one perceived it as such."

Attention to the life cycle of materials is another element that characterizes - even in retrospect - the studio's profile. Several passages in the interview emphasize the need to consider, from the design phase onward, not only the construction but also the dismantling and disposal of installations: "Where do things end up?" once the exhibition closes is the fundamental question guiding the choice between treated and untreated materials, printed and neutral substrates, and glued or reversible solutions. Origoni recalls how exhibition designers once had boilers in which they burned panels and structures - a practice that would be unthinkable today - and how the evolution of certification requirements has made the management of materials generated by exhibition installations more complex but also more informed, although many grey areas still remain.

Origoni Steiner's position within the landscape of Italian design firms appears to be marked by a unique combination of continuity and distinctiveness. On the one hand, its lineage from Albe and Lica Steiner places the firm within a tradition that views graphic design as a design tool carrying significant cultural and civic responsibility; on the other hand, its systematic integration of graphic design and exhibition design - transforming the exhibition into a narrative device in which images, texts, materials, and construction systems are conceived together - has shaped an approach that anticipates many of the themes currently at the centre of the debate on sustainable exhibition design and the reuse of standard technical systems.

From Scaffolding to Narrative: Method and Reversibility in Exhibition Design

In Origoni's account of the studio's work, the design process is not described as a codified sequence of phases, but rather as a set of established practices that recur across different contexts. A key element concerns the relationship with the client: rather than opposing "designer" and "client," emphasis is placed on the notion of shared decision-making, whereby the project rationale is discussed until a clear course of action is agreed upon. The distinction is not so much between "good" and "bad" clients as between situations in which there is a single point of contact capable of assuming responsibility for decisions - the "leader" with whom to engage - and more fragmented situations, where the decision-making process becomes diluted. Origoni recalls how it has often occurred that a CEO chose to proceed independently with the project, thanking the others and explicitly stating his or her direction: it is precisely this concentration of decision-making responsibility that makes coherent work possible.

Within this framework, the exhibition is conceived as a structured narrative. Origoni explicitly draws an analogy with a theatrical performance: every exhibition should clearly present a prologue, a development, and an epilogue. This tripartite structure is not only narrative but also spatial: the entrance clarifies where the journey begins, the route organizes groups of content according to recognizable criteria (theme, scale, or environment), and the exit provides a synthesis or concluding statement. Graphic elements - titles, headings, maps, colour schemes - form an integral part of this structure: they guide visitors, mark transitions between chapters, and help visitors perceive that they are moving through distinct sections rather than an undifferentiated sequence of panels.

The relationship between two-dimensional and three-dimensional elements is treated as an operational continuum. In exhibitions dedicated to design - from ADI events to more experimental displays - the studio expresses its intention to "show the design, the prototype, and the finished product," moving beyond the logic of exhibitions in which design is reduced to a sequence of objects displayed on horizontal or slightly inclined surfaces. This gives rise to a series of methodological choices: the active selection of the materials provided (not all drawings, but those that most effectively illustrate the process), graphic treatments that make them accessible to a non-specialist audience (the removal of dimensions and the introduction of a limited number of scale references), and the transformation of

images into surfaces and volumes that organize the space. In the case of Ricostruzioni, for example, the construction of the exhibition involved intensive editing of the drawings: dimensions were removed and a scale reference was added in an effort to “bring ordinary people closer - without being pedantic - to a design system that we, as designers, take for granted.”

Another methodological aspect concerns the use of standard technical systems. Exhibition design is often conceived as an assemblage of simple infrastructural elements - Dalmine scaffolding, Innocenti tubes, construction planks, and honeycomb panels - which are subsequently “elevated” through colour, detailing, and their relationship to the content. This choice is not merely stylistic: working with modular and repeatable systems makes it possible to control assembly and disassembly, adapt the same structural framework to different contexts, and exploit the capacity of these systems to configure complex spaces using only a limited number of elements. In a recent educational proposal, Origoni even suggested using old historic scaffolding as a load-bearing structure, combining existing elements with contemporary components: an idea that demonstrates how this design language has not crystallized into a fixed formula but continues to evolve. The issue of reversibility explicitly permeates the way in which the project is conceived. Origoni repeatedly emphasizes that, alongside economic considerations and safety regulations, attention must be paid to the “final fate” of what is built: where materials end up once an exhibition has concluded, how they are disposed of, and what consequences surface treatments and material combinations have for recycling processes. The evolution of certifications and regulations imposes strict constraints, yet still leaves grey areas regarding the management of the large quantities of material generated by exhibition installations: “when we take something down, what we create gets thrown away,” and the final destination of these materials remains “very undefined.”

From this perspective, design choices are described as a constant balancing act between the desire to experiment and an awareness of industrial and regulatory constraints. The case of the flooring designed using recycled panels intended for roof insulation is emblematic: the idea of constructing 2,000 m² of walkable surface from waste materials was abandoned when the company involved reported production timelines incompatible with those of the exhibition. Nevertheless, this experience led to alternative solutions, such as flooring cast from elastic materials derived from playground technologies, which allowed radical changes to the colour and texture of the floor while maintaining the reversibility of the installation. The surface was poured onto protective sheets, used for the duration of the

exhibition, and subsequently cut, rolled up, and disposed of separately, without affecting the original floor.

The same attention applies to panels and images. Reflecting retrospectively on projects such as *Italia Oggi* or the installation for *La Rinascente*, Origoni emphasizes that all the large images were already mounted on plastic-coated aluminium sheets, allowing them to be stacked and, at least in principle, reused in other contexts: “Immediate reuse - not disposal but recycling - becomes extremely important.” The retrospective recognition of the limitations of certain materials that can no longer be certified because of flammability or disposal issues demonstrates how some of these strategies, although carefully considered, were developed within a regulatory framework that has since evolved and now makes the replication of certain solutions more complex.

Another aspect of this approach concerns attention to detail as a collective decision-making process. The recollection of discussions regarding the cut of the paving tiles on the Beaubourg roof - at 90° or 45° relative to the wall - during collaborations with Renzo Piano highlights the extent to which the definition of the edge, the joint, and the termination of a pattern are considered essential components of the project. This anecdote suggests that resolving such issues is never left to chance or delegated to the construction site, but is instead addressed as a design problem, even at the cost of lengthy discussions under uncomfortable conditions. Choosing to angle the edge so as to make the floor appear to “float” is not merely a matter of finishing detail, but influences the overall interpretation of the exhibition space as a suspended surface.

Overall, Origoni Steiner’s design process can be described as an interweaving of four elements: the collaborative development of the exhibition rationale with the client; the definition of an explicit narrative structure (prologue-development-epilogue) translated into spatial and graphic organization; the systematic use of standard technical systems as modular and reversible infrastructure; and attention to the fate of materials, which leads to considering dismantling and disposal as integral components of the project. Rather than introducing formalized eco-design procedures, this approach embodies a sensibility that predates the current debate on sustainability while offering concrete tools for retrospectively assessing both its potential and its limitations.

Three Projects as a Laboratory

The projects for ADI, for Italia Oggi in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, and for the Ricostruzioni exhibition at the Triennale di Milano provide a focused opportunity to observe certain constants in Origoni Steiner's work: the integration of graphics and spatial structure, the use of standard technical systems as a compositional matrix, and attention to reversibility and the fate of materials. Taken together, these three cases demonstrate how the studio employs exhibition design not merely to "contain" content, but as a device for shaping relationships among design, narrative, and exhibition infrastructure.

Furthermore, two dimensions of sustainability intersect in these examples: on the one hand, the capacity to create reusable systems adaptable to different conditions (as in the case of the ADI exhibition system and the modular panels for Italia Oggi); on the other, the conception of the exhibition as an opportunity to make complex design processes - from the life cycle of design objects to processes of urban transformation - understandable to a non-specialist audience. In this sense, the three exhibitions function as "laboratories" in which to experiment, through different tools and strategies, with a concept of eco-design that was ahead

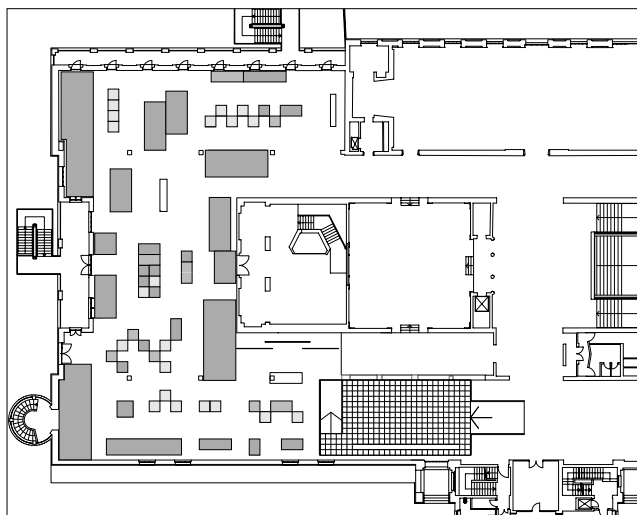


Fig. 2. Original floor plan - 20th ADI Compasso d'Oro Award and 50 Years of the Compasso d'Oro - Triennale di Milano 2004 - Milan. Image: Origoni & Steiner

of its time: not yet formalized, yet already embedded in practice.

ADI - The Compasso d'Oro Exhibition System

The project for ADI (Figs. 2, 8-14) is described as one of the cases in which research into the exhibition system was most explicit. Origoni emphasizes that the objective was not to define a single exhibition design, but rather to conceive a framework capable of accommodating, over time, objects of very different natures within changing contexts, “at the lowest possible cost.” The structure had to be capable of simultaneously accommodating small objects, large machines, and photographs of “extradimensional” objects - that is, objects so bulky that they could only be presented through images. Origoni recalls how, for years, a machine remained on display that no one could identify - “we thought it was a massage machine, but then I discovered it had nothing to do with that” - and how the curiosity generated by that enigmatic object became part of the exhibition experience itself.

In this context, the primary focus is not the presentation of the finished object, but rather the opportunity to display the design, prototype, and finished product together. In design exhibitions, “one is normally limited to lining up finished pieces on horizontal or slightly sloped surfaces”; here, by contrast, the ideally complete sequence of the design process becomes the very structure of the exhibition layout. This entails a selective approach to the materials provided by companies: not everything is displayed, but only those elements that enable visitors to discern stages, variations, and discarded versions.

From a construction perspective, the system is designed to be reconfigured multiple times and in different venues without requiring irreversible alterations to the architectural space. The decision not to “touch the walls” and instead to work with freestanding structures is translated into a layout capable of expanding, contracting, or varying in density according to the number of editions and the dimensions of the available spaces. Attention to transformation costs and the reusability of components suggests a form of sustainability that is primarily “structural”: it is the repeatability of the system, rather than any individual formal solution, that constitutes the real design investment.

In communicative terms, the installation allows for the articulation of interpretive hierarchies tailored to different audiences. From a distance, visitors perceive a landscape of volumes and planes that signal intensity and groupings; as they

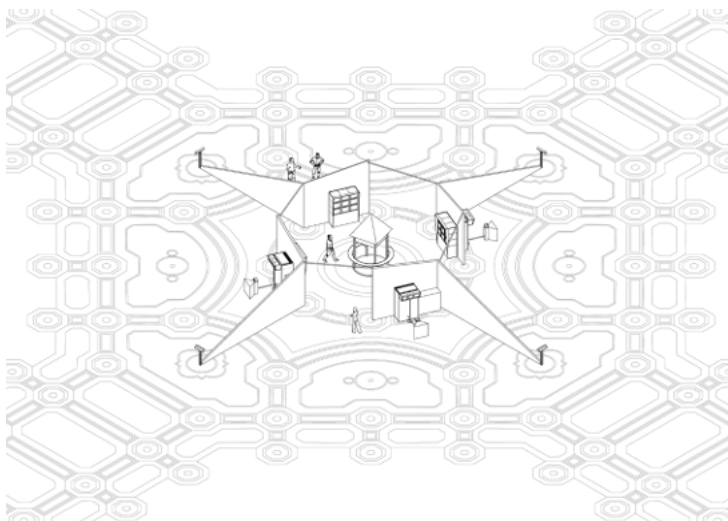


Fig. 3. Axonometric view - Exhibition design for the launch of the new daily newspaper "Italia oggi" - Octagon of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele - Milan, 1986. Redesign: L. Bettini, S. Fornasari, B. Pavan - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2024-25

move closer, they can trace the evolution of each project from design to prototype to production. This dual scale of experience - the overall landscape and the micro-narrative of the individual project - makes explicit the continuity between graphics, objects, and exhibition structure, which constitutes one of the most significant aspects of the ADI project within the broader context of the studio's research.

Italia Oggi - Installation in the Octagon of the Galleria

The installation for the daily newspaper Italia Oggi in the Octagon of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele (Figs. 3-4, 15-17) is presented as a case in which the relationship among urban space, pedestrian flows, and visual communication is placed at the center of the project. A year earlier, the studio had created an installation for Alfa Romeo at the same location, dominated by a very tall central element; for Italia Oggi, the choice was deliberately the opposite: no longer a monolith to be circumnavigated, but rather a sequence of elements that can be traversed, accompanying the main Duomo-Scala pedestrian flow.

The "sails" composing the installation rise from the ground to a height of ap-

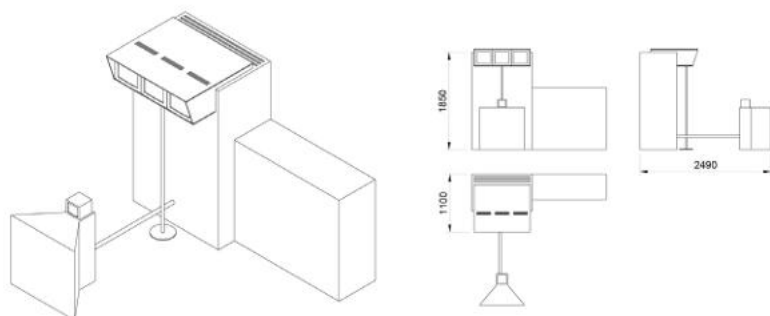


Fig. 4. Display Details - Exhibition Design for the Launch of the New Newspaper “Italia oggi” - Octagon of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele - Milan, 1986. Redesign: L. Bettini, S. Fornasari, B. Pavan - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2024-25

proximately seven meters and are spaced apart to form a linear pathway along the Galleria’s busiest route, while leaving the side aisles - traditionally less frequented - largely unobstructed. A newsstand is positioned at the center - a direct reference to the nature of the product being promoted - surrounded by monitors that connect print and digital media, while “islands” of screens accessible to the public are arranged toward the outer edges.

From a technical standpoint, the large surfaces of the sails are constructed from standard hollow-core panels approximately 7 cm thick, in modular formats (1 × 3 m, 1 × 4 m), joined and caulked to achieve greater heights. Giant photographic prints and specially composed texts are affixed to these panels using analog procedures that transform the modular system into a single, large, continuous communication surface. The decomposition and fragmentation of the “Italia Oggi” logo across the various backdrops introduce a perceptual dynamic in which visitors encounter letters and portions of words functioning as autonomous points of interest and only mentally reconstruct the brand in its entirety.

From a sustainability perspective, the project may be retrospectively viewed as an example of unintentional eco-design. The choice of off-the-shelf panels and repeatable modules effectively renders a significant portion of the installation

dismantlable and potentially reusable. Origoni points out that all the large images were already mounted on sheets of plastic-coated aluminum, designed to be stacked and reused elsewhere: the project was conceived to prioritize the immediate reuse of components over their disposal at the end of the exhibition.

Ricostruzioni - Thematic Exhibition at the Triennale

The Ricostruzioni exhibition at the Triennale (Figs. 18-28) represents a third laboratory in which the focus shifts from individual objects or brands to architectural and urban design. The exhibition occupies approximately 2,000 m² of the ground floor - “upon entering, turn right” - and organizes its contents into “major themes”: the city, the neighborhood, exteriors, and interiors. The aim is not merely to display a series of projects, but to construct a critical catalogue that renders themes and scales legible, allowing comparisons among different situations within a shared exhibition framework.

From a spatial perspective, the entrance is marked by a section constructed with Dalmine scaffolding, used explicitly as a tribute to the studio’s “grammar,” while the remainder of the exhibition route primarily employs new construction planks, treated both visually and practically to serve as walls, floors, and supports. The idea is to employ “simple tools used by libraries” - recognizable as construction materials but configured into a coherent system capable of creating distinct environments.

The most interesting aspect of the project, however, emerges in the work on the drawings. Origoni emphasizes the difference between “having design documents sent to him” and “selecting and adapting the drawings in order to communicate them”: systematically removing technical dimensions, introducing explicit scale references, and bringing “ordinary people” closer to a system of representation that designers generally take for granted. Here, too, graphics and exhibition design function as a unified mechanism: the selection of the drawings, their mounting on modular supports, and the organization of the exhibition into thematic sequences create an interpretative framework that guides the public through a vast amount of material without relying exclusively on explanatory texts.

From a materials perspective, Ricostruzioni systematizes some of the reversibility strategies that emerged in other projects. The use of construction planks and scaffolding as the primary infrastructure reduces the need for custom-made elements that are difficult to reuse; the surfaces are treated only to the extent necessary to

ensure legibility and safety, yet remain, by their very nature, demountable and reusable.

Other Projects Mentioned

Alongside the three main cases, several projects mentioned in the interview help clarify the continuity of Origoni Steiner's design language across different contexts: the installation for Alfa Romeo at the Ottagono, the façade for La Rinascente in Rome, the cast-in-place pavements developed with Gillo Dorfles, and the collaborations with Renzo Piano.

Alfa Romeo at the Ottagono: Volume as an Urban Landmark

In the firm's history, the installation for Alfa Romeo at the Ottagono of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele represents a key milestone for understanding the relationship between exhibition design and urban scale. It is remembered as a central "mass" - taller than any previous installation in the same space - that served as a landmark throughout the entire length of the Galleria: a monolithic volume conceived not so much as a standalone object but rather as a focal point for pedestrian movement. From a structural standpoint, the black-painted tubes used for the concealed parts, the Alfa-red uprights, and the new joints left in their natural brass finish meant that the structure was not recognized as standard scaffolding that had simply been reconfigured. The "elevation" of the system was achieved entirely through color and the selection of elements, rather than through the introduction of special components.

The installation reveals an early balance among three aspects that would recur in subsequent projects: the creation of a temporary landmark, the centrality of graphic communication, and the management of the relationship with a strongly characterized historical context. The installation space is not merely a "display box" within the Galleria; rather, it intervenes in the overall perception of the central void, redefining its hierarchies and directions of movement.

The Façade for La Rinascente: Graphics as Temporary Architecture

The installation for La Rinascente in Rome (Figs. 5-7, 29-32) - “in front of Palazzo Chigi,” Origoni clarifies, correcting an initially incorrect location - is designed as a structure attached to the side of the building, featuring a two-tone light- and dark-gray color scheme extending along the façade. Inside the entrance corridor, large images are displayed; on the exterior, along the pathway, a series of one-meter-by-one-meter panels traces the history of La Rinascente’s visual identity, with one poster for each year, “which we created entirely ourselves.” The culminating element is Max Huber’s LR mark - the Rinascente logo designed by Huber on a yellow background - which rotates on its own axis at the corner projection of the structure: an explicit homage to the studio’s graphic heritage, in which graphics become an architectural element rather than mere cladding.

The project demonstrates how the graphic dimension is not merely a “surface treatment” applied to a neutral substrate, but rather a structural component of temporary architecture: the work on the modular panels, their distribution along the route, and the visual chronology together construct a narrative device in which graphics assume a genuine spatial function.

