

**DRAWING
ARCHITECTURE
OF THE ITALIAN
ECONOMIC MIRACLE
THE SKETCHES
OF VICO MAGISTRETTI**

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ITALIAN ECONOMIC MIRACLE
VICO MAGISTRETTI
ARCHITECTURE
DRAWING
DESIGNING

How was architecture drawn in Italy during the years of the economic boom?

The case of Vico Magistretti, a born in Milan architect and pupil of Ernesto Nathan Rogers, as well as a designer of international renown, could provide insight into the evolution of ways of representing architecture, especially during the conceptual stages of the project. The critical re-reading of a selection of six design sketches, dating

from the period between the beginning of the 1950s and the end of the 1960s, outlines a cognitive and communicative path of architectural values. But drawing is also a moment of verification of architecture's perceptive, relational, and spatial datum, which Magistretti would decline throughout his long career convincingly and constantly in one way to achieve progressively different results.

INTRODUCTION

Drawing means transposing an evanescent, uncertain, or imperfect thought into graphic signs. The graphic act is by its very nature a moment of verification of our ideas, which precisely through drawing become a legible, interpretable, and evaluable form. But drawing, as a subjective exegesis par excellence, can also be a snapshot ascribable to a precise moment, of an existing reality, or of something only found in our imagination. It follows that several interrelated drawings may be able to iconically describe a period, or implicitly reconstruct a story. In this essay, through re-reading a limited selection of drawings by a protagonist of Italian architecture in the second half of the 20th century, we attempt to evoke a happy period for Italy, the economic miracle. By this expression, we mean the period between the early 1950s and the end of the 1960s characterised by considerable growth in the economy of a country reduced to rubble by five years of war and twenty years of fascist dictatorship. Parallel to this phase of economic expansion there was a marked technological-industrial progress and a general improvement in the social and cultural conditions of the Italian people. Probably completely unaware, the first to notice this wave of change were architects and urban planners, who knew how to interpret the favourable situation, designing skyscrapers, tower, architecture for mobility or housing complexes of all sizes (Mieli, 2021): all buildings that went down in history and that, with their charge of modernity, became the iconic symbols of the boom. Architects such as Figini and Pollini, Giuseppe Samonà, Mario Ridolfi, Giovanni Michelucci, Ludovico Quaroni or Franco Albini and Franca Helg were some of the protagonists of the economic miracle in architecture, while the most emblematic building of the period is probably the Pirelli tower, built in Milan to a design by Gio Ponti and Pier Luigi Nervi. Concerning the main city in northern Italy, the figure of Vico Magistretti: born in 1920 and a pupil of Ernesto Nathan Rogers, in the boom period he designed some of the most important buildings in

modern Milan, making a decisive contribution to the renewal of the overall image of Italy's second metropolis. Probably best known as an industrial designer, he boasts a truly significant architectural production that corresponds to an equally impressive quantity of graphic material now preserved in the foundation-museum named after him.

Vico's drawings express a precise way of thinking about things, albeit based on a holistic approach: the graphic translations in sketch form of his projects constitute "the putting into form of a concept" (Pavoni, 2021, pp. 18-20), i.e. a *modus operandi* through which the architect was already attempting to reveal—or explore—relationships between forms, the genesis of the conceived space and the expected perceptive results. This dissertation, rather than attesting to Vico Magistretti's graphic-manual skills, primarily intends to operate decoding of his way of seeing or imagining reality. To do this, we chose to analyse six architectural sketches drawn by the designer during the two decades of the 1950s and 1960s: these drawings concern five architectures for collective housing built in Milan and a villa built in Arenzano (Figure 7), a small coastal town in western Liguria.

