



# Mario Labò and the Various Design Proposals for the Oriental Art Museum of Genoa

Alessandro Meloni<sup>(✉)</sup> 

Department Architecture and Design, University of Genoa, 16123 Genoa, Italy  
alessandro.meloni@edu.unige.it

**Abstract.** The analysis of the different projects formulated in the middle of the last century for the Edoardo Chiossone Museum of Oriental Art in Genoa constitutes an opportunity to recognize some significant traces of the previous phases designed by Mario Labò in the spatial characteristics of the building. The research was focused on trying to find the original drawings, from the first version of 1948, characterized by pure forms typical of pre-war modernism, to the configurations currently in use that were conceived in the version formulated between 1952 and 1955. We want to emphasize the importance of this project from both an architectural and historical point of view, analyzing the relationship with the urban park but above all with the study of the pre-existing nineteenth-century villa; the latter thanks to its spatial characteristics becomes an explicit reference for the project. The building built in 1971 shows an original spatiality of a unitary and continuous museum itinerary that unfolds in a development similar to the double helix of some ancient sixteenth-century stairs. This version is updated through the Italian museographic development after World War II. This contribution shows the architectural surveys made to make a comparison with the documentary data that bring out the importance of the museum itinerary, the latter based on the definitive solution of the stairs, as crucial elements of the project. In the latest version, however, a spatial conception is visible and evokes the spaces of Japanese architecture.

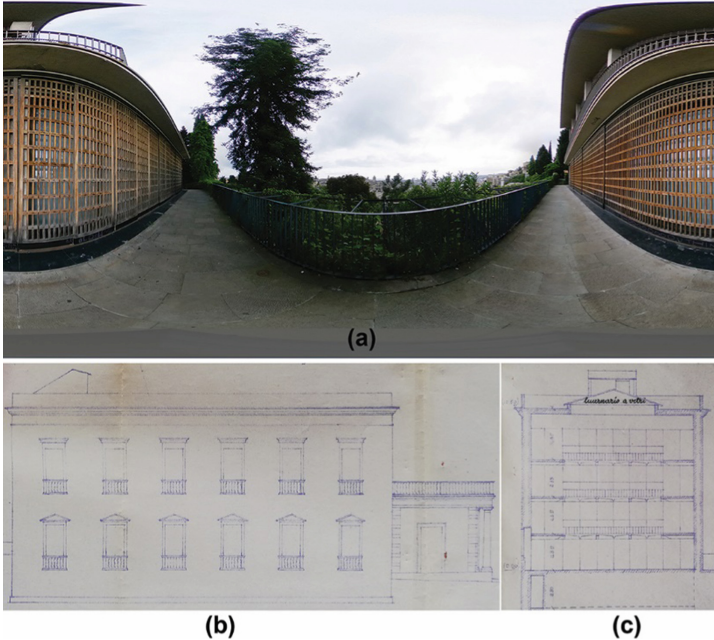
**Keywords:** Mario Labò · Museo d'Arte Orientale Edoardo Chiossone · Italian modern museum · Unbuilt project

## 1 Introduction

The contribution analyzes the Edoardo Chiossone Museum in Genoa (Italy) designed by Mario Labò (1884–1961) starting from 1948, focusing on the comparison between the projects that have marked its history and its realization. Through the critical analysis of the different design drawings, we want to provide a contribution to emphasize the importance of a little-known architectural subject. The building is important as it fits into a particular context, relating to post-war reconstruction and the cultural debate that involves the themes of musealization. In this context, the city of Genoa assumes a decisive role thanks to the figure of Franco Albini (1905–1977), who with his projects for the outfitting of Palazzo Rosso (1953–1961) and Palazzo Bianco (1950–1951) (Bucci and

Rossari 2005) and the reconstruction, of Sant'Agostino Museum (1963–1979) (Helg 1979; Cándito and Meloni 2021) marks an important architectural season for the entire Italian and international architectural movement (Piva and Prina 1998; Basso Peressut 2004). Mario Labò, as Franco Albini, contributes significantly to the affirmation of Genoa as the Italian cultural and architectural epicenter, because the Edoardo Chiossoni Museum of Oriental Art is in fact the first museum project built from scratch.

The museum is part of a sixteenth-century bastion converted into an urban park, in a central position that allows a privileged view of the historic city center (Fig. 1a).



**Fig. 1.** a) Panorama with view from the outside the museum towards the historic city center: equirectangular projection. Project of the nineteenth-century Villa built by Carlo Barabino: b) South-west elevation; c) section of the exhibition hall that reveals the floors of the gallery. Architectural survey made by Mario Labò (AGRL, Genio civile Genova. serie 29.III. Classe H. Fasc. 4. coll. 166.D/V).

