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Original
Office buildings towards the concept of corporate image. Gualino Palace: a disappeared case of corporate modernism / Franchini, C.. - In: RES MOBILIS. - ISSN 2255-2057. - ELETTRONICO. - 3:n°3(2014), pp. 90-102.

Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/2557337 since:

Publisher:
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Published
DOI:

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09 November 2026

Res Mobilis
Revista internacional de investigación en
mobiliario y objetos decorativos
Vol. 3, nº. 3, 2014

OFFICE BUILDINGS TOWARDS THE CONCEPT OF CORPORATE IMAGE. GUALINO PALACE: A DISAPPEARED CASE OF CORPORATE MODERNISM.

EDIFICIOS DE OFICINAS HACIA UN CONCEPTO DE IMAGEN CORPORATIVA. GUALINO PALACE: LA DESAPARICIÓN DEL MOVIMIENTO MODERNO CORPORATIVO

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Abstract

The article focuses on the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in office buildings. Since the Twenties architects have begun to consider furniture and furnishing in modern office as an opportunity to combine their functional needs according to the image of a modern company. Giuseppe Pagano and Gino Levi Montalcini, two Italian architects involved in office modern design, built and furnished *Palazzo Gualino* (Turin, 1928-1930) considered as a prime example of the new rationalist architecture in Italy. Every single detail was carefully studied following the concept of company identity. Over the years *Palazzo Gualino* was sold to different companies and a lot of its furniture disappeared. As a consequence, due to the change of its function, a restoration was carried out without considering the preservation of its interior design. Thus, a question arises: is it possible to preserve the historical value of a unique office building when a change of its function occurs?

Keywords: Corporate Image, Office Buildings, Giuseppe Pagano Pogatschnig, Gino Levi Montalcini, Gualino Palace.

Resumen

El artículo trata sobre el concepto de *Gesamtkunstwerk* en arquitectura. Desde los años veinte los arquitectos comenzaron a considerar los muebles y el amueblamiento de las oficinas modernas como una ocasión para combinar las necesidades funcionales acordes con la imagen de la empresa moderna. Giuseppe Pagano y Gino Levi Montalcini, dos arquitectos italianos implicados en el diseño de la oficina moderna, construyeron y amueblaron el *Palazzo Gualino* (Turin, 1928-1930), que ha sido considerado como un excelente ejemplo de la nueva arquitectura racionalista en Italia. Cada detalle fue cuidadosamente estudiado continuando la identidad de la compañía. A lo largo de los años, el *Palazzo*

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Gualino ha sido vendido a distintas sociedades y la mayor parte de su mobiliario ha desaparecido. Como consecuencia, y por el cambio de su función, se ha hecho una restauración sin tener en cuenta la preservación del diseño interior original. Por lo tanto, se plantea una cuestión: ¿Es posible preservar el valor histórico de un edificio de oficinas cuando han cambiado sus funciones?

Palabras clave: Imagen corporativa, edificios de oficinas, Giuseppe Pagano Pogatschnig, Gino Levi Montalcini, Palazzo Gualino.

International examples prove that architecture conceived as a total work of art has been adopted and used to support corporate image in office buildings.

Already at the beginning of the 20th century the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* moved from the private sphere of domesticity to public space[1]; as testified by the Austrian architect Otto Koloman Wagner (1814-1918) design for the interiors and furniture of the Die Zeit newspaper (1902) and for the Österreichische Postsparkasse (1904-1906) of Vienna.

Since the Twenties, also thanks to the designers of department stores, the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* has become a sales tool and this new interpretation transferred into office buildings. Furthermore, interiors have become indicators of corporate identity and inseparable from brand: the Shell logo to create the façade decoration and the interior design was used by the Dutch architect Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud (1890-1963) for the Royal Dutch Shell plc House (1938-1948) in The Hague.

