



*la* Rinascente

**Suspending Modernity:  
The Architecture of Franco Albini**

**Kay Bea Jones**

**Studies in Architecture**

SUSPENDING MODERNITY:  
THE ARCHITECTURE OF FRANCO ALBINI

# Ashgate Studies in Architecture Series

SERIES EDITOR: EAMONN CANNIFFE, MANCHESTER SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE,  
MANCHESTER METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY, UK

The discipline of Architecture is undergoing subtle transformation as design awareness permeates our visually dominated culture. Technological change, the search for sustainability and debates around the value of place and meaning of the architectural gesture are aspects which will affect the cities we inhabit. This series seeks to address such topics, both theoretically and in practice, through the publication of high quality original research, written and visual.

## *Other titles in this series*

Shoah Presence: Architectural Representations of the Holocaust

*Eran Neuman*

ISBN 978 1 4094 2923 4

Reconstructing Italy

The Ina-Casa Neighborhoods of the Postwar Era

*Stephanie Zeier Pilat*

ISBN 978 1 4094 6580 5

The Architecture of Edwin Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew

Twentieth Century Architecture, Pioneer Modernism and the Tropics

*Iain Jackson and Jessica Holland*

ISBN 978 1 4094 5198 3

Recto Verso: Redefining the Sketchbook

*Edited by Angela Bartram, Nader El-Bizri and Douglas Gittens*

ISBN 978 1 4094 6866 0

The Architecture of Luxury

*Annette Condello*

ISBN 978 1 4094 3321 7

Building the Modern Church

Roman Catholic Church Architecture in Britain, 1955 to 1975

*Robert Proctor*

ISBN 978 1 4094 4915 7

The Architectural Capriccio

Memory, Fantasy and Invention

*Edited by Lucien Steil*

ISBN 978 1 4094 3191 6

# Suspending Modernity: The Architecture of Franco Albini

Kay Bea Jones

*School of Architecture, Ohio State University, USA*

First published 2014 by Ashgate Publishing

Published 2016 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

Copyright © Kay Bea Jones 2014

Kay Bea Jones has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Jones, Kay Bea.

Suspending modernity : the architecture of Franco Albini / by Kay Bea Jones.

pages cm. -- (Ashgate studies in architecture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4724-2728-1 (hardback)

1. Albini, Franco--Criticism and interpretation. 2. Architecture--Italy--History--20th century. I. Title.

NA1123.A525J66 2014

720.92--dc23

2014020390

ISBN 9781472427281 (hbk)

*Dedicated to my parents,  
Mary A. Macklin Jones and Kenneth Buxton Jones Jr.*

*This page has been left blank intentionally*

## Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xvii</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xxi</i>
1     Introducing Franco Albini	1
2     Modernity in the Balance: Italy's Equilibrium	17
3     Albini's Emergence from Designer to Architect	51
4     The Rationalist House, the Modern Room, and Albini's Method	85
5 <i>Continuità</i> : CIAM and Neorealism in Post-war Italy	121
6     The Exhibition and the Museum: Albini's Pragmatic Poetics	143
7     Tradition's Modern Corollary in Cervinia and Rome	185
8     Strange Siblings: Office Buildings in Genoa and Parma	213
9     Seeking Order: Urban Plans, Popular Housing and Furniture	245
10    Modernity's Weight: Suspending Optimism in Two Final Museums	279
<i>Appendix 1: Albini on Tradition</i>	<i>321</i>
<i>Appendix 2: Renzo Piano's "Pezzo per Pezzo:" Recollections of a Studio Albini Intern</i>	<i>323</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>327</i>



*This page has been left blank intentionally*

## List of Illustrations

### 1 Introducing Franco Albini

- 1.1 Franco Albini
- 1.2 Palazzo Albini on the Castelletto hillside of Genoa
- 1.3 “Scipione & Black and White” exhibit at the Brera Museum in Milan, 1941
- 1.4 Milan Metropolitana—subway handrail, 1964
- 1.5 Studio Albini with Franca Helg and Franco Albini in 1968
- 1.6 Portrait of Franco Albini by Roberto Sambonet

### 2 Modernity in the Balance: Italy’s Equilibrium

- 2.1 Olivetti Store in Paris, 1958
- 2.2 Museum of Roman Civilization by Pietro Ascheri, D. Bernardini and Cesare Pascoletti, 1939–41
- 2.3 Novocomum apartments in Como by Giuseppe Terragni, 1927–29
- 2.4 Stadio dei Marmi at Rome’s *Foro Olimpico* (formerly *Foro Mussolini*) by Enrico del Debbio, 1928

2.5 Fabio Filzi Housing in Milan by Albini, Palanti and Camus, 1935–38

2.6 Weissenhof Siedlung at Stuttgart by Mies van der Rohe, 1927

2.7 Palazzo dell’Acqua e delle Luce proposed for EUR ’42 (Esposizione Universale di Roma) by Albini, Romano, Gardella, and Fontana, 1939

2.8 *Fosse Ardeantine* by Mario Fiorentino, Giuseppe Perugini, et al., 1944–49

2.9 Asilo Infantile by Giuseppe Terragni in Como, 1934–37

2.10 Palazzo dei Congressi at EUR ’42 by Adalberto Libera begun, 1938–54

2.11 *Casa Elettrica* at Monza by Piero Bottoni, Figini and Pollini, et al., 1930

2.12 Sketches for the *Milano Verde* urban design proposal, 1938

### 3 Albini’s Emergence from Designer to Architect

3.1 INA Pavilion in Bari, 1935

3.2 Fabio Filzi Housing in Milan by Albini, Palanti and Camus, 1935–38

3.3 Stair for the Villa Neuffer on Lago Maggiore, 1940

3.4 INA Pavilion in Milan, 1935

3.5 INA Pavilion in Milan, interior with Carla Albini's graphics, 1935

3.6 "Italian Aeronautics Exhibition" by Albini and Giovanni Romano, 1934

3.7 "Hall of Gold Medals", by Edoardo Persico and Marcello Nizzoli, 1934

3.8 "Hall of Antique Goldworks", by Albini and Romano, Triennale di Milano, 1936

3.9 Plan for "Room for a Man" installation, by Franco Albini, Triennale di Milano, 1936

3.10 "Room for a Man" by Albini, Triennale di Milano, 1936

3.11 "Living Room for a Villa" by Albini, Triennale di Milano, 1940

3.12 "Transparent Radio" by Albini, 1948

3.13 *Casabella* of April 1937 where both Enrico Paulucci's radio on glass planes and Albini and Romano's "Hall of Antique Goldworks" were published

3.14 Albini's "Veliero" bookshelves, 1940 (replica built by Ohio State University architecture students in 2005)

3.15 "Zanini Fur Showroom" by Albini in Milan, 1945

3.16 Holtz Dermatological Institute by Albini in Milan, 1945

3.17 Movable bookshelf and vitrine model, Albini, 1945

3.18 Baldini & Castoldi bookstore by Albini in Milan, 1945

## **4 The Rationalist House, the Modern Room, and Albini's Method**

4.1 Albini family apartment in Milan, 1940

4.2 Villetta Pestarini staircase by Albini in Milan, 1938

4.3 Albini family apartment, 1940

4.4 Apartment for Caterina Marcenaro by Albini in Palazzo Rosso, Genoa, 1954

4.5 Residential stair at *Torre Formiggioni* renovation by Albini and Helg near Varese

4.6 Steel House for the V Triennale in Milan, 1933

4.7 Pieti Apartment by Albini, 1933

4.8 Villa Vanizetti by Albini, 1935

4.9 Marcenaro apartment entry stair by Albini

4.10 Site plan for Villetta Pestarini in Milan by Albini showing the dwelling as garden wall

4.11 Basement, main floor, and upper-level floor plans for Villetta Pestarini

4.12 Villetta Pestarini diagrams showing Rationalist formal patterns

4.13 Pestarini fireplace with glass shelves and stone firebox and paving

4.14 Suspended fireplace hood and stone hearth in Marcenaro's Genoese apartment

4.15 Marcenaro apartment before 2007 restoration

4.16 Marcenaro apartment following restoration

4.17 Louis I. Kahn's unbuilt Fruchter house plan, 1951–54

4.18 Villa Allemandi plan at Punta Ala by Albinì and Helg, 1959

4.19 Interior loft and stair detail of Villa Allemandi

## 5 *Continuità*: CIAM and Neorealism in Post-war Italy

5.1 Giancarlo De Carlo, Walter Gropius and Franco Albinì

5.2 New Genoa School of Architecture building inserted by Ignazio Gardella into the historic context of the Sarzano neighborhood near the Sant'Agostino Museum