THE 1950S

The decade between 1951 and 1960 represents the beginning of the rebirth of the nation: Lombardy and its capital city will play a propulsive role that will lead the entire country towards a season of prosperity; throughout Italy reconstruction is underway but there is no lack of *ex-Novo* constructions; in Milan, among the many new buildings erected there is certainly the residential tower in Via Revere designed by Vico Magistretti—in collaboration with Franco Longoni—starting in 1953. The building is significant both for its disruptive visual impact on Milan's skyline and for its immediate proximity to the city's most important green area, Parco Sempione. The building we see today is the result of a complex gestational

process, in which the design choices had to be mediated by the requests received from the city and the client (Irace & Pasca, 1999). In fact, in the two perspective sketches made on the same support (Figure 1), Magistretti draws a twenty-stories building with a floor plan that seems to refer more to a 'wide V' shape than to the 'L' with which it will be realized. The differences with the final version are many, starting with the two façades that define the concave part, initially imagined as a large system of loggias covering the entire vertical dimension of the front but enclosed within a pair of blind walls placed at the extremes that materialize two corners with more urban than architectural ambitions.

Both perspective sketches communicate precise design intentions: the forty-five-degree hatching executed in hard pencil for the back wall of the loggia system through the uniform lightness of the stroke indicates the choice of a transparent yet reflective material – glass; the partitions are represented with a fine felt-tip pen flanked by a softer pencil, in such a way as to simultaneously mark the edges and the *chiaroscuro* of the intrados of the corbels; these elements, in the second sketch on the right below, are instead treated indistinctly with a felt-tip pen, perhaps to emphasize the choice of a particular cladding material for the loggia system; the latter, compared to the other drawing, in fact appears more autonomous from a figurative point of view, referring more specifically to the concept of a frame; the two perspective drawings also explore the south-east front, which reiterates the theme of the loggia obtained as an overlapping of balconies; this time the continuity is interrupted by the presence of glass-enclosed volumes arranged according to a staggered criterion that always leaves the east end free, in which the overlapping of the projecting planes defines an immaterial vertical edge; this volumetric articulation is overhanging in the first drawing while it is coplanar to the façade in the second drawing. The representation of the base denotes certain design attention to the integration of greenery with architecture: the building appears to be

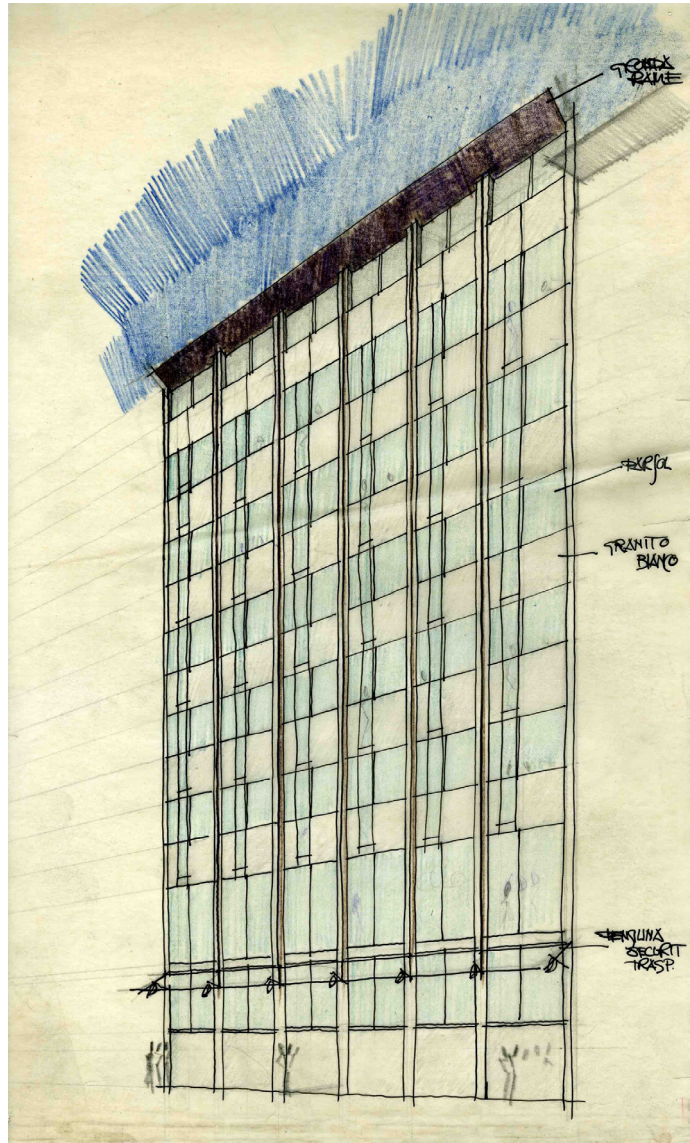
Fig. 1 Vico Magistretti, design sketches of Torre in Via Revere, 1953. Freehand drawing in pencil and felt-tip pen on paper. *Fondazione studio museo Vico Magistretti, Milan* <archivio.vicomagistretti.it>.



