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Carlo Mollino’s Celebration in Architecture

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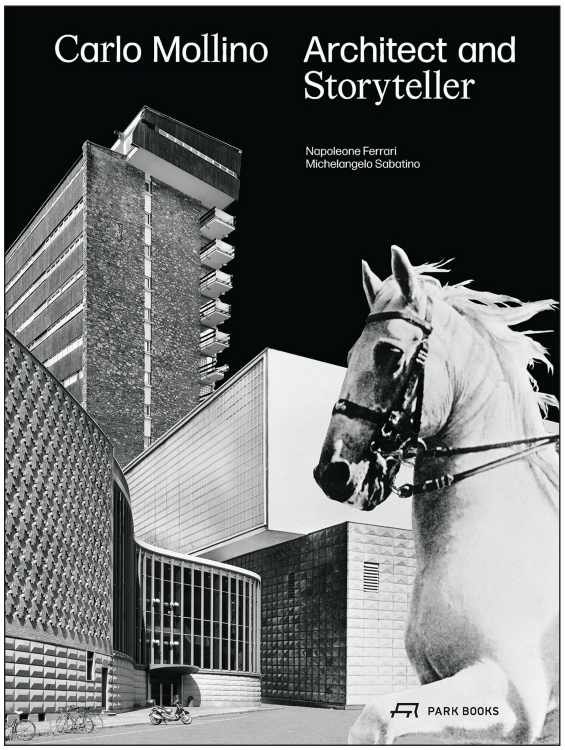
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A review of Napoleone Ferrari and Michelangelo Sabatino, *Carlo Mollino: Architect and Storyteller*, Zurich: Park Books, 2021, 456 pages. ISBN: 9783038601333. Focused on architecture, but not limited to it, this book is remarkable both in form and content. On the one hand, it stands out for its iconography and addresses a wide audience and thus participates in the broader celebration of Mollino over the past few decades. On the other hand, the textual content provides scientific insight into his work.

Keywords: Carlo Mollino; 20th-century Italian architecture; Turin; Pino Musi

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Napoleone Ferrari and Michelangelo Sabatino's *Carlo Mollino* is a book of notable editorial quality, both formally, having been designed by the Zurich-based graphic design studio Elektrosmog, and content-wise, the contributions having been selected by Ferrari, the president of Museo Casa Mollino in Turin, and Sabatino, professor and director of the PhD Program at IIT College of Architecture in Chicago. To better appreciate the book, it is necessary to understand how the Turin architect has been received over the last fifty years.

Carlo Mollino designed extraordinary buildings, sui generis interior spaces, experimental projects, furnishings of admirable workmanship and also wrote and edited books and taught at the Politecnico di Torino, Italy. Furthermore, he successfully crossed over into other disciplines. He occupied a space between futurism and surrealism and between rationalism and eclecticism and combined his professional life with the reckless life of a skier, aviator, pilot, and even a risqué photographer. Because he had such a wide-ranging career, his work has received meticulous scholarly attention, while his life story has been subject to glossy spectacularization.

Scholars began addressing his work about a decade after his death in 1973. The first monograph by Giovanni Brino (an architect who graduated with Mollino and managed his archive) was published in 1985, while the first exhibitions were undertaken in Turin and Paris in 1989 and followed by an exhibition in Basel and Vienna in 1991 (Brino 1985; Mollino 1898; Reichlin and Stiller 1991). Established figures from the Italian and international architectural milieu including François Burkhardt, Roberto Gabetti, Ignazio Gardella, and Paolo Portoghesi as well as younger scholars of Italian modern architecture such as Fulvio Irace (1989) contributed to these pioneering initiatives.

Since then, numerous other monographs have taken diverse approaches to Mollino's oeuvre, devoting attention to his artistic production beyond his building. Another significant exhibition was held in 2006–2007 in Turin that was accompanied

by a catalogue edited by Sergio Pace (2006) that delves deeper into the peculiar way Mollino practiced the architectural profession. Meanwhile, especially abroad, Mollino's fame has grown significantly owing to his photographic work and furniture design (Ferrari and Ferrari 2006a; Ferrari and Ferrari 2009; Giunta 2016; Zanot 2018; Ulmer and San Pietro 1994; Colombari 2005; Ferrari and Ferrari 2006b; Perruccio and Milan 2020). Thanks to the media sensation he has become, since the 2000s, his design has been part of the crowded realm where contemporary art and design meet, as the skyrocketing prices for his furniture testify (Lovell 2009). In 2020, one of his tables — donated in 1954 by Italy to the Brooklyn Museum, in New York — was sold by Sotheby's for US$6,181,350.

As Ferrari and Sabatino's volume clearly shows, the twofold nature of the interest in Mollino's career influences almost every new publication and exhibition on his oeuvre, and they take up both his architecture and the 'storyteller' dimension of Mollino's life and works.