5.3 Stazione Termini Rome train station by Mario Ridolfi, 1947

5.4 *Fosse Ardeantine*. View from inside the communal crypt, 1944–49

5.5 Cortile of the Casa Girasole by Luigi Moretti, Rome, 1949

5.6 INA-Casa Cesate Housing near Milan by Albinì and Helg, 1951

## 6 The Exhibition and the Museum: Albinì's Pragmatic Poetics

6.1 Palazzo Rosso façade on the Strada Nuova, Genoa

6.2 Renovated cortile of the Palazzo Bianco on the Strada Nuova, Genoa

6.3 Renovated gallery of the Palazzo Bianco by Albinì, Genoa

6.4 Main piano nobile gallery of the Palazzo Bianco before renovation

6.5 Controversial support structures for paintings using architectural fragments

6.6 Mobile piston stand for Pisano's Margherita di Brabante, originally exhibited at Palazzo Bianco

6.7 Eleonora di Toledo is the only freestanding figure in this room in the Palazzo Abatellis gallery renovated by Carlo Scarpa, Palermo, 1953

6.8 Palazzo Rosso cortile by Albinì and Helg, 1952–62

6.9 Palazzo Rosso painting gallery

6.10 Original handle mounts at Palazzo Rosso to adjust paintings to desired viewing and light

6.11 Scarpa's hinged painting mounts at the Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo

6.12 Palazzo Rosso frescoed loggia enclosed in glass by Albinì and Helg

6.13 Palazzo Rosso spiral stair

6.14 Museum of the Treasury of San Lorenzo under the Duomo church of Genoa by Albinì, 1952–56

6.15 Plan and section diagrams of the Treasury of Atreus at Mycenae, 1350–1250 B.C.E.

6.16 Entrance to the Treasury of Atreus at Mycenae

6.17 Treasury of San Lorenzo gallery showing off-center installation and stone pattern

6.18 Treasury of San Lorenzo's Genoese silver craft installation

6.19 Sacred robes in display cases designed by Albinì in the Treasury of San Lorenzo

6.20 Plan of the underground Treasury of San Lorenzo by Albinì, 1952–56

6.21 Plan of Philip Johnson's underground Painting Gallery at his New Canaan estate, 1965

6.22 Castello Sforzesco Museum by BBPR in Milan, 1956

6.23 Carlo Scarpa's Castelvechio renovation in Verona, 1959–73

6.24 Yale Art Gallery cylindrical stair by Kahn in New Haven, CT, 1953

## 7 Tradition's Modern Corollary in Cervinia and Rome

7.1 Pirovano Youth Hostel by Franco Albini and Luigi Colombini, Cervinia, 1949

7.2 Third- and fourth-floor plans for the Pirovano Youth Hostel, 1949

7.3 Mushroom column capitals and construction details showing Modern and Traditional techniques in the Pirovano Hostel

7.4 Pirovano Hostel dining level showing custom furnishings, ribbon windows framing horizontal views, and ladder stairs

7.5 Pirovano Youth Hostel section

7.6 Kahn's Richards Medical Center, 1959

7.7 Piazza Fiume façade of La Rinascente Department Store by Albini and Helg, Rome, 1961

7.8 Cornice and construction details of La Rinascente Department Store

7.9 Model of the first proposal for La Rinascente Department Store showing roof-top parking and exterior circulation route

7.10 La Rinascente rear signage along spiral stair on the Via Salaria

7.11 La Rinascente final plan

7.12 La Rinascente spiral stair vertical perspective

7.13 La Rinascente spiral stair section

7.14 Yale British Art Center High Street façade in New Haven, CT by Kahn, 1974

7.15 Yale British Art Center spiral stair by Kahn

7.16 Yale British Art Center spiral stair cylinder by Kahn

## 8 Strange Siblings: Office Buildings in Genoa and Parma

8.1 INA Office Building on the Via del Corso in Parma by Albini, 1950–54

8.2 Genoa's New Municipal Offices (renamed Palazzo Albini) by Albini, 1950–63

8.3 INA Office Building top level, typical office, and ground floor plans

8.4 Palazzo Albini ground floor and upper level structural plans

8.5 Palazzo Albini (formerly called New Municipal Offices) horizontal cornice and Modern monumental stairs mediating slope of the Genoa hillside

8.6 INA Office diminishing façade grid details and urban cornice in Parma

8.7 Baptistry of Parma begun in 1196 marks the transition between Romanesque and Gothic periods

8.8 Diagram of INA Parma front and side façade elevations showing raised non-load-bearing ornamental pilasters

8.9 INA Parma spiral stair elevation

8.10 INA Parma spiral stair perspective

8.11 Isolation of the ornamental concrete lattice reveals proportional relationships to the pattern of windows and vertical brick infill panels behind it to form a tartan plaid

8.12 INA Parma elevation detail: slippage of front façade grid joins windows into traditionally proportioned units and provides reading of the façade as a dynamic surface

8.13 Palazzo Tursi elevated courtyard is encountered en route to Palazzo Albini municipal office and city council chambers, Genoa

8.14 Palazzo Albini section diagram

8.15 Stairs from Palazzo Tursi to Palazzo Albini—beginning of pedestrian promenade to Castelletto Panorama

8.16 Palazzo Albini green roof terraces with view over Palazzo Tursi and the Strada Nuova

8.17 Palazzo Albini meeting hall with “Lampada Ochetta” custom lighting and framed palace view across the Strada Nuova

8.18 Clerestory lighting glazing detail typical of the office floors throughout the Palazzo Albini

8.19 Palazzo Albini handrail detail can be compared to Milan subway handrails and other expressions of levity, continuity and the use of the line