hoisted on a podium –which would later be the internal car park– drawn as an overlapping of horizontal lines drawn with felt-tip pens of various thicknesses interspersed with short flights of stairs; the ground floor appears to be represented with ‘pilotis’, through which Magistretti draws, using thick felt-tip pens, the vegetation placed on the back of the part of the lot destined to be a garden. Using a probably identical technique, the Magistretti creates, in both cases, a hint of background with a compact forty-five-degree hatching, with the probable intention of further emphasizing the architecture and in particular its top crowning system, the canopies with different material for the two solutions, to which the designer seems to want to assign a linguistic role that is not secondary to the overall perception of the building. Again playing on the contrasts between background and figure, in 1955 Vico Magistretti, during the design gestation of his multifunctional building in Corso Europa in Milan, draws a perspective sketch of the only publicly visible façade (Figure 2). The designer elaborates a perspective construction that protrudes from the sheet of paper and for which it is safe to as-

sume that an additional, larger support may have been used. The perspective construction lines, as well as the elevation draft, were drawn with a hard pencil; the subsequent drawing of the façade was done freehand with an Indian ink pen. Through the modulation of the latter, the overall image of the front is defined as a warp of several overlapping textures: the pillars, drawn as split starting from the second elevation, play the primary role of governing the overall composition, also through the use of a more marked stroke; to a later level seems to belong the modular partition between opaque and transparent walls; the latter is extended to the entire surface area available between beams and pillars in the first three elevations, while all the subsequent floors –except for the last– are based on the reiteration of a module composed of a transparent part and an opaque part acting as a parapet, the latter interspersed with a vertical-axis hole for the entire useful height. Vico Magistretti this time characterizes the transparent surfaces with a faint colouring done with blue pencils, a graphic expedient that could be the result of a twofold intention: firstly to determine a clear visual contrast with the opaque parts and secondly to connote the reflective character of the glass, which thus becomes the mirror of the clear sky over the city of Milan. In fact, Magistretti, using a deep blue felt-tip pen, draws a hint of the sky above the particular top crowning part represented by a canopy coloured in a compact black as well as inclined as an eave. This sky-blue background, which only insists in the above-mentioned area, not only gives greater prominence to the represented architecture but also underlines a fundamental characteristic of the building: that is, to participate in the construction of a metropolitan curtain defining the entire south-eastern street frontage of Corso Europa. The sketch contains some indications in block letters regarding the materials to be used for the façade, in particular the white granite cladding of the curtain walls, the types of glass for the window and door frames, and the lower canopy and copper for the upper eaves system.

Fig. 2 Vico Magistretti, design sketches of polyfunctional buildings in Corso Europa, 1955. Freehand drawing in pencil, china ink pen, and felt-tip pen on paper. *Fondazione studio museo Vico Magistretti*, Milan <archivio.vicomagistretti.it>.



Magistretti does not neglect the relationship with the human dimension, drawing in pencil silhouettes at the ground floor openings. In contrast to the use of advanced technologies and materials is the project for the Arosio house of 1956, which also marks the differences between the two previous cases in terms of location: the agro-coastal landscape of the