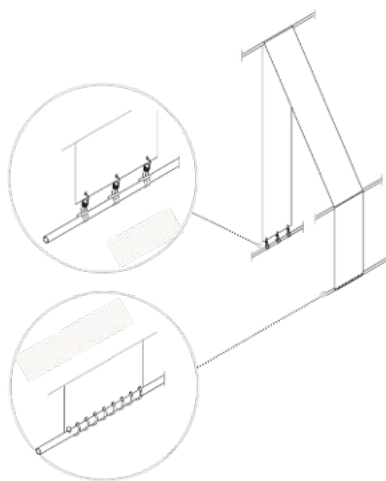


Fig. 5. Axonometric projection - Story behind the image of La Rinascente - La Rinascente 1985 - Rome. Redesign: G. Dinale, M. Lupo - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2024-25

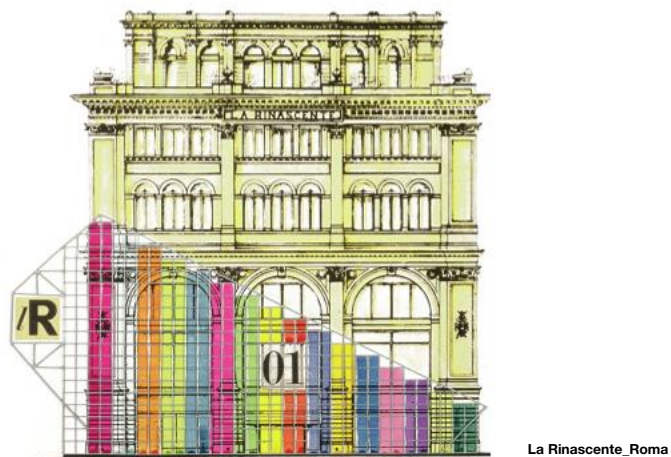


Fig. 6. Original drawing - The Story Behind the Rinascente Logo - La Rinascente 1985 - Rome. Image: Origoni & Steiner

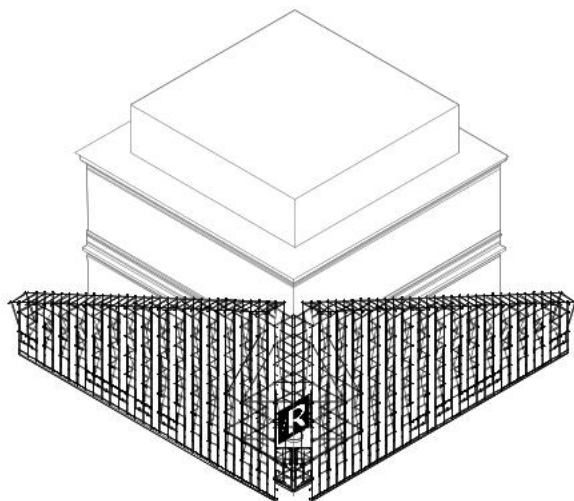


Fig. 7. Axonometric drawing - Story behind the image of La Rinascente - La Rinascente 1985 - Rome. Redesign: G. Dinale, M. Lupo - Lab. Exhibit Design IUAV 2024-25

Cast Flooring and the Reversibility of Interiors

A recurring area of experimentation concerns the use of cast flooring made of elastic materials, a technique also developed in collaboration with Gillo Dorfles at the Triennale. The walkable surface is treated as an autonomous field of design: “as if you were taking buckets of colour that changes colour - a liquid material that solidifies, and when it solidifies on top, it’s like walking on a moving lake with different colours.” The material derives from technologies used in children’s playgrounds - that soft surface beneath swings that no one considers an element to be worked on aesthetically - but, when transferred to an exhibition context, it acquires an entirely different perceptual significance.

The objective is twofold: to create an environment in which spatial perception is altered from the moment one steps onto the floor, and to experiment with forms of radical reversibility. “At the end of the exhibition, you cut it into pieces; underneath the plastic are the protective supports; you leave, and you haven’t touched the environment”: the surface is cut into sections, rolled up, and removed, restoring the space to its original condition. This emphasis on the possibility of “not touching what already exists” introduces an element of environmental and managerial responsibility that predates, at least in part, the widespread discourse on sustainability.

Collaborations with Renzo Piano: Graphics as Spatial Infrastructure

The collaborations with Renzo Piano - approximately forty-seven exhibitions, both large and small - provide an exemplary context for understanding how graphic design, within the studio’s practice, tends to become three-dimensional. Origoni recalls the major exhibition on Renzo Piano’s career in Paris and later in Milan (“Renzo’s Seventy Years”), and in particular a significant episode: an exhibition designer wished to exclude a video element from the exhibition, considering it off-topic. Origoni responded by taking out his markers, tipping the plinth onto the floor, and sketching directly on the spot - and the element remained. This anecdote illustrates how, even within highly structured collaborations, defending the coherence of the exhibition system involves immediate design actions, unmediated by formal hierarchies.

The most recurrent aspect of these collaborations, however, is the attention devo-

ted to geometric and perceptual detail. The discussion concerning the cut of the floor tiles on the Beaubourg roof - whether positioned at 90° or 45° relative to the wall - conducted while standing on that roof under uncomfortable conditions, demonstrates how seemingly marginal issues - an edge, a joint, the termination of a pattern - are regarded as essential components of the project, on a par with more large-scale design decisions. The decision to angle the edge in order to make the floor appear to “float” concerns not merely a finishing detail but directly affects the overall perception of the exhibition space as a suspended and lightweight element.

Discussion and Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the cases analysed reveal that the most recognisable feature of Origoni Steiner’s work is not so much an immediately identifiable stylistic signature as a relatively stable constellation of approaches: the systematic integration of graphic and exhibition design, the conscious use of standard technical systems, attention to the architectural context, and an explicit or implicit questioning of the fate of materials once an exhibition has ended. The exhibition is conceived as a unified communication device in which the catalogue, environmental graphics, visitor pathways, and spatial structures all form part of the same design problem. The underlying lesson - if one may speak of a lesson - is that no hierarchy exists between the sheet and the volume, between the graphic sign and the structure that supports it. Rather, there are design challenges that require both, and the ability to integrate them constitutes a skill in itself.

From this perspective, the interplay between two-dimensional and three-dimensional design appears central. In the projects for ADI, Italia Oggi, and Ricostruzioni, graphics are not a surface treatment applied after the fact but a structural component of the project itself: they define interpretative hierarchies, guide the gaze, and construct thresholds and sequences. Letters, logos, photographs, and drawings become wall sections, backdrops, “sails,” and floors, ultimately shaping environments in which the distinction between information panels, exhibition displays, and temporary architecture tends to dissolve. What Origoni Steiner has consistently implemented on a large scale is the idea that graphic design can become spatial infrastructure: not signage, not decoration, but the framework of an experience.

A second area of interest concerns the relationship with standard technical sy-

stems. Dalmine scaffolding, Innocenti tubes, hollow-core panels, construction planks, and cast flooring are employed repeatedly, yet rarely as mere expedient solutions. On the contrary, they become design elements: they are coloured, oriented, joined, and cut according to compositional logics that remain legible even from a distance. The elevation of construction-site languages does not occur through aestheticisation but through recognition of their intrinsic capacity to organise space. The repeated use of scaffolding as a matrix - from the entrance to Ricostruzioni to the installations for Alfa Romeo - indicates that the studio tends to work with established technical repertoires, adapting them each time to different contexts and narratives. What emerges from this repertoire is not a catalogue of solutions to be replicated but a method: working with modular and repeatable systems eliminates the need to reinvent the infrastructure for every project, allowing design energy to be concentrated on narrative, detail, and the relationship with context.

With regard to sustainability, the picture that emerges is one of a forward-looking sensibility rather than a systematised programme - and it is precisely for this reason that it proves instructive. Demountable and modular structures, the principle of not altering existing walls and floors, images mounted on reusable rigid supports, and reversible cast flooring: none of these choices originated from an ecological manifesto, but rather from on-site practices, a sense of proportion, and the recurring question of “where do things end up?” The lesson that can be drawn today is that sustainability in exhibition design is not necessarily achieved through certified materials or advanced technologies; rather, it can emerge from a design culture that considers the life cycle an integral component of the project from the very first sketch. At the same time, retrospective analysis reveals genuine limitations and ambivalences: materials that can no longer be certified today, difficulties associated with the disposal of certain components, and intentions of reuse that were not always realised in practice. This, too, forms part of the lesson: awareness alone is insufficient if it is not supported by supply chains and regulatory frameworks capable of accommodating it.

In Origoni Steiner’s experience, sustainability resides more in the realm of structure than in that of materials themselves. The true design “resource” is the repeatable system - the scaffolding, the honeycomb module, the flooring cast onto protective sheets - which enables intervention in diverse contexts while reducing the production of custom-made elements. This principle - designing systems rather than objects - is perhaps the most transferable aspect of the firm’s work: moving away from the conception of each installation as a unique and unrepeatable

artefact and instead developing technical and compositional repertoires that can be adapted, dismantled, and reactivated.

A final consideration concerns the studio's position within the broader context of Italian exhibition practices during the second half of the twentieth century. Origoni Steiner stands in continuity with the tradition of socially engaged graphic design associated with Albe and Lica Steiner and Max Huber, while shifting its focus from the printed object to the spatial dimension of the exhibition. The idea of "not touching the walls" - of intervening on the floor through completely removable layers - may also be interpreted as a cultural stance: respect for the space is not a technical constraint but a declared principle of responsibility towards public and institutional environments. In this sense, Origoni Steiner's contribution to the theme of sustainable exhibition design does not consist in a prescriptive model but in something rarer: the demonstration, project after project, that it is possible to exert a strong impact on a space without leaving scars. That one can build while already knowing how to dismantle. And that the question "Where does this end up?" is not a limitation on creativity; if anything, it is the starting point of a mature design project.

Notes

¹ From a conversation with Franco Origoni on June 10, 2025



Fig. 8. Exhibition photograph - 20th ADI Compasso d'Oro Award and 50th Anniversary of the Compasso d'Oro - Triennale di Milano 2004 - Milan.

Photo: Origoni & Steine



Fig. 9. Detail photograph of the exhibition installation - 20th ADI Compasso d'Oro Award and 50th Anniversary of the Compasso d'Oro - Triennale di Milano 2004 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 10. Close-up photograph of the display stand - 20th ADI Compasso d'Oro Award and 50th Anniversary of the Compasso d'Oro - Triennale di Milano 2004 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 11. Close-up photograph of the display stand - 20th ADI Compasso d'Oro Award and 50th Anniversary of the Compasso d'Oro - Triennale di Milano 2004 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 12. Close-up photograph of the display stand - 20th ADI Compasso d'Oro Award and 50th Anniversary of the Compasso d'Oro - Triennale di Milano 2004 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 13. Close-up photograph of the display stand - 20th ADI Compasso d'Oro Award and 50th Anniversary of the Compasso d'Oro - Triennale di Milano 2004 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 14. Close-up photograph of the display stand - 20th ADI Compasso d'Oro Award and 50th Anniversary of the Compasso d'Oro - Triennale di Milano 2004 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 15. Close-up photograph of the display stand - 20th ADI Compasso d'Oro Award and 50th Anniversary of the Compasso d'Oro - Triennale di Milano 2004 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 15. Exhibition set-up photograph - Set-up for the launch of the new daily newspaper "Italia oggi" - Octagon of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele - Milan, 1986. Photo: Origoni & Steiner

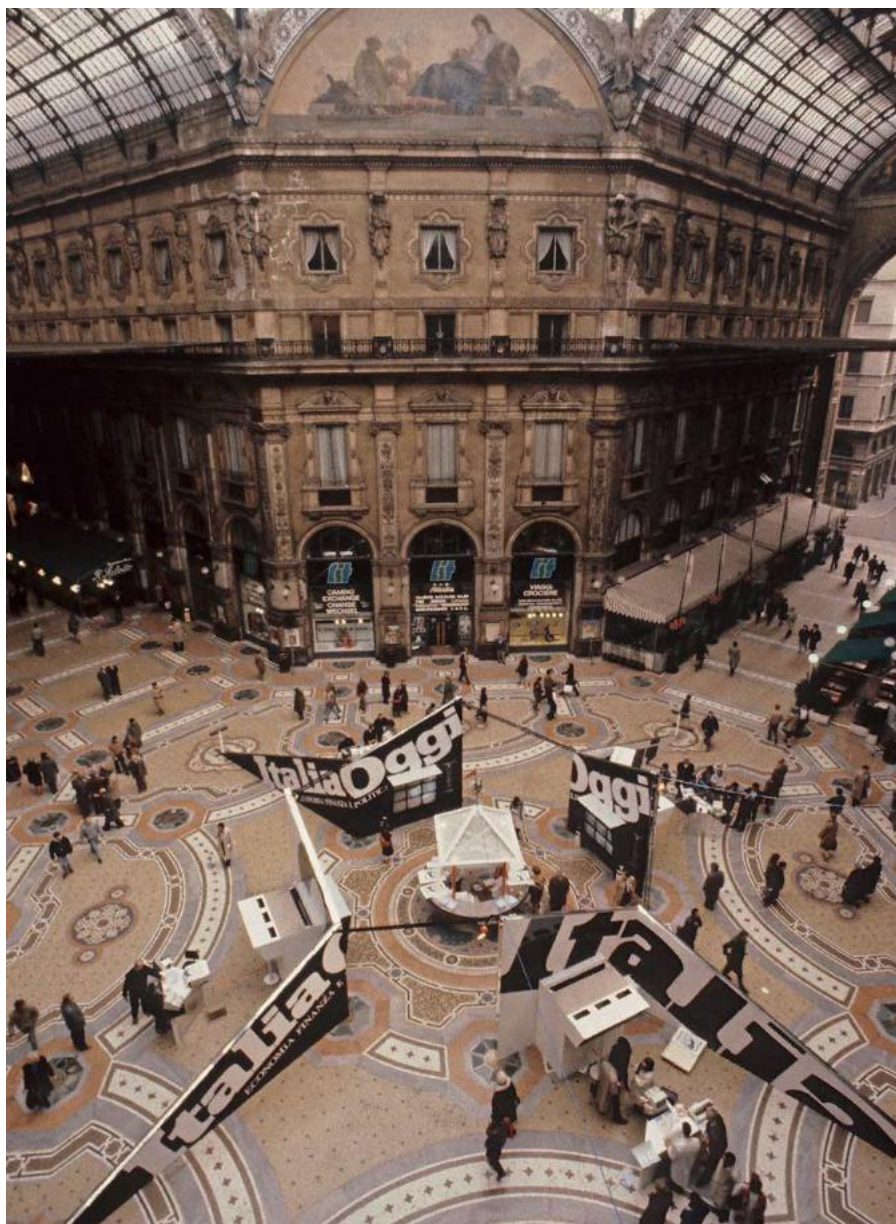


Fig. 16. Exhibition set design photograph - Set design for the launch of the new daily newspaper "Italia oggi" - Octagon of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele - Milan, 1986. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 16. Exhibition set design photograph - Set design for the launch of the new daily newspaper "Italia oggi" - Octagon of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele - Milan, 1986. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 17. Exhibition set design photograph - Set design for the launch of the new daily newspaper "Italia oggi" - Octagon of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele - Milan, 1986. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 18. Exhibition photography - Ricostruzioni. City and Landscape in the Era of Destruction - Triennale di Milano 2019 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 19. Exhibition photography - Ricostruzioni. City and Landscape in the Era of Destruction - Triennale di Milano 2019 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 20. Exhibition photography - Ricostruzioni. City and Landscape in the Era of Destruction - Triennale di Milano 2019 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 21. Exhibition photography - Ricostruzioni. City and Landscape in the Era of Destruction - Triennale di Milano 2019 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 22. Exhibition photography - Ricostruzioni. City and Landscape in the Era of Destruction - Triennale di Milano 2019 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 23. Exhibition photography - Ricostruzioni. City and Landscape in the Era of Destruction - Triennale di Milano 2019 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 24. Exhibition photography - Ricostruzioni. City and Landscape in the Era of Destruction - Triennale di Milano 2019 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 25. Exhibition photography - Ricostruzioni. City and Landscape in the Era of Destruction - Triennale di Milano 2019 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 26. Exhibition photography - Ricostruzioni. City and Landscape in the Era of Destruction - Triennale di Milano 2019 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner

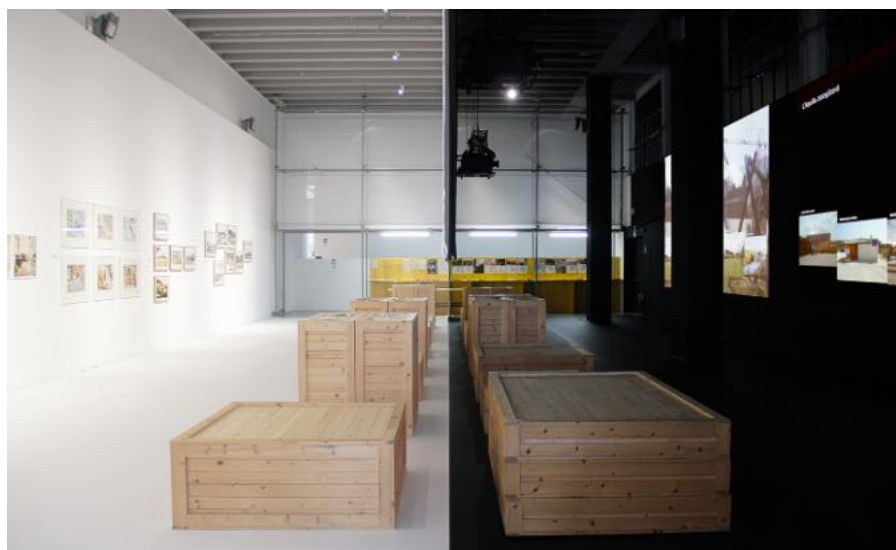


Fig. 27. Exhibition photography - Ricostruzioni. City and Landscape in the Era of Destruction - Triennale di Milano 2019 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 28. Exhibition photography - Ricostruzioni. City and Landscape in the Era of Destruction - Triennale di Milano 2019 - Milan. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 29. Photograph of the exhibition - The Story Behind the Image of La Rinascente - La Rinascente 1985 - Rome. Photo: Origoni & Steiner

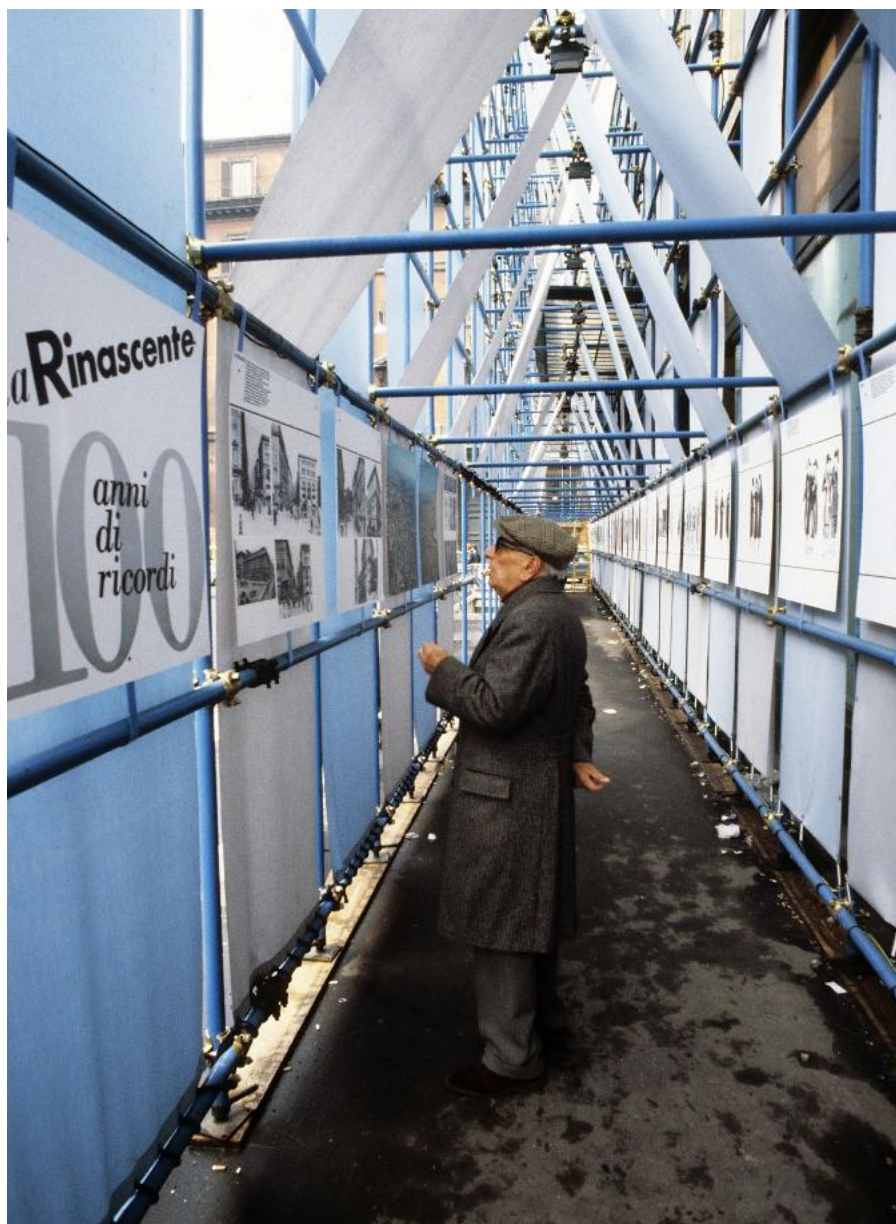


Fig. 30. Photograph of an exhibition display - A History of La Rinascente's Image - La Rinascente 1985 - Rome. Photo: Origoni & Steiner



