

# GIO PONTI. Loving architecture

27.11.2019 - 13.4.2020

curated by Maristella Casciato e Fulvio Irace  
with Margherita Guccione, Salvatore Licitra, Francesca Zanella

in collaboration with  
CSAC - Centro studi e archivio della comunicazione dell'Università di Parma  
Gio Ponti Archives

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*Love architecture, be it ancient or modern. Love it for its fantastic,  
adventurous and solemn creations; for its inventions; for the abstract,  
allusive and figurative forms that enchant our spirit and enrapture our  
thoughts. Love architecture, the stage and support of our lives*

*Gio Ponti, Amate l'architettura (In praise of architecture) 1957*

Rome, 26 November 2019. Architect, designer, art director, writer, poet and critic, **Gio Ponti** was an all-round artist who traversed much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, profoundly influencing the taste of his time, responding to its most significant demands and anticipating many of the themes of contemporary architecture.

40 years on from his passing, **MAXXI, the National Museum of XXI Century Arts**, is devoting a major retrospective to this exceptional figure. The exhibition examines and presents his multi-faceted career, starting with an account of his architecture, a unique and original synthesis of tradition and modernity, history and progress, elite culture and quotidian existence.

The exhibition title, **GIO PONTI. Amare l'architettura (Loving architecture)** echoes that of his best-known book, *Amate l'architettura (In praise of architecture)*. Curated by **Maristella Casciato** (Senior curator of Architectural Collections at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles) and **Fulvio Irace** (architecture critic and historian) with **Margherita Guccione** (Director, MAXXI Architettura), **Salvatore Licitra** (Gio Ponti Archives, Director) and **Francesca Zanella** (CSAC, President), the show will be hosted in MAXXI's stunning Gallery 5 from **27 November 2019 to 13 April 2020** and has been produced by **MAXXI** in collaboration with **CSAC - Centro studi e archivio della comunicazione of the University of Parma**, which conserves Gio Ponti's professional archive, and the **Gio Ponti Archives**. Main partner **Eni**.

For **Giovanna Melandri**, President of the Fondazione MAXXI, "Celebrating the greatness of Gio Ponti signifies immersing ourselves in a legacy that is peerless in terms of versatility, talent and application. Private buildings and public commissions, companies and places of study, objects of everyday use, office and naval furnishings, cathedrals and museums alternate within research that was never dogmatic or ideological, in which there was dialogue between classicism and modernity, the natural landscape and the urban horizon, the social vocation of space and the safeguarding of beauty."

As **Margherita Guccione**, Director of MAXXI Architettura says, "Neither classical nor modern, the work of Gio Ponti was unique in the history of Italian 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture, a century the architect spanned almost in its entirety, ranging from the design of objects of everyday use to the invention of spatial configurations for the modern home and the creation of complex projects embedded within the urban context, maintaining architecture, *setting and saving grace of our lives*, as the fixed core of his research.

The exhibition is the fruit of painstaking research that has aimed to update our understanding of the figure of Ponti the architect, highlighting a number of the guiding issues underlying his long career and his extraordinary ability to foreshadow the spaces and concepts of contemporary architectural practice. His aspiration towards verticality and lightness through the dematerialization of facades, his conception of a green city in which nature returns to playing a key role in the agenda of planning and architecture, as well as designing flexible domestic spaces, capable of adapting to the demands of their users, are without doubt themes that, over half a century ago, anticipated with unique clarity the concerns of the present-day.

## THE EXHIBITION

On display are **archive materials, original models, photographs, books, magazines and design classics** closely associated with his architectural projects and organized into eight sections evoking key concepts expressed by Ponti himself. The exhibition layout is immersive and spectacular, suggesting the master's own idea of space: fluid, dynamic and colorful. In the museum lobby, visitors are welcomed by a powerful installation of monumental Alcantara banners, hanging the full height of Zaha Hadid's spaces which reproduce the stylized facades of skyscrapers, evoking the skyline of an imaginary *Pontian city*.

Leaving the lifts that lead to the third floor, the reproduction of the *giallo fantastic* linoleum floor used for the ramp immediately transports visitors into the most famous of Pontian skyscrapers, the Pirelli tower in Milan. Before entering the Gallery, the photographic project by **Thomas Demand** recounts the exceptional vertical buildings conserved at the CSAC Archive and also on display in the exhibition.