8.20 Palazzo Albini rooftop as contemplative garden

8.21 Green rooftop of Palazzo Albini with the medieval city of Genoa beyond

## 9 Seeking Order: Urban Plans, Popular Housing and Furniture

9.1 Fabio Filzi Housing Quarter on the periphery of Milan by Albini, Palanti and Camus, 1938

9.2 Albini’s sketch for Edoardo Persico’s apartment, 1935

9.3 Recent photograph of Fabio Filzi Housing Quarter by author

9.4 Albini’s design proposal for efficient dwellings installed at the VI Milan Triennale, 1936

9.5 Unit plans for Fabio Filzi Housing by Albini, Palanti and Camus, 1938

9.6 Unit plans for housing projects Ciano, Ponti, and Sauro by Albini, Palanti, and Camus

9.7 Ettore Ponte Housing Quarter, 1939

9.8 Fabio Filzi Housing Quarter stairwells pulled into the public domain

9.9 Mangiagalli Housing in Milan by Studio Albini with Ignazio Gardella, 1952

9.10 Mangiagalli Housing unit plans

9.11 Corridor bridges for open circulation at Vialba Housing, Milan

9.12 Piccapietra commercial and residential complex by Studio Albini and Eugenio Fuselli, Genoa, 1955

9.13 Piccapietra covered pedestrian sidewalk detail

9.14 INA-Casa Cesate neighborhood outside Milan by Studio Albini, 1951–54

9.15 INA-Casa Cesate neighborhood loggia detail

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 9.16 INA-Casa Cesate neighborhood unit plans  | 10.11 Sant'Agostino Museum ground floor entry level gallery plan  |
| 9.17 Bookshelves with versatile column unit in Caterina Marcenaro's Genoa apartment   | 10.12 Interior first floor Sant'Agostino gallery  |
| 9.18 "Cicognino" tables by Albini   | 10.13 Window façade detail for large exterior openings aligned with the interior loggias at Sant'Agostino   |
| 9.19 "Luisa" chair by Albini  |   |
| 9.20 Model of Albini's "Gala" chair showing motion of seat on rattan frame  | 10.14 Typical Genoese pedestrian scaled alley or <i>crèuza</i>  |
| <b>10 Modernity's Weight: Suspending Optimism in Two Final Museums</b>  |   |
| 10.1 Façade of the Sant'Agostino Museum on Piazza Sarzano in Genoa  | 10.15 Sant'Agostino's interior ramp-stair circulation inspired by the alleys of Genoa   |
| 10.2 Model of the Sant'Agostino Museum by Knowlton School of Architecture students for "Museums and Installations of Franco Albini" Exhibition, 2006              | 10.16 Sant'Agostino's upper floor gallery with missing cloister corner column   |
| 10.3 Plan of the Sant'Agostino complex with Cathedral (Repertory Theater), Museum by Studio Albini, and public promenade through the historic triangular cloister | 10.17 Sant'Agostino's first floor gallery with Modern colonnade echoing the historic cloister contained in a display case   |
| 10.4 Urban network facing the Sant'Agostino Cathedral   | 10.18 Sant'Agostino's lower level sunken glass court acting as a source of daylight   |
| 10.5 Axonometric of the Sant'Agostino complex   | 10.19 Modern walls inserted into medieval halls of Verona's Castelvecchio for new museum by Scarpa  |
| 10.6 Thirteenth-century triangular cloister at Sant'Agostino  | 10.20 Glass display cases in the Eremitani Museum in Padua by Studio Albini   |
| 10.7 Public stair of Ignazio Gardella's Genoa School of Architecture (1992) off the Stradone Sant'Agostino  | 10.21 Site plan for the Eremitani Complex of Padua showing the former Roman amphitheater, the Scrovegni Chapel, the Cathedral, minor and major cloisters, and the unbuilt New Pinacoteca by Studio Albini |
| 10.8 Exoskeleton exposed steel structure of the Sant'Agostino Museum façade   | 10.22 Missing corner column of the Eremitani Museum minor cloister as designed by Albini  |
| 10.9 Studio Albini's Sant'Agostino Museum section   | 10.23 Centered columns of the Eremitani Museum minor cloister   |
| 10.10 View into new cloister and sunken glass light well of the Sant'Agostino Museum  | 10.24 Section diagrams comparing Studio Albini's New Pinacoteca and Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum   |

10.25   Exterior façade of Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

10.26   Interior of Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum gallery vaults

10.27   Maurizio Sacripanti's proposed project of the open glass section for New Pinacoteca as recalled by Franco Purini

10.28   Superimposed section diagrams to scale of Albini's New Pinacoteca over Kahn's Kimbell vaults

10.29   *Boston Globe*, April 19, 1964.

Internationally renowned architects gathered by Jackie and Bobby Kennedy to consult on the design of the JFK Presidential library

10.30   Handrail of the Milan Metropolitana (subway) by Franco Albini, Franca Helg and Bob Noorda, 1962



*This page has been left blank intentionally*

## Preface

It was a damp, dark day the first time that I wandered into Franco Albini's Treasury of San Lorenzo Museum in Genoa. I had been fortunate enough to receive a USIA (United States Information Agency) research grant to study Modern architecture in Genoa during the winter of 1989. The city's miniature streets—in some of which you can reach walls on both sides with outstretched arms—drew me along labyrinthine corridors where I found painted façades, traced the common striping of local black and white stone, discovered medieval loggias, some long since filled in but leaving embedded columns, and I enjoyed neon-laced storefronts advertising antiquities or books or old cafes. Narrow, often empty sloping streets eventually led to the daylight of a piazza or the *Sottoripa* with its busy traffic and business activities of the harbor. The stair-stepped ramp paths leading uphill rewarded tired legs with grand views of the industrial port over silver rooftops. I felt an equal mix of delight and anxiety as I got lost threading my way through the networks of this hard-worn port town, its old solid structures and hard working citizens inhabiting a kind of density I had not known, although I had lived in Rome and Florence. Meanwhile, grandiose frescoed interiors of elegant baroque palazzi holding private family collections existed just beyond the surface.

Up from the port and through the Piazza Scuole Pie, I wandered into the duomo church of San Lorenzo. The monumental façade invited passage through its left side door—a portal that looked like the section of nested Russian dolls. I passed the stone lion, climbed the black and white stone steps, and admired the intricate inlaid marble ornament that Marco Polo and Andrea Doria no doubt had touched that brought the scale down to human dimensions with magnificent detail and color. The austere striped and arcaded colonnade formed side aisles that led me into the sacristy, from which a ticket bought entry underground to the precious collection of artifacts known as the cathedral's treasury, a most unusual assortment of sacred bounty. Among the spoils of seizure was the reliquary of St. Lawrence brought back by a Genoese crusader from the Levant. It included such "treasures" as St. Anne's arm—bone exposed—within a gilded sleeve, the chalcedony chalice

framed in gold, said to have held the head of John the Baptist when it was served to Herod, a the green glass bowl called the Holy Graal. Could it be?

Except for the bejeweled and shiny treasures, the crypt was empty. I was alone; the silence and reflections were dizzying. Intense beams of light focused on gem-studded cardinal's robes in custom glass cases, silver statuary and ritual vessels glistened in the dark chambers—spaces that remained invisible until my eyes adjusted to the dim light. Gradually, I became aware of the architecture that allowed for such intimate relations with such unique artifacts. Four small gallery cylinders and an interstitial hexagon that joined three of the four round rooms formed a Modern assemblage of interlaced spaces, quite in contrast to the collections they housed, and in spite of being buried beneath a medieval church. The rooms were refined and simple, rendered from abstract geometries and realized in matte finished carved stone producing uniform floor and wall surfaces. Masterful was the design of almost invisible infrastructure that provided lighting and air movement with cast-in-place radial concrete structural ribs that included beads of skylight overhead. Such humble, yet brilliant, and effective architecture for displaying these historic artifacts was new to my Modern eyes.

Over the following weeks, I discovered three other museums and two office buildings, all in the heart of Genoa and all designed by Franco Albini. I had been attracted to each Modern intervention for the subtle way the present was married with the past, and the fabrication craft was superb, albeit with expression of the intervention minimized. As I learned that each work of architecture was drawn by the same hand, I became acutely aware of the profound nature of design that transcends style. Except for tectonic precision and subtle performance, there was little to link the look of these different Modern interventions to one another. Most apparent, each was intimately in sync with its physical surrounds, drawing selectively from existing conditions and able to revalue and challenge indifference to history. In his solutions to small problems, Albini had, for me, elevated the practice of architecture to a new art. In these few projects, his greatness lay less in the novelty or boldness of his intervention than in its subtlety.

Two aspects of this experience were discoveries to me at the time. First, the fact that Albini's thesis and signature were not initially perceptible piqued my curiosity. His very site-specific Modernity was in part rooted in qualities of his well-crafted architecture for that place. Appreciating his work, for me, required getting into his buildings. Second, although I had studied projects by Giuseppe Terragni and other Italian Modernists, I now realized that Albini's work had been overlooked and deserved scholarly attention. The combined impact of these revelations left me searching for more, and so subsequent research, grants, and travels led me on a 12-year adventure.

In the course of this journey through Modern Italy, I've met former Studio Albini collaborators, brilliant Italian Modern scholars, and Albini's son and grandchildren. I have attended Albini exhibits and hosted one myself along with a symposium aimed at situating his contributions within the complex ambitions of multi-faceted Modernism. The Modernism that Albini's work defined, along with that of other artists like T.S. Eliot and Louis Kahn, recognized cultural and building traditions

in service to ingenuity, creativity, invention and the infusions of the current age, informing rather than limiting them.

