

Urban Domestic Landscape. Architecture and Design of the Bourgeois House: A Cultural Heritage of the Act of Dwelling

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Abstract. The critical observation of high-bourgeois urban houses, with a particular attention to the ones of that enlightened entrepreneurial bourgeoisie characterizing modernity in Milan during the 1959s and 1960s, helps to identify a number of common specificities which are still valid within the current notion of “project of design.” In this sense, the use of a discrete, never flaunted image, the sequence of generous spaces, the quality and modernity of material and the ease for invention and creativity give reason to a notion of luxury which is perfectly measured according to rules of style following the pleasures of the social life. The present writing investigates the scenario of the high-bourgeois world through projects which show the relationship between the client and the architect and between architecture and design. In doing so, it highlights how the observed case studies represent the attempt of achieving a domestic ideal - which nowadays has become an integral part of the act of dwelling -, founded upon the privilege of affording the latest trend.

Keywords: Architecture · Design · Bourgeoisie · Home living · Milan

1 Introduction

Purely in economic terms, architecture, when seen as a product, represents the result of a social contract, which is derived from the relationship between οἶκος (the house) and νόμισμα (money). The purchasing power of money, prior to the capitalistic invention of the *homo sapiens sapiens* happened during VII century BC, allows the notion of agreement (νομός) to represent the medium through which human subjects choose to give a value to a certain object and to raise or lower such value throughout time. In the *Etica Nicomachea* Aristotle argues money, conceived as a measuring medium, establishes a balances in goods by making those quantifiable. According to Aristotle “all goods must be measured through money as the act of exchange makes the construction of a community possible”¹; money then facilitates the circulation of goods and thus life within an economic society. Through the argument of the Greek philosopher it is possible to understand that, if the term economy contains within itself the notion of dwelling (οἶκος), this latter represents the first kind of social aggregation which forms

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book V.

first villages, then cities. The house represents an economic asset and holds within itself the notion of heritage; it embeds ancient craftsmanships and contains within the potentiality to develop future technologies.

The construction of *oikos* within the history of architecture sees different phases of style and fashion, in which the relationship between dimensions and costs is not always directly proportional: reaching beauty (*venustas*) at all costs demands a synergy between the client and the architect which represents the most truthful essence of the notion of house. Since the second industrial revolution, in which money started to conflate with the notion of capital, the medium-high class, or in other words the bourgeoisie, started to affirm the images of the house and the private dwelling as the highest architectural space, which speaks a plurality of voices - crossing the everyday life, the notions of comfort, luxury and privacy - and mirrors, through those, the identity and the stylistic character of its inhabitant. From now on, the search for beauty in the Vitruvian terms becomes a question of taste. Adolf Loos, considered here one of the greatest theorist of the act of dwelling, constructs at the beginning of the twentieth century a sophisticated imaginary architectural language by eliminating anything considered superfluous useless - represented indeed by decoration -with the sole scope of achieving comfort and luxury within the domestic everyday life. Loos' architectural ideal still considers expensive and fine materials such as metallic coverings and veined marbles, though they do not represent a decoration applied to other objects as they are applied to the architecture as continuous linear surfaces, in which the material is free to express its texture. According to the Viennese author, comfort, intended as necessity, needs to be included within the house in accordance to the personal taste and lifestyle of the owner, through an integrated project able to communicate elegance and coherence from the single piece of clothing to the whole inhabitable dwelling.