In Italy, through a process of formal simplification and careful research of functional solutions, few office buildings epitomized the utilitarian and anti-monumental idea that characterized the Modern Movement. The Italian architect Giuseppe Terragni (1904-1943) built and furnished the well-known Casa del Fascio in Como (1928-1936) and, to promote Fascism, he designed the tubular steel chair which was named *Benita*[2].

Some striking examples show worldwide how the modern interior office has become a means of communication. Rebuilt in 1934 by the designer Raymond Loewy (1893-1986) for the Contemporary Industrial Art exhibition at the Metropolitan of New York, Loewy's own office set the scene for the streamline that was his signature.

The Italian architect Giò Ponti (1891-1979) used horizontal black and white striped wooden inlays to cover the walls and furniture of the Società Ferrania director's office (Rome, 1936) in order to evoke the photographic film the company produced and to remind the popular logo "omino Ferrania".

As individuals, even companies develop their own identity through their buildings. A "cathedral of work", the Johnson Wax Building (Racine, Wisconsin, 1936-1939) by Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) symbolizes through forms and materials the brilliance of wax. Thus, design became the best way to advertise a company. In the Johnson Wax building, Wright organized the project around the

typing pool, as he had previously done in the Larkin building (1904, Buffalo, New York, demolished in 1950)[3]. The architect created "immersive" environments that were isolated from the outside through controlled temperature and light. He used metal furniture to achieve an impression of efficiency. The first headquarter of Montecatini in Milan (1935-1938, by Giò Ponti and Antonio Fornaroli) was the emblem of modernity and throughout its interiors displayed the various possibilities of uses aluminium produced by the company: from windows, furniture, handles, telephones to balcony and pneumatic tube.

Architects all over the world considered office furniture as an opportunity to combine functional needs and a concise and expressive grammar, with the requirements of efficiency, productivity and the image of a modern company. As in a total work of art, interior design was conceived as an indissoluble union of space and furniture: «The furniture by Figini and Pollini impose on the critics and on the public the belief that the furniture is mostly architecture […]»[4]. In a valuable book that collected the pictures of Italian modern interior design, Guido Fiorini wrote in 1935: «The interiors of an architecture *are* the architecture»[5].

Metal office furniture was seen by Giò Ponti as a "fixture" of public spaces[6]. The Italian architect Armando Melis de Villa (1889-1961), taking the ideas of William Henry Leffingwell (1876-1934, founder of National Office Management Association), considered the office furniture as a "tool"[7].

In Italy the taste for colour re-entered office design with a new perceptive function. Inlays in *linoleum* underlined the perfect geometries and the smooth surfaces of modernity. The new autarchic materials like *buxus* were extensively used in furniture design to replace more expensive materials[8]. The choice of materials was related to comfort, maintenance and durability. Right angles and smooth surfaces created abstract patterns of reflection of pure volumes suggesting cubic paintings.

Adriano Olivetti (1901-1960), Olivetti's director since 1935, took the tayloristic approach to the organisation of office work. He published his theory in *Tecnica ed Organizzazione*, that was the magazine he founded in 1937. At the end of the Forties, in Italy, the typology of office-building was perfectly defined through the adoption of: functional circulation schemes, conditioning systems, appropriate lighting, clear signposting, and safety equipment. The "corporate modernism" was completely established.

Among Italian architects-designers involved in office modern design there was Giuseppe Pagano - Pogatschnig (Parenzo 1896 - Mathausen 1945)[9] and Gino Levi Montalcini (Milan 1902 - Turin 1974)[10] who built and furnished Palazzo Salpa, *alias Palazzo Gualino* (Turin, 1928-1930) for Riccardo Gualino's Salpa company[11].

Since the time of its construction, *Palazzo Salpa*[12] has been recognized as a prime example of the new rationalist architecture in Italy and the functional severity of its volume was defined as Loosian[13]. Its exterior design demonstrates a planned correspondence with the functionality of interior spaces (Fig. 1). It was the first office building in Turin, and one of the first in Italy, to use a floor-type and to install a conditioning system[14].