As I began to study Albini's unique contributions to Modernism, I presented a paper about similarities between works by Franco Albini and Carlo Scarpa, which won recognition at an ACSA (Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture), East Central regional meeting in Montreal. In 2004, on the occasion of the City of Genoa being selected to represent the European Union as a City of Culture, I proposed that Albini and his museums become a focus of the celebrations. While too late for the EU 2004 events, momentum was building. The next year, Ohio State's Knowlton School of Architecture hosted the traveling exhibition assembled at the Milan Polytechnic that featured Albini's museum and installation designs. My students built a series of models (including a nearly full-scale reproduction of his 1940 "Veliero" bookshelves) to accompany photographs of many of his ephemeral and permanent designs. We shared that exhibit with Kent State University, the University of Michigan, Arizona State University and the University of New Mexico. When *Do.Co.Mo.Mo Italia* featured the work of Albini in Genoa for the 2004 annual international meeting, I worked with Maristella Casciato and Cristiana Marcosano Dell'Erba to contribute to and translate the meeting publication. I was part of a team that then secured resources from the national *Beni Culturale*, Ministry of Culture, to fund a centennial show on the anniversary of Albini's birth honoring his complete career. The resulting *Zero Gravity* exhibit installed by Albini's intern, Renzo Piano, took place at the Milan Triennale in 2006. The result was a proliferation of writings by some who had known Albini and even more from a younger generation of scholars. The event and publication fostered renewed local appreciation of his public and private buildings, urban plans, and furniture developed over a more than 40-year career crossing the paths of most great mid-century Modernists.

It is a fitting question to ask why the work of Franco Albini has continued to draw my attention. As a practicing designer and teacher in a Midwestern American university town, examples of the greatest Modern architecture have fueled my interest and research, but discerning among the truly greatest has been a fluid process. Today, we are witnessing a period of expensive and prolific formal modeling devices fostering design methods mediated by digital programs. Young hands invited to produce biomorphic or alien form with increasing plasticity—because they can—introduce new questions about the craft, inhabitability, evaluation criteria, purpose and potential of the extant "new" architecture. Novelty seduces. The problems, patterns, needs, and discord addressed by Modern design persist, informing designers about what has lasted and what has not in conceiving and fabricating the Modern city. Albini's work provides lessons evident in a methodology beyond style, materials, or ideology. His iterative processes for finding solutions within the problem that required his disciplined restraint and discerning eye drove a practice that evolved through Fascism and urban renewal to the post-war economic boom. Over four decades, he took notable risks. He suspended glass planes, returned to typology and recognized, but confronted, history when *tabula rasa* was the status quo. And although male-female partnerships were rare at the time, he successfully collaborated with women, and partnered with Franca Helg for

most of his professional career. *Chi non risica, non rosica*, Italians say—who doesn't take risks doesn't eat, literally. Nothing ventured; nothing gained. With Albini's designs from bodily scale of furniture to the urban scale of the Milan subway, the partnership's risks are our reward.

Recently, the Fondazione Franco Albini has been formed in his former Milan studio to preserve his image and make his archives better available to future scholars. As several of Studio Albini's mid-century buildings undergo renovations by knowledgeable restorers, his furniture designs are being commercially fabricated and marketed, something Albini himself never emphasized. The "Veliero" bookshelves produced by Cassina, the same artifact my students reproduced, can now be purchased for the sticker price of a couple of brand new Smart cars. The value of Albini's simple ideas and systematic methods transcends fashion, and they are priceless.

For me, producing this book has been a revealing journey, and there is much more to pursue in Albini's legacy, other versions of situated Modernisms, and allied design innovations, whose contents I have tried to align here. It is my belief that Albini's work deserves much greater critical attention than it has, to date, received on the international stage. This book is my contribution toward that goal.

Kay Bea Jones  
Columbus, Ohio

## Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the many scholars who share my interests in Modern Italy and great architecture and design. They have prodded me with critical questions and helpful recommendations over the 14 years I have invested in this project. I owe a scholarly debt to many who have pursued avenues of parallel research and provided inspiration and debate: Maristella Casciato, Giorgio Ciucci, Dennis Doordan, Peter Eisenman, Richard Etlin, Mia Fuller, Diane Ghirardo, Fulvio Irace, Terry Kirk, Stephen Leet, Brian McLaren, Antonio Piva, Vittorio Prina, and Michelangelo Sabatino, Thomas Schumacher, most centrally among them.

I owe a significant debt of gratitude to Pippo Ciorra for first making me aware of that Modern Italian legacy that has informed his generation (along with rock and roll and all that goes with it) when I believed we traveled to Italy primarily to study the old stuff. In the years required to develop my ideas I have benefited greatly from the support and critical feedback of Katerina Ruedi Ray, Mosé Ricci, Maurizio Sabini, Davide Vitale, Scott Finn, Ferro Trabalzi, John McMorrough, Douglas Graf, Charles Klopp, Lydia Soo, and in particular, Stephanie Pilat, who introduced me to Ashgate Publishing. For critical corrections about facts from the Genoese scene, I thank Franco Boggero and Piero Boccardo. I thank Maristella Casciato and Cristiana Marcosano Dell'Erba for involving me in *Do.Co.Mo.Mo Italia's* feature of Franco Albini's work in Genoa for the 2004 Do.Co.Mo.Mo international meeting. I am grateful to Augusto Rossari and Federico Bucci for sharing their curatorial collection of the itinerant exhibition of Albini's museums and installations.

Two former students of Franco Albini, Matilde Baffa and Bruno Gabrielli, have had noteworthy and long professional careers in Milan and Genoa, respectively. Because of their personal relationships with Albini, their contributions were most rich. My conversations with each over several years have painted for me the portrait of a man with blood in his veins, which I hope to have honored here. The Fondazione Franco Albini, led by the architect's granddaughter Paola, and his son Marco, has been essential to my work. Thanks also to Elena Albricci from the Fondazione, which has provided almost one third of the images included in this volume. It has been an honor and a pleasure to work with each of them.

Research assistance over several years from Jane McMaster, head of the Knowlton School library and more recently from Tina Franks have been of great help. I appreciate the professional support of Nancy Thorne at the University of Pennsylvania—Louis I. Kahn Collection and of Elvia Raedelli from the historic archives of the Milan Triennale. For his beautiful photographs of Albini's renovated buildings in Genoa, John M. Hall has made this documentation unique among other publications of the work of Studio Albini. John found me in the course of our joint work, and I am deeply grateful for his talent, generosity, passion and inspiration.

My research for *Suspending Modernity* began with funding from the USIA (United States Information Agency) administered by the Columbus Quincentenary Committee at the Ohio State University. I am grateful for my institution's on-going support through grants from the OSU Office of International Affairs. I have been assisted by the administration of the Austin E. Knowlton School of Architecture at Ohio State and wish to thank Jean-Michel Guldman, Beth Blostein, Michael Cadwell and Robert Livesey. My sincere thanks are due to the students in my G1 Architecture Design Studio for model craft and insightful questions in the process of installing the exhibit "Museums and Installations of Franco Albini" in the Banvard Gallery in 2005. Over the past 12 years countless OSU students have listened to my lectures, reminding me of the importance of Albini's ability to stimulate, provoke and teach. Specifically to those who have produced drawings for this volume, I am indebted. They include Natalie Shovlin, Mengqing Chen, Winna Japardi, and Haotian Ma. I extend my appreciation to Luke Anderson, Marc Syp, and Evan Chakroff, Molly Evans, and especially to those who crafted the "Veliero" bookshelf, now in the KSA library Modern furniture collection, Victoria Fortuna, Patrik Matthews, Ashley Middleberg, Christie Mills, and Jason Robinson. I wish each of them could have a Cassina manufactured version of "Veliero".