Labò's project was born on the rubble of Villa Di Negro, a neoclassical building from the early 1800s commissioned by the Marquis Gian Carlo Di Negro to the architect Carlo Barabino (Failla 2014). The nineteenth-century Genoese architect is a leading figure analyzed by Labò himself (Labò 1921a, b); In the Archive (*Fondo del Genio Civile dell'Archivio Generale Regione Liguria* (AGRL) there are the survey drawings made by Mario Labò and which make it possible to identify the main characteristics of the entire neoclassical building. The villa was characterized by two main volumes: the entrance defined by a classic trilitic structure and the exhibition space (Fig. 1b). The interior showed a symmetrical layout and was characterized by the gallery floors that overlooked a central space at full height (Fig. 1c). The Villa fits perfectly into the

park, becoming an important center for the city from both a cultural and a playful point of view, a feature that is maintained even after the death of the Marquis of Negro; in fact, towards the end of the 19th century the park underwent changes with the addition of water features and the iconic waterfall, an element that still distinguishes the park today, becoming a real point of reference. The bombings that destroyed much of the Ligurian capital in 1942 also hit the Villa, causing extensive damage that prompted the Municipality to commission Labò for the reconstruction of the building.

## 2 Mario Labò's Different Projects

The reconstruction of the museum was characterised by a wide-ranging debate in the city, in which Caterina Marcenaro (Director of the Fine Arts Office of the City of Genoa) played an important role, she proposed that Labò be given the task of reconstruction.

The museum was to house Edoardo Chiossone's collection of Japanese art, previously kept at the Ligustica Academy of Fine Arts in Genoa.

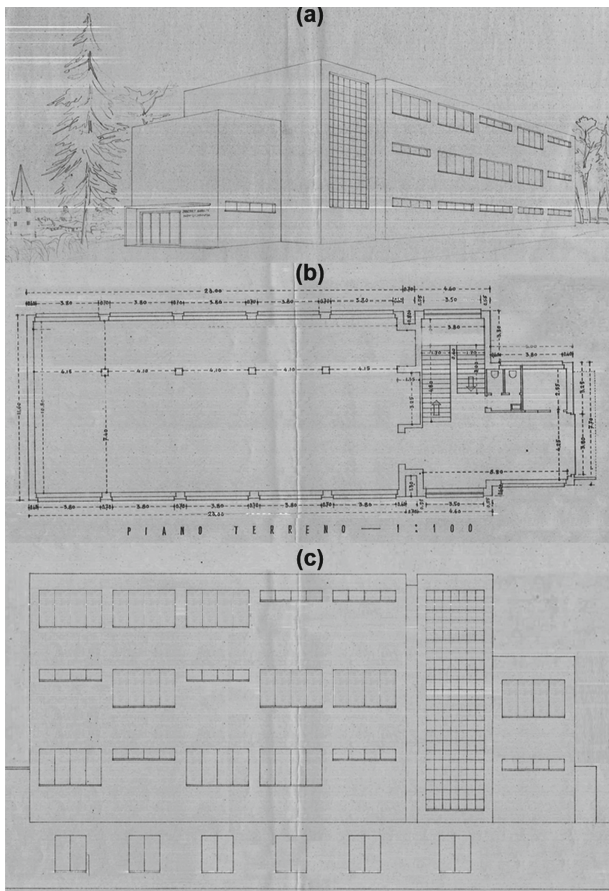
The contributions presented by the Genoese architect are different and can be identified mainly in two distinct phases: a first unrealized project dating back to 1948 and a second presented between 1952 and 1955. This research makes a comparison between the versions by analyzing materials from the *Fondo del Genio Civile dell'Archivio Generale Regione Liguria* (AGRL), the *Archivio Progetti Comune di Genova* (APCG), critical literature (Spesso and Porcile 2019; Lanteri Minet 2017) and data obtained through metric surveys and the use of nodal photography.

### 2.1 The First Project

The first version of the 1948 project is attributable to previous works by Labò himself and is strongly linked to the architectural modern movement (Lanteri Minet 2017), whose canons have found an updated formal identification (Montes Serrano 2010).

The project relates to the villa through the coincident planimetric arrangement within the context of the park. The volumes of the entrance, the exhibition hall and the stairs are characterized by pure forms (Fig. 2a).

