

# [A]rchitecture + [P]hotography + [A]rchive: the APA factor in the construction of historiography

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Architectural photography delivers the object it represents as a finished product. It stalls human perception to the perennial rewinding of time. It extrapolates one image of a building out of its physical context from a specific point of view in space within a flow of countless events and sets it on an autonomous journey in the circulation system of architectural visuals. It magnifies sight at the expense of architecture as a complete sensorial experience, carrying upon itself its cargo of memory of past buildings and symbolism. Metaphorically speaking, the architectural photograph is the declared enemy of the artifact's life cycle: it denies the edifice its vulnerability to the agency of time. This is by far the dominant type of illustration being published in scholarly journals and overrides the building's Heideggerian 'being in the world' as a material object subject to use and abuse. Ultimately, the most iconic of these images prevail against all factual evidence about the structure's physical decay. Their suspended reality takes precedence over their actuality in the collective unconscious. Who would not be surprised to say the least to compare image with reality in the case of, for example, the definitive black and white shot choreographed by photographer Norman McGrath of the renowned design Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans by American architect and educator Charles Moore (1925-1993)? At the time of its completion it was considered a paradigmatic example of post-modernist architecture. Yet in its current state the project is entirely enclosed with a cheap metal fence and shockingly irrelevant in the life of the city for which it was conceived.

The loss of innocence of photography in being a faithful equivalent of external reality has been abundantly documented - although not fully exhausted as a research topic- in canonical meta-disciplinary texts within humanistic discourse. A little less than half a century ago, art and architectural historian George Kubler made aware the specialized audience of this background assumption in the assessment of architecture:

.. it is useful to learn - and it is a hard lesson - that no work of art ever is really finished. The workmen leave, the painters come, the client pays, and the building is occupied, but it is not finished, because from the very first moment, its users and its designers are

aware of possible improvements.<sup>1</sup>

In the narrower scope of architectural photography, what remains largely unexplored from a scholarly perspective are the side effects of universal photographic practices codified in the genre. What of the 'retrievability' of the archives of the photographers who authored those pictures on the formation of the institutional accounts of modernism and of our contemporary time? The former is only one of the unforeseen consequences of what at the onset were believed to be protocols of objective recording of the built environment ever since the camera became the preferred instrument for documentation of architectural subjects in the mid-nineteenth century. The latter has without doubt an across-the-board impact on our shared knowledge of past and present design accomplishments in the field, because photographs are the evidentiary units of art and architecture historical work, and their retrievability is a prerequisite for their inclusion in the master narratives of architecture. The heritage industry is unquestionably dependent on photography to substantiate its own claims of universality.

When, for reasons of distance or available time, the pragmatics of site visits prove to be impractical for scholars - a much more frequent circumstance than one might assume - historians scrutinize pictures<sup>2</sup> of built work to validate its existence and to insert these examples in a network of visual references generating a delineation of the subject being examined, although one arguably still incomplete.<sup>3</sup> Once these historical constructs become authoritative and institutional, the past is locked into a specific order and represented by a predictable sequence of carefully selected pictures drawn from the same collections, remaining the same and consistently unchallenged even by following generations of scholars.<sup>4</sup> The magnitude of this phenomenon, anticipating the photographic age, might be measured and fully understood when reflecting upon the influence on eighteenth century artistic discourse of German art historian and archeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768). Throughout his career, he argued through carefully selected images - and convinced the majority of his European audience - for the superiority of Greek heritage over that of the Romans, despite having himself never set foot either in mainland Greece or in the Eastern Mediterranean countries.

But what happens then when a project of potentially critical acclaim is photographed by an architectural photographer whose archive, filled in all likelihood with tens of thousands of negatives (or digital files since the Internet age),

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<sup>1</sup> George Kubler, 'What Can Historians do for Architects?', *Perspecta*, 9/10, 1965, 302.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Thomason, 'The Magic Image Revisited: The Photography as a Historical Resource', *The Alabama Review*, 31, April 1978, 83-91.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Segger, 'Mirrors of the Architectural Moment: Some Comments on the Use of Historical Photographs as Primary Sources in Architectural History', *Material Culture Review*, [14, Spring 1982](#), 47-54.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Borden, 'Imaging Architecture: the Uses of Photography in the Practice of Architectural History', *The Journal of Architecture*, 12:1, February 2007, 57-77.