village of Arenzano, a few kilometers west of Genoa, is, in fact, the place for this house conceived as a juxtaposition of compact stereometries. The project sketch we chose to analyze concerns the south front of the house (Figure 3), which Magistretti represented freehand using the orthogonal projection method. Using a technique that involves the combined use of Indian ink pens and pencils, the architect uses the former to sketch the building and its context, i.e. volumes, openings, their edges, and the orography of the terrain; graphite, on the other hand, is reserved mainly for the creation of chiaroscuro effects to distinguish between glass and opaque surfaces or to simulate an ideal sky, shaded and partly sampled at forty-five degrees, to emphasize the building. Again in pencil and with the same support, Magistretti elaborates further notes that are true graphic reflections on the project, starting with the drawing of the homologous but scaled-down elevation in the lower left-hand corner, which looks like a preparatory sketch; again in pencil, on the left-hand side of the house, a flight of steps reaching the roof plane is represented; there is also an attempt to explore the relationship between architecture and vegetation perceptible in the transparent drawings of hedges, creepers, shrubs, and small trees; the representation of a human silhouette, again in pencil, on the left-hand side of the elevation, testifies to the desire to place the person who uses the architecture at the centre of the architectural project. At the bottom right, the autograph inscription 'Fronte Sud' and the designer's stamp complete and identify the drawing. The complexity of the orography is declared by the two contrasting land profiles, one marked in red pencil and placed lower down –this could be a section line– and the other at a higher elevation, in which the house is positioned: the sloping site can thus be considered the fundamental practical reason for the complex volumetric articulation of this house. About the drawing of the sills, especially concerning the crowning part, which Magistretti had envisaged in slate, are distinguished by the execution of unusual hatching with narrow 'zig-zag' lines made with an Indian ink pen. In short, the drawing of the