Within the Gallery, the section **Towards the exact house** traces the theme of the house that was central to Ponti's research into defining a space congruent with modern life: here we find the first typical Milanese *Domus*, the designs for the *La Casa Adatta* exhibited at Eurodomus in 1970 and, above all, the synthesis of much of the architect's thinking over the years: his apartment in Via Dezza, Milan.

The exhibition continues with a focus on Ponti's **Classicisms** from the 1930s, when major commissions led to imposing projects on the urban scale, such as the *Scuola di Matematica* in Rome, 1934, and the two Montecatini buildings in Milan, from 1936 and 1951.

The osmotic relationship between architecture and nature is explored in **Living nature**, featuring the projects realised along the Mediterranean coastline (*Villa Marchesano* in Bordighera, 1938 and the *Hotel Parco dei Principi* in Sorrento, 1959).

We then arrive at the best-known buildings, documented in the section **Architecture of the surface**, which are the ultimate expression of a design philosophy based on surfaces rather than volumes, in which the facades become two-dimensional planes to be pierced and folded like sheets of paper (the renowned *Villa Planchart* in Caracas, 1953-57, and the *Istituto italiano di cultura* in Stockholm, 1958, both testifying the international standing of Ponti's work).

**Architecture as crystal** is the aphorism that celebrates the idea of a closed, finite form that gives rise to a faceted, crystal-like plan. This section also features certain major works such as the *Denver Art Museum* (1971) and the church of *San Carlo Borromeo* in Milan, along with projects on a smaller scale, underlining the ease with which Ponti shifted from the urban dimension to that of the single object within a coherent and integrated conception of the design process. On show are the designs of the cutlery for Christofle, the ceramics for Marazzi, the handles for Olivari, the bathroom fixtures for Ideal Standard, the *Superleggera* chair for Cassina and even the model of a bodywork for a car, with styling that by no coincidence was named the *Linea Diamante*. Lightness and the dematerialization of the vertical characterise the section **Light façades** with the *Concattedrale* in Taranto (1970), the *Grande magazzino de Bijenkorf* in Eindhoven and the *Ministerial Buildings* in Islamabad. The exhibition concludes with the same evocative setting with which it opened, the *Pontian city*, composed of skyscrapers developing vertically, reducing their footprint and leaving space for green areas. This image emerges strongly in the sections **Appearance of skyscrapers** and **The spectacle of cities**, housed at the point where the Zaha Hadid designed MAXXI is closest to *its city*: next to the great glass wall that opens Gallery 5 to the panorama of 20<sup>th</sup> century Rome.

Alongside the skyscrapers and the city, testifying to a philosophy that ranges uninterruptedly from the urban context to the domestic environment, is the **reading room**, echoing the interior of the Ponti House on Via Dezza, with the reproduction of the ceramic floor realised for the occasion by Ceramica De Maio and the presence of the furnishings designed by Ponti and produced by Molteni.

The exposition is enriched by a kind of exhibition within the exhibition thanks to a **photographic commissioning project** conceived and curated by **Paolo Rosselli** who, together with the other seven auteurs he has selected, has given rise to a series of contemporary views of Pontian works, illustrating their present day existence. Delfino Sisto Legnani looked at the *Concattedrale* in Taranto; Allegra Martin the *Hotel Parco dei Principi* in Sorrento; Giovanni Chiaramonte *Villa Planchart* in Caracas; Filippo Romano the *Grande magazzino de Bijenkorf* in Eindhoven; Giovanna Silva Il Liviano (the faculty of letters) and *Palazzo del Bo* (rectorate), University of Padua; Michele Nastasi the first and second *Palazzo Montecatini* in Milan; Stefano Graziani the *School of Mathematics* in Rome; Paolo Rosselli the *Pirelli tower* in Milan.

The **catalogue** is published by Forma Edizioni, edited by Maristella Casciato and Fulvio Irace, and is a dual edition in Italian and English, consisting of 300 pages, 150 illustrations, and texts by 45 authors including Giorgio Ciucci, Barry Bergdoll, Domitilla Dardi, Anat Falbel, Farhan Karim, Jorge Rivas, Règean Legault, Bernard Colembrader and Alessandra Muntoni.