is nowhere to be found? Or got lost in a fire or was disposed of by family members? Or its location is known, but the collection is unprocessed? That project is lost, together with thousands of others, and, for historical purposes, is photographically, visually unaccountable. The existence of a work of architecture and its ultimate addition to the permanent references – and thus the historiography – within the field is therefore inextricably linked to what I call here the APA (Architecture + Photography + Archive) factor. Prerequisites for the prospective inclusion of a work of architecture in the canon are that the project in question is bearer of design innovations relevant to the time in which it was built; that an architectural photographer captures that project in a set of images crafted according to the visual rhetoric of the genre; and that the archive of the photographer will be retrievable over time, fully processed as well as cross-referenced, and accessible to scholarly scrutiny. How does the APA factor impact the reliability and validity of the genealogies institutionalized in the defining narratives of the historians? This essay explores this theme through the case study of prominent Italian architectural photographer Giorgio Casali (Fig. 1), visual chronicler of magazines such as *Domus* and *Casabella*, and the Italian rationalist architect Gian Luigi Giordani (Fig. 2), celebrated during his time as a pioneer of industrial architecture, with numerous other building types realized throughout his career, and virtually lost in the current memory of the discipline. A closer look at what appears as a default condition of historical inquiry might cast light on our knowledge gaps. While complete reversals of historical accounts based on the discovery of new sources are improbable, widening our awareness about the extent of the architects' participation in the vast project of modernization of the built environment can dramatically increase the accuracy of our comprehension of the time under investigation.

In 1956 the Reynolds Metal Company of Louisville, Kentucky published a two-volume set titled 'Aluminum in Modern Architecture' (Fig. 3). It was a worldwide survey charting the use that signature architects of the time had made of aluminum in a variety of buildings types of all scales. This compilation resulted from merging suggestions from legendary architectural editors such as Douglas Haskell, Jane Jacobs, Walter McQuade, and Peter Blake; leading architecture magazines from *l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (France), *Domus* (Italy), *The Architectural Review* (UK); and key organizations in the metal sector such the Société Anonyme pour L'Industrie de L'Aluminium (Switzerland) and the Aluminum Development Association (UK). The list of architects featured in the book was the 'who's who' of post-war architecture around the globe with the adoption of aluminum as their common denominator in the pursuit of a modernist design expression. Among the few lesser-known architects in that parade of celebrated names, the Italian Gian Luigi Giordani (Bologna, 1909-Rovereto, 1979) is represented with two built accomplishments illustrated with images by Giorgio Casali (Lodi, 1913- Milano, 1995), a sought-after architectural photographer of the post-war Italian avant-garde. One project was the *Farmitalia* Pharmaceutical Factory (Fig. 4) in Milan, Italy of 1953, an ambitious manufacturing complex hailed in the aforementioned book as 'one of

Europe's best industrial structures'; the other was the Methane Gas Exhibition Building (Fig. 5) in Piacenza, Italy, also of 1953, praised for its technological inventiveness, cost-effectiveness, and ease of assembly.

While as of 2011 the factory is still intact, with some modifications to its skin and exterior circulation elements, today both the projects and the architect who conceived are utterly vanished in the collective memory of Italian Rationalism (Fig. 6 and 7). More precisely, the entire body of work of Gian Luigi Giordani, one of the most innovative talents of the generations of 1930s in Northern Italy, is completely unknown to our contemporary eyes. Similarly, the archive of the architectural photographer Giorgio Casali, donated to the Università IUAV of Venezia, Italy, in 1998, has been partially processed and made accessible to researchers only recently, thirteen years after the donation of this unique cache of materials to the university. Nonetheless, the name Giorgio Casali is *de facto* foreign to the contemporary generation of scholars and architects. For both characters, this was certainly not the case when the architect and the photographer were active and prolific producers in their respective domains. Their omission in the architectural literature of the last twenty years is all the more baffling especially because both figures were acclaimed protagonists within their own field. Both of them remain remarkably absent in the most authoritative texts of our time. To name a few, there is no mention of the work of Giordani in *The History of Italian Architecture, 1944-1985* (Fig.8) by Manfredo Tafuri (MIT Press, 1989), nor in the *Il Secondo Novecento. Storia dell'architettura italiana* by Francesco Dal Co (Electa, 1997), nor in the more recent *The Architecture of Modern Italy* (Fig.9) by Terry Kirk (Princeton Architectural Press, 2005). Similarly, the instrumental role of Giorgio Casali in promoting the dissemination of the modern idiom throughout the nation is only occasionally acknowledged. In the latest *Storia della Fotografia di Architettura* (History of Architectural Photography) by Giovanni Fanelli (Laterza, 2009), Casali's name is not even listed. Casali does appear in the log of photographers of the Alberto Sartoris collection, now at the Vitra Museum, but not in the catalog that accompanied its exhibit *Photography, Modern Architecture and Design* (Fig.10) (EPFL Press, 2005). The standard reference in the English-speaking world on architectural photography *Architecture Transformed: A History of the Photography of Buildings from 1839 to the Present* by Cervin Robinson and Joel Herschman (MIT Press, 1990) bypasses Casali's oeuvre in the same way. How is such extensive forgetting possible? What processes are taking place that eventually determine the canonization of one architect versus another? What brings - generations later - a photographer to the center stage of the construction of memory, while another languishes slowly fading in the background or is completely absent from the historical and historiographic record? And what is at stake in failing to acknowledge these mechanisms in the development of historical constructs?