Fig. 31. Photograph of the exhibition - A History of La Rinascente's Image - La Rinascente 1985 - Rome. Photo: Origoni & Steiner

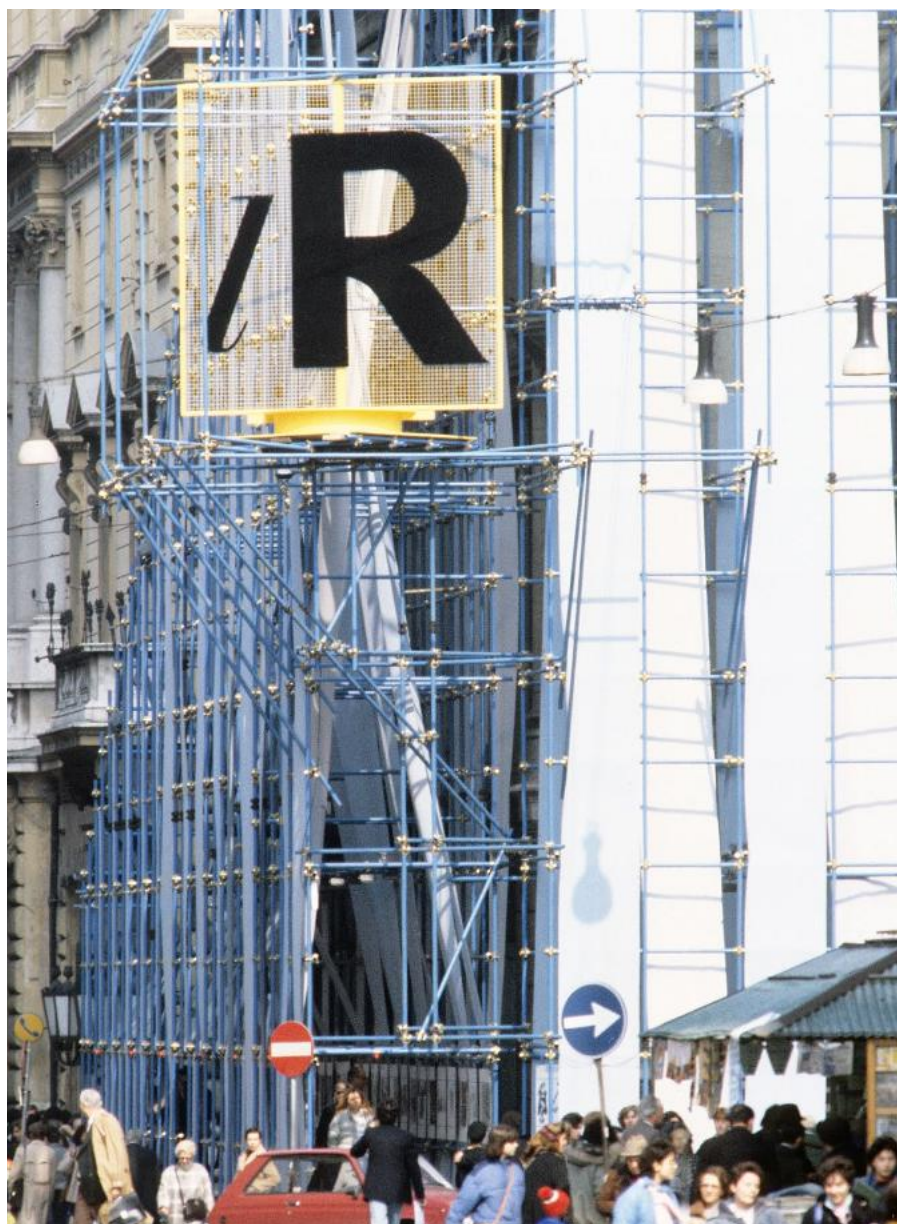


Fig. 32. Photograph of the exhibition - A History of La Rinascente's Image - La Rinascente 1985 - Rome. Photo: Origoni & Steiner

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ALESSANDRO SCANDURRA

Machines, Systems, and Scenarios: Between Set Design and Architecture

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ALESSANDRO SCANDURRA

*Machines, Systems, and Scenarios: Between Set Design and Architecture*¹

There is an idea that runs through Alessandro Scandurra's work like a continuous thread, regardless of the scale or duration of the projects: that every space is, first and foremost, a machine. Not in the sense of a cold, impersonal contraption, but rather as a device designed to function - to foster relationships, direct the gaze, and set those who pass through it in motion. It is on the basis of this conviction that Scandurra Studio moves seamlessly between architecture, exhibition design, installation, and urban design: not because the boundaries between these disciplines do not exist, but because the underlying question remains the same. How does one construct a space that does something?

A structural element of the studio's work is the practice that Scandurra defines as 'tuning'. In a context perceived as 'mellifluous', where globalisation tends to standardise signals and flatten differences into a single indistinct field, the project is described as an attempt to recover, on a case-by-case basis, a specific horizon of meaning. This process is framed through the metaphor of 'stratigraphies of memory': to engage with a theme, a place, or an author, the studio states that it 'immerses itself' in the available traces - historical, cultural, and biographical - in

Fig. 1. Photograph by Alessandro Scandurra. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra <https://www.scandurrastudio.com/people/>

order to identify and bring to the surface the living, active component. Projects are thus conceived as the outcomes of a movement of descent and re-emergence: they absorb materials of memory and render them in the form of emblematic situations that do not bring discourses to a close, but rather reopen them, leaving questions unresolved within the context in which they are situated.

This focus on the relationship between project and context is reflected in the recurring image of the 'machine of meaning'. Scandurra tends to describe installations, exhibitions, and architectural works as functioning devices rather than as formal compositions: structures which, once activated, organise pathways, rhythms, and comparisons, and which always require a degree of participation from users. The public is not conceived as an external spectator, but as a figurative component of the work: in the pavilion on Carlo Scarpa, in the interactive installations of the Verdi/Wagner exhibition, or in the modular system for the Medaglia d'Oro, users are called upon to move, choose, compare, and vote, thereby contributing to the completion of the exhibition's meaning. In this context, the installation is not a 'frame' for pre-existing content, but a mechanism that actively produces experiences of interpretation, comparison, and judgement.

The research activity is underpinned by an internal framework referred to as 'Backstage', which, rather than constituting an autonomous structure, may be understood as a way of naming the reflective dimension of the project. Backstage brings together observations, materials, themes, and case studies that extend beyond the scope of individual commissions but which, over time, sustain a practice of continuous engagement with contemporary reality. In this sense, the project is not regarded as a linear response to a brief, but rather as a moment of condensation within a broader interpretative process spanning media, technologies, urban transformations, and exhibition languages.

In Scandurra's account, the studio's genealogy is also constructed through references to several masters of Italian architecture - particularly Umberto Riva, Carlo Scarpa, and Angelo Mangiarotti - invoked not so much for the adoption of a formal vocabulary as for their attention to the 'constellations' of elements in space and to the density of detail. The relationship with Riva emerges as a key element in defining a design approach attentive to transitions, junctions, and interfaces between materials: Riva is described as a 'hypersensitive receptor', capable of re-configuring a space by slightly shifting an object or reducing a profile by a few millimetres. Scarpa's influence is felt above all through the work on the Venetian pavilion and the study of his archive, which provide an opportunity to reflect on his method, his obsessive assembly of alternative solutions, and the relation-

ship between design and artistic processes. Mangiarotti, by contrast, represents the more systemic and industrial dimension: that of a designer capable of translating attention to detail into a serial constructive vision in which joints are not ornament but rather a logic of function. These are three different variations on the same problem - how to construct a spatial machine that reveals its own functioning - and in Scandurra's work they coexist without excluding one another. The figure of the architect is, in certain passages, associated with that of a 'cannibal' or an omnivorous subject: a designer who absorbs materials, references, and visual and textual memories, only to bring them back into play in new and, as far as possible, generous forms. This 'omnivorous' nature is not portrayed as indiscriminate accumulation, but as the ability to hold together different layers of meaning and to bring historical, technical, narrative, and playful elements into the same framework. The exhibition on Verdi and Wagner, conceived as a journey through 'scenes from a video game', is exemplary in this regard: the cultures of opera and video games coexist, giving rise to an experience that seeks to translate a potentially boundless subject into accessible forms.

Within this framework, the studio occupies a distinctive position with regard to exhibition design. On the one hand, it draws from set design a focus on the construction of temporary environments and the performative dimension of space; on the other, it transfers this sensibility into permanent architectural projects, conceiving buildings and infrastructure as forms of permanent installation. The notion of 'incompleteness', which recurs throughout several passages, should be understood in this sense: projects are conceived as open structures that lay bare their mechanisms, reveal how they are made, and anticipate that subsequent uses, appropriations, and transformations will contribute to defining their image over time.

Even within this initial discussion, certain links with the theme of sustainability emerge, which will be developed further in the following sections. The idea of the project as a disassemblable machine, the centrality of systems and joints, and the emphasis on lightness and transportability recur across both installations and architectural works. The interest in what can be assembled, dismantled, transported, and reassembled elsewhere - from exhibition stands to urban pavilions and kits for schools in Ukraine - is not presented as a purely ethical choice, but rather as the outcome of a particular way of thinking in terms of parts, systems, and scenarios. In this sense, Scandurra Studio offers a case in which issues currently at the centre of debates on sustainable exhibition design are intertwined with a broader design ethos, one that concerns the very definition of what it means to construct

‘machines of meaning’ in contemporary space.

From the Stage to Space: A Project Based on Systems

In the narrative reconstructed from the interview, Scandurra traces the origins of his practice back to his experience in set design for theatre, television, and opera. This transition is presented as a formative phase during which a number of issues were consolidated that would later re-emerge in both his exhibition designs and architectural works: a focus on the construction of temporary environments, the management of technologies and technical equipment behind the scenes, and an awareness of the distance between stage and audience. It is precisely the limitation of the ‘stage behind glass’ - an audience separated from the action and confined to a frontal viewpoint - that is cited as one of the reasons motivating the search for forms of installation and spatial design in which the visitor’s body is no longer external but instead becomes part of the apparatus, participating in the definition of the work.

From this emerges the idea of the project as a process of ‘tuning’. Scandurra describes the contemporary condition as a ‘strange, mellifluous globalisation’ that flattens differences and identities into a single indistinct field: a ‘great magnetic field’ that makes it increasingly difficult to grasp the complexity of places and situations. In response to this condition, the studio states that it has established an ongoing research programme - formalised through its internal unit, Backstage - tasked with gathering signals, materials, and layers before selecting, on a case-by-case basis, the elements upon which to focus the project. The process is described as a descent into the ‘stratigraphies of memory’ - predominantly cultural - from which the studio seeks to extract the active and living element, namely that which can still produce effects in the present. Projects are therefore conceived as the outcomes of this movement: they carry with them traces of research that are rendered emblematic through exhibition or architectural installations capable of reactivating questions within the contexts in which they are situated.

Within this framework, installations and architectural elements are treated as ‘machines’ rather than as finished forms. The primary concern is not composition itself, but rather how it functions: how space organises pathways, what relationships it establishes between contents, and what it demands of the visitor’s body. In the account of the Verdi/Wagner exhibition, for example, the rooms dedicated to the comparison between Verdi and Wagner are conceived as ‘levels

in a video game', in which visitors choose routes, enter interactive installations, and manipulate images and sounds, following a gameplay logic which, although optional, structures the overall experience of the exhibition. The installation is constructed as a narrative and sensory machine in which wiring, infrared sensors, screens, polystyrene busts, and lightweight metal structures are arranged so as to remain detached and autonomous from the historic building that houses them, thereby avoiding irreversible alterations to the building itself.

This 'mechanical' conception of the project is closely linked to a component-based approach. Throughout the interview, attention repeatedly returns to joints, parts, and systems: the idea that the points of contact between different elements are where much of the design energy is concentrated. The reference to Umberto Riva - described as a 'hypersensitive receptor', capable of reconfiguring a space by slightly moving an object or reducing a profile by a few millimetres - places this sensibility within a specific lineage. In this sense, Scandurra interprets his own work as an architecture 'by parts', which seeks to make the process of construction legible, almost as if it were an instruction manual: in the modular systems for exhibition stands, in the kits for schools, and in the demountable structures of Expo Gate, the design does not seek to conceal the traces of construction, but rather exposes them as part of its overall language.

The distinction between 'exhibition design' and 'exhibition system', explicitly addressed in the dialogue, should be understood as part of this approach. In the case of the Gold Medal at the Triennale, for example, the issue is not merely how to stage a specific exhibition, but how to construct a system capable of accommodating highly diverse materials - photographs, drawings, and models by approximately forty architects - while avoiding compartmentalisation into monographic 'little rooms'. The RICU system, referred to on several occasions, is presented as a modular framework based on a T- or L-shaped element capable of moving in three dimensions, available in three scales proportional to one another and capable of being assembled together. The combination of these variants allows for different configurations in plan and elevation, ultimately generating the spatial 'cloud' that characterises the installation. Each module consists of flat elements made of lightweight timber, joined by internal bayonet-style metal joints that are inserted, rotated by 90 degrees, and locked into place, leaving no visible fixing on the surface. These joints are designed to allow complete dismantling into the smallest possible units. The entire installation can be packed into just two crates measuring 2 metres by 4 metres and reassembled elsewhere in different configurations. The project thus becomes a laboratory for defining what it means, in

practice, to move from a one-off installation to a reusable exhibition system.

The theme of sustainability recurs throughout this discussion, but Scandurra explicitly situates it within an evolutionary perspective. Looking back, he emphasises that many choices made in the past did not stem from a deliberate intention of 'eco-design', but rather from a combination of personal sensitivity and attention to the systemic dimension of the project: not 'spatial scenography', but 'spatial systems'. Today, however, sustainability is perceived as a structural necessity, driven as much by regulatory frameworks as by market transformations. In particular, large property developers and the fashion sector are identified as contexts in which requirements relating to environmental impact, energy performance, life cycles, and certifications have become integral components of project briefs, directly influencing design decisions.

Within this evolving landscape, attention to temporality and disassembly assumes a central role. Exhibition stands, installations, and pavilions are treated as 'disassemblable machines': not only are their form and function designed on site, but so too are their weight, dimensions, transport methods, and packaging. In the case of the Estel aluminium stand, for example, Scandurra's work begins with a detailed analysis of the company's exhibition costs and investments; the objective is to develop a system based on natural aluminium profiles and panels produced in-house, characterised by a high degree of modularity and reusability across multiple trade fairs, adaptable to varying floor areas and capable of being updated in terms of colour and style over time. The design integrates aesthetic expression, logistics, and life-cycle considerations: the dimensions of the modules, the number and type of joints, and the weight of each individual component are calibrated to facilitate transport by lorry and assembly in different contexts.

A similar approach can be observed, on a larger scale, in the project for schools in Ukraine, cited as a paradigmatic example of a sustainable spatial system. Here, the emphasis on assembly and disassembly becomes a guiding principle: rather than proposing a single standard building type, the project takes the form of a construction kit based on lorry dimensions and the minimum requirements of a classroom. The system is designed to be constructed using different materials, including concrete and timber, while drawing upon local production capacities; it incorporates the reuse of rubble within façade gabions; it minimises road transport; and it organises schools as open civic centres equipped with courtyards, theatres, and communal spaces. Taken as a whole, the project demonstrates how the emphasis on lightness, modularity, and reuse - refined through exhibition design - is transferred to an architectural and urban scale.

Overall, Scandurra's design process may be described as a synthesis of scenography, research, and systems engineering: the process of attuning the project to its context sustains a design approach based on parts, in which each element is conceived as contributing to the overall functioning of the spatial 'machine', while sustainability emerges as a consequence of this approach rather than as a constraint imposed from outside. The following sections, devoted to case studies, make it possible to examine more closely how this logic is translated into concrete solutions for exhibitions, stands, pavilions, and reconstruction infrastructures.

Three projects as a laboratory

In the projects for the Gold Medal for Italian Architecture at the Triennale, for the Estel stand at the Salone del Mobile and for the Venetian pavilion dedicated to Carlo Scarpa, the combination of themes that runs through the entire body of work by Scandurra Studio is particularly evident: the notion of the project as a functioning machine, the focus on systems and joints, the centrality of the temporal dimension and disassembly, and the relationship between content, memory and audience behaviour.

Gold Medal for Italian Architecture: a modular exhibition system

The project for the Gold Medal for Italian Architecture at the Milan Triennale (Figs. 2-6, 16-21) is repeatedly cited by Scandurra as a case in which the notion of an 'exhibition system' takes on a fully realised form. The context is that of an exhibition required to bring together extremely diverse materials - photographs, drawings, models, documents - relating to numerous selected practices, whilst avoiding fragmentation into a series of monographic micro-spaces. The objective, shared with the curators, was to construct a framework capable of holding together the plurality of voices and, at the same time, allowing for a clear comparison between the different approaches.

