Modest, and fitted into the sloping landscape, the Italian pavilion at Brussels Expo 58 did not leave fairgoers indifferent. A contemporary translation of a Mediterranean cittadina or small town, it covered an expansive 17,800 m² (of which 6,500 m² was built), and had strong appeal for some visitors because of its seeming authenticity; many who roamed the pavilion felt as if they had spent a few relaxing hours in Italy amidst the bustle of the fair. Others, however, including many international architecture critics, expressed dismay and confusion over what they perceived to be a rejection of contemporary modern architecture. In the words of British editor and critic J. M. Richards, the pavilion was truly “one of the puzzles of the exhibition.”

Ironically, the quiet architectural presence of the cittadina sat at the center of a heated transnational discussion on style and progress in architecture, one that raged on even after the fair closed.

The pavilion featured five low volumes clad in white stucco, together mimicking groups of houses arranged around patios and alleyways. The main courtyard or piazza was dominated by the pavilion or castello, three levels high, establishing the project center. The streets had the look of century-old patchworked alleys, freely covered with brick and cobblestones and enlivened with sculptures, both modern and historicized. However, in its celebration of the vernacular, the project was more than a nod to a bygone era. It was a subtle demonstration of the Neoliberty style, a style identified in 1958 by young architect and historian Paolo Portoghesi and used by historians and critics in the years to follow. As a style, Neoliberty emphasized fine detailing and the building crafts in order to underline the local specificities of modern building and the human, personal input of designers and craftsmen in the building process. While members of the architectural team of the Italian pavilion were in the process of developing a language combining...
modern architecture with local, traditional Italian building techniques and materials, they themselves never referred to the *cittadina* as Neoliberty in the context of Expo 58. Nevertheless, at the Italian pavilion, the architects presented Neoliberty as a counterproposal to the ubiquity and anonymity of machine-inspired international modernism in postwar architecture. Unsurprisingly, the reception of the pavilion was ambiguous at best and most non-specialist Italian and several non-Italian specialist observers saw the *cittadina* as a negation of what was implicitly expected: it was considered not just vernacular but, above all, as “non-modern” architecture, lacking the visual flair commonly used to express postwar economic and cultural success and the style that dominated the Expo 58 architectural landscape.

This chapter will unravel the concepts and conditions that shaped the Italian pavilion at Expo 58, taking into account not only its contested exterior but also its interior, which has largely been overlooked in later academic and popular discourse. Discussions about its overall appearance dominated the initial planning of the pavilion as well as the ensuing transnational controversy. Organizational challenges plagued the project—including its delayed completion and disagreements on the design attribution of the interior spaces and exhibits—all of which contributed to the questioning of the Italian architectural team’s competency. As such, we will also consider the tensions between the architectural team and the architects Marcello Piacentini and Luigi Moretti, both of whom worked on the project. The architects had gained experience during the interwar period and continued, mainly behind the scenes, to influence Italian architectural discourse during the ensuing decades. Thus, while the Italian exhibition at Expo 58 presented a postwar image of the nation as part of an inviolable history, it did so without disavowing or even acknowledging its recent fascist past. Instead, through its visual languages, it conveyed a seemingly recognizable and timeless image of the Italian state, its people, arts, and industries.

**Postwar transnational modern style and Italian ambiguity**

As feats of modernity and progress, interwar world’s fairs and exhibitions had fostered the association between democracy, prosperity, and modernism. At Expo 58, the first postwar world’s fair, the Belgian and international specialists expected modern architecture to be omnipresent. Indeed, modern architecture’s rapprochement with both the general public and the political establishment was observed by professional critics and by the Belgian organizers of