It is worthwhile briefly reconstructing the careers of Gian Luigi Giordani and Giorgio Casali to understand where the breakdown in memory transmission occurs and what can be learned from this case that might be extended globally to the discipline of architectural history. Before embarking on this biographical enterprise,

it is equally worthwhile noting that the spelling of an architect's name and the attribution of buildings to one architect as opposed to another can alone severely impact the statistical recurrence of that architect in the production of discourse. Gian Luigi Giordani and Gianluigi Giordani have been used interchangeably in numerous publications, decreasing the number of occurrences of this architect's name, a scenario that has impacted his place in the architectural record very differently than if its spelling been unanimously resolved. As a further example, depending on which publication is being examined, the *Farmitalia* Pharmaceutical Factory has been attributed to Gian Luigi Giordani, or Gian Luigi Giordani, Ippolito Malaguzzi Valeri, or Gian Luigi Giordani, Ippolito Malaguzzi Valeri and Ezio Sgrelli.

Short biographical sketches of the architect and the photographer are *de rigueur*. Following graduation from the Reale scuola superiore di architettura of Florence in 1931 at age 22, Gian Luigi Giordani won, with a colleague, the first prize for the design of a fountain facing Bologna's railway station. Relocated in Rome, he worked on a competition exhibiting command of the rationalist idiom. At age 25 he realized two Casa del Fascio (one in Minerbio, outside Bologna, and another one in Santarcangelo, few miles from Rimini) plus the Villa Neri in Bologna. In 1934, he won the competition for the design of the Forlanini airport of Milano-Linate. Completed in 1938, this project catapulted Giordani to the international stage. By 1936, his name is listed in an exhibition at the Triennale di Milano devoted to Italian architects. Multiple competitions will ensue with numerous award-winning entries. After World War II, he worked for a few years as the lead design architect in staff for the Montecatini company. In 1950 he founded an office in Milan together with Ezio Sgrelli and Ippolito Malaguzzi Valeri. Besides the *Farmitalia* Pharmaceutical Factory, a few of the noted projects of this phase are the office tower of Richard Ginori in Milan (1961-65), the Centro Zootecnico Sperimentale (Zootechnical Lab) in Serviano, Milano (1958-64), the Thermal Baths 'Nuovi Redi' in Montecatini Terme, a noted resort in the province of Pistoia, the remarkable Barilla plant in Parma (completed in 1964 and demolished in 1999), and numerous villas. Little to no information is available about his last years of life, and his archive remains equally untraceable for scholarly research.

Giorgio Casali learned the trade as a photographer in the Rambaldi studio in Milan. In 1938, he opened his own studio with Giovanni Muzzarelli, with whom he worked until the break of World War II. Casali's exclusive involvement in architectural photography took place at the end of the war, through the endorsement of Piero Bottoni, distinguished Italian architect and intellectual. In 1951, Casali met renowned Italian master Gio Ponti, architect of the Pirelli Skyscraper in Milan and founder of the Italian magazine *Domus*, and started a thirty-year-collaboration with him to chronicle his own work, and to create images for the magazine itself. Given Casali's talent and Ponti's symbolic backing, he became the photographer of choice for the architecture and design Italian elite. Franco Albini, Ignazio Gardella, Vico Magistretti, Marco Zanuso, Vittoriano Vigano, Carlo Scarpa, and Giovanni Michelucci are just a sample of the post-war Northern Italian protagonists who

relied on Casali's expertise and aesthetic to memorialize their projects. Furthermore, manufacturers of contemporary furniture such as Cassina, Gavina, Knoll, and Kartell, as well as noted Italian artists Lucio Fontana and Fausto Melotti, to name a few key names from Casali's vast clientele, provide an understanding of the ubiquitousness of the photographer's artistry and the identification of his imagery with the current knowledge of Italian modern architecture.