The Danish architect and writer Steen Rasmussen considers similar criteria in his study of the historical high-bourgeois housing of Queen's gate in London [19]. The considered case studies are represented by houses slightly different in terms of dimensions, though their external characters reflects a similar conception of value, evident "not within the expressivity of the facade, but instead within the clever and inexpensive usage of a small area" [19]. Consider at this point the crucial variable of the simplicity of the construction. Such a simplicity defines an idea of luxury of the higher class which is not expressed through the single dwelling, but instead through the whole unity of the dwelling complex and its homogeneity with the outdoor space. According to Steen Rasmussen, the rich, higher class of London elaborates a concept of sober luxury, characterized by simple and sophisticated stylistic choices, through which designing indoor spaces with sufficiently luxurious atmospheres [19]. In *Dentro l'architettura* Vittorio Gregotti talks on the expressive simplicity of architecture, arguing "a building is simple not because its shapes refer to elementary geometries, but rather because its parts communicate they are all necessary to each other and to the whole architectural solution" [13]. In this sense, economic matters in architecture overcome the mere money-related boundaries of the construction costs, for entering within a conception of the clever spatial distribution as an harmonic proportion between the parts and the whole. The interesting aspect of the houses studied by Steen Rasmussen is the attention - or, in other word, the economy - characterizing the land use of the dwellings and solutions for their internal distribution and decoration. In this sense, the

house is not parading itself, but it rather simply reveals the most possibly correct architecture solution within its parts. Rasmussen interprets Loos' idea within the London case studies, not surprisingly though as the Viennese architects declared once to be anglophile². In these terms, the architect, by representing the final image of the project, represents the image, or even the essence, of the client, becoming in the end the demiurge of the owner's everyday life (Fig. 1).

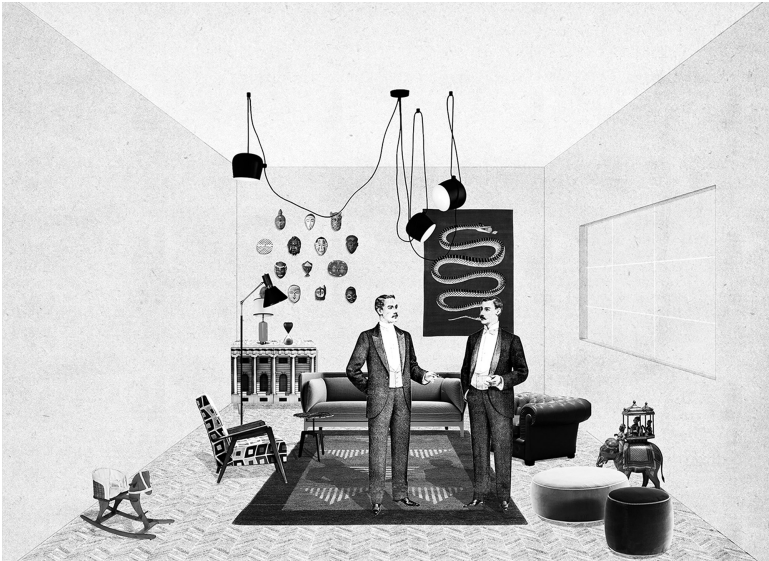


Fig. 1. The bourgeois house: living room, photomontage by Giovanni Carli and Alessandro Colli

The desire for modernity, triggered by the idea of a new way of living, brings architects during the Twenties and Thirties to conceive architectural experimentations such as the Werkbundsiedlung in Vienna or Via Novak's housing in Zagreb. Those were intended as housing models specifically built for the progressive bourgeoisie which, freed from the traditional customs, could afford the privilege to follow the new trend of living. These prototypical houses, available in different configurations and arrangements, for an estimated current price of 150.000 euro for an 80–90 sqm apartment accommodating four people, allowed the reduction of costs and the creation of a functional and essential space. Within post WWII Italian architecture, Franco Albini designed a number of houses for the rich bourgeoisie of Milan, which was the object of a new attempt of taste re-education by Italian architects such as Franco Albini or Gio Ponti. In this context, the design of interior spaces plays between the opulent and the simple, setting itself free from the conventions of the bourgeois customs through pure, light geometries and essential materials. Going beyond the design of

² "Per fare le cose nel modo giusto bisogna seguire quello che si fa nel cuore della civiltà, cioè a Londra o a New York". See [16].

housing interiors, architects defined even the smallest object to be fitted to its owners and to the people inhabiting this space. For his personal house in Milan, located in via Dezza and measuring approximately 100 sqm, Giò Ponti designed then a large open flexible space, thought as a big reception hall exhibiting paintings by friends such as Massimo Campigli and Lucio Fontana which could open or close itself thanks to movable walls. The luxurious but discrete exclusive atmosphere here is emphasised not only by the design but also by the social environment the Pontis loved to live, engaging with artists and intellectuals. The intimate and discrete character of the bourgeois house, evident in its dimension and in its architectural solutions, is also present in Vico Magistretti's apartment in piazzetta Bossi. The architect here, following Loos' lesson of the *raumplan*, intervenes on the small space with mezzanines and double heights creating an heterogeneous spatial distribution of the living spaces.