The access to the building has a reduced height compared to the others but a wall continuity is preserved in the south-west elevation, which in any case reveals a differentiation between the indoor spaces, especially in the glass brick walls that correspond to the stairwell (Fig. 2b). The various sectors of the museum are clearly recognizable from a planimetric point of view (Fig. 2c) and the exhibition hall consists of a free space interrupted only by the presence of the pillars, with a planimetric structure that is repeated on all floors. In this project emerges the vision of a space capable of adapting to different exhibition needs according to the moment, where the viewer is involved only through the works on display and not by the spatial characteristics; unlike what will be observed in the second project, in this case the setting is separate from the architecture and not an integral part of the project.



**Fig. 2.** First project, 1948: a) perspective view; b) South-west elevation; c) Ground floor plan (APCG cataloging number. 231/1948).

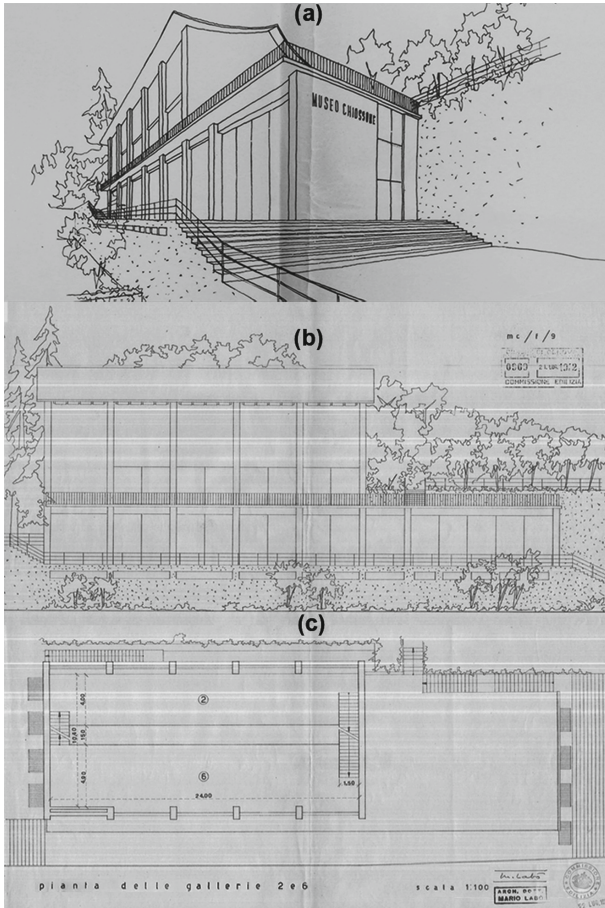
## 2.2 The Second Project

The second project, presented for the first time in 1952, was officially born following some legal problems between the municipality and an owner bordering the museum. The evident difference style used compared to the first project leads us to think that this constituted only a pretext to allow Labò to rethink entirely the spatial conception.

The project will undergo many variations before reaching the 1955 version, when the shapes took on characteristics similar to those actually made. For this reason, we will analyze this phase in which the changes already include the implemented version of the connecting stairs and the roof, the latter initially conceived with a pagoda configuration, a clear reference to oriental constructions (Fig. 3a).

The façade of the museum (Fig. 3b) shows a division into two main volumes: the entrance and the exhibition space. The access area is characterized by large windows facing south which are arranged in continuity with the window surfaces of the exhibition

hall; this choice allows the viewer to enjoy a panoramic view towards the historic city center (Oliva 1972). The exhibition hall is characterized by a simple plan: a system of landing floors that protrudes from the main sides of the building, generating a central full-height void (Fig. 3c).