The *Farmitalia* project enjoyed great exposure in the media. It appeared prominently in publications in Italy and abroad. In his *Recent Italian Architecture* (Edizione il Milione, 1959), noted chronicler and critic Agnoldomenico Pica bestowed Giordani and this project the same cultural capital as the work of the venerable Luigi Moretti, Carlo Mollino, and Luciano Baldessarri. However, in the n. 4 issue (1959) of the Milanese magazine *Zodiac*, a publication at the forefront of architectural information in the fifties and sixties and now out of print, an article on young architects showed a wide coverage of *Farmitalia*, yet the project was attributed to architect Ippolito-Malaguzzi Valeri with no mention of Giordani. Broadly speaking Giordani was an editorial fixture in the national architectural press from the thirties till the mid-sixties. His name appeared intermittently in the seventies up to the early eighties, to be completely abandoned as a reference in the following years until today. Concurrently, Giorgio Casali earned the esteem of colleagues, architects, and editors during his lifetime. After his collaboration with *Domus* waned, Casali continued doing assignments for magazines and institutions with his son Oreste, who had joined him in the seventies. He passed away in May 1995 and his son died few months later. The University IUAV of Venezia, Italy acquired the archive shortly after the photographers' death. While the number of negatives was initially estimated to be around 70,000, today the archivist Rosa Maria Camozzo states that there are around 110,000 negatives of which only 55,000 have been processed and digitized. Half of them are still unprocessed. This means that of the archive of a photographer whose images, in a number of cases, have been definitive of particular buildings for the development of the architectural canon in modern Italian architecture, over half remain an undiscovered treasure chest. There lies in wait a rich visual commentary that could significantly shift the discourse around the vast crowd of architects that embraced modernism as the language of the post-war society in their built work. Yet, until that archive is fully processed, it remains a labyrinth as impenetrable as the mythological palace of Knossos, without the looming presence of the Minotaur. The real loss is the sad toll of forgetting remarkable projects that would add to the extraordinary legacy of twentieth century architecture and the vastness of the modernist enterprise.

The intermittent spotlighting of the *Farmitalia* project is by no means a rare episode. Casali was one among several dozen architectural photographers in post-war Italy. The archive of architectural photographer Oscar Savio who surveyed the Roman scene in those same years, for example, is still in process, with imminent exhibits scheduled to be organized in the near future by the University of Rome 'La Sapienza'. Yet to this day, Savio's archive is again unreachable. Foto Vasari, also

known as Studio Vasari, whose body of images is tied to the architecture of engineer Pier Luigi Nervi, is also unaccounted. Other names lost in the black hole of oblivion are Foto Fortunati, Foto Breda, Ivor De Wolf, Paolo Monti, Fotogramma, Foto Farabola, Istituti Luce, Foto Ancillotti, Stabilimento Fotografico Mazzoletti, Gino Barsotti, and many more. Therefore, of the current histories of modern architecture, whether focused on Italian territory or whether Italy is framed in the larger context of modernism, the astonishing lacunae that these institutional accounts carry become patently evident.

The rise of the Modern Movement in architecture runs parallel with the emergence of architectural photography as a genre with its own visual rhetoric. It is in the black and white images of likeminded photographers that the formal abstractions of the avant-garde found optical amplification. Then, like now, at project completion, architects sought photographic documentation of their work to retain a permanent record for varied uses, and for submission to publications and periodicals among others. Yet only a selected few of those images made the editorial cut, leaving under the radar countless noteworthy propositions together with their authors. If for every canonical building of the avant-garde there is an equally canonical photograph of that project, the availability to scholarly scrutiny of the larger archival source from where that image came remains central to the writing of modern history. Furthermore, buildings are vulnerable to the development process. The circumstances that brought them into existence over time often become obsolete, thus determining their later destruction to make room for new construction. Their photographic documentation thus becomes their enduring memorialization.