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Expo 58.\(^5\) In this context of international comparison, most critics perceived postwar modernism as a *lingua franca* for the representation of a successfully globalizing nation and, when considered together, for a world at peace. The event became not only a place of *acte de présence* for the renewed faces of the former Allied Forces and Axis Powers, such as West Germany, Japan, and Italy, but also the new Cold War superpowers such as the USA and USSR. Stylistically, the pavilions of most participants referred to the abstract touchstones of interwar modern architecture: visible structural elements: large, lofty, and brightly lit spaces; impressive surfaces in glass; strong geometrical façades; and other modern markers. Many were, through their designers or commissioners, embedded in the vibrant postwar exhibition culture.\(^6\) This modern architecture was not as uniform, however, as the organizers had predicted, and several architects tried to express national character through their pavilions.\(^7\) According to some commentators, such as German architect and critic Jürgen Joedicke, who, soon after the fair had closed, spoke critically of it as the “fair of national vanities,” found these explicit variations in modern architecture to be expressions of the failure to create a common architectural language in line with postwar globalization.\(^8\) Italian architect, historian, and critic Bruno Zevi also condemned these intentionally differentiated and symbolic architectures, in which he felt architects anxiously looked for a metaphorical expression of national character without considering “true architecture.”\(^9\) To Zevi, who by then had gained international recognition, the buildings were nothing less than acts of treason that betrayed the contemporary development of modern architecture. Zevi, who was active in the Italian postwar debate as a defender of modern organic architecture as an example of “true architecture,” strongly positioned himself against any form of academism, classicism, or neoclassicism. He wrote several critical pieces on Expo 58 in the magazines *L’Espresso*\(^10\) and *L’Architettura: Cronache e Storia*, the latter of which he owned and


\(^7\) Marcel Van Goethem, “Allocution prononcée par M. Van Goethem, architecte en chef,” *Journées de contact des commissaires généraux étrangers. Deuxième session. 21 et 22 Novembre 1956* (Brussels: Commissariat Général du Gouvernement, [1956?]), 39–41. Van Goethem was the architect-in-chief of Expo 58. His statement was made during the presentation of the preliminary designs of the pavilions to the international press.


For Zevi, the idiosyncratic differences between the pavilions were designed to underline the specificities of nations and therefore were analogous to the psychological condition Frankfurt-born psychoanalyst Erich Fromm enumerated in his critically acclaimed *Escape from Freedom* (1941), to which Zevi referred explicitly in his article “Brussels 1958: first questions.” In his book, Fromm questioned the dangers and responsibilities inherent in freedom. Unlike most other critics, Zevi understood the architecture of the fair as a materialization of postwar or Cold War anxieties and not as the demonstration of postwar peace and progress that much modern architecture claimed to be. In it, he detected a kind of architectural unrest in reaction to the newly acquired economic, social, cultural, and technical liberties of the postwar period. This sense of anxiety identified by Zevi has more recently been analyzed by architectural historians Sarah Williams Goldhagen and Réjean Legault, who propose a reassessment of postwar modernism as a phenomenon in its own right.

At first sight, the Italian *cittadina* at Expo 58 blended vernacular architecture with modern technology, developing a formal language embedding in its local architectural discourse. By reassessing the vernacular, the pavilion also featured an Italian character and historical continuity in building that differed from the stylistic choices found in propaganda architecture—being either classicist or, on rare occasions, modernist—and supported by Italian nationalist discourses for over thirty years. As a result, most observers failed to recognize the *cittadina* as modern architecture. However, its architects had clearly understood the privileged position modern architecture held in national postwar representations, as is apparent from their comments on what they referred to as the “formalist structuralism” of the fair. While the pavilion was the work of a team of architects, it was architect and critic Ernesto N. Rogers of the Milanese BBPR studio (Gianluigi Banfi, Lodovico Barbiano di Belgioioso, Enrico Peressutti, and Ernesto Nathan Rogers) who acted as the primary theoretician. Rogers, former publisher-editor of *Domus* (1946–7), and current editor of the influential journal *Casabella-Continuità* (1953–65), had in his postwar...
columns and books orchestrated a plea for the continuity (continuità) of the influence of tradition in contemporary architecture and for the search for coherence (coerenza) between historical context and new buildings. As such, he steered away from his advocacy for interwar rationalism and criticized postwar radical modernism. Before, during, and after Expo 58 Rogers expressed critical views on the fair’s architecture in general. His scathing article on the architecture of Expo 58 lambasted its “hypertrophy of form” and the many “modernistic, formal, pretentious and empty contributions.”