The design solution takes the form of the RICU modular system, based on a T- or L-shaped element that moves in three dimensions. Rather than obsessively replicating a single module - a solution already too closely associated with exhibition logistics - Scandurra has created three variants of the same element on three scales that are proportional to one another and can be assembled together: this allows

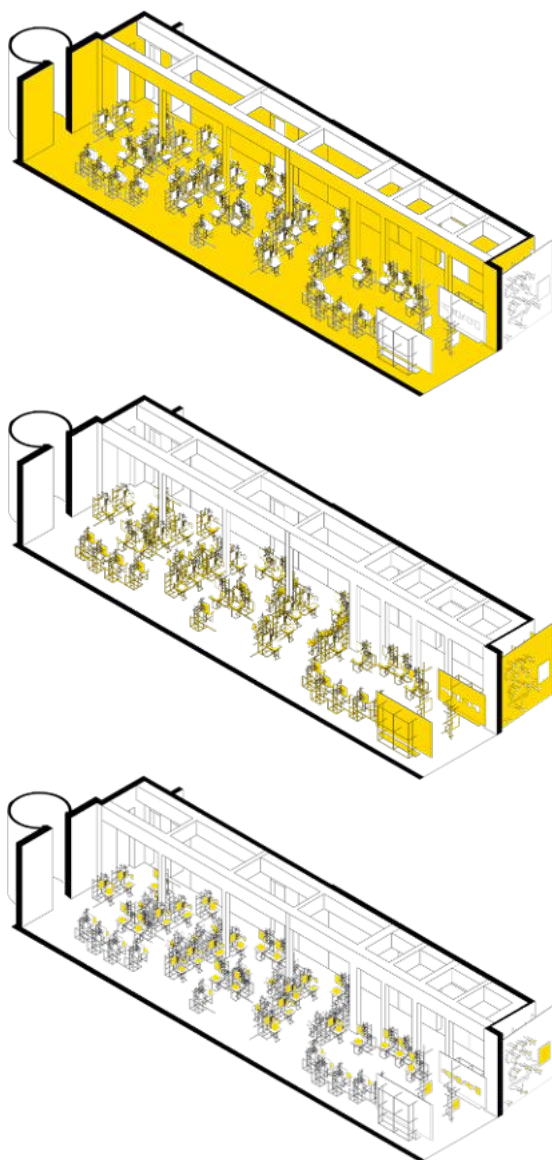


Fig. 2. Background, installation, and object code - Gold Medal for Italian Architecture - Milan Triennale 2019 - Milan. Redesign: L. Paolantonio - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2023-24

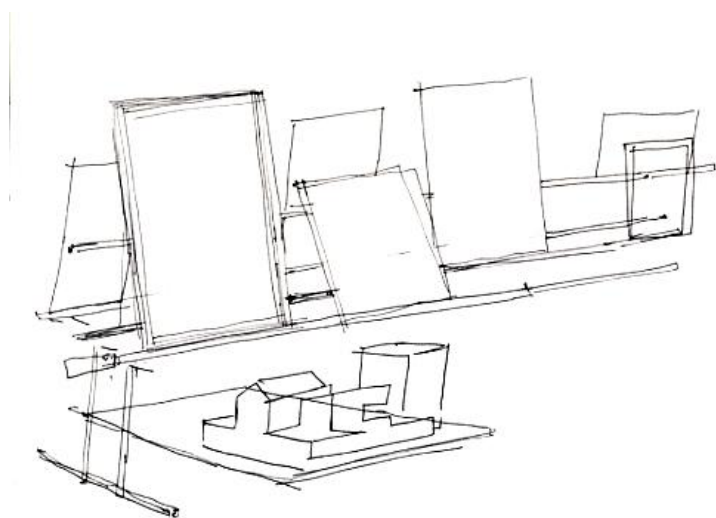
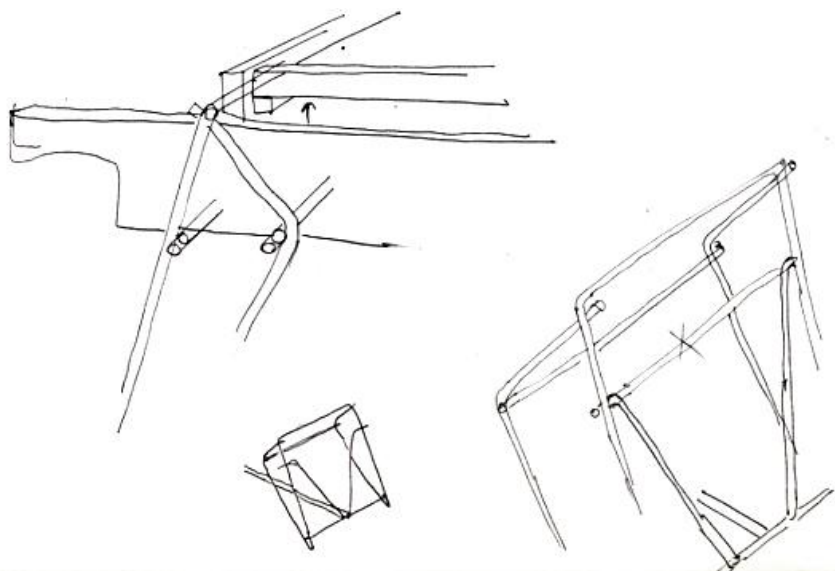


Fig. 3-4. Original drawings - Gold Medal for Italian Architecture - Milan Triennale 2019 - Milan. Image: Alessandro Scandurra

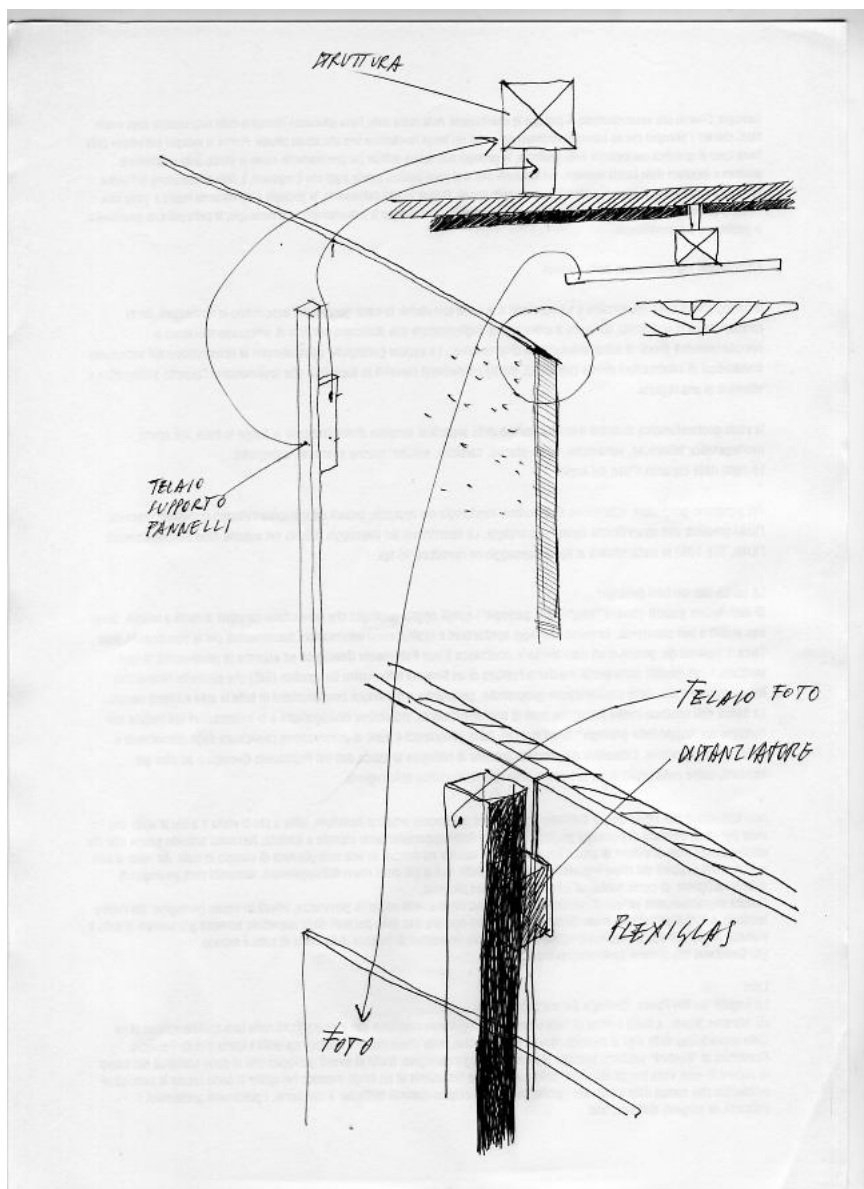


Fig. 5-6. Original drawings - Entrance details - Gold Medal for Italian Architecture - Milan Triennale 2019 - Milan. Image: Alessandro Scandurra

for the creation of different configurations in plan and elevation, with the possibility of emphasising the smaller-scale modules at points where the compositional principle is to be highlighted. Together, the cells generate a sort of exhibition 'cloud' that traverses the halls of the Triennale, superimposing itself on the existing architecture without compartmentalising it. To complete the composition, semi-transparent, coloured Plexiglas elements are extended towards the void at height, signalling the generative principle: modules that aggregate from nothing to become a physical structure, like the designers' thoughts that ultimately fall to the ground.

The system is conceived not merely as a physical support for panels and images, but as a mechanism for organisation. Each cell can accommodate multiple levels of interpretation: project images, summary data, and process materials. The distribution of these elements is not neutral: the vertical arrangement and the relationship between the parts guide the viewer's gaze, suggesting analogies and differences between the works on display. In this sense, the modular structure functions simultaneously as a spatial grid and as a curatorial device.

From a technical perspective, RICU has been explicitly designed to be dismantled. The elements are lightweight wooden panels, joined by internal metal bayonet joints: insert, rotate by 90 degrees, lock into place, and nothing is visible on the surface. A significant part of the design work involves the numbering and cataloguing of the pieces - each with its own role within the apparent chaos of the cloud - and the specification of the shipping crates. The entire installation is sized to fit into two crates measuring 2 metres by 4 metres, and can be reassembled elsewhere in different configurations. Transportability is not the driving force behind the project, but its natural consequence: thinking in terms of elements and joints inherently involves considering assembly, disassembly and transport.

This aspect also allows the project to be interpreted in terms of sustainability: not so much due to the use of 'innovative' materials, but rather because of the systemic logic that enables their reuse. The possibility of reassembling RICU in other contexts reduces the need to build exhibition structures from scratch for each exhibition, shifting the investment from individual events to a reusable infrastructure. At the same time, the clear legibility of the parts - uprights, crossbars, shelves - reveals the mechanism's functioning to the public, highlighting the mechanical and temporary nature of the structure.

Rather than proposing an iconic 'form', the Medaglia d'Oro thus offers an example of how a modular system can address diverse requirements: representing a variety of practices, ensuring the possibility of touring exhibitions, minimising

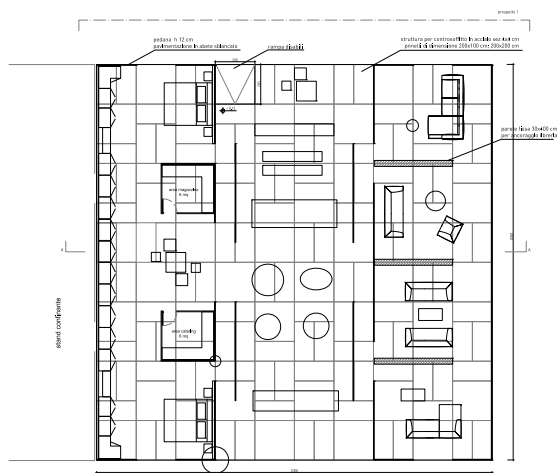


Fig. 7. Original floor plan - Estel Booth - Salone del Mobile 2012 - Milan. Image: Alessandro Scandurra

weight and bulk, and keeping the host architecture legible. In this sense, the project serves as a laboratory where exhibition design, logistics and an initial formalisation of reuse strategies intertwine, anticipating issues that are now central to the debate on sustainable exhibition design.

The Estel stand: a reusable aluminium exhibition system

The stand designed for Estel at the Salone del Mobile (Figs. 7-9, 22-29) is described as the outcome of an ongoing, in-house collaboration: Scandurra served as art director for five years, during which time he was able to directly observe how Estel operated within the trade fair system and analyse the investment reports edition by edition. This privileged position allowed him to see the problem clearly: complex structures, with little potential for reuse, built from scratch each time, involving a drain on financial and material resources that was often not justified by the results. The design of the aluminium stand stems precisely from the intention to overturn this approach: to convince the company's chairman that it was worth investing in a system designed to stand the test of time, consistent with the

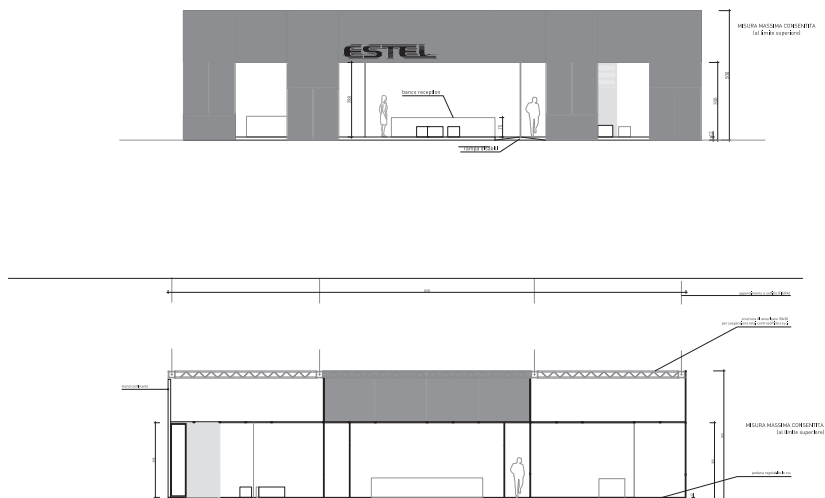


Fig. 8. Original cross-sections - Estel Booth - Salone del Mobile 2012 - Milan.
Photo: Alessandro Scandurra

industrial culture of a company that builds things well - one that is recognisable, lightweight and reusable across multiple editions and contexts.

The solution lies in the creation of a system using natural aluminium profiles, a material already central to the company's production. The stand is conceived as a modular structure based on panels and frames in standard sizes (for example, 1×2 m, 2×2 m), which can be combined to achieve different configurations depending on the available floor space and the type of products to be displayed. The cladding - fabrics, panels, graphic elements - is treated as replaceable layers, whilst the aluminium framework forms the stable and reusable part of the system.

From a methodological perspective, it is clear that the project adopts the logic of industrial design: the stand is not a 'set' built specifically for a single occasion, but an industrial product in its own right, which applies the principles of standardisation, optimisation and cost control typical of mass production to its own construction. In Scandurra's description, great attention is paid to the weights of the individual elements, the number of modules required, and the methods of stacking and transport. The system is calibrated according to the load capacity of lorries, ease of assembly and disassembly, and the ability to replace components without compromising the whole.

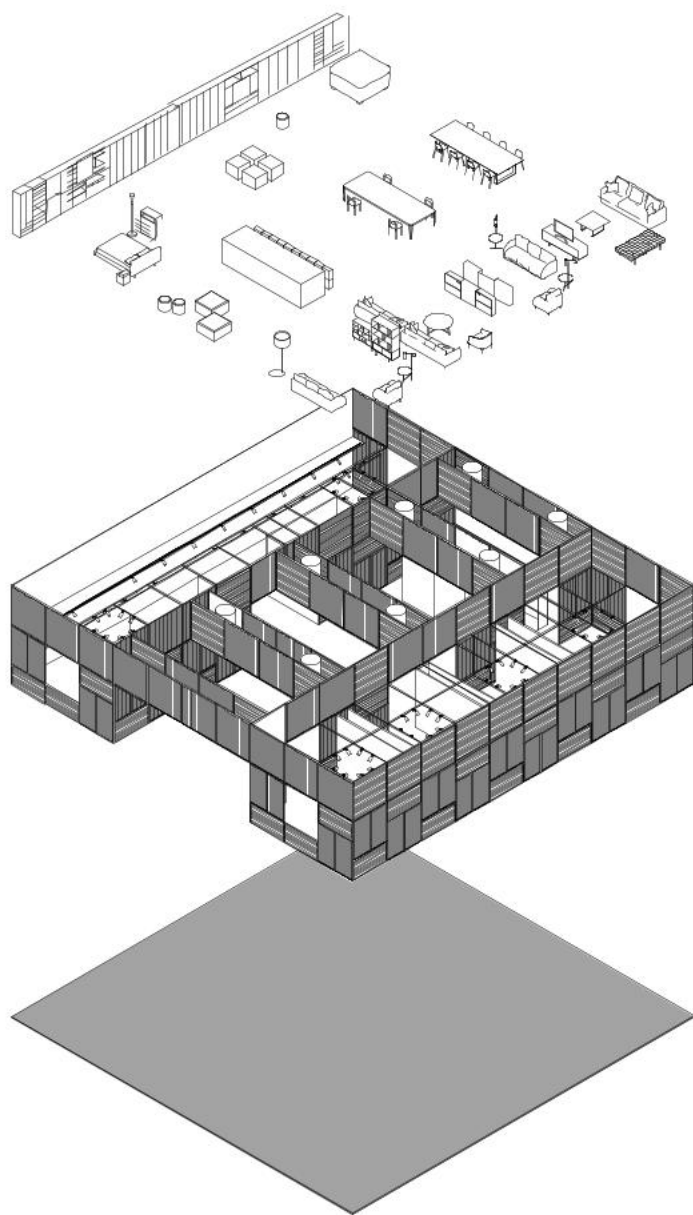


Fig. 9. Axonometric view - Estel Booth - Salone del Mobile 2012 - Milan. Redesign: F. Busco, C. Di Petti, E. Pigella, G. Tasso - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2024-25

This approach allows the Estel stand to be seen as a concrete application of a concept of sustainability that combines economic, logistical and environmental dimensions. The system's reusability across multiple trade fairs reduces waste and the need for new structures at each event; the choice of natural aluminium, in keeping with the company's identity, potentially facilitates the recycling of components at the end of their life; the ability to adapt configurations over time allows the exhibition design to be updated without fundamentally altering the basic structure.

Here too, the clarity of the structure plays an important role. The aluminium framework is not concealed behind opaque cladding but remains partially visible, asserting its nature as a technical apparatus. In this way, the public is confronted not only with the products on display but also with the system that supports them, perceiving - at least implicitly - the relationship between the object, the exhibition infrastructure and production logic. The stand thus becomes a small manifesto on the possibility of making sustainability a matter of overall coherence, rather than merely a question of individual 'virtuous' materials.

The Carlo Scarpa Pavilion: a framework for understanding his method

The pavilion dedicated to Carlo Scarpa (Figs. 10-12, 30-35), designed for Venice as part of a commission from the Veneto Region via the Centro Palladio, offers an example of a Scandurrian 'machine' centred not on structural reuse but on the construction of a device for interpreting the design method. The stated premise is anti-celebratory: not a tribute to Scarpa through iconic images, but an attempt to understand how his creative process worked, particularly in relation to art. The project's title - 'Carlo Scarpa. At the Origin of Things' - sets the direction: to trace the method back to its sources, not to comment on the built outcome.