Fig. 1. *Palazzo Salpa* called Palazzo Gualino (Turin, 1928-1930). *La Casa bella*, *n.*32 (1930), p. 11.

Lamps were positioned around the openings to signal the entrance and, in the evening, the whole building became a dark background with no volume where the windows changed into large lamps. Furthermore, it was the result of a total work of art where every detail was conceived to be a part of a whole.

Inside the building, the wall edges were covered with chrome profiles, which reduced wear and at the same time made the light vibrating (Fig. 2). Every detail, from wall clocks to handles, was designed to improve work and receive clients.

Fig. 2. Entrance hall comprising office boy's table. *La Casa bella, n.*32 (1930), p. 17.

To provide the company image in the reception hall the names of the various offices were written in *buxus* letters on a sliding rail. Above office doors signal lights were installed to call the office boy. On the side entrance for "white and pink collars" there was a *time clock* with punching holes for 400 cards (Fig. 3).

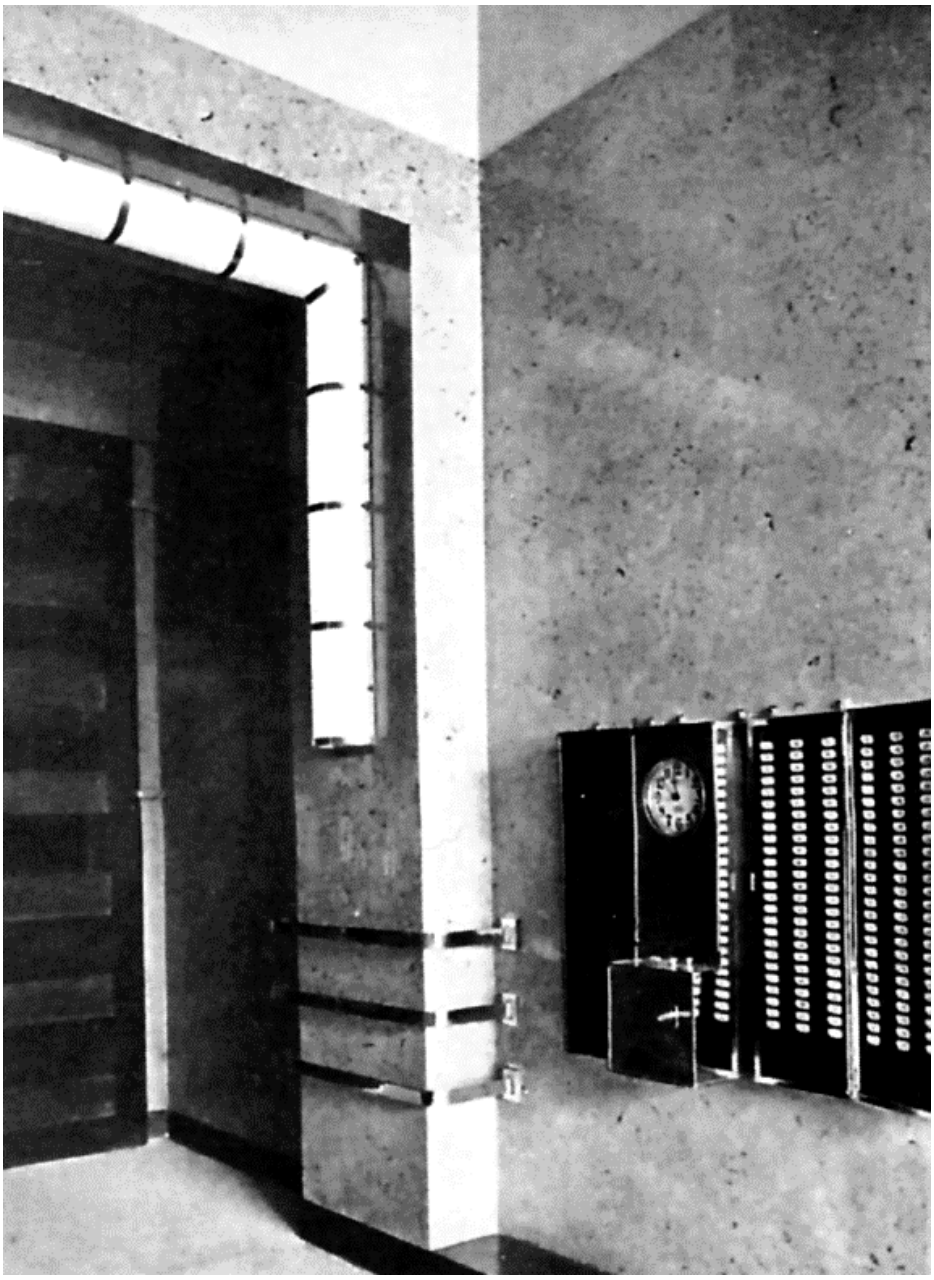

Fig. 3. Entrance used for employees framed by light with *time clock* on one side. (Ph. Pedrini). *Domus* 30 (1930), p. 39.

Siemens telephones were placed everywhere and, for the boardroom and the meeting rooms, new telephones were designed and produced by S.A. Brevetti Perego of Milan. Special chandeliers made with cubes of *Artax* were designed for the boardroom (Fig. 4), while the offices were illuminated with light diffusers by Kandem, Zeiss and Philips.