What had been missed by many critics at the time was that the very concept of the Italian pavilion had been conceived as a critique of the recent evolutions in modern architecture Rogers condemned. Rogers, however, recognized later that the subtleties of the pavilion had been misunderstood. He concluded: “In building the Italian pavilion we have tried to create a serene and quiet work rooted in our culture. Maybe we have forgotten that the taste of many people has now become spoiled; perhaps we should have added to the salt much more pepper.”

In other words: the architect admitted that the Italian design team had misjudged the anticipated public who were unfamiliar with the ongoing debates on tradition and continuity in Italian modern architecture. He suggested a world’s fair—with its festive atmosphere, attempts at cultural diplomacy, and flaunted nationalismswas no place for architectural subtleties. Placed in the context of this mass event, the Italian plea for the embrace of tradition in modern architecture was thus understood as a reactionary position. Moreover, the fact that other former Axis Powers sought to present a distinctly modern national image—one that broke away from the interwar propaganda style—did not help to clarify the Italian position.

Coerenza (coherence) and continuità (continuity): the origins of the cittadina

The Italian pavilion at Expo 58, while a sanctuary to some visitors escaping the hustle and bustle, was also a puzzle to many. First, it did not meet the expectations of architecture specialists, as exemplified by the critique of the Belgian critic Pierre-Louis Flouquet. “Those familiar with contemporary Italian architecture expected to find a monumental edifice, testifying of a brave self-awareness in modern design,” he wrote, “For 1958 one could not conceive of a more complete contrast than this cittadina.”

Second, even before the fair opened, the pavilion was misread by the public as a naïve village, rather than a sophisticated commentary. As Giovanni

18 “Hypertrophy” (p. 133) is the translation as published in Architects’ Yearbook of “ampollosità delle forme” (p. 2), or “overstretching or blow-up of forms.” Rogers refers to the many spectacular constructional forms at Expo 58.
19 Postscript to Ernesto Nathan Rogers, “All’ Expo ‘58 il futuro (dell’ architettura) non è cominciato,” Casabella-Continuità 221 (1958): VI. (English translation in Casabella.) The article was later published as: Ernesto Nathan Rogers, “The Future was not to be seen at Brussels,” Architects’ Yearbook 9 (1960): 132–9. In the latter, the postscript was omitted. All translations by the authors.
Giovannini wrote doubtfully in *La Stampa*, months before its debut, “the Italian pavilion, which for now does not impose on visitors’ admiration . . . will represent a typical village: we hope that in the end it will be worthy of the Exhibition and of our Country.”21 Finally, as demonstrated in Rogers’s aforementioned postscript, its negative reception surprised even those involved in its creation, who felt they had lost control over the project. The pavilion’s design process was long and difficult; analyzing its chronology allows us to understand the slippages between intention and result.

In winter 1955 the Italian Commissariat General (*commissariato*),22 leading Italy’s participation in Expo 58, invited five of the most renowned Italian architecture studios to participate in a closed competition for the pavilion, including BBPR studio (Milan); Ignazio Gardella (Milan); Amedeo Luccichenti and Vincenzo Monaco (Rome); Giuseppe Perugini (Rome); and Ludovico Quaroni (Rome). All were well-known architects recognized in the architectural press for their modern work. While little detail is known about the competition brief, later testimonies suggest that the architects did complain that the client’s wishes were not clearly formulated.23 Yet taking into account that the Brussels organizers had announced Expo 58 as a feast of modern progress, the desire of the Italian government to put the nation on the postwar map, as well as the “progressive” reputation of the architects invited by the *commissariato*, it can be presumed that the latter was looking for a pavilion to highlight Italy’s postwar successes in a clearly progressive and modern manner.

Due to the short period to develop proposals—only two weeks—and the restricted budget that threatened to curtail the project, the architects soon decided to work together. In addition, they demanded also to be put in charge of curating the displays on view inside the building to allow for an overall coherent design. In their words, they felt they “were unable to seriously project a generic building in which anything could be placed,”24 and their proposal for the pavilion, they believed, could never be an “architectural ‘object’ that could be filled with ideas later.”25 Following the lead of Rogers, the team of architects opted for a theoretical and polemical stance against what they called “formalist structuralism,” an architectural tendency in which load-bearing structures were rendered visible in a spectacular manner, and which Rogers expected to dominate the fair.