I would not likely have sustained this long inquiry or have had the will to complete this book without the long dialogue and nudge of a few very special friends, among them, Sylvie Duvernoy, Elizabeth Frolet, Terry Dwan, Pippo Ciorra, Maristella Casciato, Mosé Ricci, Cheryl Jones (my sister), Kristin Jones (not actually my sister), Massimo Garavello, Susanna Voltolini, and Anna Soter. I am thankful to Beatrice Bruscoli for as many years of teaching collaboration in Italy and putting up with my passion for this subject.

But most critically, this book would not exist without sentences, paragraphs and ideas, and if they are legible, it is because of the patient edits and wordsmithing of Christian Zacher. Without him, my images would hang limp like so many dangling modifiers without structure, tense, or meaning. Like the structure that holds Albini's glass shelves in tension and compression, Chris's enduring poetry and adherence to craft have provided guidance and a persistent critical dialog along with invaluable technical support. Above all, I am grateful to him.

# 1

## Introducing Franco Albini

An exhibit must seek to be a success because this is an indication of its usefulness. Full approval, contradictory opinions, polemics don't matter—they are all signs of success.<sup>1</sup>

Franco Albini

Franco Albini (1905–1977) produced some of Modernism's most sensual and successful museums by departing from curatorial standards to compose fresh relationships between the observer and the artifacts he exhibited. His greatest contributions inhabit a tight radius around Milan, where he worked, but his influences continue to be widely recognized. His design language was local, yet international. Albini's inwardly focused character and Italy's isolation from the avant-garde mainstream during the early part of his career may explain his relatively subdued profile among Italian Rationalists and Bauhaus protégés beyond Italy. Yet Albini's diverse body of work has left a deep mark on the Modern landscape. His contributions continue to gain value as this period in Modern Italy is better understood and his best works grow more familiar. Close readings of some of his many projects and his contemporaries' reactions to them reveal a compelling story. His esteem in local circles is expanding with new scholarly investigations. This compilation of historic and new depictions of Albini's most significant works, some recently renovated, and diagrammatic analyses of revered buildings will unveil his formal and social ideals while situating him in a primary position within recent architectural history, conscious of tradition, as a master of Modern craft.

Scholarship reconsidering Albini's long career has been inspired by a series of exhibitions and publications that marked the centennial of his birth in 1905 in



1.1 Franco Albini



Robbiate, near Como, Italy.<sup>2</sup> When the Milan Triennale hosted a retrospective in his honor in 2006, like the traveling shows that have recognized his ephemeral installations, Albini's work was presented in isolation from other renowned Modernists. Italian scholars have reacted to a plethora of his ideas for museums and housing, office buildings and furniture, and each collection provides evidence of the depth, integrity, and variability of his formal language during a period when Italy's Modern identity was being consciously formed. Yet there exists no single comprehensive, critical overview that adequately positions Albini among the international cohort of Modern architects, since there has been little evidence of his body of work or assessment of it outside Italy, or even much beyond Lombardy. He has been highly renowned at home, but my efforts to objectively analyze his contributions along with subsequent studies stand to establish his prominence on the international scene, where lessons to be learned from his oeuvre, design methodology and attitude toward tradition remain valuable to practitioners, historians, students, product designers, and clients alike.

The material phenomena that give presence to Albini's existing works have motivated my investigation. Some of his buildings are characterized by sublime simplicity, while others offer more complex signs of the changing expressions characteristic of his era. Unquestionably Modern and influenced by the culture of Modernism in northern Italy before and after World War II, Albini's work was not, however, defined by codes, icons, or prevailing style. Nearly all of the results of his collaborations possess a poetic assimilation of the pragmatic realities of everyday life. He relied on the essence of the design problem to provide simple solutions for architecture, like those which can be found in the qualities of a single room, the comfort of a chair, the flexibility of a table, or the grip of a door handle. His coherence in producing work of variable scales and functions is the mark of an introspective designer who developed his personal methods even often at odds with his surroundings. This quality distinguished Albini, and linked him more closely to even lesser known figures like Edoardo Persico, during the formative period of Italian Rationalism, when the highly charged political climate of Italy shaped, and in a few cases ended, the careers of his cohorts. Through close readings of some of Albini's surviving structures, as well as critical interpretations of his many designs for ephemeral rooms long since dismantled, I aim to reveal a rare legacy held suspended in each remarkable example of this quintessentially Rationalist architect.

My title, *Suspending Modernity*, carries dual implications for the architecture, furniture and planning interventions of Franco Albini during mid-century Modernism. As an early member of the Rationalist movement, Albini played an important role in defining the material palette and innovative construction techniques of Modern Italian design. He employed glass in ways that exploited its potential for transparency, reflectivity, and apparent weightlessness. He repeatedly composed interiors with structures that defied gravity. From his glass bookshelves to several hanging stairs in his pre-war projects, Albini made objects float in celebration of the whimsy of structure denied.

Over his 47-year career, Albini continually explored the use of changing materials for new structures in relationship to their existing contexts. He built as he taught in Venice and eventually formed Studio Albini with new partners. During this period he was responsible for large public works in historic urban zones. As he addressed more façade studies in extant conditions, he developed solid figures to infill exoskeleton structures. For his last two museums, he spanned long spaces with six-foot deep steel I-beams and eliminated corner columns. These mature works amounted to a demonstration of real weight, a counterforce to the lyrical levity of his early Rationalist projects. Members of CIAM (Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) and Europe's avant-garde old guard took issue with his Neorealist experiments, especially the Pirovano Youth Hostel located in an Alpine village. Together with his Milanese cohorts, who changed course after World War II and produced historicized symbols, including Milan's Torre Velasca, and the Roman contingent, who employed more opaque masses than glass curtain walls, Albini's late work suggested an early post-Modern challenge to the status quo of Rationalist Modernity. In this sense he suspended the forward progress of International Style Modernism.

Albini practiced architecture from the time he completed his studies at the Milan Polytechnic in 1929 until the late 1970s. His most distinctive buildings subliminally reflect the technical, political, and societal changes that directly affected his life and work, yet he also remained true to his Modern sensibilities and methods. It can be shown that his vast array of projects—including domestic interiors and popular housing, commercial storefronts and furniture, urban plans that reshaped prevailing tendencies, iconic Modern buildings in historic urban settings, museums and exhibition installations, and ultimately his design for the Milan subway—characterize co-incident cultural transformations to which he responded with clarity, elegance, and uncanny intelligence. I will also attempt to demonstrate his responsibility for many aspects of Italy's architectural identity on the world stage after World War II. While working in his Milan studio, Albini recognized emergent patterns that evolved both before and after the war, and his role in shaping Modern Italian culture is born of his unique sensitivity for craft with a persistent will to facilitate change. According to contemporaries and protégés, he worked mostly in silence; he was shy and not prone to self-promotion or pontificating. His design rigors demanded coherence, whether pursued alone or in partnership, to find the essence of the thing made. He was a difficult taskmaster, rarely if ever satisfied with his own work or that of his students. He often reconceived, revised, and improved his own novel solutions to archetypal problems, which he rendered with extreme precision and craft.

While myriad achievements that also include the failings of Modernism are being reconsidered today for their informative lessons, a reexamination of Albini's work also plays a primary role in the desire to portray and understand that period. His work shows construction methods, material innovation, and spatial simplicity both familiar and distinct in the context of his international cohorts. His entire career deserves fresh critical assessment, one informed by comparison with better known architects, such as Renzo Piano, Carlo Scarpa, Ernesto Nathan Rogers,



1.2 Palazzo Albini  
on the Castelletto  
hillside of Genoa

Philip Johnson, and Louis Kahn, as well as less familiar figures, like Lina Bo Bardi and Edoardo Persico. The lack of stylistic similarity among Albini's many works, along with the paucity of his published writings, has made it difficult for historians to comprehensively know his intentions and therefore fully assess his legacy. The consistency among his recurring formal motifs notwithstanding, the different looks that characterize his public works and his many collaborators introduce a level of intrigue to any attempt to fully grasp his body of work.