Fig. 4. Boardroom with Salpa leather floor, lamps using *Artax* cubes and F.I.P.'s furniture in grey and black *buxus* (Photo Pedrini). *Domus, n.* 30 (1930), p. 66.

The building looked like a great "body" in the service of a great industry. «Light signals, ringtones, phones accelerate the work, organizing activities, the possibilities multiply in perfect step with the fastest machines of the big industry that feeds these offices»[15].

Salpa leather - the autarchic material patented by Salpa - was used to line the Stigler elevators and to cover the pavement of the boardroom with the aim of strengthening the corporate image. Ahead of its time, furnishings and furniture were designed by assigning an advertising value to the material produced by the company.

In Palazzo Gualino all materials, colours, lightings, textiles, furniture and furnishings were carefully studied to realize the concept of company image that anticipated Olivetti's.

The architects designed 67 different pieces of furniture that were supposed to be the prototype for the new specialized production of office furniture in Fabbrica Italiana Pianoforti - F.I.P. (Italian Piano Factory), bought by Gualino in 1927 (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. F.I.P. advertisement. *Domus*, n. 30 (1930), sp.

Furniture was composed of pure volumes made shiny by the combination of different *buxus* veneers (Fig. 6). The new material was produced by the Cartiere Giacomo Bosso and worked by F.I.P. in Turin[16].