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22 In full: *Commissariato del governo Italiano per la partecipazione del nostro Paese all’Esposizione Universale e Internazionale di Bruxelles 1958*.


25 Quaroni and De Carlo, “Inchiesta sul Padiglione Italiano,” 405.
Three major phases can be discerned in the design process. In their first proposal (dating from late 1955 to early 1956), the architects conceived of the pavilion as a series of identical buildings: prefabricated steel umbrellas with a 10-square-meter plan. The few preserved drawings make it difficult to evaluate the building’s stylistic features in this first proposal. In an updated version presented to the fair organizers in July 1956, the architects proposed a similar layout, but with elements with load-bearing walls and roofs made from prefabricated concrete. As the architects explained, the buildings had a character “at once similar, continuous, modest, spontaneous and noble, with the aim to recall the long history of our country.” Published drawings of this second proposal, the architects’ own project description, and their contemporary work indicate that the project was stylistically in line with the Neoliberty tendency then developing in the architects’ oeuvres.

The term Neoliberty was introduced by the young architect and historian Paolo Portoghesi in his analytical text “Dal neorealismo al neoliberty” published in 1958, the same year BBPR’s Milan Torre Velasca was completed. Sketching out the development of modern architecture in Italy, Portoghesi observed a renewed interest in the work of the early modern masters, including those of the Art Nouveau or Stile Liberty. In its renewed interest in this period, Neoliberty was marked by its refined use of craftsmanship and technology, bourgeois cultural references, overall elegance and harmony, as well as, according to Portoghesi, its exploration “of the technical possibilities of both new and old materials without programmatic distinction.”

Despite the architects working together, interpersonal tensions among them and the commissioners plagued the pavilion project from the start as both struggled to keep control. Further budget cuts, and likely the tight time frame, eventually made the architects opt for a more conventional construction. In this third phase, dating to spring 1957, the building consisted of load-bearing masonry and concrete walls with flat roofs with a traditional timber structure. In this last version the buildings were no longer square or modular. One of the most prominent exterior features was a unifying, graphic element: a dark blue ribbon that highlighted the roof edges and window openings. The result was a pavilion that strongly resembled an idealized Mediterranean cittadina.

26 Ibid.
In designing the pavilion, the architects used traditional materials and techniques in both the exterior and interior finishes: red brickwork, stuccoed walls, and plain terracotta tiles. The architects also left the wooden ceiling girders and iron joints visible, emphasizing a traditionalist aesthetic. This modest interior finishing greatly added to the vernacular character of the ensemble. The concepts at the basis of the pavilion were inspired by the notions of *coerenza* (coherence) and *continuità* (continuity) between building traditions, human experiences, and modern architecture, central to the intellectual work of Rogers.\(^{30}\) While its presence was more subtle in the exterior of the pavilion, the Neoliberty influence was most strongly felt in the interior of the *castello*, a central element present from the first design proposal onwards, where the crafty detailing of the architectural elements, the use of classic, luxurious materials and fittings in both building and exhibition, and, most prominently, the decorations and particular layout of the building strongly suggested a distinct architectural language. The *castello* contained a monumental hall on the first floor which was used as an exhibition space and reception hall. It boasted fine finishes such as the stained glass windows located in the open corners, the use of polished marbles, and an impressive Venetian Venini chandelier reminiscent of the one displayed in the Italian pavilion at the Paris 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*.\(^{31}\) Some distinct details, like the grooved edge of the roof or the railless ceremonial staircase, gave the hall an updated appearance.

**“Infantile regression?” Insulted Italians and agitated professionals**

The ambiguity of the pavilion as built triggered strong and emotional reactions from both the popular and professional press in Italy, Belgium, and abroad. Criticism arose even before the pavilion opened and lasted, in some cases displaying changing opinions, long after the fair closed. From quite early on, critics such as Giovannini aired their concerns that the pavilion, albeit unintentionally, would represent an Italy incapable of keeping up with the contemporary world. Such concerns gave rise to national indignation when the team failed to finish the project by the Expo’s opening.\(^{32}\) As a result, the Italian government publicly denounced the project: “The government pushes the responsibility of the scandal of the expo over to the architects” read the

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\(^{30}\) On the characterization of the position and ideas of Rogers with respect to pluralism, tradition, and continuity in contemporary architectural practice, and on the Italian discussion on Neoliberty, see: Marie Louise Lobsinger, “Monstrous Fruit: The Excess of Italian Neo-Liberty,” *Thresholds* 23 (January 2001): 44–51.