Albini's ability to translate concepts into real and timeless form, and yet achieve poetic results within tight physical and budgetary constraints, earned him significant critical acclaim in Italy. Such design economy was especially relevant during lean times when sustainable practices were sought in many endeavors. Albini's minimalism was neither self-satisfied nor favored for its theory over pragmatism or craft. The terraced green roof for the new offices of the municipal town hall located in the heart of historic Genoa provides a sublime example of the *giardino pensile* (contemplative garden), a familiar motif that Albini elevated to a new level in response to a difficult building site. Constructed in the 1950s, the office building appears highly relevant today as an example of progressive environmental urban architecture.

By his hand, Modernity's succinct rationality can also be read as suspended in time, and delight for Modern material, like glass and grill work, hover still as the incomplete Modern project continues to evolve. He mastered a readable, accessible language for the design of gallery spaces and exhibition infrastructure whose details allowed for parts to move, and transparency made movement evident where statics

and dynamics live in the present tense and the presence of tension. Within these unique rooms the visual and actual weight of his interior architecture could be viscerally felt, yet with transcendent levity and humility he directed attention more toward the exhibited artifacts than toward his careful intervention. His severity and methodological rigor have endured assorted interpretations, but one thing is certain—he never relinquished his responsibility to the client, the site, or the artifact.

In Italy, and Lombardy in particular, Franco Albini has long been revered among Rationalism's protagonists. He emerged as the progenitor of the revolution in Italian post-war museum design with leitmotifs for displaying art that grew out of his ephemeral installations and private commissions for domestic space produced before and during the war. A single room sufficed as his primary form-giving object. From his earliest projects for temporary exhibits, Albini developed a formal language that evolved and matured into a refined palette, and he forged utilitarian elements that proliferated in defiance of gravity. He was deeply influenced by two of the most important architectural figures in pre-war Milan, Giuseppe Pagano and Edoardo Persico, and won their critical acclaim for his distilled installations and residences. His experimental uses of new materials and lightweight structural frameworks during the 1930s reflected a dialog shared among his Milanese cohort.

After the war, he was awarded a series of public commissions, due in large measure to the successes of his temporary installations. One project that earned Albini significant recognition was his 1941 exhibit in Milan's Brera Museum designed to display the works of the Modern painter Gino Bonichi, known as Scipione. The show was confined to four rooms in the gallery from the Napoleonic period. Following his success at the Brera, Albini was commissioned by the curator of Genoa's artistic patrimony to design four museums in pre-existing structures. The Genoese projects demanded integrating new ideas into important historic sites and presented him with challenges that became his catalyst for innovation. Three of his Genoese museums have recently undergone renovation, fostering renewed appreciation for his ability to integrate abstract spatial motifs within historic buildings in order to rejuvenate old structures and artworks.<sup>3</sup>

The immediate post-war period found Albini poised for leadership following the absence of many other significant cultural figures who had died or departed during the course of the war.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the authority of other previously prominent architects had been diminished as the winds of cultural authority and political power changed, bringing shifts in stylistic trends. Albini had worked for the Fascist regime but did not promote its ideology or let himself be subsumed by any correlated design dogma. During reconstruction, while assuming a more public and academic role than before or during the war, Albini produced many of his most recognized works of architecture and industrial design, including the "Luisa" chair, the Pirovano Youth Hostel in Cervinia, Genoa's Palazzo Bianco and Treasury of San Lorenzo museums, the INA Office Building in Parma, portions of the Cesate housing compound outside Milan, and, later, Rome's La Rinascente Department Store. Scholars have identified characteristics in later collaborations that suggest a new realism in the way his aesthetics and building programs responded to the tendencies of social change.



1.3 "Scipione & Black and White" exhibit at the Brera Museum in Milan, 1941

When oppositional rhetoric dominated Italian architectural debates, Albinì's public statements, both in words and in his buildings, contributed to bridging avant-garde trends with tradition, diminishing polemics and ultimately reshaping interior design, the gallery experience of viewing art, and public transportation during his era.

From among his varied collective housing complexes, the Cesate residences on the periphery of Milan reveal Albinì's tendency toward independent thinking. Cesate was built as part of the post-war INA-Casa federally sponsored housing initiative. Albinì's row houses along with the housing designs of his collaborators are frequently included in the loose canon of Neorealist architecture. Neorealism in Italian film and literature was brought about by resistance to tyranny and the hope of social revitalization that witnessed the reengagement of everyday life. This striving for reality, or in Gramsci's terms, "a new way of feeling and seeing reality," eventually came to architecture after resources for reconstruction had been secured, and new construction of mass housing ensued.<sup>5</sup> Albinì's post-war buildings found their intended purpose in urban manifestations that progressively attended to new social problems and territories. He collaborated on major residential compounds from the mid-1930s for IPFAC, the Fascist housing program, then later produced housing projects and neighborhood master plans for the cities of Milan, Genoa, and Reggio Emilia, including sites as far away as Havana.





Albini was engaged in urban design debates and practices that culminated in his design with Franca Helg and Bob Noorda for Line 1 of the Milan metro, while simultaneously producing works of industrial design, including lamps, tables, shelving and hardware, and earning recognition for his finely crafted furniture.

1.4 Milan  
Metropolitana—  
subway  
handrail, 1964

Renewed interest in “spontaneous” or vernacular architecture had been in vogue since the 1930s, but it was not until after the war that architects re-appropriated common craft and form for mass housing. New ideas for neighborhoods resisted previous Modern models of compositional and geographic abstraction. Beginning in 1938, Albini and his fellow Rationalists encouraged the integration of living functions, including public and green space, transportation, and infrastructure, into new collective compounds through urban planning. His master planning and residential projects during reconstruction aided in the emergence of new ideas of place, scale, comfort, and individual identity. During this period, Albini played a key role in the critical reassessment of values extracted from Italian tradition to reshape Modern culture. His address given to the *Movimento di Studi per l'Architettura* (MSA) in June 1955 was soon published in *Casabella continuità* (see Appendix 1), and it stimulated much interest and deliberation about the role of tradition in Modern culture.<sup>6</sup>

Several of Albini’s published projects became catalysts for passionate debate. Observers aiming to protect the ethos of abstraction criticized his Pirovano

Youth Hostel (1951) for being too contextual, its upper two floors resembling an Alpine chalet, while sympathizers recognized his translation of vernacular idioms into new hybrids. Albini and Helg's Rinascente Department Store (1961) in Rome resulted from an earlier scheme that proposed parking on the roof but was abandoned. Its palazzo-like massing, protruding cornice, and symmetrical façade evident in the built version appeared to some as a retreat rather than a challenge in Rome, a place obliged to historic replicas. Yet these controversial works were also highly regarded by noted critics and proved thematically similar to his celebrated museums, even as his instincts remained rooted in local solutions to formal problems and his interventions became more overt as his work grew in scale. By installing historic paintings in new ways without frames and within daylighted rooms in revitalized museums, he would consciously demonstrate that "tradition is a living phenomenon."<sup>7</sup> His oft-quoted adage, "*tradizione siamo noi*," literally, "we are tradition," revealed Albini's conviction that tradition can best be understood in relation to the creative necessity for change that exists in response to contemporary trends. On his terms, collective recognition of cultural identity will beget perpetually new expressions rather than a collection of nostalgic forms.

His interest in the relationship of Modernity to tradition was not only shared by other architects of his generation, but was in sync with the ideas of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Eliot defined tradition by its influence on Modern thinking when identifying the historical sense that spoke "not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence." Pound lived in Italy from 1924–45, and although circumspect because of his defense of Fascism, he participated in the progressive period that forged a continuum between the *Quattrocento* and *Dada* movements that, through his writings, had a significant influence on Modern literature and the visual arts. Albini's inventiveness with construction tectonics and his ongoing search for essential design solutions situated him as a Rationalist architect wedded to the continuity of an Italian Modern ethos and the unique cultural expression of native architecture.