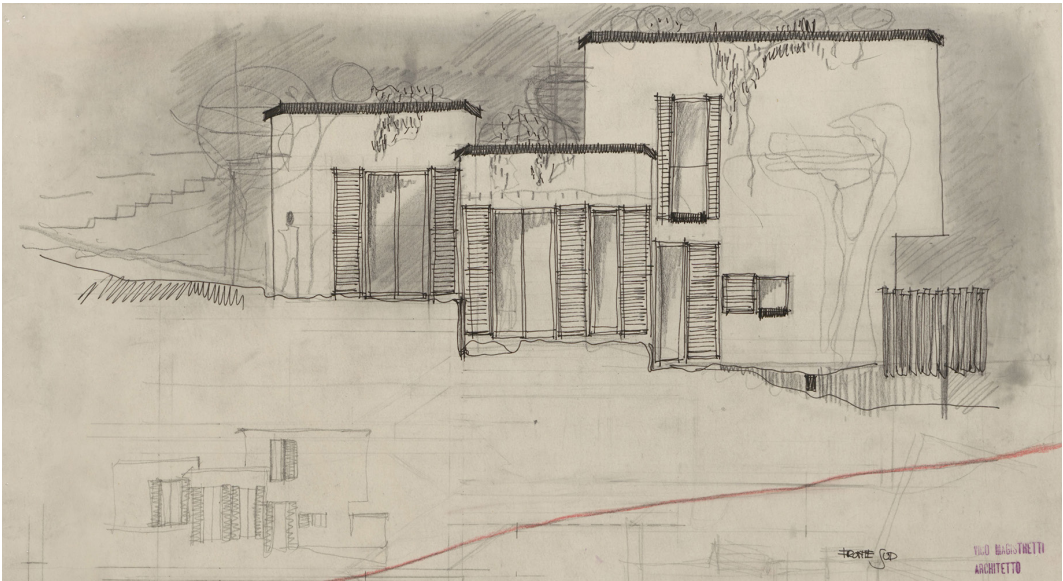


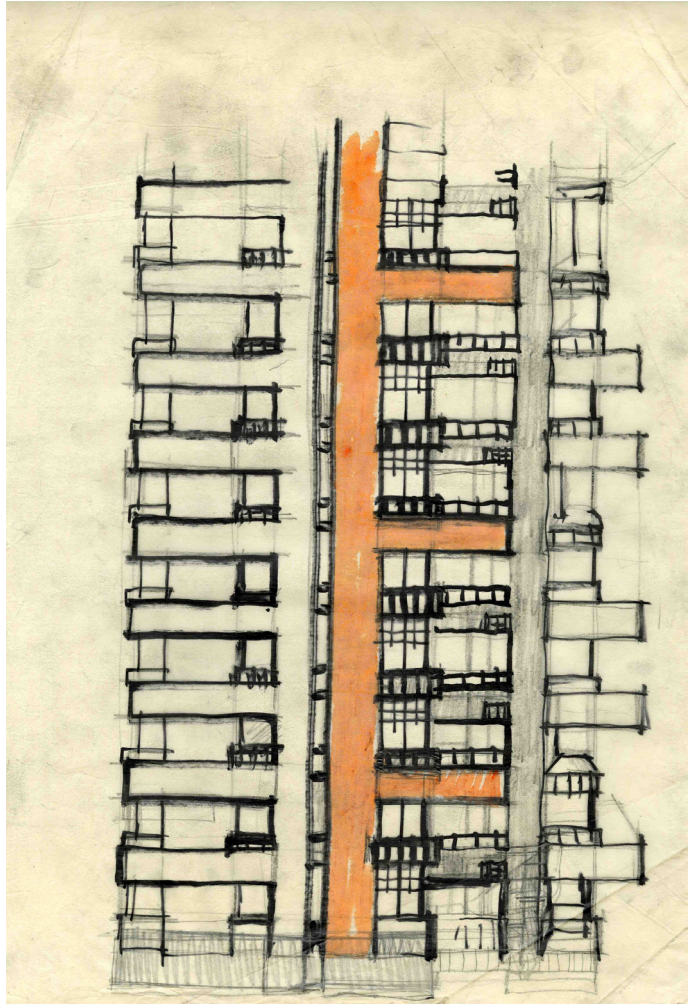
Fig. 3 Vico Magistretti, design sketch of the south elevation of Villa Arosio in Arenzano, 1956. Freehand drawing in pencil and china ink pen on paper. *Fondazione studio museo Vico Magistretti*, Milan <archivio.vicomagistretti.it>.

south front of the Arosio house as a whole communicates to the observer a certain attention of the designer towards certain specific themes that were to characterize Italian architecture in the 1960s, such as the relationship with the surrounding environment, respect for the traditions of the places and references to the architecture of the past (Irace & Pasca, 1999).

THE 1960S

During the 1960s, the economic miracle reached its peak: the misery of the war now seemed to be a memory and prosperity pervaded the homes of Italians. It was during this decade that Vico Magistretti became an important architect, also establishing himself in the field of product design, with revolutionary objects such as the *Eclisse* and *Dalù* lamps and the Selene chair. In architecture, there was no shortage of commissions for housing complexes that were to become symbolic of the areas of Milan where they were to be built. This is the case of the two buildings in Piazzale Aquileia in 1962, of which a design sketch of only the residential tower

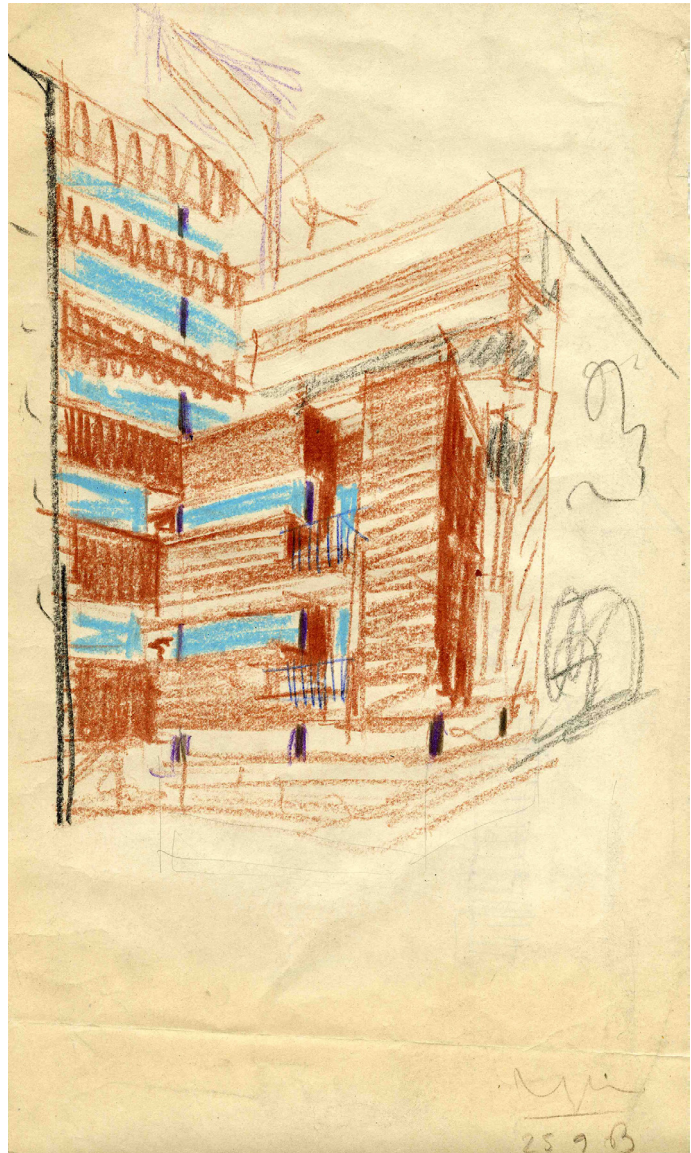
Fig. 4 Vico Magistretti, design sketch of the tower of the residential complex in Piazzale Aquileia, 1962. Freehand drawing in pencil and felt-tip pen on paper. *Fondazione studio museo Vico Magistretti*, Milan <archivio.vicomagistretti.it>.



