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Exhibit Review

Zero Gravity. Franco Albini. Costruire le Modernità

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Abstract. Kay Bea Jones reviews the exhibit of the work of
Franco Albini in Milan.

On a spectacular, warm Friday evening in early fall, throngs of the fashionably clad pushed into the great Rationalist hall of the Milan Triennale to hear Andrea Cancellato, Triennale director, curator Fulvio Irace, architect Renzo Piano, and media personality Vittorio Sgarbi inaugurate the centennial exhibition of the prolific and astylistic work of architect Franco Albini (1905-1977). Both Irace and Piano, who installed the show with Franco Origoni, dedicated the event to the recently deceased Milanese designer, Vico Magistretti. Magistretti has left his own mark on Milan's modern culture in the form of mass produced, sleek, smart, everyday furniture. I asked Vico only a few years ago what he thought of the design work of our evening's protagonist: "Ahhh, Franco Albini," he sighed, "He was born too soon."

Piano and Origoni's installation design is light, frugal, and almost invisible – appropriate to set off the work of the home town architect who consistently sparked poetic expression from pragmatic circumstances. Piano's address and catalog statement acknowledge that Albini has been his source of design rigor, material ethos, and tectonic sophistication throughout his career. Piano, after dropping out of the Florence school of architecture after his third year, stalked Albini until he took him into the studio as an apprentice from 1960-63. As a young draftsman in the office where apparently no one spoke, Piano drew detail upon detail for projects that included the Rinascente Department Store in Rome and the Palazzo Rosso Gallery renovation in Genoa. Albini's design method and built objects are renowned for their rigorous craft, and Piano "stole daily with his eyes wide open." The contemporary Italian architect, who like his predecessor became world

renowned for his museums, came to light for the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and has produced the Menil and Cy Twombly Museums in Houston; the High Museum expansion in Atlanta; The Beyeler Foundation in Basel, Switzerland; the Morgan library in Manhattan; and is currently working on the Chicago Art Institute and the conflict-ridden Whitney. Piano concluded by saying that he was glad to celebrate “Albini’s poetic which for me has been so formative.”

If the sublime modern San Lorenzo Museum (1954) that holds the Treasures of the Duomo of Genoa were more accessible, it might be as important to the history of modern architecture as Mies van der Rohe’s Crown Hall or Kahn’s Trenton Bath House. Philip Johnson surely knew of it when he designed his underground painting gallery at his New Canaan estate (1965). The buried treasure held in four cellular rooms banded in local grey stone (*promontorio*) with cast concrete spines is presented in “Zero Gravity” via a large original model, meticulous drawings that render each stone coursing, and period construction shots along with new photographs that honor the 1995 renovation. The success of this Triennale exhibition depends largely on the wealth of material provided by the Albini studio and archives. The range of the architect’s accomplishments is made explicit through museums, installations, interiors, housing, furniture, and urban proposals, and the detailed presentation of this complex assemblage verifies what Manfredo Tafuri called Albini’s “technically faultless vocabulary.” No other architect so thoroughly and consciously designed each and every room as though it were the essential element of modern architecture. In fact, Albini’s many domestic interiors for clients and exhibits during the 1930s were Albini’s means of research. They eventually comprise a thesis that defines his later work: that modernity begins not with the object building, but with the perfect room. Walls become abstract planes from which paintings are removed and suspended on steel armatures. Removing heavy picture frames allowed images to float in the open spaces of galleries or dwellings. Custom furniture made of glass yields transparent views and reflected surfaces. Gravity is dynamically challenged as the room’s contents float and stairs hover above the ground. Albini’s formal language that so gracefully manipulates the constraints of construction to render poetic each element’s component parts relies on concept rather than modern style for its unique architectural expression. The architect’s son, Marco, notes that these carefully developed elements are critical to understanding the significance of his father’s lessons for objects that take on a life of their own. For example, the versatile and elegant composite column of the Veliero bookshelf became the interior column system for the Brera installation, the Palazzo Rosso gallery, and the Olivetti showroom. Through repetition and evolution Albini modelled the accretion of space showing that a modern place is the sum of well-conceived and crafted parts to generate a greater cohesive whole.