The central spatial feature is a track running the length of the curved pavilion - a tunnel with no visible end, which makes the journey dynamic rather than rhetorical. On the track run wheeled display units carrying Scarpa's layered tissue papers: the semi-transparent sheets on which he obsessively redrew the same details, one on top of the other, in pursuit of solutions that were not only technical but also figurative. The display units can be moved, placed side by side, stacked or kept apart: visitors can reconstruct the sequence of the working stages, almost as if assembling a montage at their own discretion. The whole installation is mounted

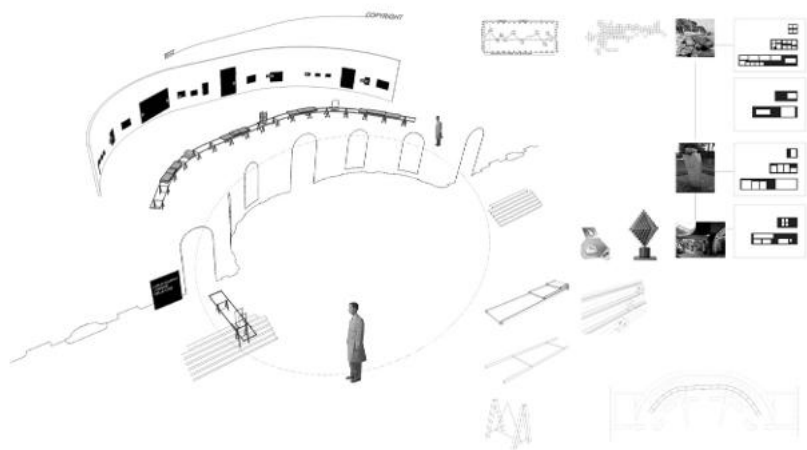


Fig. 10. Original Drawings - General Rail Diagram - Carlo Scarpa: The Origin of Things - Venice Biennale 2008 - Venice. Image: Alessandro Scandurra

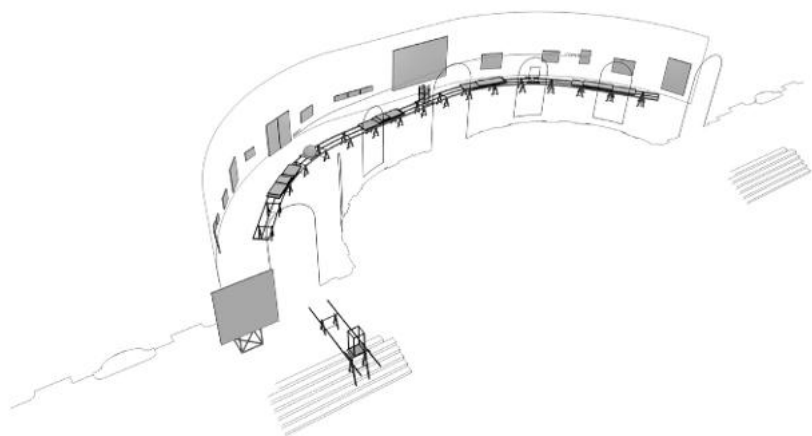


Fig. 11. Original Drawings - General Rail Diagram - Carlo Scarpa: The Origin of Things - Venice Biennale 2008 - Venice. Image: Alessandro Scandurra

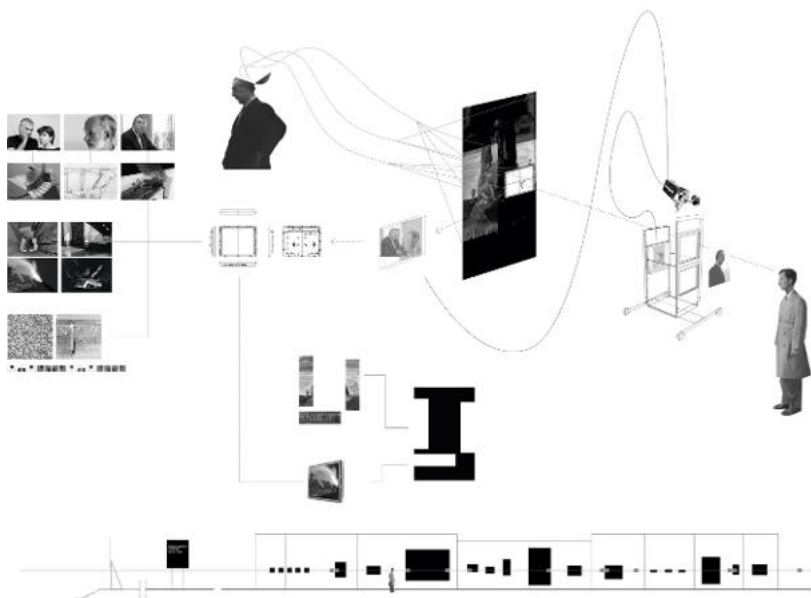


Fig. 12. Original drawings - General video layout - Carlo Scarpa and the Origin of Things - Venice Biennale 2008 - Venice. Image: Alessandro Scandurra

on simple trestles, resting freely and independently, without any irreversible alterations to the pavilion.

On the walls, the most emblematic works with which Scarpa had come into contact - curated, studied and absorbed - are reproduced in life-size and then veiled in black, except for the sections that Scandurra identifies as the formal sources of Scarpa's details: uncovered fragments that reveal the origins of certain forms in his designs. Embedded within some of these works are technical screens showing two interviews - with Umberto Riva and Juan Navarro Valverde - in which the two architects answer questions about their own methods, Scarpa's approach, and the interactions between the two. These same interviews have been compiled into a book, in which everything mentioned - project, building, place - is redrawn alongside the text, creating a visual map of the relationships between memory and design. Above, a neon sign accompanies the entire route: at the entrance the word 'test', at the exit 'copyright', as if the journey were imprinting something on the memory of those who pass through it. The entire structure is painted in

construction-site yellow; the safety signage also serves as the primer layer beneath the final coat of paint: a deliberately incomplete object, declaring that it is still under construction.

Visitor engagement here is predominantly cognitive in nature, yet no less active: the structure of the exhibition layout encourages choices of route, backtracking and cross-references. There is no single compulsory direction of travel; the installation is designed to allow the relationships between the materials to be reconfigured in different ways, almost as if the exhibition were a vast editing suite at the disposal of those walking through it. From this perspective, the pavilion on Scarpa makes explicit the continuity between research and exhibition design: the analysis of the Venetian master's method is not merely a premise for the project, but an integral part of the experience offered to the public.

From the point of view of sustainability, the focus here is not so much on structural reuse as on the careful management of material constraints and reproduction. The use of copies helps to limit the handling of delicate originals; the construction of an exhibition system based on modular and movable elements facilitates adaptations and reconfigurations; the choice of a restrained aesthetic, which avoids scenographic excesses, reduces the need for intrusive installations. More generally, the project suggests that sustainability can also be interpreted as an economy of cognitive tools: an exhibition design which, using relatively modest means, manages to convey the complexity of a method without overwhelming the public with redundant information.

Taken together, the three cases highlight three complementary interpretations of the idea of the 'machine' that runs through Scandurra Studio's work: a reusable modular machine (Medaglia d'Oro), an exhibition machine consistent with the company's industrial culture (Estel), and a machine for the critical interpretation of a 20th-century master (Scarpa). In all three, the combination of attention to the system, attention to detail and the relationship with temporality forms the foundation upon which, more or less explicitly, the issues now associated with the sustainability of exhibition installations are built.

Other projects mentioned

Alongside these three main cases, a series of projects allows us to observe how certain themes - systemic logic, attention to temporality, and the relationship with technology and reconstruction - are applied at different scales and in different

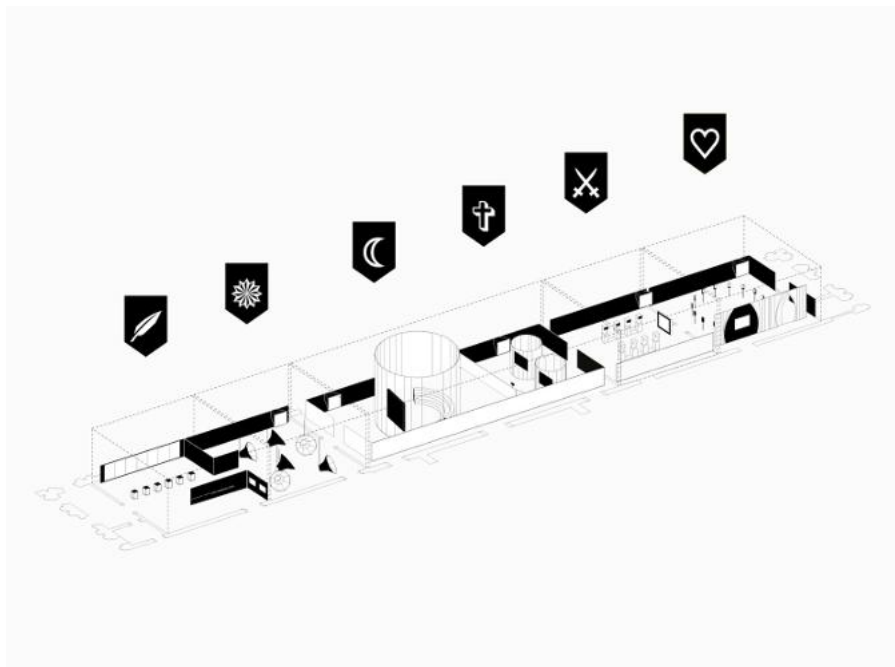


Fig. 13. Original axonometric projection - Verdi Wagner - Palazzo della Gran Guardia - Verona. Image: Alessandro Scandurra

contexts: from interactive installations to temporary urban structures, from regeneration projects in the heart of a commercial city to schools in a war-torn setting.

The Verdi/Wagner exhibition in Verona: music, interactivity and spatial organisation

The Verdi/Wagner project (Figs. 13, 36-46), dedicated to the bicentenary of the two composers and staged at the Ca' Granda Palace in Verona, highlights the most explicitly scenographic and interactive dimension of Scandurra Studio's work. The starting point is neither an object to be displayed nor a biography to be reconstructed; rather, the project creates a physically immersive comparison between the two figures. The exhibition is organised as a sequence of themed rooms - heroism, night, death, celebration and love - each featuring a different interactive mechanism. In one room, visitors must identify the singer by approaching

the correct loudspeaker; in another, videos of performers projected within busts are compared; in a third, visitors listen to conductors through sound-enhanced top hats and then use an infrared baton to identify who was conducting. Further along, a seemingly closed cylinder conceals a small amphitheatre for video projections with a strong sensory impact; this is followed by gramophone-shaped bells placed on the floor that play themes of love, and finally by a large wall bringing together all the films that have used music by the two composers, with which visitors can interact. The accumulation of sensory experiences throughout the route culminates in a final vote, cast using physical tokens - one for Verdi and one for Wagner.

From a technical perspective, the installation relies extensively on technology: infrared sensors, screens, projections, motion-detection devices, busts and physical elements that respond to the presence of visitors. A recurring theme in the project narrative concerns the management of cabling, weight and interference within a constrained space, where invasive fixings to the historic surfaces were not permitted. The solution was the creation of a form of autonomous “second infrastructure”: a network of lightweight structures, supported bases and concealed substructures capable of bearing the technological load while allowing cables and equipment to pass through in a fully reversible manner.

From a sustainability perspective, the project highlights a tension typical of technology-intensive installations. On the one hand, it employs lightweight, removable structures that leave no trace on the building; on the other, it depends on electronic equipment, energy consumption and rapid cycles of technological obsolescence. The supported management of devices and the design of an infrastructure independent from the building are driven by a logic of protection and reversibility. However, the impact of intangible components - servers, hardware and maintenance - remains largely in the background, despite representing a key issue that today would require more explicit assessment tools.

Expo Gate: a temporary urban object and the ambiguity of permanence

Expo Gate (Figs. 14, 47-51), built in Milan as an urban “gateway” in advance of Expo 2015, is an example of a highly visible temporary structure located at one of the city’s most strategic junctions. The project takes the form of two lightweight pavilions overlooking Largo Cairoli, conceived not as exhibition pavilions in the traditional sense but as an urban “backstage”: a venue for information, events and

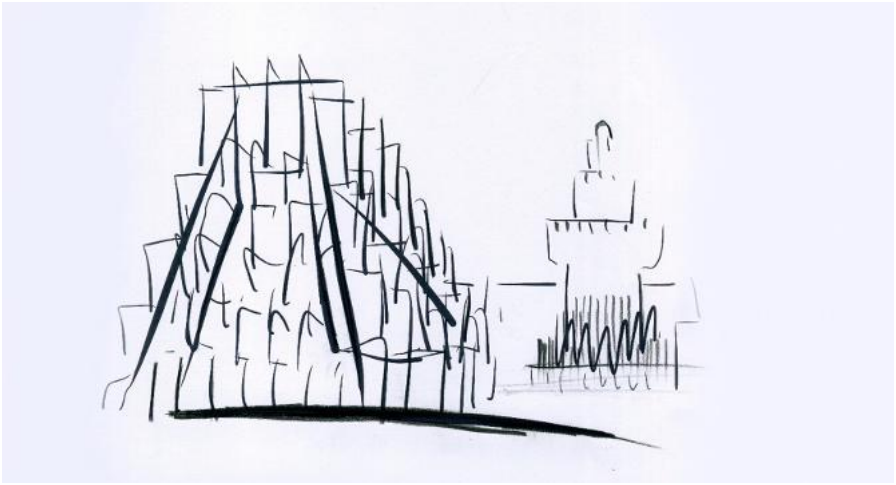


Fig. 14. Original drawing - Expo Gate - Milan 2014-2015. Image: Alessandro Scandurra

meetings rather than a space dedicated to a single exhibition.

From a structural perspective, Expo Gate is based on a tubular steel framework composed of fifteen different sections, designed to minimise weight while responding precisely to the stresses acting on each element. The result is almost skeletal - a sophisticated form of scaffolding that simultaneously evokes the toll booths of Largo Cairoli, the fountains in front of Castello Sforzesco and Leonardo's machines, generating a series of deliberately constructed visual ambiguities. The structure was conceived from the outset as fully demountable, with bolted connections and dry assembly techniques, while the entire enclosed volume was suspended from the external framework. The enclosing elements - glazing, panels and membranes - complete a form that does not compete with the surrounding historic buildings but overlays them like a lightweight, reversible layer. As a result, each pavilion remains visible from the other, creating an urban visual axis between the twin volumes.

The project clearly illustrates an ambivalence typical of highly visible temporary urban structures. On the one hand, their explicitly temporary nature justifies lightweight construction, demountability and experimentation; on the other, such structures often become embedded in the collective imagination of the city,

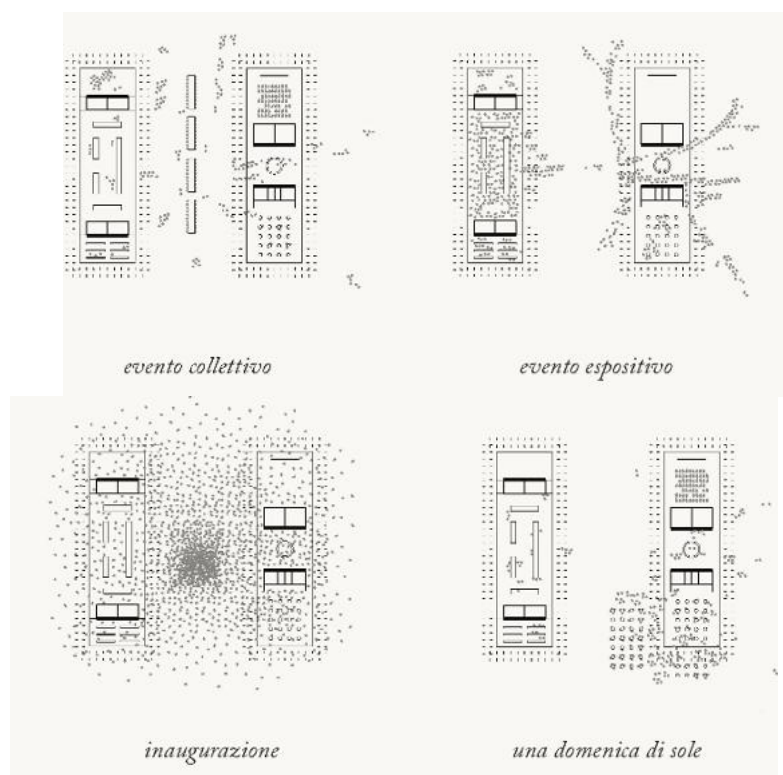


Fig. 15. Original drawing - Expo Gate - Milan 2014-2015. Image: Alessandro Scandurra

generating debate about their fate after the event. In the case of Expo Gate, the pavilion remained in place for a year longer than originally planned - also hosting the first International Triennial - and generated an unexpected sense of attachment among local residents, who had begun to appropriate it by sitting along the pavilion edges and using it for events and gatherings. The outcome is emblematic: when the decision was made to clear the site, it proved less expensive to demolish the structure than to dismantle it. The pavilion was therefore demolished. The promises of reversibility ultimately collided with political decisions, with the logic of those wishing to distance themselves from choices made by the previous administration, and with the absence of a concrete alternative use for the materials.

From a sustainability perspective, Expo Gate demonstrates that technical readiness for disassembly alone does not guarantee reuse. For the systemic potential of temporary structures to be realised, accompanying policies and strategies are required that envisage, from the outset, possible second lives, relocation sites and functional adaptations. In this respect, the project offers a useful case study for reflecting on the relationship between design, public commissioning and the life cycles of ephemeral urban objects.

Another significant aspect of Scandurra Studio's work concerns regeneration projects in Milan's fashion district, particularly along Via della Spiga. Here, sustainability emerges explicitly as a market-driven requirement: investors and major brands demand high environmental performance, certifications, attention to life-cycle considerations and indoor wellbeing, not only for ethical reasons but also because these characteristics directly influence property values and brand reputation.

In this context, continuity with exhibition design lies primarily in the understanding of architecture as a system. Buildings are treated as "energy and spatial machines" in which the building envelope, technical systems, natural light and shading devices operate in an integrated manner. Research into joints, components and layered assemblies - typical of installations and exhibition stands - is applied to façades, roofs and interiors, with particular attention paid to the reversibility of interventions on existing structures. The need to comply with heritage constraints while simultaneously achieving high levels of comfort and reduced energy consumption makes these projects a testing ground for integrating the language of luxury with the principles of sustainability.

It is noteworthy that, in Scandurra's accounts, the drive towards sustainability in these contexts is attributed less to legislation than to the ESG policies of major investors and the positioning strategies of luxury brands. This shifts the discussion beyond a purely technical dimension towards a broader framework in which design decisions become part of a discourse on corporate social responsibility and the international competitiveness of the luxury sector. Within this framework, the experience gained through exhibition systems and temporary urban installations provides practical tools for managing the layering, disassembly and adaptability of buildings in ways that are compatible with market expectations.

The project for schools in Ukraine: the kit as a general principle

The project for schools in Ukraine, developed as part of an international competition, represents a paradigmatic extension of the approaches tested in exhibition installations and trade-fair stands to the scale of reconstruction infrastructure. Scandurra presents this work as a case in which the notion of a modular and demountable system is applied to a programme of considerable social and symbolic significance: the reconstruction of school buildings in a context marked by war. Rather than proposing a single “standard building”, the project is conceived as a construction kit based on modules dimensioned according to standard lorry sizes and the minimum requirements for a classroom, including pupil capacity, air and daylight ratios, and ceiling heights. The same logic employed in trade fairs - components transported and rapidly reassembled - is taken to its extreme conclusion: the schools must be capable of being erected on complex and precarious construction sites, with variable resources, while simultaneously providing safe, dignified and adaptable learning environments.

The system is designed to be constructed using different materials - concrete, timber or other locally available solutions - without altering the fundamental logic of the kit. Ukrainian stakeholders opted for precast concrete, which can be produced rapidly by local workers using the concrete pumping stations already available in the area. The school is organised on a single storey around a central courtyard onto which the classrooms open, and incorporates a system of underground bunkers integrated into the structure, appearing externally as a simple garden wall. The perimeter is defined by a large gabion enclosure filled with rubble from local bombings, within which sacks of soil are placed to support vegetation growth. From the outside, the wall appears green and living; within it lies the assembly system that forms the classrooms. The rubble is thus transformed into a construction resource while simultaneously serving as a visual reminder of the conflict. Each complex can accommodate up to three schools, and the school itself becomes an agent of transformation: not merely an educational facility but a community centre incorporating a theatre, courtyards and communal spaces designed to catalyse both social and physical reconstruction.

The overall layout is organised so as to create not simply a building but a small civic centre. Courtyards, open spaces, meeting areas and a theatre are integrated into the system, reflecting the idea that such spaces can act as catalysts for social as well as physical reconstruction. In this sense, the project takes the concept of architecture as a machine to its logical conclusion: not merely a technical machine,

but a machine for relationships and collective care.

Viewed through the lens of installation design, the Ukrainian experience suggests that the principles of the kit, the modular system and disassembly do not belong exclusively to the worlds of trade fairs and museums, but can serve as practical tools for addressing emergency situations and reconstruction processes. At the same time, it highlights the limitations of a purely technical transfer of these principles: for such “kit-based” architectures to be genuinely sustainable, they must be accompanied by local production chains, maintenance policies and forms of community ownership.

Taken as a whole, the Verdi/Wagner exhibition, Expo Gate, the interventions in the fashion district and the project for schools in Ukraine delineate a broad field of application in which the logic of “machines of meaning” and modular systems permeates installations, urban objects, commercial buildings and educational infrastructure. This continuity relates less to formal outcomes than to the conception of the project itself: a temporary or permanent device that organises relationships, reveals its own mode of operation and seeks, within very different constraints, to reconcile expressiveness, constructive logic and awareness of life cycles. These cases provide the background against which the concluding discussion of Scandurra Studio’s contribution to the debate on sustainable exhibition design can be developed.

Discussion and Conclusion

The materials analysed portray a practice that bridges exhibition design, installation, and architecture, treating them as variations on a common theme: how to construct spatial ‘machines’ capable of organising experiences, activating memories, and establishing connections between subjects, content, and contexts. The distinction between the temporary and the permanent thus becomes primarily a design variable - defined by duration, regulations, and supply chains - while the underlying logic remains constant: working through systems and components, making the operation of the device legible, and treating the public as active participants.