Given what was learned through the *Farmitalia* case, it is important to bring this new understanding into the territory of the United States. While the archives of American architectural photographers such as Ezra Stoller, Julius Shulman, and the Hedrich Blessing brothers, to name the most notable, are within academic reach, those photographers of equal renown - at least during their time - such as Lionel Freedman, Robert Damora, and Ben Schnall are nowhere to be found, their content lost permanently. Architecture is dependent on photography to survive the passage of time. In turn, the latter relies on the retrievability of the photographic archive for the recovery of its material and its insertion into architectural discourses. Each urban region in the United States had an architectural photographer. By tapping the archives of the architectural photographers of each region a far more comprehensive picture of the dissemination of modern architecture in the United States would emerge. Photographic documentation and archival retrieval are therefore two indispensable ingredients to augment the accuracy index, so to speak, of any historiography of modern architecture. It goes without saying that the APA factor operates globally, in all regions of the world where industrialization is sovereign, because the architecture realized in those territories is subjected to the same hyper-compression of the building lifecycle. The latest victim in the United States is the Information and Computer Science/Engineering Research Facility (ICS/ERF) at the University of California Irvine by Frank Gehry, built in 1986 and

demolished in 2007. Nations traditionally absent in the modernist discourse, Marocco, South Africa, Colombia, Chile, Greece, Australia, for example, would then be included in the inquiry of the contemporary scholar to retrace the maps of movements, exchanges, and reciprocal influences of the spread of modernism in the culture of buildings worldwide.

**Pierluigi Serraino** is an architect and author. He holds professional and research degrees in architecture from Italy and the United States. He has published lectured widely on the subject of Mid-century modern, Architectural Photography, and Digital Design. Current research interests are the work of California architect Donald Olsen (forthcoming, 2012), the 1958 ground-breaking creativity study on 40 architects very recently resurfaced, and changes in professional practice models in the digital age.

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## Illustrations



**Figure 1** *Portrait of Giorgio Casali.* Credit: Università Iuav di Venezia - Archivio Progetti, Fondo Giorgio Casali. Author: unknown, unpublished.



**Figure 2** *Portrait of Gian Luigi Giordani.* Author: unknown. Published in *Catalogo Bolaffi dell'Architettura Italiana. 1963-66.* By P. C. Santini, G. L. Marini, Giuseppe Luigi Marini. Torino, Italy, Giulio Bolaffi Editore, 1966.

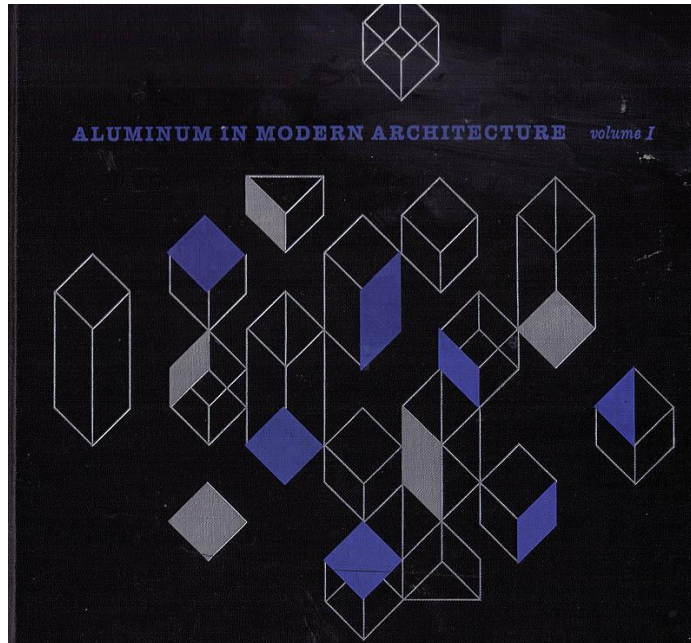


Figure 3 *Aluminum in Modern Architecture. Vol. 1.* By John Peter, Louisville, Ky.: Reynolds Metals Co., 1958-1960. Book Cover