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### SECTIONS

#### Towards the exact house

The research of a definition of the *exact house*, or better the house that would be *suitable* to the life of those who dwell in it, the modern life of modern humans, was always central in Ponti's production. His research started from the typical Milanese *Domus*, i.e. from the origins of domestic tradition, developed through the pages of the magazines Ponti directed, "Domus" and "Stile", and found its conclusion in Ponti's apartment in Via Dezza - with its fluid spaces and visually connected rooms. A variety of types applicable to standardized lodgings can be found as early as the models designed for Feal, where adaptability was conjugated with the prefabrication of tower buildings.

#### Living nature

Placed at the centre of Ponti's design creativity, Nature establishes a biunivocal and osmotic relation with architecture. This is manifest when Ponti uses porticoes, terraces, pergolas and verandas, loggias and balconies as architectural elements that project architecture *outside*, and at the same time bring nature *within*. For Ponti, Nature par excellence reveals itself along the coasts of the Mediterranean, the cradle of classic architecture but also of modern architecture, as expressed by the projects studied with Bernard Rudofsky between the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s. During the 1970s and 1960s, the relationship between architecture and nature became more conceptual and took form in more organic and almost intimate projects, such as the house called *Beetle under the leaf* and the villa for Daniel Koo in California.

#### Classicisms

The 1930s were a period which offered Ponti the opportunity to experiment with large projects, mostly on public procurement, characterised by a multi-scale vision, capable of integrating the urban dimension with the that of details. In the competition project for the Palazzo dell'Acqua e della Luce for the E42, in the university seats of Liviano and Palazzo del Bo in Padua, and in the School of Mathematics at Rome's Città Universitaria, besides establishing a dialogue between architecture and art, Ponti started from the monumental scale and moved down to the design of interior spaces and furnishings. A similar method guided him in the design of the First Montecatini Building in Milan, undeniably a monument to labour, replicated and reiterated twenty years later with the Second Building.

#### Architecture of the surface

Projects such as the Italian Cultural Institute in Stockholm or the Institute of Nuclear Physics at Sao Paulo in Brazil represent the accomplished expression of a design concept that reasons through planes rather than volumes. The façade becomes a two-dimensional surface that can be punctuated and folded as a sheet of paper. In the villas built in Caracas and Teheran, also thanks to the wealthy and enlightened clients, Ponti lightens the casing which detaches itself from the ground and reveals all his ability to handle complex plans, in which the domestic spaces follow one another and merge, with furnishing solutions and artistic interventions integrated into the architecture. These projects also attest to the international dimension that Ponti's work had reached in the 1950s.

#### Architecture as crystal

Ponti's most telling and well known aphorism expresses the idea that the "finished form" is a guarantee of a correct architecture: It is not volume that makes architecture, but its closed, finished, immutable form. *Architecture [...] when it is pure, is pure as a crystal, magic, closed, exclusive, autonomous, uncontaminated, incorrupt, absolute, definitive*. The faceted essence of the crystal manifests itself in the plan, with an elusive profile made of corners that multiply and chase each other without ever finding the absoluteness of two perpendicular faces, and in perforated and suspended surfaces that are the elevations of those plans. A consistent and univocal method that we find in impressive projects such as the Denver Art Museum or the chapel of San Carlo in Milan, and in the small scale design of door handles for Olivari, of bathroom fixtures for Ideal Standard, of ceramic tiles or the bodywork for a car called, not by chance, *Diamante* (Diamond).

### **Light façades**

The history of humanity, Ponti affirmed, advances from weight to lightness, from the big to the slender: the prophecy of "lightness" called for the rising of "a light and transparent style, a simple style connected to simplified social customs". Therefore, lightness is not a literary metaphor for Ponti, but the answer to the construction methods of the 20th century, so much so that it takes on an ethical value, even before its formal one. The façades of buildings are "intact surfaces, as the white sheet of paper" on which the windows play the "arcane game of Architecture", which is dematerialized as in the final result of the Co-cathedral of Taranto, where concrete becomes air and light. In his studies on prefabrication, his INA and Savoia office buildings in Milan, and his government buildings in Islamabad, the game of perforated façades wins over the lazy repetitiveness of elevations.