The domestic architectures of Vico Magistretti, since the Fifties, are characterized by the attention given both to the spatial layout of the rooms, designed on different levels, and to the decor, for shrewd combinations of antique furniture and contemporary lines, opening the way for that 'Milanese' taste of right balance between an ancient knowledge and a modern thought. The house, Vico Magistretti underlined, is made by who inhabits it because "my job is not to propose furniture solutions, but to constantly call those who request my collaboration to the deep structure of the relationship between them and the space that they intend to create". Vico Magistretti developed an idea of a bourgeois life, where design is free to express multiple configurations, able to interpret the Present without ignoring the pleasures of high society.

In the vision of Vico Magistretti the construction of the house is accomplished in the design of spaces accurately drawn in every detail, moulding extruded surfaces such as shelves, steps, fireplaces, shaped openings treated as volumes able to sculpt the space to inhabit. The profound respect for natural materials and the geometry of the façades are other hallmarks of Vico Magistretti, a great admirer of the Northern European architectures of Poul Kjørholms and of the irony of the interiors designed by Charles and Ray Eames (Fig. 2).

The application of the principles of the good-living needs to consider also the typically Italian attention towards furniture design. As well as in architecture, product design is expressed through images which reside within the essence of the bourgeois house. The birth of Italian industrial design does not conflate, contrary to other western countries, with the Industrial revolution, but rises only later, holding "elements from the artistic culture from which it was generated, and elements from older times, including aspect from latin animism and from the Italic mystic culture, which used to give object a proper soul and an apotropaic function, beyond mere utilitarian and aesthetic scopes" [4]. Within the Italian context, domestic objects are linked to a anthropologic culture, to religion, to politics. They represents a crucial part of the history of Italy, and in this they become mirrors of behavioural and thinking logics, of socio-economic trends, of shifts in taste.

During the Fifties and Sixties of XX century, Italy invests enormous economic and cultural energies in the production and diffusion of objects, achieving to export worldwide a rich, sophisticate, and, though contradictory, vital image of itself. In this period, many are the "pure" icons in Italian furniture design to represent Italian companies and design firms in the world. First in this icon making trend, the

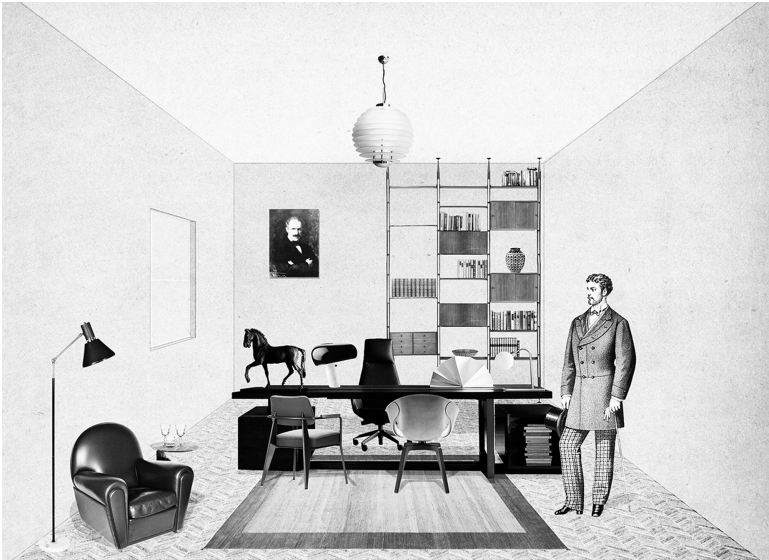


Fig. 2. The bourgeois house: studio, photocolage by Giovanni Carli and Alessandro Colli

“enlightened bourgeois - mostly Milanese - club” [4] represents the social scenario of the bourgeois and intellectual class of the time, which utilizes the modern style to achieve confidence and a sense of identity. Remnant of this sentiment are the interiors of the new high-bourgeois houses, which reveal “a tormented cultural reality, shifting between luxury, good taste and Calvinistic rigour” [4] (Fig. 3).