It bears noting that Albini's most malleable and prolific period stretched seamlessly from early post-war reconstruction to the Italian economic miracle of the 1950s and 1960s. His initial furniture designs exploited elegant, if compulsively worked, details with a knowledgeable devotion to craftsmanship and the expressive potential of his materials. Even when his work employed less precious materials, such as wicker, and sought simplified versions of his well-studied objects, like his personal editions of the chaise longue, the folding table, or the dining room chair, he produced elegant functional prototypes. His sequential evolution of his designs involved revising familiar elements to produce quintessential archetypes.

An example of his recursive process can be seen in the two columns that form the V-structure of his 1940 bookshelf. The tapered, compression-loaded element was reconceived as a simplified perforated pole that was then multiplied to create an ensemble of horizontally wired columns for the Brera Gallery "Scipione & Black and White" exhibit in 1941. The new components were assembled to suspend

artworks, horizontal cases, and lighting systems on a freestanding matrix that replaced the gallery wall as a location for exhibiting flat and 3-dimensional works of art. The concept of the flexible, repeatable element used to position artifacts in open space evolved into his networked exhibition systems for the Genoese palazzi installations, and they eventually reappeared, revised again, in his Paris Olivetti Store in 1958.<sup>8</sup> By re-conceiving the lightweight, modular column as a unit element for interior infrastructure, the monumental room could be rescaled, viewing distances and sequences more easily controlled, and lighting systems integrated into flexible displays. Whole systems could infiltrate precious historic interiors with minimal permanent impact.

This rarified expression of tension and compression became emblematic of Albini's personal vocabulary of transparency and suspension devices. Serial fabrication ultimately fostered standardization and facilitated the mass production that promoted widespread dissemination of Italian Design. However, it would take later designers to exploit such changes in industry practices and production. Vico Magistretti recognized Albini's pioneering role when asked his thoughts about the latter's impact on Italian design. Magistretti responded, "He was born too soon."<sup>9</sup> Albini's collaborations with other Milanese Rationalists before the war laid the foundation for his novel material experimentation, technical precision, and suspension motifs, and he never wavered from an ethos rooted in a search for coherence that did not succumb to mere effects or commercial exploitation.

The legacy of Franco Albini can be measured in part by the growing number of articles that appear about his work during the years of his active career. Prominent cultural critics of the time regularly published his latest works. Among them was Giuseppe Pagano, editor of *Casabella* from 1928–43, who also supported Albini's participation in exhibits at the Milan Triennale and Ernesto Nathan Rogers of BBPR studio, who edited the journals *Domus* from 1946–47 and *Casabella* from 1953–65. Pagano taught Albini the necessity of simplicity, standardization and functionalist logic which he applauded in Albini's practice over Giuseppe Terragni's complexity and Gruppo 7's rhetoric. Edoardo Persico, who was among the most respected voices of the era, credited Albini for his sensibilities and for striking a balance between utility and poetry. Persico also found Gruppo 7 members to be too romantic in their visions, unhistorical, especially in their use of typology, and "a product of dilettantism."<sup>10</sup> He preferred Albini's deployment of geometry and perception, which linked his architecture to the best designers of northern and eastern Europe. When referring to Albini's 1935 INA Pavilion in Bari, Persico stated that, "The works of Albini, in line with German or Swedish rationalism, are recognized as ours by the sincere personality of the designer."<sup>11</sup>

The esteemed art historian and critic Giulio Carlo Argan, who served as Rome's leftist mayor in the 1970s, was among the first to identify Albini's innovative, revitalizing approach to museums that radically refigured a plethora of old artworks and essentially redefined Italian exhibition protocols. He launched Albini's Palazzo Bianco renovation (1949–51), produced for arts administrator



Caterina Marcenaro, when he called it “Modern and wholly satisfactory in both architectural and museographic terms.”<sup>12</sup> Cesare De Seta remarked on the importance of Albini’s consistency and unwavering faithfulness to his own Modern principles.<sup>13</sup> Manfredo Tafuri recognized Albini’s “technically faultless vocabulary” in crafting the Museum for the Treasury of San Lorenzo in Genoa while lauding his interiors as “ephemeral containers for magically transported historical objects.”<sup>14</sup> Critics praised the virtues of Albini’s novel formal language for its ability to surpass the conservation of objects while serving as history’s witness and to reintroduce past works of art in fresh ways for Modern consumers. Giuseppe Samonà, who had hired Albini to teach in Venice, called his work a “vigorous critical instrument” owing to his awareness in “working toward something much deeper than the transient structures to which his spatial vision was limited.”<sup>15</sup> Luigi Moretti was among the many who applauded Albini’s austere realization of the Palazzo Bianco Museum renovation. He observed that the abstract and anti-formalist intervention within a baroque monument essentially struck a cord that could be heard by his contemporaries’ “somewhat deafened Modern ears.”<sup>16</sup>

Bruno Zevi found the organicism he sought in his interpretation of Albini and Colombini’s 1949 youth hotel designed for the Alpine slopes. Zevi’s journal, *Metron*<sup>17</sup> was also responsible for publishing Albini’s works. Gio Ponti, for whom Albini had interned from 1929–31, was an early critic of the search for a personal Modern aesthetic, but recognized in the design of Albini’s own dwelling the architect’s “love for concepts dangerously balanced between severity and freedom.”<sup>18</sup> Renzo Piano, on the other hand, left architecture school in Florence to intern in Studio Albini for three years in the early 1960s, during which he has admitted that he “stole daily with his eyes.”<sup>19</sup> Given the endurance of some of Albini’s key works, his recognition by colleagues and critics during his lifetime, and rekindled interest in him today, it remains curious that more architecture scholars outside of Italy have not addressed his oeuvre. Although he produced nothing in the United States, Jackie Kennedy invited him as the only Italian to serve on her advisory council when interviewing architects to design the JFK library in Boston.<sup>20</sup>

Albini collaborated with many designers and architects throughout his long career, especially but not exclusively on large-scale interventions. Undoubtedly several of his partners shared his vision, but few have been recognized for such coherence of method to achieve formidable results with so varied a palette, nor were others responsible for the number of astonishing interventions over more than 40 years of practice as was Franco Albini. His longest collaborator, Franca Helg (1920–89), began working with him in the early 1950s. She eventually became a full partner in the studio, and she led the practice of Studio Albini for 12 years after his death. Joint authorship of their many projects makes it difficult to assign credit for ownership of specific ideas during their alliance. According to Helg’s testimony published two years after his death, such distinctions seem unnecessary. She lends significant insight into his character and their working rapport.<sup>21</sup>



1.5 Studio Albini with Franca Helg and Franco Albini in 1968

Perhaps what most served to distinguish Albinì as a unique Modernist stemmed from his earliest compositional inclination to establish integrated formal relationships within a single room. He established an interior language of transparency and suspension in his first installations that evolved throughout his mature museums and dwellings to distinguish his body of work. For his own well-documented 1940 apartment on Via dei Togni in Milan he staged his surreal “Transparent Radio” (1938) and “Veliero” bookshelves (1940) along with glass table surfaces, translucent curtains, and artworks suspended freely in space, to integrate the entire room. The elements cohered to form a unit, and photographs suggest that each single part was inseparable from the total composition. Similar interconnections can be observed in his 1935 INA Exhibition Pavilion, 1936 and 1940 Milan Triennale installations, the living room and stair hall of Villetta Pestarini (1938), and the Brera Museum “Scipione & Black and White” exhibit (1941), all works that Albinì individually authored.