A recurring theme is the centrality of the ‘mechanical’ dimension. Exhibition design is not conceived as a supporting backdrop, but rather as a device that generates relationships: the modular ‘cloud’ of the Medaglia d’Oro, the aluminium Estel stand, the Scarpa pavilion, the Verdi/Wagner exhibition, and the kit for schools in

Ukraine all exemplify structures that organise practices of reading, comparison, play, and reconstruction. The machine is both technical and cognitive: a set of spatial rules, joints, pathways, and devices that shape the ways in which the public constructs meaning.

A second theme concerns design ‘in parts’ and the visibility of systems. The attention devoted to joints, components, and stratigraphy - also in relation to the teachings of Riva and Scarpa - translates into a tendency not to conceal the structure. In the RICU systems, the Estel stand, Expo Gate, and the gabions for schools in Ukraine, modules, frames, profiles, and gabions remain recognisable, functioning almost as a three-dimensional ‘instruction manual’. This approach has direct implications for sustainability: an exposed system is, at least in theory, easier to understand, dismantle, reassemble, and adapt, shifting the focus of design from singular form to the logic of operation and reuse.

With regard to sustainability in the strict sense, the case studies suggest that it is more effectively addressed through the construction of reusable systems than through the search for individual ‘virtuous’ materials. In the Gold Medal project and the Estel stand, attention is directed towards what can be reused, transported, and reconfigured: the exhibition installation that can travel in only a few crates, or the modular stand that adapts to different floor areas. In the project for schools in Ukraine, the same logic becomes a structural principle: the kit designed to fit onto lorries, the use of rubble-filled gabions, and the conception of the school as a small community centre.

At the same time, projects such as the Verdi/Wagner exhibition and Expo Gate highlight the limitations of relying solely on ‘potential’ sustainability: structural lightness and reversibility with respect to the building envelope do not automatically resolve the issue of overall impact unless accompanied by policies for reuse, the management of technological systems, and long-term decision-making. Within the fashion district, moreover, the growing prominence of this theme is linked primarily to the ESG strategies of developers and brands, demonstrating how the ecological transition of installations and architecture is intertwined not only with technical standards, but also with market and reputational considerations.

Scandurra Studio’s contribution to the debate on sustainable installations appears to lie precisely in this area: in the development of a lexicon centred on the concepts of ‘machine’, ‘system’, ‘kit’, and ‘backstage’, and in the ability to transfer approaches originating in set and exhibition design to the architectural and infrastructural scale. ‘Attunement’ to the stratifications of memory and the figure of the ‘omnivorous’ architect provide useful interpretative keys for understanding

the cultural dimension of these installations; strategies of modularity, disassembly, and reuse emphasise their operational scope, while leaving open questions concerning quantitative assessment and actual durability over time.

Rather than proposing a definitive model, the projects analysed offer a set of tools and questions through which to engage with the subject: how to design temporary installations and architectures that reveal their own functioning, that can be transformed by others, and that balance experiential quality, responsibility towards resources, and awareness of life cycles. In this sense, the Scandurra case study helps shift attention from the individual ‘sustainable form’ towards the spatial and decision-making infrastructures that enable - or hinder - sustainable practice over time.

Notes

¹ From a conversation with Alessandro Scandurra on June 6, 2025



Fig. 16. Exhibition setup photograph - Gold Medal for Italian Architecture - Milan Triennale 2019 - Milan. Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 17. Exhibition setup photograph - Gold Medal for Italian Architecture - Milan Triennale 2019 - Milan. Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 18. Exhibition setup photograph - Gold Medal for Italian Architecture - Milan Triennale 2019 - Milan. Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 19. Exhibition setup photograph - Gold Medal for Italian Architecture - Milan Triennale 2019 - Milan. Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 20. Exhibition setup photograph - Gold Medal for Italian Architecture - Milan Triennale 2019 - Milan. Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 21. Exhibition setup photograph - Gold Medal for Italian Architecture - Milan Triennale 2019 - Milan. Photo: Filippo Romano

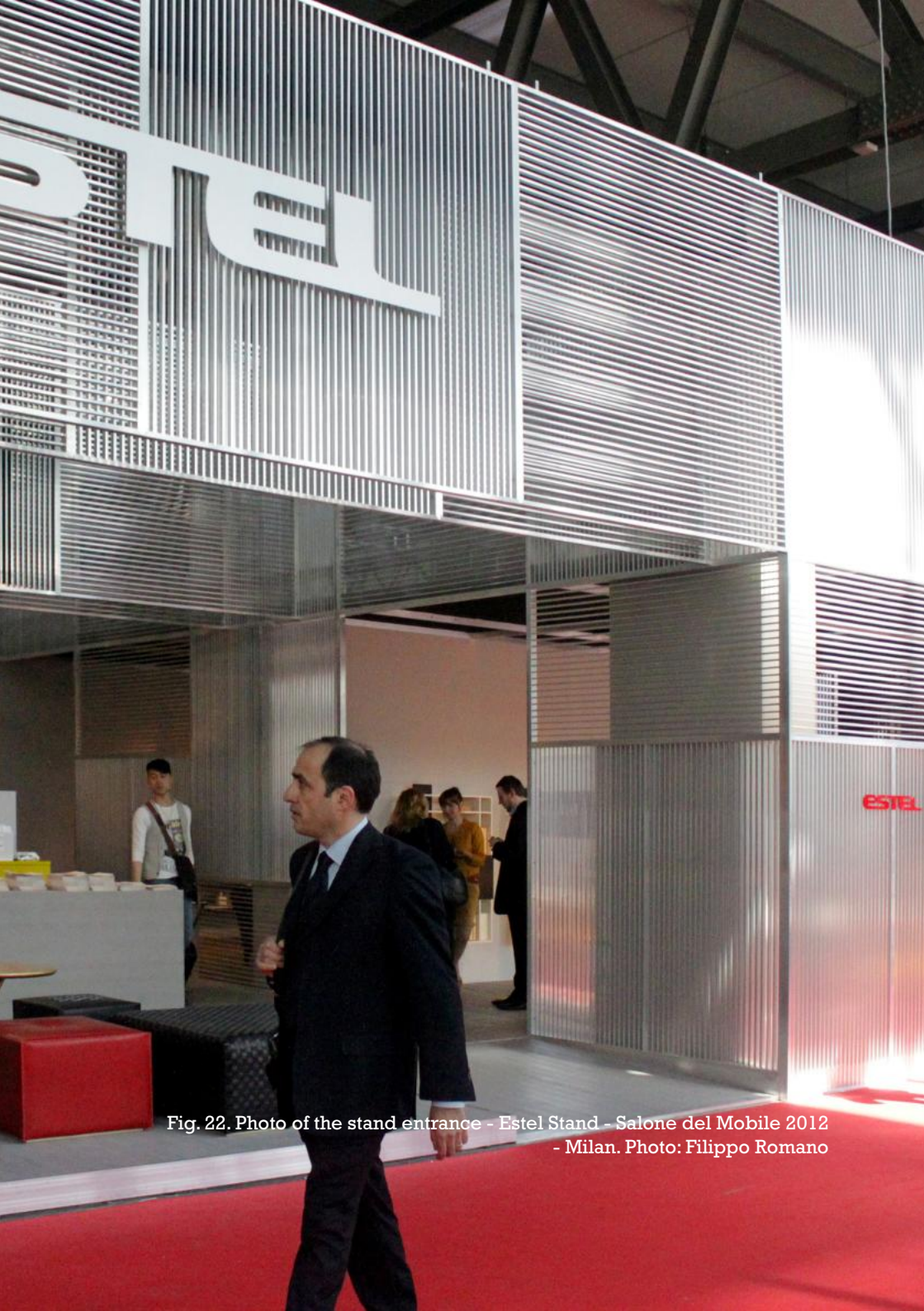


Fig. 22. Photo of the stand entrance - Estel Stand - Salone del Mobile 2012
- Milan. Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 23. Construction site photo - Estel Booth - Salone del Mobile 2012 - Milan.
Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 24. Construction site photo - Estel Booth - Salone del Mobile 2012 - Milan.
Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 25. Construction site photo - Estel Booth - Salone del Mobile 2012 - Milan.
Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 26. Photo of the booth - Estel Booth - Salone del Mobile 2012 - Milan. Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 27. Photo of the booth - Estel Booth - Salone del Mobile 2012 - Milan. Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 28. Photo of the booth - Estel Booth - Salone del Mobile 2012 - Milan. Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 29. Photo of the booth - Estel Booth - Salone del Mobile 2012 - Milan. Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 30. Exhibition photography - Carlo Scarpa and the Origin of Things
- Venice Biennale 2008 - Venice. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra



Fig. 31. Exhibition photography - Carlo Scarpa and the Origin of Things
- Venice Biennale 2008 - Venice. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra

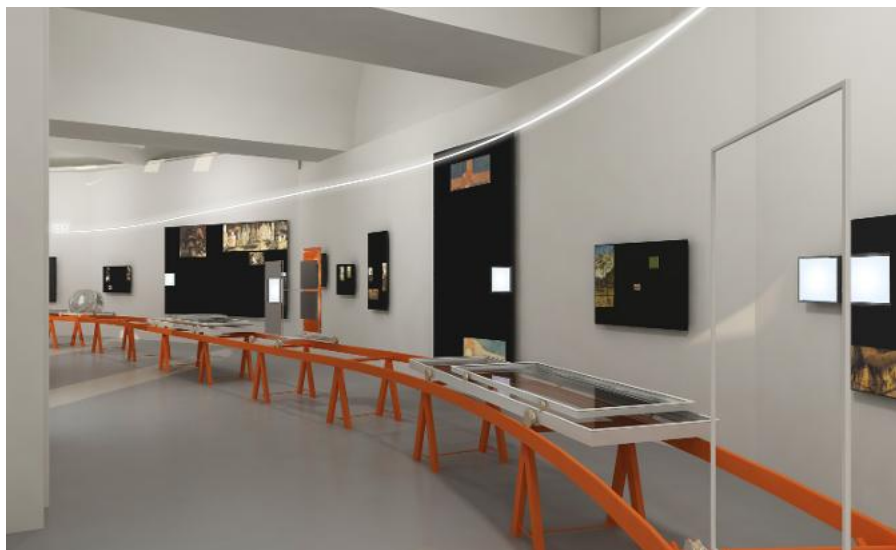


Fig. 32. Exhibition photography - Carlo Scarpa and the Origin of Things
- Venice Biennale 2008 - Venice. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra



Fig. 33. Exhibition photography - Carlo Scarpa and the Origin of Things
- Venice Biennale 2008 - Venice. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra



Fig. 34. Exhibition photography - Carlo Scarpa and the Origin of Things
- Venice Biennale 2008 - Venice. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra



Fig. 35. Exhibition photography - Carlo Scarpa and the Origin of Things
- Venice Biennale 2008 - Venice. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra



Fig. 36. Photograph of Room 1: Screening - Verdi Wagner - Palazzo della Gran Guardia - Verona 2013. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra



Fig. 37. Photograph of Room 2: Timeline - Verdi Wagner - Palazzo della Gran Guardia - Verona 2013. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra



Fig. 38. Room 2: Timeline - Verdi Wagner - Palazzo della Gran Guardia - Verona 2013. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra



Fig. 39. Photograph of Room 3: Immersive - Verdi Wagner - Palazzo della Gran Guardia - Verona 2013. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra



Fig. 40. Photograph of Room 4: Picture Gallery - Werdi Vagner - Palazzo della Gran Guardia - Verona 2013. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra



Fig. 41. Photograph of Room 5: Costume Sketches - Werdi Vagner - Palazzo della Gran Guardia - Verona 2013. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra



Fig. 42. Photograph of Room 6: Costume Sketches - Verdi Wagner - Palazzo della Gran Guardia - Verona 2013. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra

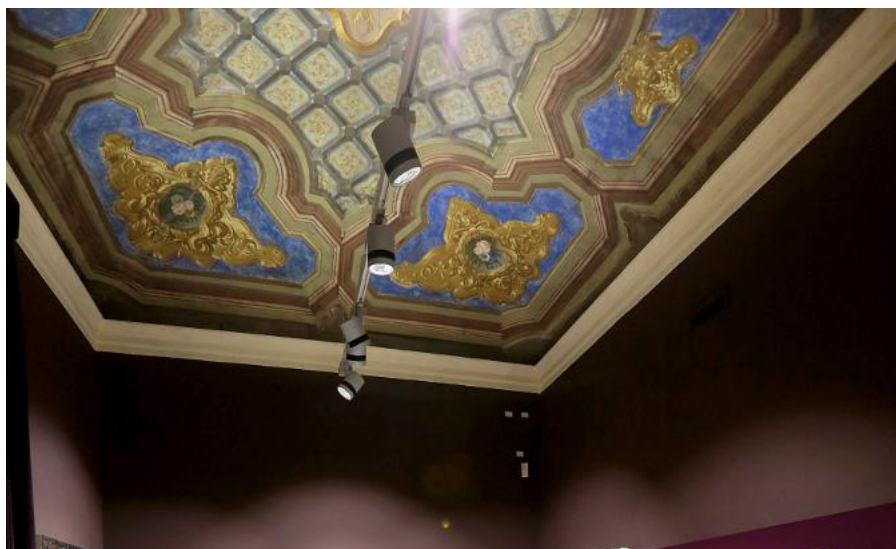


Fig. 43. Photograph of Hall 7: Falstaff - Verdi, Wagner - Palazzo della Gran Guardia - Verona 2013. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra



Fig. 44. Photograph of Room 8: Verdi - Werdi Wagner - Palazzo della Gran Guardia - Verona 2013. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra

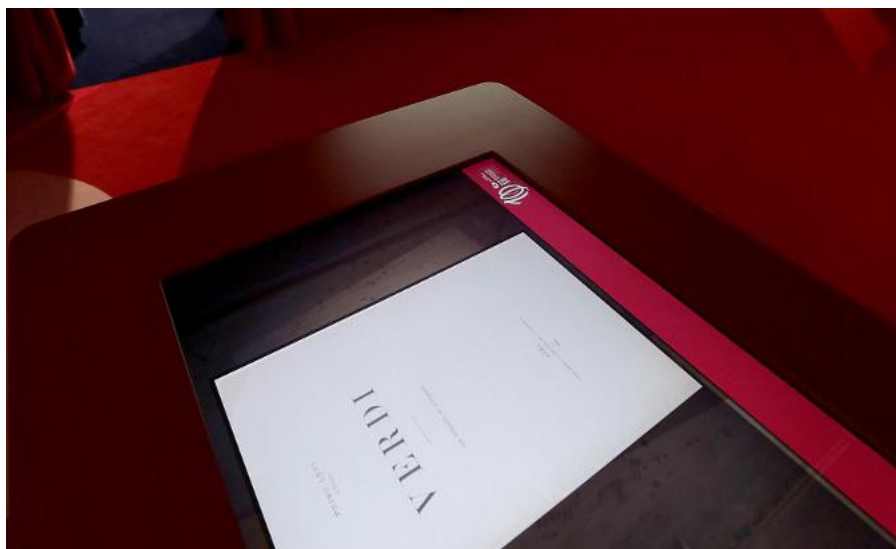


Fig. 45. Photograph of Room 8: Verdi - Werdi Wagner - Palazzo della Gran Guardia - Verona 2013. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra

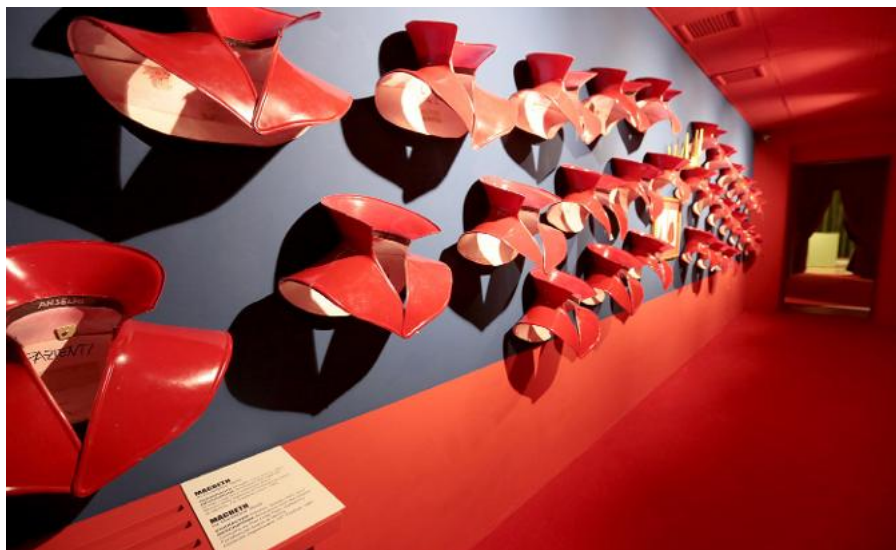


Fig. 46. Photograph of Hall 9: Macbeth - Verdi, Wagner - Palazzo della Gran Guardia - Verona 2013. Photo: Alessandro Scandurra



Fig. 47. Photograph of Expo Gate
- Milan 2014-2015. Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 48. Photograph of the exterior installation - Expo Gate - Milan 2014-2015.
Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 49. Photograph of the interior installation - Expo Gate - Milan 2014-2015.
Photo: Filippo Romano

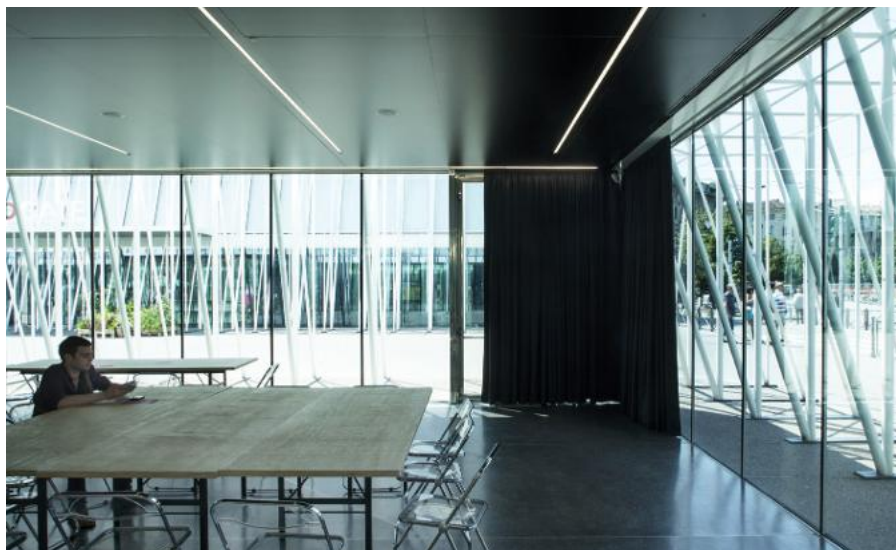


Fig. 50. Photograph of the interior installation - Expo Gate - Milan 2014-2015.
Photo: Filippo Romano



Fig. 51. Photograph of the exterior installation - Expo Gate - Milan 2014-2015.
Photo: Filippo Romano

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CINO ZUCCHI

CZA Cino Zucchi Architetti. Character, Resonance, and Reticence in the Exhibition Design

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Department of Culture del Progetto



CINO ZUCCHI

*CZA Cino Zucchi Architetti. Character, Resonance, and Reticence in the Exhibition Design*¹

When asked to summarise the studio's 'design philosophy', Cino Zucchi sidesteps the question. He does not speak about himself, nor does he describe a method; instead, he proposes a distinction between two groups of creators. On the one hand, there are those who recognise a consistent, instantly recognisable aesthetic in their own work: Fellini in cinema, Tadao Ando in architecture, and a certain vision embodied by Herzog & de Meuron. On the other hand, there are those who regard language not as an expression of the self, but as a function of the subject at hand: Kubrick, who moves through *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Lolita* and *Barry Lyndon* - the latter shot using natural light and candles - without ever repeating a stylistic formula; and the Beatles' *White Album*, twenty songs in which almost no two arrangements are alike. It is within this second category that Zucchi places his own work. The lesson, stated at the outset, is also a warning: the work does not speak of the author; it speaks of its subject.