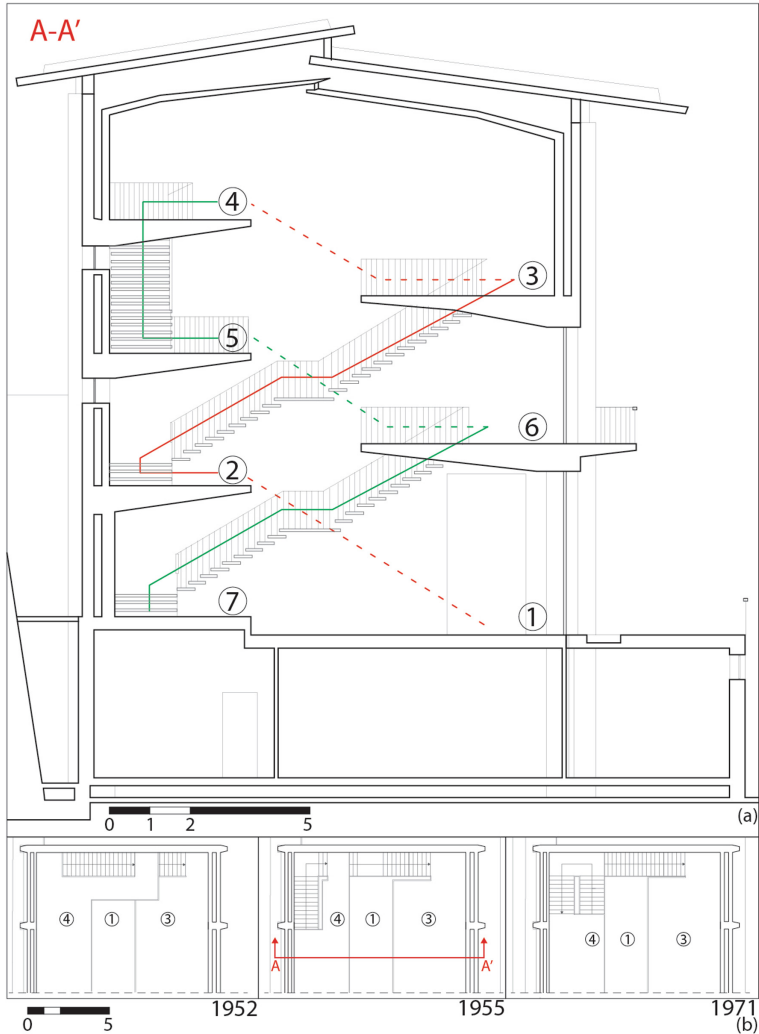
**Fig. 3.** The second project (1952): a) perspective view that show the pagoda roof; b) South-west elevation; b) Plan Galleries 6 and 2 (APCG cataloging number 969/1952).

The apparent planimetric simplicity is contradicted by the actual complexity found during the space exploration, thanks to the galleries that undergo a vertical translation and an offset from each other.

The stairs, positioned at the ends of the floors, play a fundamental role, they are the elements that make the museum itinerary continuous (Fig. 4a) consisting of:

- a rise that connects galleries 1, 2, 3 and 4, alternately cantilevered on the south-west and north-east walls.
- a descent that starts from the last level 4, instead connects galleries 5, 6 and 7, as the previous ones.

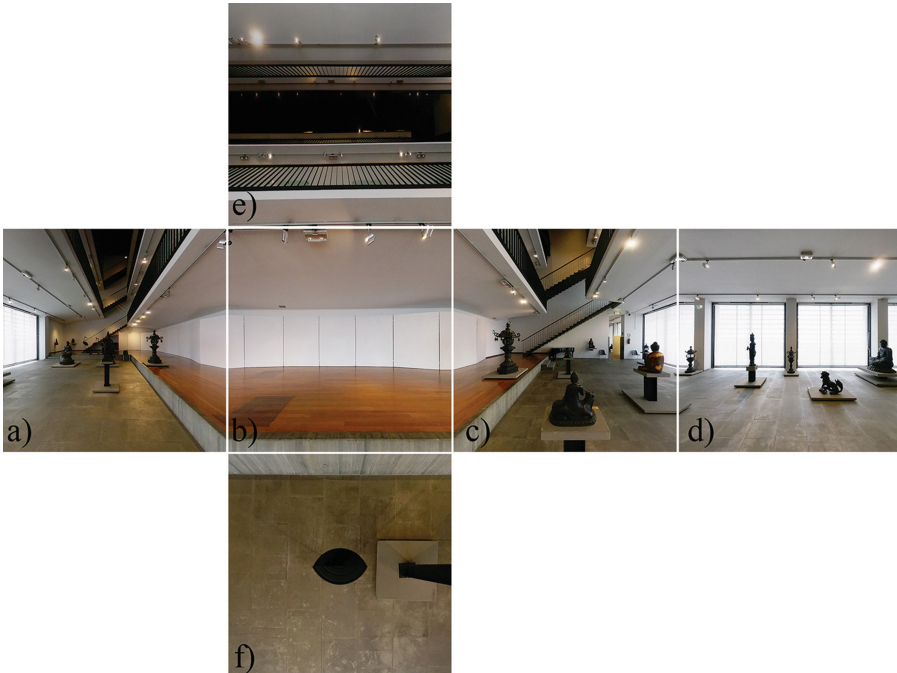
For this reason, the connecting staircase between levels 4 and 5 (Fig. 4b), starting from the second version of the project, has a 90° rotation compared to other stairs.