Albinì demonstrated early in his formation that Modernity was a powerful *interior* idea, and that the room was its quintessential unit element. As his suspension motifs and devices grew further refined, his notion of Modernity embodied the same gestalt, one that Louis Kahn would arrive at after critically reassessing the open plan of his own 1951 Yale Art Gallery. Like Albinì, Kahn came to the understanding that the complete room defines a great work of architecture—and provided the primary component for the making of Modern space. This reversal of formal order and priorities invites reconsideration of the holistic approaches of Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and other Rationalist and Bauhaus innovators who conceived of the total building defined by tectonic novelties as an object that constituted Modernism’s prime unit. This difference in concept further reveals that Albinì responded to specific urban modifiers in the relationship of the room to the building and the building to the city. His personal interpretation of the international style paradigm demonstrates his aim to define his own Modern project, which he carried out with sensitivity and tenacity. Perhaps his taciturn character played a decisive role in his intellectual independence—claims have been made that he rarely smiled—yet relationships with patrons like Caterina Marcenaro endured and were quite formative. Albinì’s Modern room proved exceedingly persistent in the evolution of his own work as well as for those he influenced.

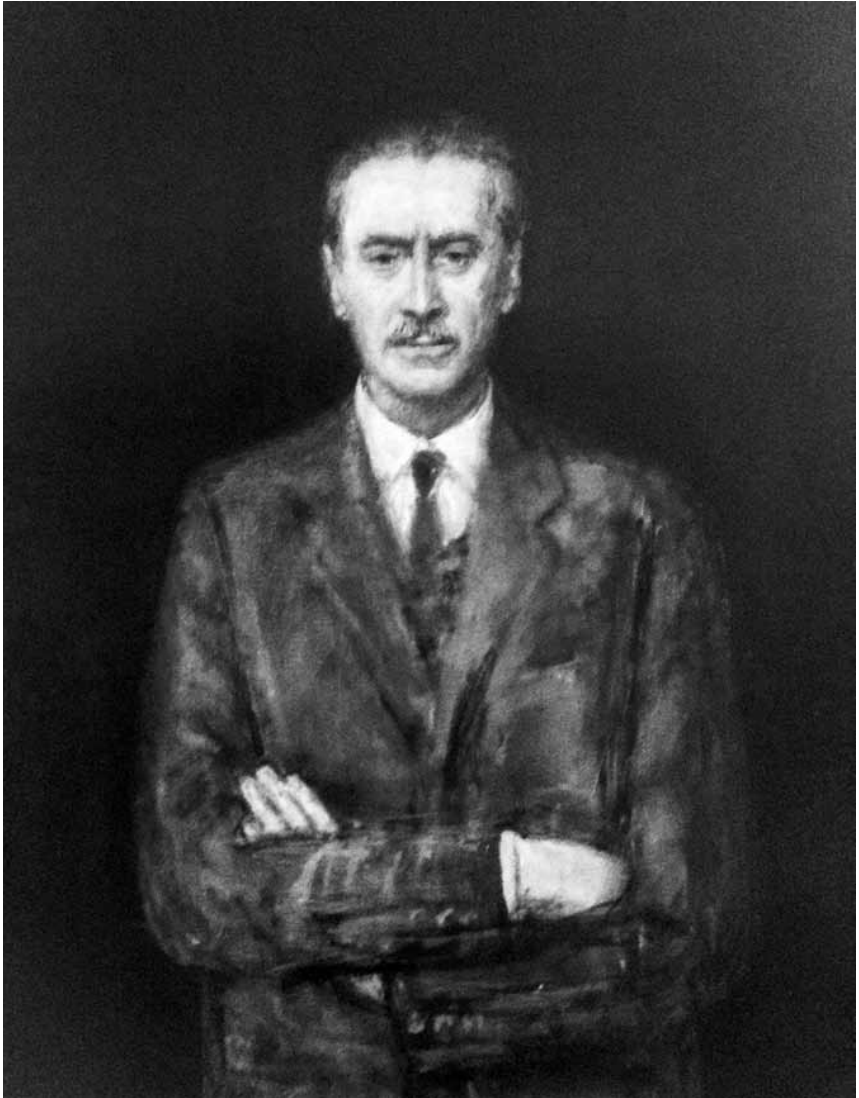
The prolific and varied nature of Albinì’s long career also presents challenges in editing this account of his work. In my efforts to establish his importance on the international Modern scene, I have chosen to study some examples in depth rather than provide a comprehensive account of his long career. I have drawn my selection of buildings and furniture to investigate his contributions in two categories: those works that have been consistently recognized by Italian scholarship and media since they first appeared and signaled a transformation in trends; and certain lesser known projects that reveal important aspects of his architecture, especially when compared to work by his contemporaries, and have sometimes been overlooked in telling his story.

A book that details Albini's masterpieces and methods seems timely in the context of reflection about the Modern project. The enduring qualities in his work, including his museums and public buildings, have stood the test of time to offer valuable lessons about design rigor, unity, logic, and effects beyond style. Changes in taste, whether tied to novelty or political symbolism, only secure the value of the lessons found in Albini's oeuvre. The rational rigor of his compositional methodologies for solving pragmatic problems—both physical principles of weight and statics and utilitarian functions of everyday life—produced well-resolved, enduring, yet surprisingly poetic, works of architecture. Albini's original design for Villetta Pestarini in urban Milan (1938) stands alongside other notable dwellings of the period, such as Le Corbusier's *Maison La Roche* (1923), Mies van der Rohe's *Tugendhat house* (1930), Gropius's own *Massachusetts house* (1937), and Neutra's *Palm Spring's Miller House* (1937). His extraordinary apartment for Caterina Marcenaro (1954) in the attic of the *Palazzo Rosso* museum is emblematic of Albini's elegant domestic ensembles and demonstrates a persistent principle in his work. Effectively doing less with more takes more design energy than is often expended in many minimalist derivations.

Albini's best works exemplify the integrity of a determined professional who draws less attention to the figure of the architect and more to the extraordinary fruits of his labors. The fresh, even whimsical character of Albini's earliest experiments, luminous and weightless, that exploited transparency and employed suspended glass planes, cables, and slender posts to support solid artifacts, successfully manipulated the perception of gravity. As inspiring now as when they first appeared, his sublime interiors suspended the limits of time as they also transcended constraints of style. Later, Studio Albini produced more assertive urban interventions in which familiar structural and suspension motifs gained weight and became more aggressive. On more than one occasion he conveyed the dual meaning of suspension—that of withholding the certainty and ubiquity of the positivist Modern project even while precious elements dangled in air.

Learning from Albini has required a journey through books and buildings, conferences and exhibitions, and the redrawing and diagramming of exemplary projects to sufficiently grasp the dynamics embodied in Studio Albini's total oeuvre. My perspective on his ideas comes from examining Albini's accomplishments in an international context, both beyond and within Italian culture. His few published remarks, all transcribed in Italian, in particular those regarding the role of tradition in design and his museum and exhibit experiences, allow his voice to be heard. My graphic diagrams complement contemporary and period photographs of key structures to reveal the level of formal complexity necessary in many cases to construct a simple idea. Continuity of that idea can thrive neither in dogma nor by way of formal replicas, but for Albini required an incessant search for an idea within the problem and its context. Investigations of Albini's ways of working and collaborating, which employed significant creative independence throughout his long career, are served by comparable rigor while also inviting readers to reflect on his most poetic expressions. As a result of this study, Albini emerges as an uncommon artist whose ephemeral structures and spaces paradoxically have grown more visible with time.

1.6 Portrait of  
Franco Albini by  
Roberto Sambonet



Vittorio Gregotti characterized his 1966 book, *New Directions in Italian Architecture*, as neither a history of Modern Italian architecture by a historian nor a systematic survey. My study, similarly, is a product of the methodology and eye of an architect, with access I have had to a wealth of current Modern histories. It is aimed at providing other architects and designers of allied practices with a new source of inspiration, one that does not duplicate the direct experience of Albini's spaces but that provides insights about his achievements through historic reference, diagrams, photographs, and descriptions of his most important contributions. Critiques and interpretations resituated with the benefit of recent studies of the history of Italy's Fascist period along with theoretical frameworks offered by phenomenology and the practices of the everyday seek to draw