### **Appearance of skyscrapers**

Ponti's aspiration towards lightness translated into an aspiration for verticality when applied to buildings that were to be inserted in a consolidated urban context. A vertical development in fact allows a limited footprint and allowed Ponti to foretell the *appearance of skyscrapers* in the skyline of modern cities. In his design of high-rise buildings, the plan remains however a finite form, closed and absolutely original. In his study of triangular-plan skyscrapers, the plan is functional to a multiplication of continuous window views, and a similar choice of light façades permeates the design for the Montreal Towers and that for the Italo-Brazilian Centre in Sao Paulo. However, Ponti's skyscraper par excellence is the Pirelli Tower in Milan, a synthesis of many design themes presented in this exhibition.

### **The spectacle of cities**

On an urban planning level, Ponti developed an idea of the city that is intimately linked to the vertical development of architecture. He demonstrated this already in 1937 with the regeneration project of the former Scalo Sempione, where he fought against the concept of a horizontal garden district in favour of an organic composition of large ensembles placed along a wide tree-lined avenue, which ten years later (when he worked on the project once more with Mazzocchi and Minoletti) became the "Green River", a backbone with sports facilities and tall collective buildings. Even on the small scale of a mountain town, Chiavenna, his proposal for a "School City" reflects the organic vision of an education district integrated into the fabric of the historical centre.

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### **FIFTY QUESTIONS FIFTY ANSWERS**

**from *Amate l'architettura (In praise of architecture)*, Gio Ponti, 1957**

#### **Where is architecture going?**

From heavy to light, from opaque to transparent, from corruptible to incorruptible, from composed to unified

#### **The most beautiful colour in architecture?**

White, the pure colour of form

#### **Does colour belong to architecture?**

If in the material, if for the illusion...

#### **All colours?**

All of them

#### **Are certain materials modern?**

Only chronologically: all materials are modern, modernity is in the choice, in using them as an expression

#### **Which is the most long-lasting material?**

Art

#### **Is urban planning a matter of imagination?**

Yes, when it is only a technical matter, it is at fault

#### **Does the issue of housing belong to urban planning or civilization?**

To civilization

#### **Architects today?**

Intermediaries between the world of yesterday and that of tomorrow: to conquer the latter, measuring ourselves against the greatness of the former

#### **Formally, does tradition exist?**

No: many traditions exist

#### **Which tradition should we keep then?**

Only one, that of transforming things; time is measured (is "created") only by the transformation of things, where things do not transform, time doesn't exist, history doesn't exist

#### **What is the exact house?**

"Greatest usable space with lesser surface"

#### **And the Italian house?**

The Italian house is outside and inside without complications. Its design does not only stem from material everyday necessities: it is not only a machine à habiter.

#### **Does architecture need original ideas?**

Original ideas are not important: actually, original ideas don't exist. Ideas are received and re-expressed. We say 'I got an idea', not 'I created an idea'. Etymologically, to invent means to find, not to create."

**Who is Gio Ponti?**

Gio Ponti is an Italian, a Lombard, a Milanese. A cheerful man, with no idleness, who writes, designs, builds, travels: who loves living

**How would you define your life?**

A life persecuted by good luck

**When can an architect be defined mature?**

In maturity all ages of life are present... but maturity is not a reason for quietness.

**A modern piece of furniture must be only functional?**

I believe that each piece of furniture, while always being functional, must spark the imagination of its designer and of the onlooker.

**How important is Art for Ponti?**

The dream of painting has always accompanied my life and the pleasure in allusive drawings and portraits has always accompanied my life.

**Why should we love architecture?**

"To love architecture is to love your country"

**What is the major feature of your architecture?**

Illusiveness is among the prerogatives that Gio Ponti attributes to architecture

**Is there one of your buildings that you consider the start of a new research?**

The Italian Cultural Institute in Stockholm. This architecture inaugurated Ponti's idea that the wall no longer a bearing structure.

**You have designed many churches. What is a church for you?**

Building a church is a little like rebuilding religion, returning it to its essence.

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**Giovanna Melandri**, Fondazione MAXXI, President

“The most resistant element is not concrete, nor is it wood, nor stone, nor steel, nor glass. The most resistant material in building is art.”

Bursting onto the scene at MAXXI is one of the most extraordinary Italian figures of the twentieth century, a visionary of a very rare species, capable of shaping and fulfilling his insights in works destined to be handed down through a multiplicity of historical eras and cultural seasons.