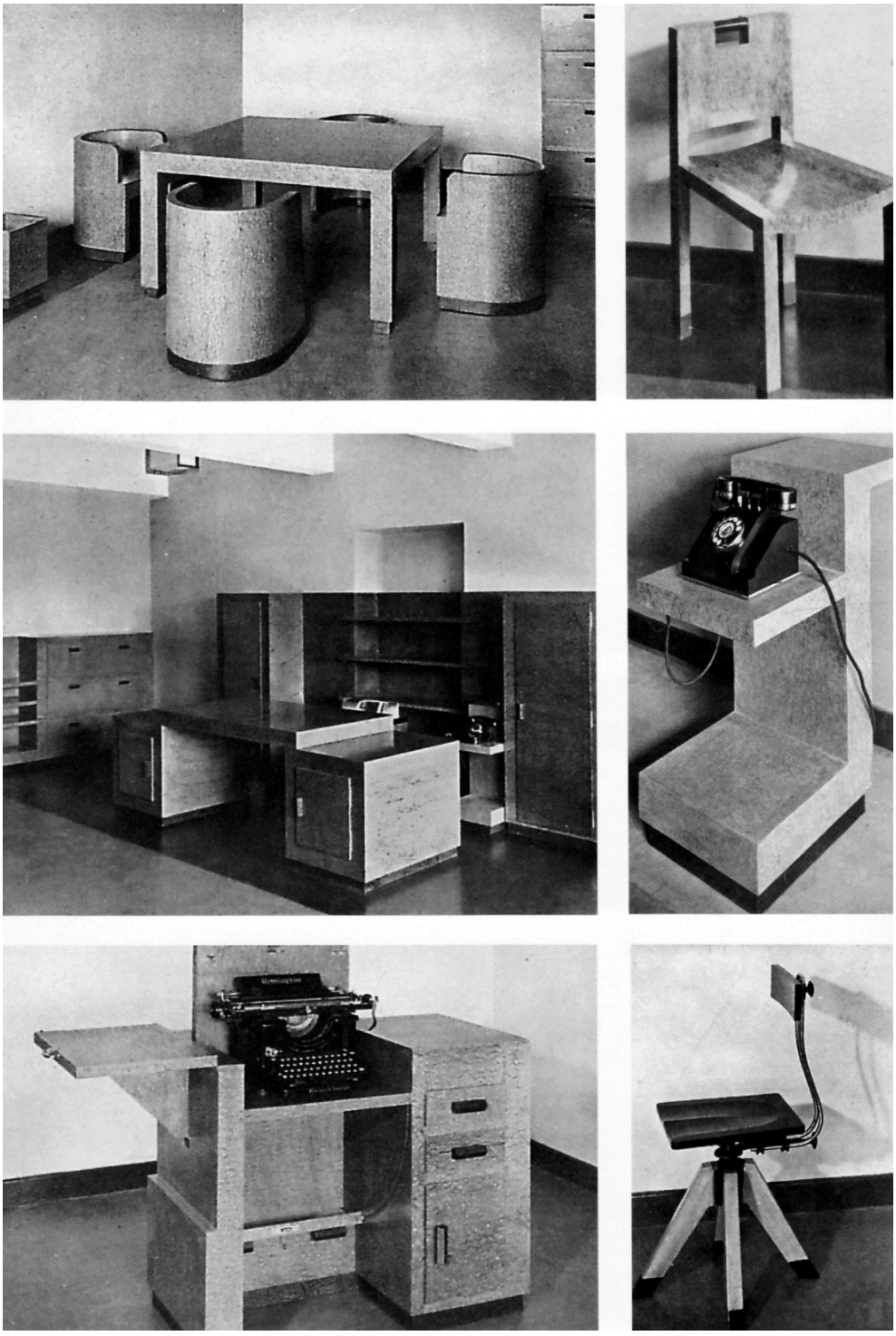

Fig. 6. F.I.P. furniture for Gualino Palace. *Domus*, n. 30 (1930), sp.

Chairs, folding furniture for typewriters, tables and cabinets for offices had a cohesive design. Only the swivel chair for clerks, adjustable in height, was light in its formal conception, thanks to a use of tubular metal structure. The design of the office boy's desk, which was placed in front of the elevators in the hallway,

was totally new: it had a high shelf on the front to allow the visitor to write while, standing on the opposite side of the cabinet, the office boy was sitting waiting.

Gualino's office was at the top of the building (Fig. 7). In *Domus* the painter Gigi Chessa published an enthusiastic comment on this interior design: «Isolated on the top floor, away from street noise, is the most refined and comfortable work environment [...]. But who can describe the beauty of the large window made of glass and chromed steel, and the veranda covered with shiny black?»[17]. In this space, the use of glass is symbolic: glass was the metaphor of moral transparency of the director and used as a medium of the corporate image (Fig. 8).

Fig. 7. The president's office. *La Casa bella, n.*32 (1930), p. 16.

Fig. 8. Veranda of the president's office. *La Casa bella, n.*32 (1930), p. 21.