\(^{32}\) The pavilion opened with a delay of twenty days.
headline of a critical article published in the newspaper Unità two weeks after the official opening. Such a difficult reception in the homeland might also explain why the official catalogue was explicit in its self-conscious defense of the pavilion. It echoed the discourse of the architects themselves who had positioned the project as modern, but framed it in a critical light vis-à-vis the dominance of technology, while at the same time refraining from the use of overt nostalgia or folklore. Italian critics kept up the attack during the fair. The Italian popular press launched an almost univocal negative campaign that, according to Agnoldomenico Pica, one of the pavilion’s designers and editor of a commemorative booklet on the pavilion, greatly and negatively influenced popular sentiment against the pavilion and “weighed dramatically on the public opinion of our Country.” The building was judged not modern enough and as projecting an image of a backward Italy excluded from globalizing tendencies. Although positive reactions in the international press eventually resulted in the official rehabilitation of the project in Italy, when the conclusive report on Italian participation was compiled, the commissariato felt compelled to defend the project. Cesco Tomaselli, for example, presented the pavilion as “a kind of architectonic protest . . . in the heart of conformist submission to search for new forms.” Nonetheless, the popular and political rehabilitation at the end of the fair did not bring an end to the quarrel in international architectural circles. The Italians’ critique of contemporary modernism, their assessment of traditional and regional elements and strategies, as well as the Neoliberty trend all gave rise to continued controversy. The Architects’ Journal reported that “this distinguished team decided to abandon modern constructional technique and, indeed, all that we mean by ‘modern architecture.’” In critiquing the pavilion, British designer Misha Black wrote: “Italy has also chosen the path of slight self-deprecation, at least as far as its building is concerned.” French modernist architect and editor Alexandre Persitz had judged it simply “incomprehensible,” an architectural monster “that discourages all criticism and provokes a sentiment of dismay.” Although when the Expo closed Persitz was already engaged in a fierce debate on Neoliberty with Rogers, he, like other observers, decided to ignore the pavilion’s

33 “Il governo scarica sugli architetti le responsabilità dello scandalo dell'expo,” Unità, April 27, 1958, s.p.
polemical content completely.\textsuperscript{40} Zevi, in contrast, felt compelled to respond. While persistently critical of Neoliberty\textsuperscript{41} and with little enthusiasm about the pavilion in its early months, he finally defended the project and the architects in the professional press during the last month of the fair. His journal \textit{Architettura: Cronache et Storia} then published not only the three project phases of the pavilion but also a report on the structural research on the prefabricated concrete roofs of the second phase, inherently demonstrating the original modern intentions. In addition, Zevi gave the floor to the architects themselves through extensive published interviews.\textsuperscript{42}

The pavilion and the critical position of Neoliberty once again came to the fore when discussed by Reyner Banham in his \textit{Architectural Review} piece “Neoliberty: The Italian retreat from modern architecture.” In it, he engaged in a debate on new tendencies in modern architecture, their ethical, political, and technical roots and impact, as well as the role of tradition and the duties of the modern architect. Banham accused the Italians of “infantile regression” \textit{vis-à-vis} the modern movement and considered the Italian pavilion as a disappointing confirmation of the stylistic \textit{excesses} of Neoliberty.\textsuperscript{43} Previously, Banham had admired postwar Italy for its “architecture of social responsibility” and “formal architectonic purity,” for which he considered BBPR a leading office. This new tendency, however, he considered to be a betrayal of modern architecture and nothing less than a proposal “to abdicate from the Twentieth Century.”\textsuperscript{44}

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the international debate resumed shortly afterwards, when BBPR presented their recently finished Torre Velasca project at the 1959 Otterlo congress.\textsuperscript{45} Rogers showcased the tower building as “mixing the rational and the expressionistic,” and explained the varied program, concepts, and materials used for which the “main purpose was to give this building the intimate value of our culture—the essence of history.”\textsuperscript{46} Ironically, it is primarily because of such debates after Expo 58 that historians rehabilitated the Italian pavement,

\textsuperscript{40} On the involvement of Persitz in this discussion, see: Alexandre Persitz, “Casabella... Casus Belli,” \textit{L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui} 77 (May 1958): xxxiii–xxxiv.