So much creativity, talent, competence did Gio Ponti unleash in a volcanic, feverish, restless cycle of thought and hard work. Even today, forty years after his death, his complex intellectual and professional production - of which even certain aphorisms, like the one just quoted, are the sign of never-ending new ideas - stand out among the most original testimonies of a century that generated utopias and tragedies, wonders and horrors. Gio Ponti left a deep trace made up of many segments: architecture and design, teaching and publishing, decoration and scenography. Celebrating his greatness means immersing oneself in a legacy that has no equals in terms of versatility, flair, and application.

Private buildings and public commissions, companies and places of study, objects of daily use and furnishings for offices and ships, cathedrals and museums are alternated in a search - which is never dogmatic or ideological - along a ridge where the classical and modernity, the natural landscape and the urban horizon, the social vocation of space and the safeguarding of beauty converse ceaselessly, influencing and altering each other.

The exhibition Gio Ponti. Loving Architecture - curated by Maristella Casciato and Fulvio Irace with Margherita Guccione, Salvatore Licitra, and Francesca Zanella, and organized with the Centro Studi e Archivi della Comunicazione of Parma and with Gio Ponti Archives - is an intense retrospective, worthy of a figure toward whom the national community has an open debt. Not only because some of his creations attest to various latitudes of Italian ingeniousness and technique that Ponti, like few others, was able to attract and merge with skill, calling artisans, workshops, famous or unknown companies to bask in an unfamiliar limelight. Toward him we have a duty of acknowledgment, rediscovery, valorization, also because his vision of the city and his critique of the solutions of a certain type of mass building were misconstrued, if not openly ostracized, by cultural currents ideologically distant from his thinking characterized by liberal roots. Instead, it is a legacy most of which has yet to be reelaborated and enlivened.

So come up close with eyes wide open to view the treasure trove of archival materials, models, photographs, books, and objects selected to illustrate such a multifaceted and in many ways very modern figure. With him the MAXXI turns on yet another spotlight, from being a national museum of contemporary architecture to being a gallery of masters where the lessons of Álvaro Siza and Bruno Zevi, Yona Friedman and Carlo Scarpa, Pier Luigi Nervi and our own very dear Zaha Hadid have recently taken turns on the museum stage. All of them, as Gio Ponti might have put it, “enamoured of civilization.”

## GIO PONTI. Loving architecture

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Margherita Guccione, MAXXI Architettura, Director

**Love architecture, be it ancient or modern. Love it for its fantastic, adventurous and solemn creations; for its inventions; for the abstract, allusive and figurative forms that enchant our spirit and enrapture our thoughts. Love architecture, the stage and support of our lives.**

With these words, an exhortation addressed to the world and an intimate declaration of love at the same time, Gio Ponti begins *Amate l'architettura*, his most famous, most eloquent book, and the one most representative of thinking and work that has no equal on the architectural scene of the past century.

Neither classical nor modern, Gio Ponti's work was unique in the history of twentieth-century Italian architecture, a century that the architect lived through almost entirely, his activity ranging from design to the everyday object, to the invention of spatial solutions for the modern house, to the realization of complex projects situated in the urban context, always holding on to the architecture - the scenario and assistance of our life" - at the heart of his research.

But why has the Museum of 21st-Century Arts chosen to devote an ambitious and original exhibition to Gio Ponti, a figure who lived and worked throughout most of the twentieth century, profoundly influencing its taste and at the same time reflecting the most significant moments? Despite the undisputed central role of architecture in Ponti's thinking, by virtue of an approach that is in a certain sense humanistic, in which the space for man—modern man—becomes the *topos* at the start and the conclusion of all his design-related contemplation, architectural historiography has mostly kept this very complex figure on the sidelines of the narrative. Although Gio Ponti was undisputedly a man of his age who accompanied the passing of the decades of the twentieth century while always closely adhering to and participating in what was taking place and being considered and realized all around him, thanks to the coherence of his ideas, he knew how to prefigure architectural space and foreshadow design themes that in the last part of the twentieth century and in our own day and age are surprisingly close to the themes of contemporary research. Among them, the aspiration to verticality and lightness by dematerializing the façades, the conception of a green city in which the newly built architecture is discreet and concentrated, the flexible and changing interior space, capable of adapting to the needs of the user. These are unquestionably themes that fifty years ago anticipated architectural research, without this actually being perceived by history and criticism.