(Figure 4), built in a position behind the square, within the large condominium garden, will be explored. This tower has an 'L-shaped floor plan like the building in Via Revere, mentioned in the previous lines; the purity of primary stereometry is replaced here by a strong articulation of exteriors, which can already be seen in the plan, where the living quarters are organized in a 'fan-like' arrangement, in which the 'pivot' is represented by the barycentric spatial nucleus composed of the stairwell and its hallways. The design sketch, which probably concerns the north-west elevation towards Via Lipari

—later realized in a slightly different way— seems to denote a hierarchy of elements positioned at different depths, each of which has a linguistic function as a frame: in this sense, the primary role is played by the solid parts —which are then made of concrete— one of which is distinguished by a colouring created with a felt-tip pen and mixed between orange and

Fig. 5 Vico Magistretti, design sketch of the building in Via Conservatorio, 1965. Freehand drawing in pencil on paper. *Fondazione studio museo Vico Magistretti, Milan* <archivio.vicomagistretti.it>.



brown; using identical techniques, but in black, the outlines of the other architectural elements are represented, modulating the stroke depending on whether they are walls and parapets—thicker—or fixtures and railings—thinner. Like the other drawings shown, it seems that Magistretti had previously prepared a pencil sketch over which he only then traced the visible strokes and the corresponding fields with a black felt-tip pen. Some of these are made in pencil, perhaps to indicate precise design choices regarding the cladding materials to be adopted. Although the drawing, executed freehand, appears to have been done with the orthogonal projection method, on the right side, at some of the balconies there are hints of perspective construction, which would lend legitimacy to the hypothesis that the sketch, in Magistretti's initial intentions, might have been a central perspective, later disregarded. The considerable height of the building and the repetitiveness of the module lead the designer to represent the building without a crowning part, as if the architecture ideally had no altimetric end, extending into the infinite sky, thus reinforcing the concept of the tower.

In the project for the multifunctional building in Via Conservatorio in Milan, dating back to the mid-1960s, the themes no longer concern isolated architecture, devoid of adjacencies and developed in height, but the relationship with the consolidated historical city and how the contemporary can become an element of continuity in spaces of caesura while maintaining its recognisability. The sketch (Figure 5) examined is carried out with a single technique using coloured pastel pencils, while the method is an empirical perspective. The existing wings are depicted in black, while the planned building is drawn in a reddish colour—quite similar to the colour with which it will be realized—the stroke of which is skilfully modulated according to the orientation of the walls: those facing north present a horizontal and rarefied hatching, while the surfaces facing west have a more compact and vertically executed colouring. The use of intense blue for the windows and purple for the visible parts of the pillars is rather unusual.