The idea of reducing noise coming from the street and spreading natural light evenly through glass was later used by Pagano in the offices of the "*Il Popolo d'Italia"* newspaper (1934-35, Milan), where the architect furnished the room belonging to director Vito Mussolini, the Duce's nephew. A full conception of symbolic space was used for Gualino Palace. Furthermore, the project is surprisingly close to the international style for the functionality, transparency, lightness and simplicity achieved[18].

At the end of the 30's Gualino Palace was sold to the Agnelli family and became the FIAT representative office. In 1988 FIAT sold the building to the Turin Municipality and Gualino Palace was reconverted into municipal tax offices. Over the years a lot of its furniture disappeared.

Situated in a "central historical area", the Palace was under legal protection because it was a public building dating back to more than 50 years ("Code of cultural and landscape heritage", law decree n. 42/2004 art. 10). Nevertheless, in 2007 it entered the "Fondo Città di Torino" (a special fund also comprising the powerful Pirelli Re real estate company) and in March 2012 the Palace was sold again and bought for 14.2 million euro by Gesco Impresit, a real estate company of Rome.

Palazzo Gualino was soon reconverted into a luxury residential building losing its original value. Due to the change of its function, a careful restoration of its exterior has not comprised the integral preservation of its interior design.

In July 2012 a public petition against the building transformations was signed. Some local newspaper articles exposed the clearance sale of 20th architectural heritage to conceal the municipal debt.

In conclusion: considering on the one hand that the identity of office buildings is interrelated to the corporate image which may extend to interior design, and on the other hand, considering that the materials used in Modern Movement interiors were conceived to be renewed and replaced, not due to the wear of the material but in order to adapt to changing needs and fashions. Two questions can arise. Are the interior design changes compatible with the architectural conservation of office buildings? How can a unique interior design be preserved when a change of its functions occurs?

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NOTES

[1] See: SPARKE, Penny, *The Modern Interior*, London, Reaktion Books, 2008.

[2] Among the Italian manufacturers of metal furniture we can find: Cova - Milan, Emilio Pino - Parabiago; Columbus - Milan (producer of the seats for Palazzo del Fascio of Como); Antonio Parma e Figli - Saronno. The first real mass production of metal furniture for offices was due to Olivetti, who in 1930 founded Synthesis.

[3] The industrial open-space entered office design under the name of "pool". Made possible of reinforced concrete structure, the "pool" was the easier space to control the work of employee if compared to the previous room offices. See: FIORINO, Imma. *Uffici. Interni arredi oggetti*, Torino, Einaudi, 2011.

[4] PERSICO, Edoardo, "Una mostra a Milano", in *La Casa bella*, n.57, Milano, 1932, p. 25. Quotation translated by the author.

[5] FILLIA (ed.), *Gli ambienti della nuova architettura*, Torino, Unione Tipografica Editrice Torinese, 1935, p. 9. Quotation translated by the author.

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11 By the same architects is SALPA factory office building (1930, Sesto San Giovanni - Milan). BOTTONI, Pietro, "Un ufficio moderno", in La Casa bella, n.29, Milano, 1930, pp. 16-19.

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13 MAZZUCCHELLI, Anna Maria, "Pagano architetto", in *Costruzioni-Casabella*, nn. 195-198, Milano, 1946, pp. 30-32.

[14] On office buildings in Turin see: FRANCHINI, Caterina, "La modernità della tradizione. Caratteri di innovazione tecnologico-progettuale nel palazzo per uffici", in CRIPPA, Maria Antonietta, MONTANARI, Guido (eds.), *Città architettura tradizione*, Firenze, Alinea Editrice, 2006, pp. 241-279. FRANCHINI Caterina, "L'insediamento del terziario: rinnovamento urbano e continuità della tradizione", in TURCO, Maria Grazia, DOCCI, Marina (eds.), *L'architettura dell' "altra" modernità*, Roma, Gangemi Editore, 2010, pp. 204-211.

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Fecha de recepción: 14 de noviembre de 2013
Fecha de revisión: 18 de noviembre de 2013
Fecha de aceptación: 27 de noviembre de 2013