The volume, indeed, stands out, first and foremost, for its large format (24 × 32 centimeters), the quality of the graphics, and the generosity of the iconography (502 color and 45 b/w illustrations across 456 pages, foregrounding the photogenic and eccentric character of the Turin architect), which resulted in the volume being named one of the most beautiful Swiss books of 2023. At first glance, the predominance of images over texts might make it seem the book is at bottom a coffee-table book. However, the selection and arrangement of the iconography and how it is intertwined with the written content ensures it is a rigorous and scholarly contribution. Many monographs are structured through a succession of thematic essays that images are tasked with supporting, but in the case of this volume, full-spread pictures determine the narrative that is accompanied by long captions and short texts that expand on the work or topic under discussion.

The rhythm of text and images varies across the volume's three sections. The first section ('Framing Carlo Mollino') offers a preliminary portrait of Turin's architect through nine short paragraphs, documenting his (self-)representation (Mollino was 'an architect who curated his images' and who 'left nothing to chance'), his modus operandi ('work in process'), his communication and expressive strategies ('architecture as language'), his formative years ('an enchanted childhood, an educational journey'), his design ('surreal interiors', 'the structures of nature', 'surface and structure'), his writings and teaching ('essayist and educator'), and the enmeshment of technique, memory, and aesthetics in his work ('the body of architecture', 'beauty and proportions', 'art and technique', 'modern eclecticism').

The second section — the volume's core, covering 360 pages of the 456 — deals with Mollino's architectural work from 1933 on. The starting point is not a building, but a prose fiction manifesto entitled 'Vita di Oberon' (an allusion to the king of the fairies in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) that was published in the Italian journal *Casabella* in several parts and that in the book is reproduced in a larger format (Mollino 2006). The manifesto describes the architect Oberon's design of the horse riding club (1937–1940), house on the hill (1942), and RAI auditorium (1950–1952) in Turin, the offices of the farmers' federation (1933–1935) in Cuneo, and mountain resorts in Cervinia, the Susa Valley, and the Aosta, buildings that show where professional practice met Mollino's 'futurist' spirit. His profound knowledge of Alpine building culture (De Rossi and Dini 2023) was accompanied by his passion for sports that he addressed with a proverbial analytical attitude. *Introduzione al discesismo* (1950) is a genuine ski manual that he wrote and illustrated.

Ferrari and Sabatino document the process behind Mollino's architecture by drawing on images sourced from Piedmontese archives, including the Carlo Mollino Archives at Turin's polytechnic that are accompanied by a recent series of photographs by the Italian photographer Pino Musi. Shot mostly in black and white, Musi's photos linger on architectural details, such as the unsturdy railings at the top of the Lago Nero sled station terrace (1946–1947) that recall Victor Horta's whiplash line; the roughness of the stone of the monument to the fallen soldiers in Turin (1945–1947), and the pointed drainpipe projecting out from the Cattaneo house that dialogues horizontally with Lake Maggiore's horizon in the background.

Visual fragments of Mollino's imagination are also included, such as photographs of a section of epiphysis bone, Turin's *Fetta di polenta*, a house by architect Alessandro Antonelli that is literally shaped like a slice of cornmeal, and Leo Gasperl's acrobatic jumps (he was a national ski team trainer and Mollino's friend) along with reproductions of magazine covers, projects, technical briefs, sketches, letters, working drawings, publications, essays, and writings.

Despite the predominance of pictures over words, texts are not mere image captions; they provide essential information on the building history of Mollino's architecture and offer interpretations of his forms, structures, and culture. Ferrari and Sabatino offer a full account of the artistic and structural worth of the Regio opera house, a complex, polysemic building mixing the city's Baroque heritage (Guarino Guarini, Alessandro Antonelli, Benedetto Alfieri, etc.) and contemporary design culture (for example, the work of Sergio Musmeci and other outstanding Italian engineers).

The last part of the volume offers an illustrated summary of all of Mollino's projects and includes an appendix listing his writings, bibliography, index, and other contents along with an essay by Guy Nordenson titled 'Some Foxing at the Margins' that ironically compares Mollino to a fox and that revisits references in his work, and an essay by Sergio Pace titled 'The Enfant Terrible and His Students' that outlines Mollino's peculiar academic career in the faculty of architecture at the Valentino Castle on the banks of the Po River. These further additions help the volume maintain a good balance between providing academically rigorous content and assuming a form that has broader attractiveness, a balance that seems designed to appeal to an audience outside of Italy, where there is a lesser-known body of work on Mollino as an architect. From this angle, in the coming years, it will be possible to assess the impact of this volume, and specifically, whether it will inspire a new wave of studies on Mollino outside of Italy, introducing further interpretive approaches.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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