\textsuperscript{43} Reyner Banham, “Neoliberty. The Italian retreat from modern architecture,” \textit{The Architectural Review} 747 (1959): 235. One of the illustrations in the article shows the monumental hall in the \textit{castello} of the Italian pavilion.

\textsuperscript{44} Banham, “Neoliberty,” 235.

\textsuperscript{45} The Otterlo congress (1959), known also as CIAM '59, followed on the CIAM X congress (Dubrovnik, 1956) and announced the end of CIAM (\textit{Congrès Internationaux de l'Architecture Moderne}). Rogers and Gardella were members of the coordination group of CIAM '59. The discussions of this congress are published as Oscar Newman, \textit{CIAM's 59 in Otterlo} (Stuttgart: Krämer, 1961).

\textsuperscript{46} Newman, \textit{CIAM's 59 in Otterlo}, 92–3.
such as Manfredo Tafuri, who included it in his historiography of Italian modern architecture. As such, it became a touchstone in an important moment of critique of the mainstream trends within the Modern Movement.47

**An even more modest presence: the interior architecture of the cittadina**

Interestingly enough, with the exception of Zevi48 and later Tafuri,49 most architectural critics devoted their attention to the overall appearance of the pavilion’s exterior and little was published on its interior.50 The cittadina, however, was not just an empty container for display but consisted of a series of similar interiors in the “houses” that employed vernacular materials in a contemporary manner.51 The exhibitions inside the cittadina were set in several low and rather dark spaces articulated as human-scaled rooms. The stylistic contrast with the large, bright, and modern exhibition halls of the other pavilions at Expo 58 could hardly have been greater. Nonetheless, the subtle tension between traditional craftsmanship and modern design that characterized Neoliberty was most present in its interior.

From the early planning stages, the architects insisted on including the design of the pavilion’s exhibition in their proposal. At the same time, the commissariato had appointed Leonardo Sinisgalli, a mathematician, poet and designer with ample experience in staging exhibitions as the exhibition coordinator.52 Sinisgalli had been the art director at Olivetti since 1938, a position that brought him into contact with architects such as Gardella and BBPR studio for the design of Olivetti shops in cities including New York, which BBPR designed in 1954. Together, they developed a simple and clear exhibition concept for the pavilion that set out to introduce visitors to the land of Italy, Italian society, and its accomplishments, all staged in a straightforward manner. Nonetheless, most probably because of budgetary issues, but also due to...
the unexpected appointment of architect and designer Luigi Moretti in January 1957, Sinisgalli resigned from the pavilion project in April 1957, to be replaced by Moretti. As recounted by Quaroni and De Carlo, this last-minute change roiled the architects as it rendered their attempt to design a unified building and exhibition space nearly impossible.

As built, the exhibition comprised a succession of display sections following the official proposal of the Bureau International des Expositions, resulting in a more complex sequence than originally intended. Each section was devoted to a specific sector and financed either by public or private funding. Private funding dominated the Industrial Production section and in order to maintain a sense of unity throughout, the architects’ team installed a system of slender, white panels, delicately lit from behind, which helped lend a feeling of continuity and calm to the varied representations of the Italian industries. These panels served as a support for texts, which were specific to each of the exhibiting companies, some of which worked with their own designers.

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[PLACE FIGURE 2 HERE] The Olivetti room, for example, was installed next to the exhibits of some of Italy’s best-known brands such as Fiat, Montecatini, and Finmeccanica, all of which had been part of the usual displays of Italy’s industrial achievements since at least the interwar period. Next to the explanatory text and product displays, the showcase was dominated by a repetitive graphic element borrowed from the letterheads of typewriters, one of Olivetti’s most successful products. In the corner stood a collection of typewriters, calculators, and teleprinters, each of them isolated on a black-and-white pedestal, like art objects. Overall, while not entirely successful, Gardella, Belgiojoso, Peressutti, and Rogers’s visual strategy for the Olivetti exhibit did garner some praise. *Domus*, for example, hinted at the author’s distaste for most of the interior but featured the Olivetti installation in a full-page photograph, and lamented how it wished “that all of the Italian representation was of this tenure, that is: perfect.”