Hence, by acknowledging the need to stimulate historical research and emerge from the sectarian and partial interpretations of Ponti's oeuvre, which have actually all been overcome, it is by means of the exhibition *Gio Ponti. Loving Architecture* that MAXXI intends to make its own contribution, firmly convinced that - forty years after his passing - the moment has truly come to draw attention back to the figure of Gio Ponti in general and to his architecture in particular.

This catalogue, filled with in-depth contributions on Ponti's individual projects and far-reaching essays on broader themes, is the tangible sign of the advancement of studies in this direction. The title of the exhibition, which obviously paraphrases Ponti's imperative "love architecture," for the museum and for the curators Mari-stella Casciato and Fulvio Irace, is a declaration of principle aimed to underscore how architecture was programmatically chosen as the key to this multitalented and multifaceted figure. Upon examining his archive, this is achieved by going back over his projects, whether or not realized, his architectural activity, and the architectural debate he was a part of in the pages of his magazines, first among which *Domus* and *Stile*.

Unsurprisingly, the fundamental partner in the conception and production of the exhibition is CSAC Centro Archivi e Studio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, which houses the very rich graphic works produced by Ponti during the course of his professional activity, and, thanks to the work of Francesca Zanella, was offered this important occasion to be valorized and shared. The museum's relationship with CSAC is a highly positive one that has been tried and tested and is being further consolidated because of this initiative, the fruit of a common vision of the importance of working on original documents, to be preserved, studied,

and exhibited, providing a service to scholars and others in the field, as well as to the public at large. The occasion was also welcomed with enthusiasm and participation by the heirs to Gio Ponti who, represented by Salvatore Licitra with Gio Ponti Archives, collaborated on the promotion and the realization of this pioneering show.

The project itself is enriched by a sort of exhibition within the exhibition, made up of an important photography project conceived and curated by Paolo Rosselli who, along with seven other authors selected by him, breathed life into a series of contemporary gazes on equally important works by Ponti, showing what they are like today. An operation that casts light on the potential of Ponti's work to trigger short-circuits with new forms of creativity and contemporary readings.

And a further demonstration of how Gio Ponti's architecture continues to be eloquent, current, and a minefield of new studies and new projects.

Among these new studies and new projects we unquestionably need to also mention the restoration work that has involved, and will increasingly continue to do so, the works of Gio Ponti, because the times now require a reflection on the general nature of the restoration, refurbishment, and repurposing of these buildings. His late works are now forty years old, the early ones have been around for close to a century, and it is natural to imagine them soon being involved in new restoration work, although this still has not been carried out. All that has been done until now, from the impeccable philological restoration of the Pirelli Tower, to the more recent intervention on what was once the Convento delle Suore del Sion in Rome, gives us hope: today's culture of the restoration of the modern has developed tools and methods that envisage a destiny that is equally positive for other works that require conservation or a new life.

Looking at our recent past as though we were looking at the contemporary scene and at the same time imagining future scenarios underlies all of the activity of MAXXI Architettura, whose cultural plan functions along parallel tracks—both in the nature of its collections and in the exhibition activity—following two lines of research: one devoted to the authors and the events of the twentieth century, and another obviously aimed at themes and figures of the contemporary scene. Hence, included in the DNA of MAXXI Architettura is the history of twentieth-century architecture, the research, the look back to the roots of the making of contemporary architecture starting from the work of the great masters of the past century. The lesson of the masters must be recognized and transmitted but also rethought as part of a precise strategy to be implemented by the museum, which in its ten years of activity has expressed the clear willingness—through its exhibitions—to define a historical universe of references in which certain authors shine, like multiple north stars for those who devote themselves to the study and analysis of architecture, but also simply for a general public that wishes to approach this discipline. Examples are the major retrospectives on the work of Luigi Moretti, Pier Luigi Nervi, Gerrit Rietveld, Le Corbusier, today Gio Ponti, tomorrow Aldo Rossi, masters of the past that we believe to be important in telling the present in order to continue to convey the lesson of the Museum of 21st-Century Arts.