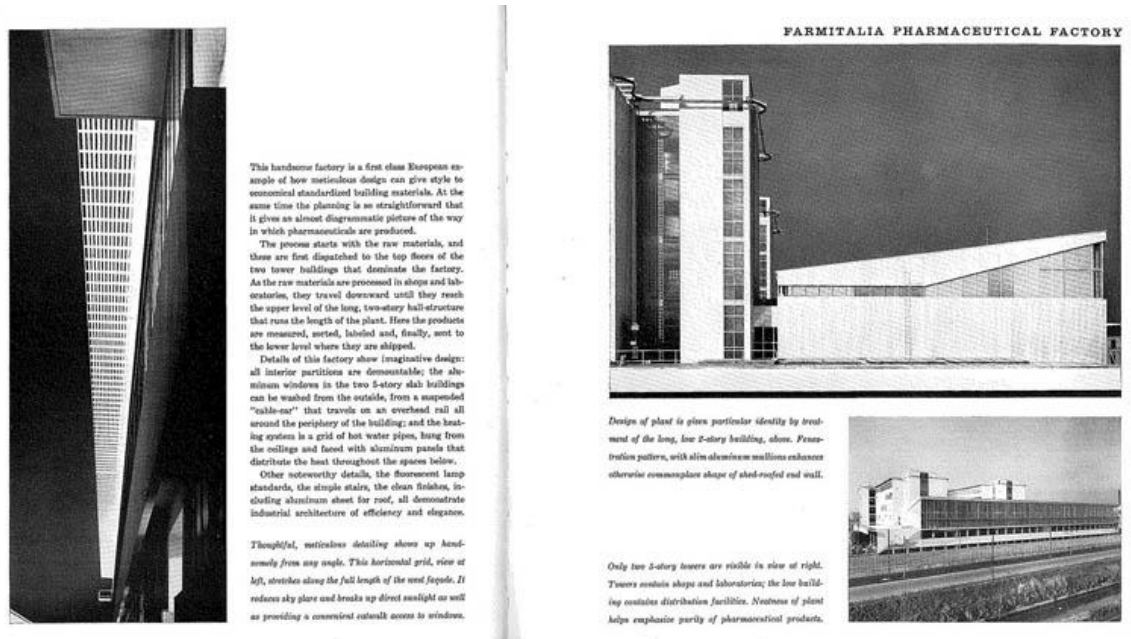


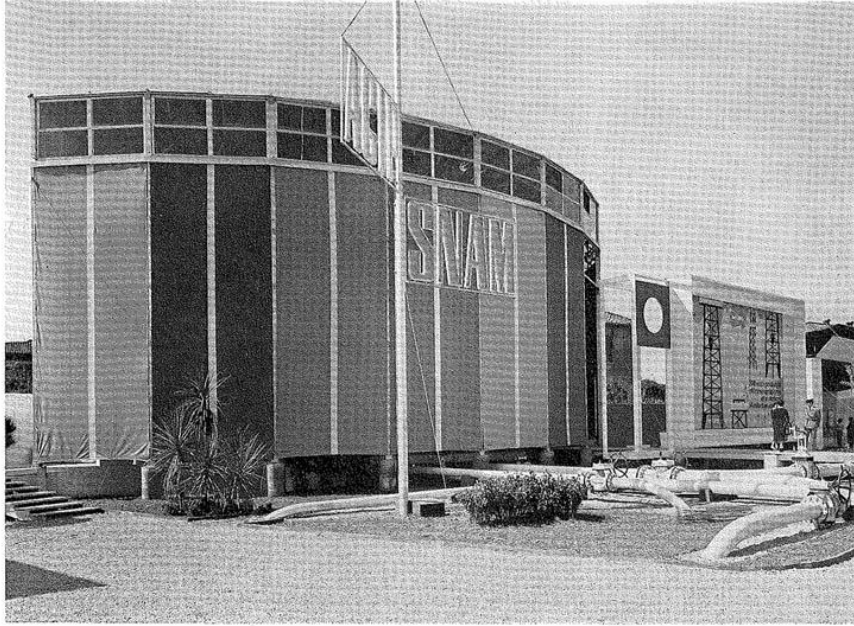
Figure 4 Coverage of Farmitalia Pharmaceutical Factory in *Aluminum in Modern Architecture. Vol. 1.* By John Peter, Louisville, Ky.: Reynolds Metals Co., 1958-1960. Page 100-101.

This aluminum-ribbed structure was dramatically designed for display purposes. Enclosing a methane gas industry exhibit, it has outstanding features beyond its functional attractiveness: its strut framework is demountable due to the design of its light-weight aluminum framing; it is easily transportable; it is economical, using wall panels of colorful strips of waterproof canvas lashed in place. It is so adaptable that any product or theme can be displayed harmoniously against it as an effective background.

**METHANE GAS EXHIBITION BUILDING**

Piacenza, Italy 1953

G. L. Giordani



*This demountable exhibition in Italy uses aluminum roof and wall structure, along with aluminum windows and brilliantly colored canvas wall panels. Lightweight aluminum structure is bolted to small pier foundations. Minimum labor is required for the erection or disassembly.*

Figure 5 Coverage of Methane Gas Exhibition Building in *Aluminum in Modern Architecture*. By John Peter, Louisville, Ky.: Reynolds Metals Co., 1958-1960. Page 163.