A new exhibition scenario: last-minute input building on long-standing expertise

Although the team of architects remained involved with designing the pavilion’s interiors after Moretti’s appointment, they nevertheless felt unhappy with how it turned out. To them, the exhibits were too large, lacked coherence, and were out of tune with the architectural concept. In

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53 See Ludovico Quaroni and Adolfo De Carlo in “Inchiiesta sul Padiglione Italiano a Bruxelles,” *L’Architettura Cronache e Storia* 36 (October 1958): 405–6. It is suggested that Sinisgalli and the architects set out to develop the exhibition together, without an exhibition designer. When the commissariato appointed Moretti, both Sinisgalli and Moretti assumed a similar or even identical role. Moretti was inclined to follow more closely on the wishes of the commissariato, and of Piacentini.

54 Ibid.

55 In the picture shown, the Olivetti machines are not yet installed on the pedestals.

56 “Prime immagini di Bruxelles,” *Domus* 345 (August 1958): 5. The attribution is unclear. The editor of the magazine at that moment was Gio Ponti.
short, they felt that they had lost control of the project. Clearly identified in the pavilion’s catalogues, but never cited in the contemporary press, the overall organization of the Italian contribution was in the experienced hands of Marcello Piacentini, an official member of the technical-artistic committee. The committee acted as intermediary between the commissioner-general Pasquale Diana and the architects’ team. Interventions in the planning of the exhibition seem to have been steered by this committee through Piacentini’s intervention and explain why and how Moretti eventually became the exhibition’s general coordinator; his appointment can be considered as the committee’s attempt to secure the “progressive” character of the Italian exhibition. Both Piacentini and Moretti had ample experience thanks to their involvement with exhibitions during the interwar, fascist period. While the commissariato’s choice of experienced members can be understood from an organizational point of view, taking into account that Expo 58 was the first postwar world’s fair, this business-as-usual option sheds new light on the notion of continuity in Italian postwar representation.

While not actively involved in the development of the pavilion, the influence and agency of Piacentini, “the fascist regime’s de facto official architect,” should not be underestimated. Piacentini was regarded as highly experienced after his successful involvement with the Italian pavilions for the world’s fairs of 1935, 1937, and 1939, and he had also been the driving force behind the design for the EUR42 exhibition planned by the fascist regime in Rome. Piacentini’s archive reveals that he was considered the Italian contact for the Commissioner General of Expo 58. In terms of design issues, Piacentini’s interventions were appreciated as evidenced by an April 1956 letter by architect and designer Gio Ponti, which suggests that Piacentini’s expertise was called upon for active intervention in the pavilion project. When Ponti, on Piacentini’s invitation, finished writing a new exhibition concept together with Sinisgalli and Piacentini—a counterproposal to the original that was deemed “inappropriate”—he sent his proposal to Piacentini for approval, stressing the importance of a “completely modern expression.” Remarkably, his proposal for the exhibition resulted in one closely aligned with the final design.

57 President was Cesare Valle; other members: Guglielmo De Angelis D’Ossat, M. G. Franci, E. Grecco and E. Paulucci.
60 When appointed for Expo 58, Piacentini was involved with the planning of the buildings for the 1960 Rome Olympics. Moretti too had been involved in EUR42.
62 Letter, Gio Ponti to Camillo Giurati, April 28, 1956, Folder 310, Piacentini Archives.
and confirms that the committee feared a retrograde representation of Italy and so intervened in the design process.63

In the end, however, the commissariato engaged Moretti, not Ponti, as exhibition coordinator, an event which, in combination with lingering budget issues, seems to have led to Sinisgalli’s resignation one year before the opening.64 Eventually, Moretti, working with architect Franco Petrucci and SAICA (Società Anonima Italiana Costruzioni e Arredamenti),65 was put in charge of the scenario of the exhibition, as well as the design of those exhibition installations that were considered crucial for the representation of the nation. These included the “Italian habitat” section—sponsored by E.N.I.T. (Ente Nazionale Italiano per il Turismo)—which showcased such iconic Italian sites as the flowers of the Riviera coast; the Puglia countryside; San Marco square in Venice; celebrated city centers; as well as historic statues such as the Florentine porcellino by Pietro Tacca, and the Nereid of Bartolomeo Ammannati’s Neptune Fountain, all staged with photographic reproductions of the Bel Paese (beautiful country).  