The CZA Cino Zucchi Architetti practice is based in Milan and has a remarkably wide-ranging portfolio, spanning residential and commercial architecture, urban

Fig. 1. Photograph of Cino Zucchi. Photo: Guido Strazzoni

design, interiors, and installations for institutions and brands. Cino Zucchi (Milan, 1955), an architect and academic, trained at the Politecnico di Milano and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he studied under Stanford Anderson and where an awareness of the unsustainability of prevailing development models became an integral part of his work 'from the very outset'. He teaches architectural design at the Politecnico di Milano and served as curator of the Italian Pavilion at the 14th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale (2014); his portfolio includes acclaimed projects such as the Lavazza industrial and museum complex in Turin, interventions on the former Junghans site in Venice, the Salewa headquarters in Bolzano, and a long list of museum exhibitions and installations. It is on the basis of this diversity - perceived as a source of richness rather than a sign of fragmentation - that the practice constructs its identity. The rejection of 'poetics' as a personal trademark does not, however, translate into a claim of programmatic eclecticism. The word 'eclecticism', Zucchi observes, has acquired negative connotations since the second half of the nineteenth century: 'styles' - Romanesque, Gothic, Moorish - have become albums of interchangeable repertoires, and this very notion 'made the hair stand on end' for entire generations, from the Modern Movement to the Bauhaus. The references to Karl Friedrich Schinkel - who, in his day, combined the neoclassical Altes Museum with Romantic Gothic - and to Franco Albini - who, within roughly the same period, designed the high-altitude Pirovano Refuge, the Museum of San Lorenzo in Genoa, and the Rinascente department store in Rome - serve to illustrate a design approach that cannot be reduced to the visual coherence of a personal style. The studio's own history, in this sense, serves as evidence: the Salewa building in Bolzano and the houses in Venice engage with such different themes - the mountain as a landmark and the stratification of Venice's historic fabric - that their juxtaposition, as Zucchi recalls, came as a genuine surprise to more than one colleague: 'But you designed the Salewa building and you designed the house in Venice - how is that possible?'

From these premises emerges a lexical substitution that functions as a statement of method. In place of the word 'style', and even more so the word 'poetics', Zucchi proposes the term 'character'. The explicit reference is to Adolf Loos: a bank must be austere, to reassure us that our money is safe; a house must be homely; a theatre must be cheerful. Seeking a character means identifying the specific nature of the subject being designed and constructing an appropriate language for it, viewing language as a means of imparting character rather than as an end in itself. The distinction is subtle but practical: what the practice rejects is not formal rese-

arch, but the idea that form is an expression of the architect. 'I seek a language in the design, I certainly do,' emphasises Zucchi; but he seeks the language specific to that particular design, not one that can be attributed to him as a personal trademark.

In support of this position, Zucchi refers to Flaubert and his letter to Louise Colet, in which he urges his correspondent not to address the public in the first person: the author must be in the novel 'like God, everywhere and therefore nowhere'. Hence the stated preference for art and architecture understood as practices that are more constructive than expressive: the aim, before 'saying something', is to produce a good design. The quotation from Paul Valéry - 'I did not want to say, I wanted to do' - encapsulates an approach in which the designer is likened to a craftsman, to a furniture-maker who does not wish to express himself but wants to build a good table, with beautiful joints, that serves a purpose. It is an incisive formulation, which explicitly distances itself from a significant part of contemporary architectural culture, accustomed to presenting the project as a 'strategy', 'narrative', or 'process': terms which, for Zucchi, ultimately overlook the fact that the final result of the architect's work is, in the end, a form.

The question of character, however, is held in critical tension with its contemporary excesses. The 'character' of commercial brands - from the country-style rhetoric of food products to Italian shops staging a 'fake-English' atmosphere, right through to 'retro' styles that serve as a disguise for the new - is described as an instrumental use of the very tool itself: a character applied for the sake of appeal, tailored to the consumer's taste. The figure evoked is Philip Johnson, capable of moving with ease through modernism, postmodernism, and almost deconstructivism, but from a position that Zucchi describes as 'almost devoid of moral principles'. The risk, he observes, is that the quality of a project is reduced to a collection of 'likes' and approvals, losing what he calls the 'essence' of the object: 'one must be as light as a bird and not as a feather', he recalls, quoting Valéry once more. The feather goes where the wind takes it; the bird flies, but has its own weight.

A final theme, recurring throughout the interview, concerns urbanity. In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the term 'urbanity' denotes good manners, as opposed to the 'villain' - etymologically, the inhabitant of a rural village, lacking the codes of urban coexistence. For Zucchi, the urban quality of a building or an installation also depends on the ability to hold back: 'I don't necessarily have to say everything'. Architecture is, in this sense, a social contract, and a certain reticence becomes an integral part of the project. In the context of exhibition design, where the imme-

diacy of visual communication often encourages shortcuts, this principle takes on even greater significance: the quality of the installation is measured by its ability not to reveal everything, to leave space for the exhibited subject and for the public encountering it. The studio's approach to exhibition design is founded on this pair of concepts - character as a response to the subject, and reticence as a measure of communication.

Presenting and Resonating

In Zucchi's account, his approach to exhibition design stems from a very specific biographical episode, presented as a small but unforgettable lesson. In 1985, while still in his thirties, he was commissioned by Pierluigi Nicolin - then director of Lotus - to adapt an exhibition originally conceived for the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin for the Milan Triennale. The work was carried out in collaboration with Carlotta de Bevilacqua, with evening presentations to the client and the psychological pressure associated with a 'first commission'. During one of those sessions, faced with the proposals of the two young designers, Nicolin lost his patience and uttered a phrase that Zucchi continues to quote decades later: 'Enough! You're trying to create little pieces of architecture. Exhibiting is not about creating a small piece of architecture with objects inside it: exhibiting is about how you present an object.' The remark was accompanied by a physical gesture, as if offering something with both hands.

The significance of that anecdote - as reconstructed by Zucchi - extends beyond the specific circumstances. It brings exhibition design back to its primary dimension as a gesture: not the construction of a shell smaller than the architecture that houses it, but the articulation of space in relation to an act of offering. The word 'present' recurs several times: Zucchi associates it with the way the Japanese hand over a business card with both hands, with the way a restaurant of a certain calibre sets a table, and with the way a jeweller displays a diamond on a velvet box. The resulting design principle is that exhibition design, before expressing itself, must bring the exhibited object or content into focus. This is the first of the two principles underpinning the studio's method.

This principle is complemented by a second, developed as an extension rather than a correction. Exhibition design also acts as a 'resonating chamber': like the body of a guitar in relation to its strings, it is not merely a backdrop but an element that amplifies and, to some extent, transforms what it contains. This resonance

can be narrative - one need only think of the BBPR exhibition at the Castello Sforzesco, where a large stone screen guided the gradual revelation of the Rondanini Pietà - or constructive, as in cases where the materials and techniques of the exhibition design enter into dialogue with the subject on display. Zucchi recalls Louis Kahn's Yale Center for British Art, where the division into rooms restores the domestic dimension of English portraiture, and, by contrast, Jean Nouvel's Musée du quai Branly, described as a 'building-exhibition', highly expressive yet almost impossible to use, in which the museographic interpretation is so inextricably linked to the architectural structure that it is difficult to reconfigure.

On a practical level, the distinction between exhibition design and installation is regarded as a fluid boundary. There are exhibitions closer to the museum model - arrangements that serve the exhibited objects, allowing their value to emerge - and exhibitions that lean towards installation, in which the constructive and narrative dimension becomes the content itself. In his work, Zucchi identifies a number of instances in which he has had the opportunity to bring these two levels together, dealing simultaneously with content and form: the Italian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, the Sempering exhibition at the Triennale (with Luisa Collina), and the exhibition Copycats. Empathy and Envy as Form Makers, presented at the 2012 Architecture Biennale (Common Ground). On these occasions, he argues, it becomes possible to develop an exhibition concept in which the exhibition design is inseparable from the subject matter.

A third principle guides the design process and concerns the relationship with architectural space. Exhibition design must not merely mimic architecture, but must remain attentive to its relationship with it. The discussion of Lina Bo Bardi's São Paulo Museum of Art - and in particular the famous system of paintings suspended on glass panels, with concrete plinths and wooden wedges - exemplifies this concern. Zucchi acknowledges the visual power of this arrangement, but also observes that suspending paintings in space risks depriving them of the perspectival background that, in some cases, forms an integral part of the work. The fundamental question - 'is this an interpretative reinterpretation relevant to the work, or merely alienating?' - becomes an operational criterion: the exhibition designer may always propose an interpretative framework, but must remain aware that this framework is in dialogue with the object, not a substitute for it. 'The Venus de Milo, whether made of wood, metal or 3D-printed, is never exactly the same thing,' Zucchi points out: the general form remains, but the technique influences the language.

A fourth dimension of the method concerns a wariness of 'references' as an open

repertoire. During the conversation, Zucchi observes with a degree of bitterness the habit among younger generations of constructing a project from a hundred images gathered on Pinterest, in what he describes as a ‘superficial form of eclecticism’. Language becomes a ‘little outfit you slip on’, and the designer dissolves into a collection of quotations. The studio’s proposed response is not a rejection of the repertoire, but an interpretative use of it: the layering of references must be legible as a choice that resonates with the theme, rather than as a decorative accumulation.

Finally, a fifth dimension concerns the layering of interpretations. The works that Zucchi regards with particular interest - from Leon Battista Alberti’s Sant’Andrea in Mantua to the Pietà Rondanini, right through to the sophisticated pop of contemporary indie music - are works that operate simultaneously on multiple levels: an immediate interpretation, accessible to anyone, and more subtle interpretations, available to those who choose to revisit them. For the installations produced by his studio, Zucchi describes a similar ambition: a more evident level, recognisable at first glance, and a series of ‘small subtleties’ - in terms of construction, colour, and geometry - that invite discovery. ‘My secret,’ he quips, ‘is the fluorescent-coloured cable cover that nobody notices, and the pole that connects different objects.’ Beneath this declaration of lightness, one glimpses an ethic of care: even what will not be noticed by everyone must be well made, because there will always be someone who appreciates it.

The studio’s design process is founded on this interweaving of principles - offering, resonating, engaging with context, avoiding decorative eclecticism, and creating works with multiple layers of interpretation. It is not a formalised, repeatable method, but a sequence of choices recalibrated on a case-by-case basis, depending on the subject, the host space, and the imagined audience.

Three Projects as a Laboratory

The Italian Pavilion at the 14th Venice Biennale in 2014, the Almini showroom in Via Bagutta, Milan, and the Sempering exhibition at the Milan Triennale (2016) represent three markedly different design contexts, allowing us to examine how the concepts of character and resonance are interpreted in each case. These three interventions span distinct exhibition-making contexts: a major institutional exhibition on a regional scale, a retail space in the heart of Milan’s fashion district, and a thematic exhibition in which form and content are conceived simul-

taneously. Considered in sequence, they reveal the variety of scales and languages through which the studio addresses the same design challenge.

Italian Pavilion, 2014 Biennale. A Collective Landscape

The Italian Pavilion at the 2014 Venice Biennale (Figs. 2-8, 11-15), curated by Cino Zucchi under the direction of Rem Koolhaas, is presented as an attempt to construct a “collective landscape” of twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Italian architecture, rather than as a survey of individual architects. Zucchi describes the project as deliberately “a bit cheeky” with respect to the pride of individual architects: those invited to contribute found their works incorporated into a large visual map, without individual labels beneath each project, as part of an overarching design. “I was prepared to do something a bit cheeky in relation to the architects’ well-deserved pride,” he explains, “but I used them to create a collective, heterogeneous landscape.”

The exhibition layout is organised into two major sections, each conceived as a narrative space. The first focuses on Milan, treated as a paradigmatic example of

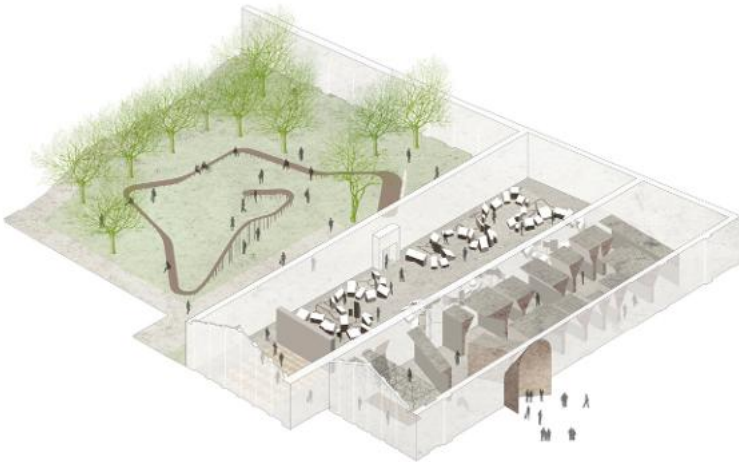


fig. 2. Original graphic representation of the Italian Pavilion, Arsenale - Innesti Grafting: Italian Pavilion - 14th Venice Biennale - Venice 2014. Image: Cino Zucchi

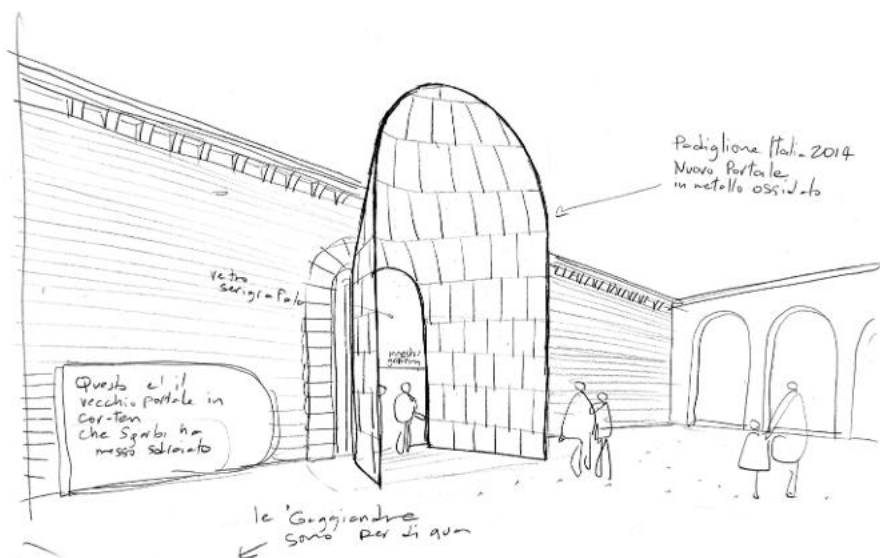
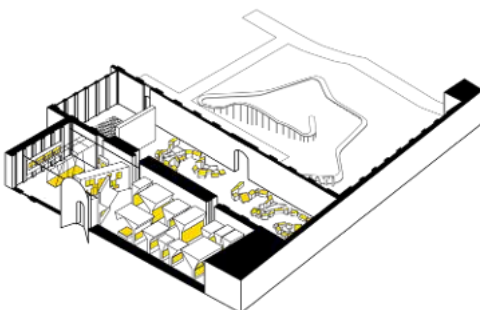
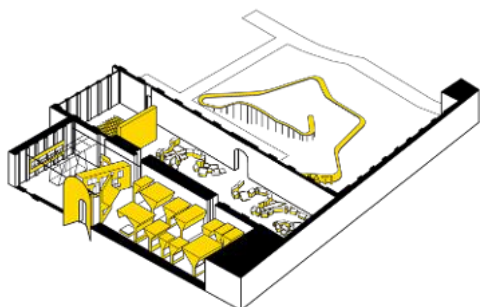
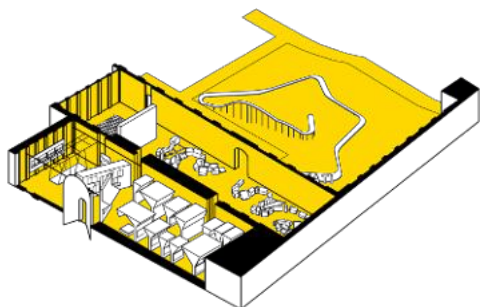


Fig. 3-4. Original drawings. "Archimbuto" sketch and "Milano Moderna" sketch - Innessi Grafting: Italian Pavilion - 14th Venice Biennale - Venice 2014. Image: Cino Zucchi



Figs. 5-6-7. Background, Installation, Object Code - Grafting: Italian Pavilion - 14th Venice Biennale - Venice 2014. Redesign: G. Coppari - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2023-24

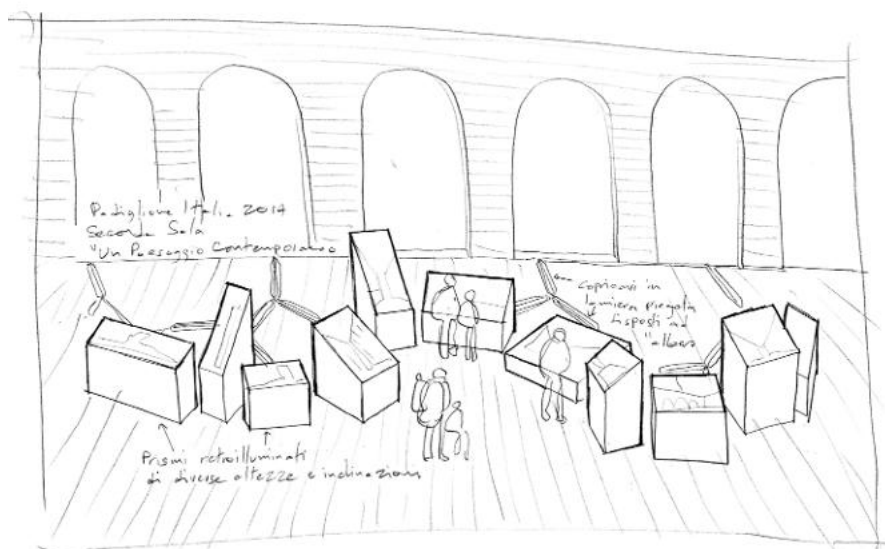


Fig. 8. Original drawings, Sketch "A Contemporary Landscape" - Innesti Grafting: Italian Pavilion - 14th Venice Biennale - Venice 2014. Image: Cino Zucchi

long-term urban transformation; the second broadens the perspective to encompass Italy as a whole through an installation that sequences photographs, models, and urban fragments, allowing each project to resonate with those around it. The approach is not encyclopaedic but evocative: the objective is to enable visitors to perceive relationships, contiguities, and atmospheres even before identifying individual projects.

Hence the decision to dispense with project-specific captions, replacing them with an overarching key plan indicating the position of the works without imposing a hierarchical reading. This choice is consistent with the studio's broader approach: the exhibition design serves a theme - in this case, the collective dimension of architectural production - and accepts that individual visibility may be sacrificed for the legibility of the whole. In this sense, the Pavilion becomes a large-scale interpretative installation, a narrative device rather than a taxonomic collection. Its coherence with the "poetics of character" is explicit: the exhibition language - large surfaces, wall-mounted photographs, and sequences of volumes - is designed to give character to the exhibition's theme rather than to establish an authorial signature on the part of the curator.

In terms of its relationship with the venue, the exhibition design engages with the

specific qualities of the spaces at the Giardini: a recognisable architecture shaped by decades of Biennales and imbued with its own narrative layers. The strategy is additive, constructing autonomous structures that do not encroach upon the scale of the pavilion but instead establish a new spatial grammar within it for the duration of the exhibition.