Figure 6 *Farmitalia Pharmaceutical Factory*. Credit: Università Iuav di Venezia - Archivio Progetti, Fondo Giorgio Casali.



Figure 7 *Farmitalia Pharmaceutical Factory*. Credit: Università Iuav di Venezia - Archivio Progetti, Fondo Giorgio Casali.

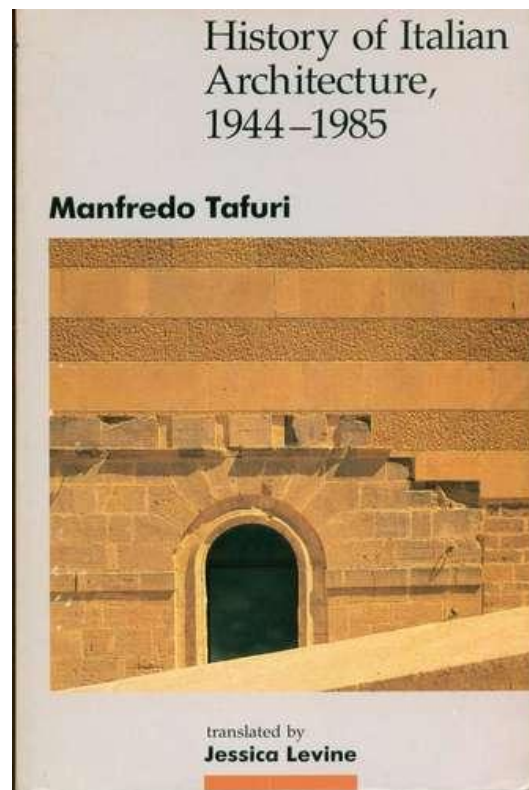


Figure 8 *History of Italian Architecture. 1944-1985*. By Manfredo Tafuri, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1989.  
Book Cover

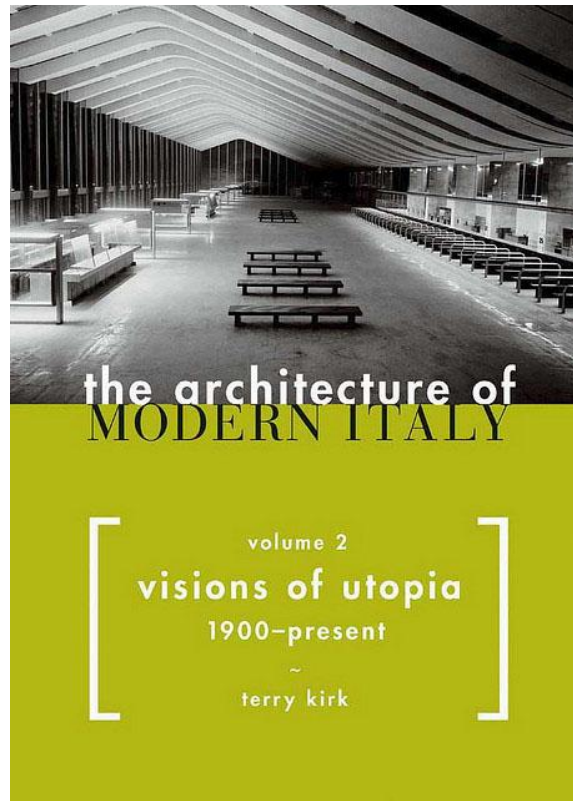


Figure 9 *The Architecture of Modern Italy. Vol 2.* By Terry Kirk, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2005.  
Book Cover

