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Gae Aulenti (1927 – 2012)

Triennale di Milano, 22 May 2024 – 12 January 2025
In collaboration with: Archivio Gae Aulenti
Giovanni Agosti with Nina Artioli and Nina Bassoli (curators); Tspoon (exhibition design)

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From May 22nd, 2024 to January 12th, 2025, the Triennale Milano is hosting *Gae Aulenti (1927–2012)*, an extensive retrospective exhibition honoring one of the most illustrious figures in 20th-century Italian and international architecture and design. Organized in collaboration with the Archivio Gae Aulenti, the exhibition is curated by art historian Giovanni Agosti, together with Nina Artioli, Aulenti's granddaughter and director of the Archivio Gae Aulenti, and Nina Bassoli, curator for Triennale's section on architecture, urban regeneration, and the city. The exhibition design, conceived by Tspoon, a female-led architectural studio based in Rome and co-directed by Artioli, transforms the Triennale's spaces into an evocative journey through Aulenti's multifaceted career.

This is the first major monographic exhibition devoted to Gaetana Emilia Aulenti, universally known as Gae Aulenti, whose career spanned over six decades. It explores her remarkable contributions to architecture while contextualizing her work within the cultural, political, and artistic currents of her time—a period during which she was one of the few women to achieve prominence in a male-dominated field. The choice of the Triennale as the exhibition venue is particularly significant: it was here, in the early 1950s, that her professional journey began, and it was here, in 2012, that she received the *Medaglia d'Oro alla Carriera* (Career Gold Medal) in recognition of her enduring impact on Italian architectural culture.

Aulenti's professional trajectory is a rare and empowering exception to the gender norms of an era when architecture was predominantly male dominated. After graduating from the Politecnico di Milano in 1954, she joined the editorial team of *Casabella-continuità* directed by architect Ernesto Nathan Rogers, where she worked until 1965. Concurrently, she served as Rogers' assistant at the Politecnico in Milan and, earlier, as assistant to Giuseppe Samonà at IUAV Venice. Rogers' death in 1969 marked a pivotal moment, prompting Aulenti to dedicate herself fully to professional practice. Defying conventions, she resisted partnerships with male contemporaries, asserting full authorship over her projects and claiming her independence—an uncommon stance for women in the profession at that time. Far from conforming to the stereotypical relegation of female architects to interior design, Gae Aulenti distinguished herself by developing her prestige in design and exhibition design, having initially established herself in architecture. Significantly, Aulenti has consistently emphasized her belief that architecture, design, and installations constitute a continuing dialogue with each other as an eloquent part of a unified practice. Her holistic practice as an architect was rooted in a sophisticated intersection between the importance of understanding the peculiarities of each project context and her interest in art, literature, music, and theatre. This interdisciplinary engagement fostered a complex and multilayered dialogue between the architecture program and the realized object.

The exhibition elucidates Aulenti's holistic approach to design, where architecture, furniture, and exhibition installations are presented not as separate disciplines but as interconnected modes of expression. Her oeuvre reflects an overarching philosophy that rejected rigid specialization in favor of a fluid interplay between form, function, and cultural context. This synthesis is evident in her embrace of diverse influences—art, literature, music, theatre, photography, and travel—all of which profoundly enriched her creative process.

Curated with meticulous precision and scientific rigor, the exhibition draws on materials from Aulenti's archive. It features a series of immersive 1:1 reconstructions of thirteen seminal projects, complemented by archival materials such as drawings, sketches, photographs, and diaries. These elements are displayed around the perimeter of the exhibition space, creating a centrifugal-centripetal dynamic that offers both chronological and thematic narratives. This scenographic approach transforms the gallery into a 'metatheatre,' where the boundaries between observer and participant blur, inviting visitors to engage with Aulenti's human and professional legacy in all its complexity.

The journey begins with a reconstruction of *L'arrivo al mare* [*Arrival at the Seaside*], a project that garnered critical acclaim at the 1964 Milan Triennale. This installation, inspired by Picasso's *Deux femmes courant sur la plage*, features wooden silhouettes and mirrored surfaces that create an illusory, theatrical environment, exemplifying Aulenti's early forays into scenography.

Another standout moment is the recreation of the Olivetti showroom in Buenos Aires (1968), which marked a turning point in her collaboration with the iconic Italian company. Aulenti transformed the retail space into a kaleidoscopic interplay of mirrors and light. Central to this setting is her *King Sun* lamp, designed for Kartell in 1967, which introduces visitors to Aulenti's sophisticated approach to lighting. This is further illuminated by the mesmerizing studies and sketches of her most iconic and well-known lamps, enriching the exhibition's archival galleries.

The exhibition also revisits her 1973 FIAT showroom in Zurich's Beethovenstrasse, where Aulenti introduced an inclined ramp to display cars in motion, echoing the dynamics of urban traffic and likely drawing inspiration from the iconic FIAT car test track on the roof of the Lingotto factory in Turin. Nearby, a meticulously reconstructed fragment of the Brion family's home in San Michele di Pagana (1973) changes the scene, revealing her approach to interior design, imbued with lyricism and where the boundaries between exhibition design, stage and set design and interior design blur. The living room, replete with her *Jumbo* marble table (Knoll) and *Stringa* sofa (Poltranova), is enriched by sculptural accents, plants, and iconic lighting designs, including the *Pipistrello* (1965) and *Ruspa* (1971).