A victory over transnational modernism or a retreat from the contemporary debate?

Italian critic Giulia Veronesi wrote of the pavilion in the periodical Emporium: “despite being signed by nine architects among the best in our country . . . [the pavilion] is an anonymous work: an inevitable result of a work done by an excessive number of collaborators. It was conceived as a fake Italian village, but it is unacceptable. . . . You cannot retreat and then claim victory in your fight.”67 For her, it was not the Neoliberty style that was problematic, but the architects’ decision to join forces. Veronesi deemed the resulting, seemingly un-authored architecture unfit for a world’s fair pavilion that was expected to celebrate national victory and progress. It seems that Rogers, for one, agreed when he declared they “should have added to the salt much more pepper.”68 She acknowledged that their proposal was too implicit, too modest

63 Indicazioni per gli architetti, attached to Letter, Ponti to Piacentini, May 7, 1956, Folder 310, Piacentini Archives. It should be noted that, at this time, the architecture project had not yet turned into a cittadina. Ponti stresses the importance of a “completely modern expression.”
64 Note, Piacentini to Camillo Giurati, January 30, 1957, Folder 310, Piacentini Archives.
65 Masina, Vedere l'Italia, 406.
66 Moretti did not proceed on his own, however, and left some exhibits to Agnoldomenico Pica, an architect and critic with whom he had previously collaborated. Moretti and Pica’s exhibition project was finalized in May 1957. For the actual design of the individual parts, diverse specialists and designers would step in, such as Perugini for the cultural institutions and schools. Pica was also the author of several important texts in the 1959 guide Italie présente, in which he formulated the official discourse on the exhibition concept and reacted to some of the criticism on the pavilion. Pica in L'Italie présente, 142 or 173. For a detailed biography, see: Maria Vittoria Capitanucci, Agnoldomenico Pica, 190—1990. La critica dell'architettura come “mestiere” (Benevento: Hevelius edizione, 2002).
68 Rogers, “All' Expo ‘58,” IV.
and too anonymous to be recognized as a progressive criticism of contemporary modernism by the general public let alone the critics. Veronesi’s understanding of “retreat” (that is, from the national boasting proper at world’s fairs) was, however, different from Banham’s criticism that Neoliberty represented an overall and unacceptable flight from modern architecture. If the rich, elaborate architectural details of the pavilion seemed to refer to a bygone, bourgeois society and cast doubt on the progressiveness of the Italian nation, its displays, at least in the case of the Olivetti exhibit, did not.

The Italian pavilion at Expo 58 implicitly demonstrated the difficulties of both commissariato and architects to anticipate the public and its reactions. While the architects themselves were perhaps overly engaged in transnational specialists’ discourse on the contemporary state of modern architecture, the actions of the commissariato exposed doubts about how to represent postwar Italy. This doubt turned into anxiety when the initial project of the architects transformed into what seemed to be a reconstruction of a vernacular village that ran the risk of being too conceptual, too simple, or even too spare. As a consequence, they returned to a well-known and well-mastered exhibition formula, steered by Moretti, who had dubious interwar experience in representing the nation. The presence of Piacentini hinted at a remarkable continuity of strategies and personalities in the commissariato. As a site of postwar international exchange, the project also reveals the simplified relation between international politics and architectural tendencies, as only distinctly modern styles were associated with progressive nations. Because of its interwar reputation in modern architecture and because of its postwar political international engagement, Italy was expected to represent itself with a grand and modern pavilion. In this view, but maybe in this view only, the cittadina was a disappointment, irrespective of its popular appeal to Expo visitors.

Select Bibliography


Fund *Expo 58*, State Archives, Brussels.