One of the trends manifested by Italian design during this period involves in fact, contrary to many other European and international cultures, the rediscovery of simplicity, through the development of basic, functional, though not strictly modernist, prototypes, which include elements from popular and rural culture, and represent perhaps the historical prelude of the compositive minimalism developed in the 1990s. Through those, modernity is interpreted and manifested in a new basic language characterized by timeless values such as a kind of simplicity emerging from “a sophisticated process of selection of forms and technologies in order to obtain the best result with the minimum formal effort” [4]. Enzo Mari, Bruno Munari, Achille e Pier Giacomo Castiglioni and Ettore Sottsass represent then a current characterizing the period here studied, which, far from both classicism and modernism, re-shapes the indoor space starting from simple and playful forms, almost with a didactic attitude.

One of the iconic product of the current of thought is the lamp Toio, designed by Achille Castiglioni and his brother Piergiacomo in 1962 and produced by Flos. Far from the harmonic beauty of the organic shapes of the 1950s and from the monolithic plasticism of the futuristic shapes of the second half of the 1960s - in many ways in opposition with the taste of the time -, in Toio the source of light suggests the kind of lighting, and the way through which the single elements are used to determine the final form. The lamp is in fact composed by a universal transformer - used as a counterweight, exhibited and visible to the eye - which is needed in order to compensate the

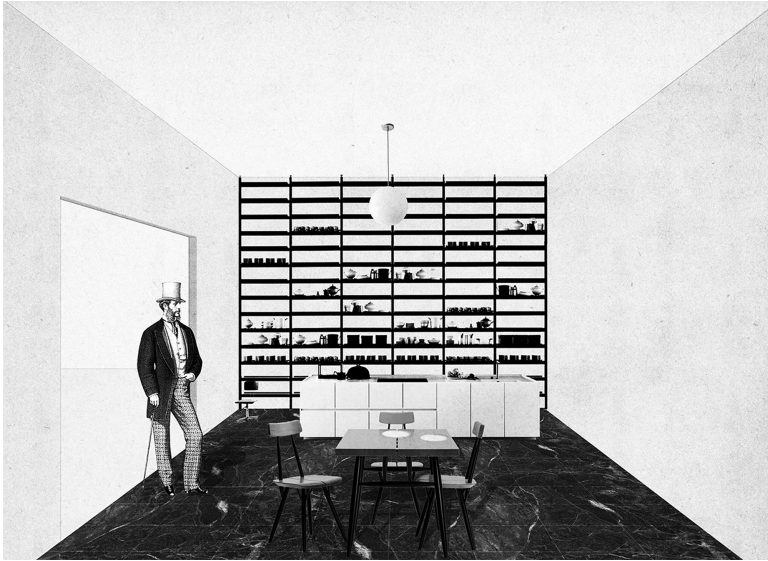


Fig. 3. The Bourgeois House: Kitchen, photocollage by Giovanni Carli and Alessandro Colli

voltage difference between the lighting bulb (125 V) and the electric voltage utilised in Europe (220 V); metal sheetings serving as a handle and support for the stem of the lamp; and a chromed brass hexagonal-shaped element, which is adjustable in height and characterised by fishing-rope loops, containing the electrical conductors, and steel cable roller-up - used for industrial electrical utensils. At the top, the light is constituted by a car headlamp of 300 W - imported at the beginning of the 1970s from the United States - which is held in place by curved welded metal frames. Toio is an elegant, harmonious but, at the same time, brutal object which, for its capacity of standing out within the compositive aesthetic of industrial design without having neither competitor nor successors, has remained in production since 1962 up until now. Born from the assemblage of industrial components already in production - ready made -, it represents an extreme attempt of industrialization of industrial objects which, through modifications in functions and applications, become design objects.