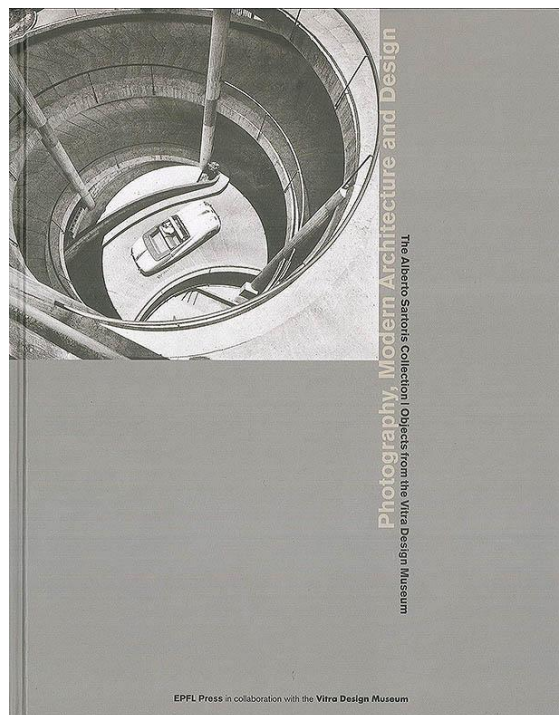


Figure 10 *Photography, modern architecture, and design: the Alberto Sartoris Collection : objects from the Vitra Design Museum.* By Antoine Baudin, Lausanne, France, Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2005.  
Book Cover

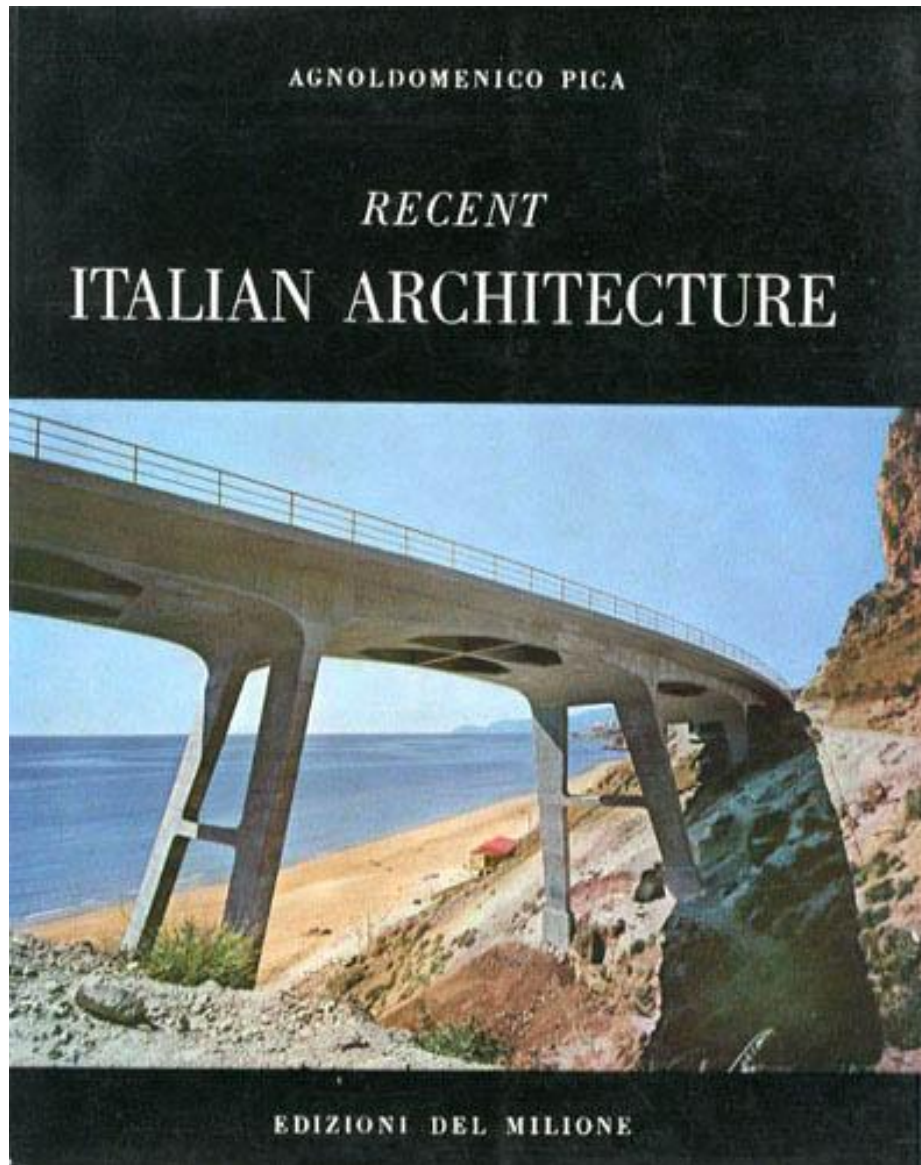


Figure 11 *Recent Italian Architecture*. By Agnoldomenico Pica, Milan, Edizioni del Milione, 1959.  
Book Cover