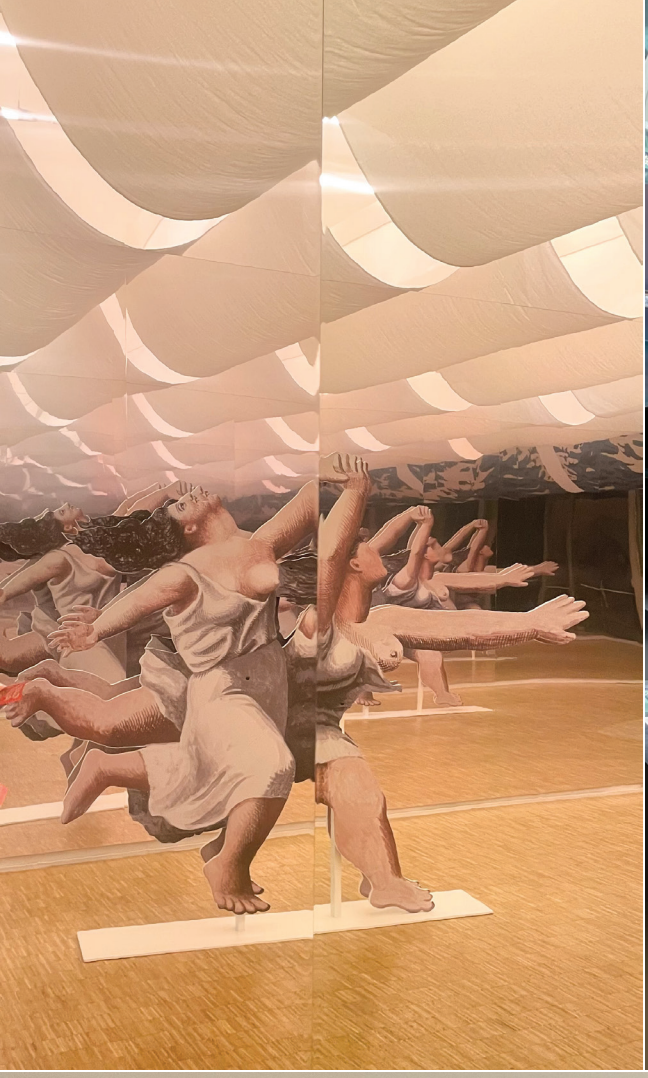
Aulenti's prowess in exhibition design is further highlighted through projects such as the labyrinthine layout for Christo's *Valley Curtain* (1973) at Milan's Rotonda della Besana curated by Germano Celant and the staging of Euripides' *Bacchae* (1977) in Magnolfi Institute in Prato, directed by Luca Ronconi. The year 1986 marked a pivotal moment in Aulenti's career, exposing her to significant museum projects, particularly the transformation of the Gare d'Orsay, which remains one of her most celebrated projects for its sensitive approach to integrating a contemporary project within a pre-existing historical architectural context. This achievement cemented her international recognition. The exhibition recreates the central gallery, where classical sculptures and custom-designed benches reflect her dialogue with art historian Michel Laclotte. In the same year, Aulenti also worked on the refurbishment of Palazzo Grassi in Venice, purchased by FIAT three years earlier, in 1983, and the exhibition offers another stunning reconstructed example of this project.

The latter part of the exhibition examines her later works, including the *Galleria dei Disegni* (1994) at the Triennale, her operatic scenography for Strauss's *Elektra* directed again by Luca Ronconi at Teatro alla Scala (1994), and the intimate cinema space of *Spazio Oberdan* (1999). The journey concludes with reconstructions of her public projects: the Naples Metro's Museum Station (2001), where her design emerges as a setting for juxtaposed copies of archaeological artefacts, including a reconstructed piece featuring Carafa's Horse by Donatello, and Perugia Airport (2011) where the architect's favorite color, red, is prominently featured on its surfaces, guiding visitors to the exhibition's conclusion.

The exhibition not only emphasizes the international experiences of the architect but also delves into Gae Aulenti's personal life and biography, highlighting her rich cultural network and friendships with notable intellectuals such as conductor Claudio Abbado, pianist Maurizio Pollini, and director Luca Ronconi, among others. Indeed, the exhibition provides a multi-faceted perspective on the major evolutions and trajectories of Italian architectural culture, as well as the distinctive experiences that marked Italy in the latter half of the 20th century. This reflects Aulenti's enduring passion for literature, music, and theatre throughout her life.

Another important aspect, certainly neither secondary nor marginal, that emerges from the exhibition is Gae Aulenti's political commitment and social involvement. In fact, the Triennale dedicates an important space, extending beyond the exhibition itself, to her interdisciplinary project *Milano invece di Milano* [*Milan Instead of Milan*] of 1969, showcased in the newly refurbished Research, Study, and Archives Centre. This project, which involved architects, sociologists, and citizens, envisioned Milan without cars—fully accessible to pedestrians and bicycles and highly inclusive for children. Aulenti even imagined producing a movie about it in collaboration with Pier Paolo Pasolini. This lesser-known project surprises for its forward-thinking vision, especially considering how little has changed in Milan since her proposal. It underscores how architecture can influence political life and how architects mediate this role through their profession—a role that is, unfortunately, often overlooked and forgotten by many in the field.

While the monolithic, chronologically driven approach risks a didactic tone, it succeeds in conveying the richness and diversity of Aulenti's oeuvre. By blending immersive scenographic reconstructions with meticulously curated archival materials, the exhibition offers a sophisticated yet spectacular homage to one of the 20th century's most remarkable architects, whose vision and approach continue to resonate far beyond the boundaries of the architectural discipline itself.



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