Given these considerations, it is an urgency to ask ourselves if ideals of representation of living spaces and awareness of the meaning of objects still exist nowadays: “the possession of objects, among the most common and the most ordinary, builds around the subject an aura of respect, a line of demarcation beyond whom the essential features of its own individuality are found. The possession, however, reveals its ambiguous, multifaceted nature, in the measure in which it reveals itself both in large quantities and in small objects. Its value is not absolute but has to be discovered in its social relationships” [20].

Even by the most wrong examples, certainly seductive, theories can be deduced. Let’s consider Patrick Bateman, the mentally disturbed leading actor of *American Psycho* [8]: he is the anti-hero of the tainted contemporary luxury. Patrick Bateman, successful lawyer, lives an aesthetic experience that feeds the idea of false luxury: his

New York apartment becomes the scene in which fall objects chosen without conscience but because they are indispensable for claiming the social status achieved. The result is a luxury selected in a list of catalogues (derogatory and trivializing expression according to those who work in the field of design and interior decoration).

It is significant the current cycle of exhibitions in Milan *La dimensione domestica* curated by Beppe Finessi at Fondazione Achille Castiglioni. In the Castiglioni brothers' office in Piazza Castello is going on stage the philological reconstruction of three domestic settings that Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni presented in major exhibitions between the Fifties and the Eighties: the project started in 2016 with *Ambiente di soggiorno* of 1957 made for *Colori e forme della casa d'oggi* (Villa Olmo, Como) while it is still running *Ambiente di soggiorno* of 1965, set for *La casa abitata* (Palazzo Strozzi, Florence). The philological reconstructions convey a clear message: the lesson of Milanese design is still powerful and it has become heritage of our domesticity beyond the stereotypes, the aporias and the discrepancies within the historiography, as within the practice, of Architecture and Industrial Design [11]. We ought to recall the overcoming required by Walter Benjamin between historic representation and appreciation since "the solution of this problem belongs to a science of history that no longer has to deal with a tangle of pure factual data, but rather with a defined group of wires that represents the plot of the Past in the warp of the Present" [2].

In this second act of *La dimensione domestica* is recreated the convivial atmosphere of a dining room: an unconventional and unpredictable expression of that design that was the signature of the Castiglioni brothers. Every detail has been analyzed and the final scene describes the moment of a domestic ritual. Time and Movement control the action; in the original sketch of Achille Castiglioni the clock marks ten minutes to one: the table is not yet fully laid; the architecture of the glasses implies a remarkable assortment of wines and drinks; the plates are still not placed for the diners of whom we do not know the precise number; the folding chairs are in random order, they are lightweight and easy to place; on the piece of furniture Ramp, equipped with wheels and double-sided (with steps on one face and with shelves on the other) are leaning glasses, bottles, trays, bread basket; although they are not in the scene, we can feel the presence of the masters of the house, probably in the kitchen to complete the preparation of the courses to be served to the guests.

There is a sense of peaceful wait and familiar warmth in this little bourgeois universe, updated to the contemporary taste where nothing is predetermined and the informal doctrine of self-construction of space is promoted: a progressive interior conceived as the over-writing between the distinctive features of a Milanese apartment (like the moulded double shutter white door) and the new design. On the wall the unusual is revealed: a needle of Roman foundation, ancestral souvenir, flanked to a ladder. In the hall set up by the Castiglioni brothers will be soon consumed a Sunday luncheon where the Time reinterprets of the memory of the past for designing a revolutionary way of living the house. Maybe today, I wonder, is the design of the domestic space eager to rediscover the simplicity mentioned by Vittorio Gregotti as "the greatest economy of meanings in relation to the work" [14] honouring the privilege, really exclusive, to design beauty and not simply to buy it? After all, it has been previously recognized as an automobile headlight can become heritage of a renewed consciousness of home living.

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