“Zero Gravity” explains the key motif in the Triennale assemblage of Albini’s oeuvre. Even the notable talking heads testify from suspended plasma screens. Among them Renzo Piano, Marco Albini, Vittorio Gregotti, Albini collaborators Enea Manfredini, Matilde Baffa and others discuss the role Albini played in forming a modern ethos. The contents of the exhibit are divided into eight sections: Bachelor Machines; The New City: Milan and Rational Architecture; Atmospheric Spaces: The Architecture of Exhibitions; Dwelling Objects; Rooms of Memory; Modernity and Tradition; The Museums between Albini and Scarpa; and the Technology of the City, each curated by a different scholar or pair of scholars. In spite of the subdivision of interests gleaned from disassociated scholarship, the show holds together. “Zero Gravity” is the first of three simultaneous exhibits titled

“Costruire le Modernità” (Constructing Modernity). The other two shows to be hosted in Genoa and Turin later this year will feature the coincident careers of Ignazio Gardella and Carlo Mollino, respectively, each also born in 1905.

“Zero Gravity” is distinguished by the quality of original material in the show – Albin’s transparent radio (1938), the original columns of the Veliero glass bookshelf (1940), static only when loaded with books, Cassina’s reconstruction of the same artifact, the table for the aviator Ferrarin (1932), several chairs with their cherry-red upholstery, and countless original drawings in ink or graphite on delicate yellow tracing paper that show the refined clarity of Albin’s design method. High-quality original black and white photographs enlarged and suspended to fill the space are the staple representation for built work, especially for ephemeral designs no longer accessible. One is left to wonder why the original Triennale installations from 1936 (Room for a Man) and 1940 (Living room for a Villa) were not reconstructed for this occasion, especially since the same venue is hosting the current homage. In the interest of situating Albin across the modern century, comparisons are forged between Albin and other Italian modernists, including Persico, Mollino, Scarpa, Michelucci, Libera, and Moretti. The Milanese are clearly enthralled with their home-grown architect, and recognize his many contributions to the built and social fabric of the city, especially noteworthy popular housing, the Villetta Pestarini, the MSA (Il Movimento di Studi per l’Architettura) debates after World War II, collaborations for a better city in the proposals for Milano Verde and the A.R. (Architetti Reuniti) plans, and the award-winning lines 1 and 2 of the Milan subway. Yet a missed opportunity of the DARC-co-sponsored Triennale tribute lies in the insular nature of the endeavor – only Italian critics were summoned and only Italian architects were sought for comparison. Had Albin’s accomplishments relative to those of Lou Kahn, Philip Johnson, and Lina Bo Bardi (working in Brazil) been examined with fresh perspectives by scholars outside the Milanese circle, the show would likely reach a wider audience, including some who are not yet aware of Albin’s role in constructing modernity. As so often happens with anniversary shows, there is too much worship and too little critical interrogation. Albin collaborated throughout his long career, and while various collaborators are mentioned, none are considered unduly influential in his constantly developing vocabulary. The most noticeable oversight is the lack of consideration of Franco Helg, who worked with Albin from 1951 until his death and carried on the studio until 1989.

The exhibition catalog, *Zero Gravity Franco Albini Costruire le Modernità*, published by The Milan Triennale and Mondadori Electa S.p.A., was edited by Federico Bucci and Fulvio Irace (2006).

About the reviewer

Kay Bea Jones is an associate professor at the Ohio State Austin E. Knowlton School of Architecture where she has taught for twenty-one years. She began the KSA abroad studies program in Italy and teaches a traveling seminar that considers cross-cultural uses of public space. She has written and lectured widely about travel pedagogy and Italian modern and contemporary architecture. Jones recently published *Publi-city: techniques for the survival of public space* (with Pippo Ciorra, and Beatrice Bruscoli), a discussion of their intercultural pedagogical collaborations. Her architectural research on alternatives to market rate housing has resulted in the recent Buckeye Village Community Center at Ohio State, which she designed with George Acock and Andrew Rosenthal. The building recently received the national 2006 EDRA Places Design Award and an American Institute of Architects 2006 Merit Award. Jones has published and lectured widely on modern Italian architecture. She has collaborated with colleagues at the Milan Polytechnic to bring the traveling exhibition of the museums and installations of Franco Albini to eight North American venues, where she has lectured about his complex modernity regarding room as the unit element of modern architecture. Her forthcoming book on this is titled *Suspending Modernity: The Architecture of Franco Albini*.