



“In Praise of Ponti: How Ponti revolutionised the modernist movement.”
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In Praise of Ponti

Introduction:

A wise man once said, “the most resistant element is not wood, it is not stone, it is not steel, it is not glass. The most resistant element in building is art. Let’s make something beautiful.”, and that is exactly what he did. [14]

The last hundred years have met some of the most genius minds of our modern world. Geniuses of science, of mathematics and of medicine. Their sagacity which has shaped much of our society. Yet somehow, amongst all of this innovation we often seem to neglect the high intellect of art. This man was Gio Ponti, a maestro in his own right.

This essay will follow Ponti’s journey to becoming one of the Italian “Masters of Architecture”[12]. A path that spanned over six decades and combined his passions for architecture, literature, design, education and for art. I will explore his efforts in determining a place for colour, pattern and decoration among modern architecture by analysing an building of his design, the Villa Planchart which exhibits his one of a kind, revolutionary concepts for interior spaces. This set him apart from others of his time and laid the foundation of a legacy still seen in this modern day.

Biography:

Giovanni, “Gio” Ponti was born on the 18th of November 1891 in Milan, Italy, the only child of Enrico Ponti and Giovanna Rigone. Having been in poor health most of his childhood he was often viewed as fragile, with this sporting

activities became forbidden to him. It was as a result of this that Ponti found his passion and longed to be an artist. [8]

After having received classical schooling Ponti enrolled in the faculty of architecture at Polytecnico di Milano in 1913. However with the outbreak of world war 1 his education was temporarily paused as he left to serve his country, returning as a captain with the bronze and the Italian military corps medals in hand. Having found a happy medium between art and career, Ponti then went on to graduate with a degree in architecture in 1921. That same year he went on to marry Giulia Vimercati with whom he had four children, Lisa, Giovanna, Giulio and Letizia. [8]

It was after this point that his architectural career began to blossom. As well as practicing as an architect, he began working with the Richard Ginori ceramics factory [12]. This collaboration lasted until 1938 and gave way to a new kind of production. 1925 saw the completion of Ponti’s first professional design, the first of hundreds, the Villa Randaccio, in which he resided.[4] From here his career began to pick up speed. In 1927 he opened his first private practice with Emilio Lanza. This merger lasted until 1933. It was at this point in time that Ponti began to rebel ever so slightly against what was accepted within modernist design by injecting his ideals for architecture, interior design, and decoration within the Villa Bouilhet at Garches, Paris. [8]

Ponti’s love of literature lead to the foundation of his architectural and interior design inspired magazine, ‘Domus’ of which he was also editor-in-chief.[4] Ponti

briefly resigned from this position in 1941 to establish his industrial magazine 'Stile'. [8] Stile was less successful in comparison to that of Domus which is still in operation to this day. Domus proved to be highly innovative during Ponti's time as it introduced the modern architectural movement to the people of Italy and acquainted them to names such as Le Corbusier and Van Der Rohe.



[6]

Ponti also advocated for a closer relationship between crafts and industry from the onset of his career, his chance to magnify this plea came with that of his involvement in the Triennale exhibitions of 1930, 1933 **"his Triennale"** [8], 1936, 1940 and 1951. During this period he also began working with the Luigi Fontana factory in 1931 which in turn solidified his artistic ambition.[6]

His 1933 to 1945 partnership with Eugenio Sanchini and Antonio Fornaroli saw the completions of notable works

such as important school buildings like the School of Mathematics at the Rome University Campus and the Dean's offices at Padua University. It also saw the fulfilment of residential buildings such as the Marmount House and the Villa Donegani. These years also saw the large production of furnishings and custom pieces in which Ponti aimed to combine sophistication, functionality and elegance. [8]

1936 saw the dawn of one of his greatest loves, teaching. Ponti began lecturing interior design, furnishing and decoration at his alma mater, Milan Polytechnic. This career lasted until 1961. Not long after he started teaching, in 1938 Ponti set about his ideals of Mediterranean architecture by the convergence of art and industry.[4][8]

The 1950s saw the Ponti, Fornaroli and Rosselli practice come into fruition.[7] The establishment of the Compasso d'Oro award in 1954 and his finite form theory becoming pivotal in all of his works. His furnishings also peaked with invention of what would become a staple of his, "organised walls" and composite furnishings. In 1954 also saw the beginnings of projects such as the Venezuelan villas Arreaza and Planchart and in 1957 there came his universally acknowledged masterpieces, the Pirelli Tower and his published essay, "In Praise of Architecture" in 1957. [8]



The Pirelli Tower

In his latter years Ponti chose to focus many of his grander design projects on religious buildings, for example the Milanese Churches of San Francesco in 1964 and the San Carlo Borromeo in 1966 are evidence of so. He also turned his attention away from South America and instead built ministerial buildings in the Middle East. [8]

Up until 1970, approaching eighty years of age Ponti continued to produce memorable works that can only be described as art, the cathedral of Taranto for one, the Denver art museum for another, in which the architecture seem to form like a perforated sheet of paper.

Gio Ponti took his final breaths in his home of his own creation, the Villa Dezza, Milan on the 16th of September 1979. [12]

Villa Planchart:

In discussing the work of Gio Ponti, the Villa Planchart in Caracas, I hope to depict exactly how innovative and ground breaking these spaces were during the 1950s and how it contributed to the Mid Century Modern movement. The uses of colour, interesting geometric abstraction and form redefined what could be considered acceptable during the Modernist era.