Almini, Via Bagutta. A Modern Italian Style versus “Fake English”

The Almini showroom (Figs. 19-20), located in Via Bagutta in Milan’s fashion district, is presented as a project in which the theme of character engages directly with both a specific client and an established typology - that of the luxury shoe shop. The client is a traditional footwear manufacturer based in Vigevano that has weathered a period of crisis and a shift towards Arab markets, specialising in women’s shoes, and has subsequently returned to Italy with a collection of handcrafted men’s footwear - “sewn and turned” - positioned at the high end of

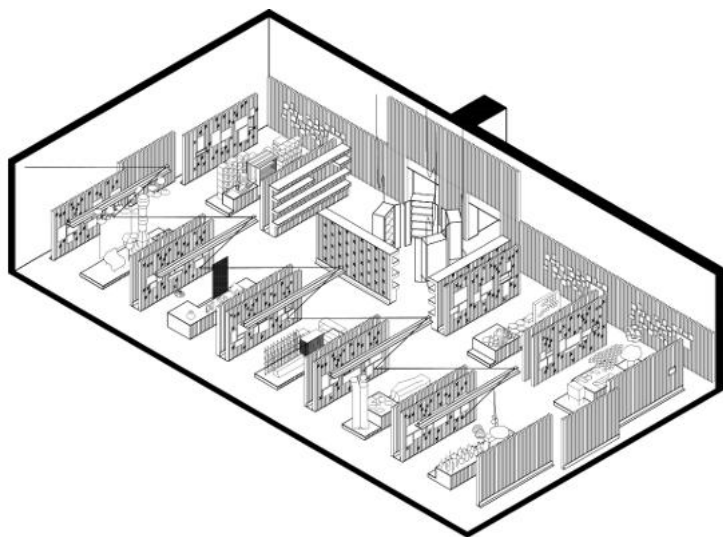


Fig. 9. Axonometric projection - Sempering: Process and Pattern in Architecture and Design - 21st International Triennial Exhibition - Milan 2016. Redesign: B. Manara, M. Montevecchi, E. Robin - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2024-25

the market.

The first design decision, developed within the framework of a small invited competition, was cultural rather than formal. In Milan's fashion district, the most obvious route would have been to replicate the "fake English" aesthetic common to many boutiques: pub-style interiors, "Established 1979" lettering in English, and leather-toned accessories evocative of Bond Street brands. Zucchi describes his approach as a reversal of this aesthetic: "we're not going for Mr Bean, the fake English style". The explicit reference is instead a different visual tradition, that of post-war "modern Italian" design: the shops featured in period magazines, Galtruccio interiors, the neon signs of Piazza del Duomo, rounded corners, and the "modern bar" found in small Italian towns. It is from this repertoire - evoked through archival photographs - that the project derives its inspiration.

In material terms, this reference is translated into a series of precisely articulated three-dimensional elements: display units with rounded corners, bronze, capitoné felt, polished furnishings, and curved lines, combined with rounded frames inspired by a mirror in Zucchi's own lift, which he photographed and presented as a reference during the design process. The intention is not to imitate a specific

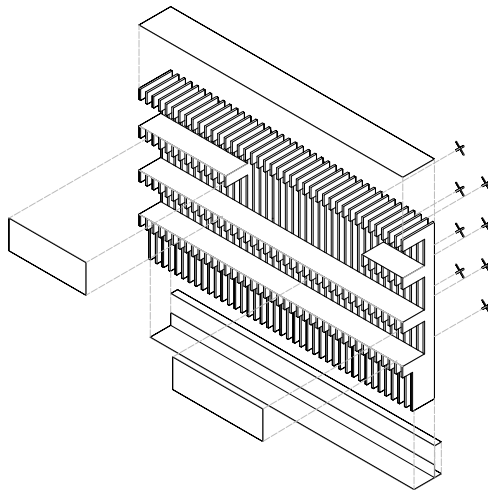


Fig. 10. Detail of the exhibit display, exploded view - Sempering: Process and Pattern in Architecture and Design - 21st International Triennial Exhibition - Milan 2016. Redesign: B. Manara, M. Montevocchi, E. Robin - IUAV Exhibit Design Lab 2024-25

historical period but to evoke a broader design culture. In his own words, it is a form of “retro-futurism of Italian modernism”, comparable to that embodied in the reissued Fiat Cinquecento or Mini Minor: a modernism that, having endured over time, has itself acquired historical value.

The shop also provides an opportunity to explore the principle of “presentation” introduced earlier. The shoes are displayed in a manner that confers upon them the status of precious objects: the backdrop of the display unit, the warm tone of the upholstery fabric, and the individual presentation of each item function in much the same way as a jeweller’s velvet-lined box. Zucchi cites Sergio Polano and his work on “presentation” as a theoretical reference: the same object, placed on an ordinary table or on a dedicated tray, acquires markedly different values. Shop fitting is not architecture, yet neither is it merely commercial choreography; it is a mechanism that shapes the conditions through which the product is perceived. From the perspective of durability, the project stands in clear contrast to the fast-retail model. The majority of luxury retail spaces are now refurbished every two or three years in response to marketing cycles; Almini, by contrast, is conceived as a long-term investment in which the coherence between image, materials, and craftsmanship can withstand rapid cycles of renewal. It is in this sense that the theme of sustainability enters the project: not through explicit material choices, but through the preliminary decision to create something that will not be consumed in the short term. The implicit lesson is that durability constitutes the designer’s primary material.

Sempering. A Structure that Resonates with Its Own Content

The Sempering exhibition at the Triennale di Milano (2016), curated jointly with Luisa Collina, is perhaps the clearest example in which the exhibition design acts as a sounding board for its own theme (Figs. 9-10, 16-19). The exhibition investigates how construction techniques - pouring reinforced concrete like a pudding, assembling timber components, folding a sheet of paper, or weaving fibres - are not merely means to an end but leave a formal imprint on the final product. “Just as saying the same thing with different words changes the tone,” Zucchi observes, summarising the central argument: technique influences the language of the work.

To give form to this argument, the practice adopted the North American balloon frame as its constructive model: a standardised system in which walls are com-

posed of closely spaced 2×4 inch (approximately 5×10 cm) timber elements, developed in a context where timber was abundant and nails were scarce. This is a system that Zucchi has known since his time at MIT and which he describes as the first truly industrial technology in construction. There is no hierarchy between lintel, stud, and window; only different methods of joining, nailing, and bracing the same elements. The wall acts as a load-bearing whole, much like corrugated cardboard.

Transferred from building construction to exhibition design, the balloon frame generates a series of effects consistent with the exhibition's themes. The exposed structure forms a backdrop for the exhibited objects that is simultaneously opaque and transparent: "the suspended objects formed a backdrop, but you could see something beyond them". The structural logic of closely spaced uprights provides a visual rhythm for the exhibition route, reinforcing the thematic content of the exhibition itself. The bracing required for stability is achieved through metal St Andrew's crosses, deliberately left exposed and incorporated into the overall visual composition. The resonance between content and form thus becomes explicit: the structural mechanisms explored by the exhibition are the very same mechanisms that support the exhibition design.

The project also exemplifies a situation in which economic and environmental considerations achieve a balance that was not predetermined yet proves highly effective. Budgetary constraints led to the use of rough-sawn timber and standard hardware; in retrospect, this technical choice also aligns with principles of material sustainability. All timber employed in the exhibition was recycled at its conclusion, a process facilitated by the nature of the material itself; some components were even reused by the studio in subsequent installations ("those are still at home; I've used them myself"). Sempering is therefore a minimalist installation both by design and by economic necessity, in which recyclability is not a marketing claim but a direct consequence of the adopted construction methodology. The lesson is clear: the sustainability of an installation depends first and foremost on design decisions rather than on declarations concerning materials.

In its relationship with the Triennale venue, the studio maintains its preference for autonomous installations that traverse the hall without altering its structure. The extended sequence of uprights, punctuated by metal crosses and exhibited objects, encourages the pavilion to be perceived as a continuous fabric in which visitors apprehend the whole before focusing on individual elements. It represents one of the clearest interpretations of the principle of "resonance": the form of the exhibition design does not merely contain the theme but reproduces it at a

smaller scale, at the level of the visitor's experience.

Other Projects Mentioned

During the conversation, Zucchi highlights two exhibitions that he considers among the most representative of his work: the installation *Copycats. Empathy and Envy as Form Makers*, presented at the 2012 Architecture Biennale Common Ground, and the solo exhibition dedicated to Luigi Caccia Dominioni at the Garden Arches Gallery in Milan. These two projects, viewed from different perspectives, demonstrate how the concept of “presenting and resonating” can be applied to subjects that differ substantially from one another: a personal collection of mass-produced objects and the work of a single architect. Considered alongside the three case studies, they complete the picture of the studio's exhibition practice.

Copycats. Empathy and Envy as Form Makers, 2012 Biennale

The installation was presented as part of the 2012 Architecture Biennale curated by David Chipperfield under the theme Common Ground. It originated from a personal fascination with mass-produced objects: Afghan rugs, Japanese Kokeshi dolls, model submarines, early Lavazza prototypes, statuettes, and small figurines kept by Zucchi in his studio. The thesis advanced by the exhibition - articulated in the subtitle “empathy and envy as generators of form” - is that the history of material civilisation progresses not through isolated inventions, but through variations and repetitions based on shared models. Within this interpretation, copying is not an operation subordinate to the original; rather, it constitutes the very driving force of the evolutionary process of design. The exhibition design translates this theme into spatial form. A series of cabinets with classical façades surrounds a central space, creating a kind of miniature Italian piazza. Inside each cabinet, sections of the collection are displayed: small objects arranged into typological families that invite close inspection and encourage serial comparison. The external element - the cabinet fronts - functions as an urban backdrop, evoking the language of squares and streetscapes; the internal element - the collection - presents the minute scale of artisanal repetition.

The project found its key manufacturing partner in De Castelli: an existing exhi-

bition hall was transformed into an exhibition space, giving rise to a long-term collaboration. Here, too, one can identify a practical application of the principle of resonance between content and form: an exhibition devoted to copying and variation is constructed through a montage of existing industrial elements, re-configured to speak for themselves. The installation functions simultaneously as content and container, consistent with the project's theoretical framework.

Caccia Dominioni at the Garden Arches Gallery

The monographic exhibition dedicated to Luigi Caccia Dominioni at the Garden Arches Gallery in Milan is presented by Zucchi as an opportunity to interpret a single building - and, indirectly, the oeuvre of an entire architect - through a curatorial framework rich in biographical significance. For Zucchi, the Milanese architect has long represented a personal point of reference, connected also to his family history; this proximity is reflected in the way the exhibition was conceived, suspended between exhibition design and art installation.

The central element is a three-dimensional structure described as “a sort of zuccotto”, a theatrical volume within the gallery that engages with the domestic dimension and with Caccia Dominioni's understated elegance. Rather than illustrating the building through panels, drawings, and models, the exhibition constructs an atmosphere: a visual ambience, a relationship between solids and voids, and a sequence of surfaces and materials designed to convey the architect's “character” to the visitor. Here, too, the principle of “presentation” returns explicitly: what the exhibition offers is not a thesis about Caccia Dominioni, but rather the manner in which Caccia Dominioni is presented to the visitor's gaze. The practical lesson is that, in certain cases, fidelity to an architect is more effectively expressed through a setting than through documentation.

Discussion and Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the material provided by the interview forms a coherent picture in which a plurality of languages is underpinned by a recognisable underlying position. The rejection of the term “poetics” in favour of “character”, the emphasis on “presenting” as the primary gesture of exhibition design, the metaphor of the “sound box”, the assertion of “urbanity” as a social contract, and the focus on du-

ration together constitute a constellation of concepts that derive from a common intuition: the project is not an expression of the author, but a device that brings to fruition the inherent nature of a subject, a place, or a content.

Applied to exhibition design, this premise entails a number of specific consequences. The exhibition space is never treated as a “small-scale architecture” filled with objects, nor as an autonomous scenography to be contemplated in its own right. Rather, it functions as an intermediary device that connects content and public, regulating distances, lighting, sequences, and hierarchies. Its quality is measured by the appropriateness with which it gives form to what it displays: in *Sempering*, the balloon-frame structure echoes the exhibition’s theme on a reduced scale; in *Almini*, the rounded display units and the materials of Italian Modernism establish the character of a shop that aims to be neither pseudo-English nor fast retail; in the Italian Pavilion, the absence of individual labels enables the interpretation of a collective landscape. These are different cases, yet all are underpinned by the same logic.

With regard to sustainability, the studio’s position is among the most nuanced to emerge from the interviews. Sustainability is presented neither as an operational programme nor as a set of technical measures, but as a conceptual framework that distinguishes the levels at which the issue can be meaningfully discussed. Zucchi proposes a tripartite distinction whose clarity deserves emphasis: the ethical level, the level of effectiveness, and the level of the communicative model. Confusing these levels, he argues, is a source of hypocrisy. At the ethical level, small daily choices serve an educational purpose: switching off lights when leaving a room, turning off taps, and avoiding waste. Such actions will not alter the global energy balance, but they contribute to the formation of a culture. At the level of effectiveness, the scale of professional action is contrasted with phenomena of an entirely different order: the reductions in emissions that would produce measurable effects, Zucchi notes, require far-reaching measures - reducing population growth, renouncing air travel, and curbing the globalisation of transport. Finally, at the level of communication, the proliferation of environmental vocabulary as a marketing tool tends to transform systemic choices into statements of identity, ultimately generating what he describes as a “certificate of good conduct” devoid of substantive content.

This distinction gives rise to a nuanced position on ephemeral installations. By definition, an installation is a time-concentrated structure in which a high intensity of materials, energy, and labour is employed for a very limited duration. The most sustainable way of approaching this condition, Zucchi provocatively obser-

ves, is to ask whether it is “reasonably necessary”. If the answer is affirmative - and civilisation, he reminds us, also represents an attempt to transcend the condition of necessity, encompassing sweets, ritual gestures, and celebrations that are not “strictly necessary” - then the project is legitimate. However, it should be realised with an economy of means that is not reducible to “Bauhaus-style” moralism. The distinction is subtle but essential: economy of means derives from care rather than from the ostentation of virtue.

This principle also leads to a reassessment of durability, which Zucchi identifies as architecture’s most significant contribution to sustainability. “If we were to spend just a little more on building these houses properly,” he observes, offering a concrete example, “they would last as long as Haussmann’s buildings in Paris: two hundred years.” His concern regarding certain “certified” techniques, such as EPS external insulation systems, stems from the recognition that some of these materials may be recyclable in theory while remaining difficult to dispose of in practice over the medium term. This perspective reverses a purely accounting-based understanding of CO₂: for Zucchi, the true “conservative” in architecture today is the one who thinks in terms of durability. Applied to exhibition design, this principle translates into the selection of techniques and materials capable of acquiring a recognisable second life, and into the rejection of solutions presented as sustainable while generating waste that is difficult to manage. Sempering, where timber is recycled and partially reused by the studio itself, represents the clearest practical example of this approach. The lesson that emerges from CZA’s work - and that may be drawn from this conversation - can be summarised in three points. The first concerns the designer’s position: the work does not speak about the designer, but about its subject. The second concerns design responsibility: the quality of an installation is not measured by the originality of the gesture, but by the appropriateness with which it “presents” content and allows its nature to “resonate”. The third concerns an awareness of limits: the sustainability of exhibition design is not merely proclaimed; it is embedded in the choice of language, the scale of resources employed, and the actual durability of the solutions adopted - and, above all, in the willingness to question the legitimacy of the project itself. The metaphor of the “resonating box” is particularly apt for this reason: it is the internal void of the box that amplifies the sound, not its visible material. Reticence is not silence; it is restraint. This is perhaps the most concise statement of method that the studio offers the reader: exhibition design as a box constructed with care and only the necessary means, enabling the object to resonate without making itself heard more than necessary.

Notes

¹ From a conversation with Cino Zucchi on June 17, 2025



Fig. 11. Photograph of the entrance to the Italian Pavilion - Innessi Crafting: Italian Pavilion - 14th Venice Biennale - Venice 2014. Photo: Cino Zucchi



Fig. 12. Interior photograph - Italian Pavilion - Grafting: Italian Pavilion - 14th Venice Biennale - Venice 2014. Photo: Cino Zucchi



Fig. 13. Interior Photo 3 - Italian Pavilion - Grafting: Italian Pavilion - 14th Venice Biennale - Venice 2014. Photo: Cino Zucchi



Fig. 14. Interior Photo 2 - Italian Pavilion - Grafting: Italian Pavilion - 14th Venice Biennale - Venice 2014. Photo: Cino Zucchi

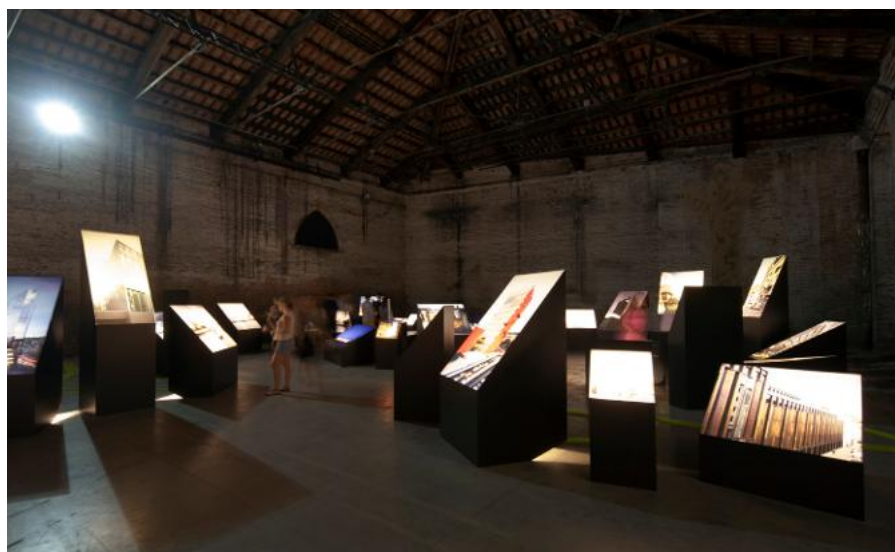


Fig. 15. Interior Photo 4 - Italian Pavilion - Grafting: Italian Pavilion - 14th Venice Biennale - Venice 2014. Photo: Cino Zucchi



Fig. 16. Exhibition view - Sempering: Process and Pattern in Architecture and Design - 21st Triennale International Exhibition - Milan 2016.

Photo: Cino Zucchi



Fig. 17. Exhibition view - Sempering: Process and Pattern in Architecture and Design - 21st Triennale International Exhibition - Milan 2016. Photo: Cino Zucchi



Fig. 18. Exhibition view - Sempering: Process and Pattern in Architecture and Design - 21st Triennale International Exhibition - Milan 2016. Photo: Cino Zucchi



Fig. 19. Exhibition view - Sempering: Process and Pattern in Architecture and Design - 21st Triennale International Exhibition - Milan 2016. Photo: Cino Zucchi



Fig. 20. Photograph of the entrance - Alimini Shoe Store Extension - Alimini Showroom - Via Bagutta, Milan - Milan, 2020. Photo: Cino Zucchi

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“Where does this exhibition end up after it closes?” In 1991, when Mario Mastropietro compiled his *Ten Lessons in Exhibition Design*, that question was rarely posed.

Thirty years later, this volume revisits that method - the lecture format, the plurality of voices, the focus on concrete practice - to measure it against the issue that now redefines the entire discipline: sustainability. Not as an environmental parameter added after a project has been defined, but as an epistemological transformation that compels exhibition design to simultaneously rethink materials, time, supply chains, and its relationships with places and audiences.

Ten Italian studios - Calvi Brambilla, gambardellarchitetti, Dotdotdot, Cino Zucchi, Migliore+Servetto, Alessandro Colombo, Alessandro Scandurra, Origoni Steiner, Francesco Librizzi, Ghigos - recount, in as many conversations, how environmental responsibility emerges from within design practice: from language choices even before materials selection, from economic constraints, and from the demands the process places on matter. Those seeking a manual on ecological exhibition design will be disappointed. Those open to more complex readings will find ten distinct approaches - poetic, technical, institutional, critical - and one of the richest bodies of work that contemporary Italian exhibition culture has produced. Not a manifesto, but a multifaceted survey: ten positions that, in their diversity, reflect the complexity of a field in the process of redefining itself.

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