**Fig. 4.** Comparison between the different projects: a) Section A-A 'from 1955. The ascending path in red, the descending path in green. b) Plans of the stairs between galleries 3-4-5 in the three different phases of the project. (Redrawing by Alessandro Meloni).

Spatiality takes up the concept of a continuous museum expressed by Le Corbusier, interpreting it according to a vertical direction (Spesso and Porcile 2019); this creates a one-way path that evokes the two helical ramps of the San Patrizio's well, built by Antonio da Sangallo il Giovane in Orvieto (1527–1537).

Mario Labò particular attention to the disposition of the stairs in galleries 4 and 5 of which he developed an unrealized solution in 1952 (Fig. 4b) that provided three stairs on each side, in order to favor the symmetry of the system.



**Fig. 5.** Panorama Cubic Projection of ground floor: f) nadir view; e) zenit view (Photo by Alessandro Meloni)

The realized version does not preserve the symmetry but maintains the spatiality that characterizes the building that which becomes “an architecture of the void” (Argan 1954), as it seen in the cubic projection panel of the panoramic photograph that represents the view towards the high (Fig. 5e).

The construction was completed in 1971 by Giorgio Olcese, who in 1960 took over from Mario Labò who was forced to retire for health reasons. Olcese made some changes, especially in reference to the staircase between galleries 4 and 5, broken by an intermediate landing (Fig. 4b). The spatial language has not changed, even if it spaces under the stairs are created which that do not conform the attention to construction detail found in Labò's project. The differences concern the use of materials, the ground floor currently is in serena stone and not in Luserna stone as envisaged by Labò; a minimal difference that does not make substantial changes. The external coating, on the

other hand, is strongly changed: the glazed terracotta tiles for the external walls and the plastering of the structural elements chosen by the Engineer Olcese are in contrast with the more material vision of Labò, that envisaged an exposed concrete structure for the structural pillars and a granite that is rougher to the touch (Lanteri Minet 2017).

The outfitting was created by Luigi Grossi Bianchi and Stefano Fera (1967) and is characterized by particular attention to the indications defined by Mario Labò during the design phase; in fact, the choice not to continue with the windows on the South-west elevation was dictated above all by light and exposure: reducing the natural light in the upper galleries allowed the exposure of material more sensitive to sunlight. The study of the installation not only expressed Labò's wishes but emphasized the relationship between space, light and Japanese architecture also thanks to the use of an external wooden screen corresponding to the windows of the exhibition hall: a structure composed of joists that intersect forming a dense rectangular texture that runs along the tracks to obtain different opening possibilities; this structure generates an interesting play of lights inside the room and is similar to the dynamic partition wall structures typical of Japanese homes (Canepari 2021).

### 3 The Comparison Between the Projects

The second project by Labò, unlike the first proposal, shows a radical change in the conception of space. The characters still strongly linked to modernist architecture are replaced by an updated museological conception, in alignment with the architectural production that established itself in the early fifties of the twentieth century. It is Labò himself who declares his will to abandon some legacies, as can be seen from one of his writings on the Museum of the Treasure of Genoa designed by Franco Albini (1956), where he describes how the choice of the spatial arrangement is an example capable of "Disengaging from a tired rationalist formalism" (Labò 1956).

The aspect that stands out most in the comparison between the two projects is determined by the path and how it relates to the exhibition hall: in 1948 the clear separation between the different levels was noted, which instead relate to each other in the second project (1952–55), where it is possible to enjoy the global perception of space both from the base and from the various balconies.

An interesting aspect is that in this last version the spatiality of the neoclassical villa is taken up with its central space at full height (Grossi Bianchi 1986). It should be noted, however, that the open and dynamic space also incorporates the spatial characteristics typical of Japanese architecture (Canepari 2021) which is also revealed in other choices that do not involve the materials identified by Labò and which refer to the use of wood as a reference material and to the solutions proposed by the subsequent outfitting.

### 4 Conclusion

This contribution illustrated the genesis of a fundamental project for Italian museum architecture, analysing its crucial points: the choice of the cyclical path and unitary spatiality. The differences that emerged between the projects allow us to observe Mario Labò's ability to update his own spatial design concepts by relating them to the urban



context and to the pre-existence, studies that have allowed him to maintain firm relations between the project, the history and the contemporaneity.

The Davide Chiossone Museum of Oriental Art is reborn from the ashes of a neo-classical villa from which it inherits a unitary spatiality that is fully reflected in the museographic instances of the second post-war period and a singular harmony with the spatial culture of the hosted collection.

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