[9]

The Villa Planchart, or 'El Cerrito' is a mid-century modern house located in Caracas, Venezuela. It is over ten thousand square foot in size [13] and was constructed between the years 1953 to 1957 and was home to Armando and Anala Planchart who commissioned Ponti having found themselves fascinated with his love of architecture. [7]

The villa is situated on top of a hill, overlooking the breath taking capital of Venezuela in remarkable perspective. Ponti's initial concept for the building was that it was to resemble "a butterfly that had alighted on a mountain". [1] This description can in some ways be seen from its white walls and origami like structure to its unsymmetrical structure and floor plan. He sought to combine metamorphosis form and lightness within this design. One could most definitely argue that the almost wing-like shielding along the entrance of the home resembles that of an insects wing or antenna. This V shaped canopy with its large cantilever shades serve as a protective outdoor carpark shielding the cars from the sun.[2]



[2]

This carport is also a great example of how Ponti blurs the boundaries to create a fluid relationship between exterior and interior with the use of stereotypical mid century modern colours, turquoise and yellow, along the supporting beams.[2] Indicating as to what one might find within the interior. Ponti also illuminated the house using hidden light fixtures to make the structure appear almost as if it is

nocturnal and visually blurs the boundaries making it hard for one to differentiate between what is inside and what is outside.

However, according to Ponti to truly understand this tropical, Italian villa one must more so focus on the interior. He describes this as “a game of spaces, surfaces and volumes offered in different ways to those who visit”[2], this perfectly describes how the complex, yet cohesive design. It is also worth noting that while the decorative aspects of this home are intriguing to say the least, this building was not merely created for ornamental use but also for the requirements of those who inhabited it.

Ponti's aimed to make the buildings as individual and original as possible. One element of the design that Ponti remained adamant about in creating this Florentine villa was that materials were to be imported from Italy. He had marbles of every colour imported to create a harlequin staircase of coloured marbles.[1] No two steps the same. He also used geometric shaped tiles along the ceilings and more so on the floors. This creating a patchwork assemblage of marble slabs. He layered tones of colours like yellow, taupe, terracotta, green and turquoise in order to do so effectively.



[1]



[9]

He used a yellow and white diagonally striped ceiling (seen above), bright coloured feature walls and throughout enamelled the dining room with geometric shapes of blue, green, yellow and pink mosaic floors to create fluidity and transitions throughout the home.[2] He also added one of kind touches like handmade custom furniture, cabinetry

and stencilling into the wainscoting to ensure that there could be no other place like it.

Ponti was also adamant that every piece or artwork be Italian and abstract sculptures be Venezuelan. He commissioned a polygonal dining table with eight sides and the works of Italian artists such as Fausto Melotti to create the ceramic mosaic sculpture the patio's southern wall and Romano Rui to create the fireplace and chimney stack. [2]

In terms of how the style of the building reflects the modernist period one can look at the white origami like exterior walls that almost make the building appear as if it is gently hovering on the hillside, like the butterfly Ponti envisioned.



[14]

One can also examine the use of the bright and airy mid-century modern colour palette that is used throughout the entirety of the interior, and indeed parts of the exterior to distinguish itself as a modern building. Tones within colours such as blues, pinks, rusts, oranges, greens and yellows

complement each other in abstract geometric patterns to create a graceful, light and tropical atmosphere.[1]

As well as that one can identify the style by studying the furnishings and décor within the house. The vertical elements, use of veneered wood, the tapered legs of furniture, pops of colour, bold shapes like domes, flared back chairs, the use of function of form with geometric designs within the likes of cabinetry.[10]

Another characterization of a mid-century modern home is that of the use of botany. The Plancharts had a deep passion for botany so much so that they had orchids sprouting from the staircase. Ponti set about using metal trays to create 'portable gardens'. These custom units could be set into the floor to incorporate flowers as a part of the structure of the building.[2]

Some of the elements that define this building as Ponti's include the use of functions before form a belief he held strongly as both an architect and furniture designer.

Throughout the entirety of the building this proves to be the case, and even then the form aspect is always very simple and clean.

Ponti also showcases the artistic design of industrial products with the use of the V shaped canopy and stone work.

Another feature that identifies this building as Ponti's is the 'organised shelves' to be found within studio library. [2]

After having a difference in opinions with Armando Planchart regarding displaying his collection of animal heads, Ponti made the decision to install his signature organised shelves so that whilst not ruining the beautiful

home that he had built, at a push of a button six cabinetry niches would rotate to reveal Armando's prized collection.[2]

Personal Interpretation:

Personally having studied this building I must admit that it is like no other I've ever seen. However the genius composition of colours and shapes, as well as the gradual transitions does indeed manage to create a happy, bright and relaxing atmosphere. To add to that it meets both form, being a ten thousand square feet art piece, and function, whilst operating as a family home. That being a balance which seem quite too difficult to get. Though, Ponti describes this villa as both tropical and Florentine I find that in some ways it is somewhat ambiguous. In my own personal opinion, the clean background and pops of colour could place it anywhere in the world.

Conclusion:

Having examined the works of Gio Ponti, this one in particular detail, I stand firm in saying that his design concepts crumble the crisp clean confinements of what was traditionally considered modern design and injects personality, comfort, atmosphere and beauty into everyday living. His individual style is like no other and no one can match in comparison. Gio Ponti fought for what could be considered contemporary design and established himself as one of the greatest masters of architecture. He contributed to that of architecture, culture, design, education, literature but most importantly he found a place for art in architecture.

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