The drawing as a whole emphasizes the building's role as a 'link' between two pre-existing but staggered historical urban curtains: the designer is careful to harmonize the connection both in the plan, with the 'corner' loggias, and in elevation, through the balconies and the 'stepped' overlooks that progressively recede as the height increases. Moreover, with his drawing Magistretti returns to graphically reiterate the concept of architectural edge that becomes urban, this time not materializing it with a pencil stroke but by placing two coloured surfaces with the same colour but different intensities side by side. At the end of the 1960s, when the themes of confrontation with the antique began to monopolize the Italian debate on architecture, Vico Magistretti was called upon to design a multifunctional complex in Piazza San Marco in Milan. In this case, the theme of the tower gives way to the marked horizontal character of a series of volumes with heights similar to those of the surrounding 19th century buildings – on average five stories above ground. The elevation drawing analyzed relates to the façade on Via Solferino: made with a mixed technique using Indian ink pens for the strokes and coloured felt-tip pens for the areas sampled, it is realized freehand by the orthogonal projections method.

Magistretti emphasizes several design issues through his sketch: the use of the dark red colour and the repeated

Fig. 6 Vico Magistretti, design sketch of the complex in Piazza San Marco (elevation in Via Solferino), 1962. Freehand drawing in Indian ink pen and felt-tip pen on paper. *Fondazione studio museo Vico Magistretti, Milan* <archivio.vicomagistretti.it>.



small openings can refer to the typical vernacular architecture clad in red brick of the Milanese hinterland; the drawing of the projecting sloping roof can also be read as a homage to the past; the references to history and context are, however, counterbalanced by the interruptions in the chromatic compactness of the facing made with 'gashes' that show the linguistic modernity of the structural frame, that is, the 'machine' of the building, made legible as it is marked –or unmarked, it would be better to say– with a white colour that strongly contrasts with the red of the walls; to communicate a relationship of continuity, the same load-bearing frame is visible in the pillars between the pairs of openings on the first floor and as pilotis on the ground floor; although the drawing is in orthogonal projection, there is an attempt to accentuate the *plastic-chiaroscuro* depth through the creation of shadows that reveal the presence of projections, recesses and setbacks; for example, on the ground floor several of the shadows drawn reveal the oblique position of some of the glazed areas with respect to the façade plane, while the greater extensions of the non-illuminated parts on the top two floors in the areas where the frame is visible suggest the presence of loggias; finally, the glazed surfaces are distinguished from the opaque ones by a slight pencil shading that simulates their translucency.

In general, the sketch, through a hierarchical superimposition of elements –frame, facings, transparencies– already

Fig. 7 Collage of images of five buildings by Vico Magistretti in Milan. From left to right: residential tower in Via Revere; multifunctional building in Corso Europa; residential tower in Piazzale Aquileia; building in Via Conservatorio; multifunctional building in Piazza San Marco, facades on Via Solferino and Via Ancona (Photos by the author).



noted in some of the previous cases, communicates Magistretti's attempt to contemplate tradition and innovation in the design of a fully contemporary architecture that is nevertheless tailored to the site.

CONCLUSIONS

The six sketches discussed here have been chosen because they outline a complete phenomenology of architectural design for Magistretti in relation to the *genius loci*: from the vertical building overlooking urban greenery to the fragment that completes a modern metropolitan curtain; from the exception of a restrained condominium tower among a horizontal multitude of residential architectures to the connecting building between staggered wings in the 'Novecento' style; continuing with the summer holiday home, conceived in compact volumes, in the agro-coastal landscape of Liguria, to end with the ex-novo construction of a block as a real new piece of city in a historically consolidated urban context.

The architecture of the economic miracle for Vico Magistretti is also participating in the definition of a new concept of public space, in which, like his furnishings and lamps, the buildings facing it belong not only to those who live in them but also to those who observe them: a new vision of the city that supplants the rigid dictates of the Littorio style and rationalism in favour of a scenographic construction implemented by compositions of different figures, taking into account the cultures of the places and the suggestions offered by the Italian landscape far from urbanised areas (Irace, 2021).

From the point of view of the History of Representation, each of the six sketches recounts the evolution of Vico Magistretti's approach to design in the first part of his career, the part coinciding with the Italian economic miracle: if the representations of the 1950s, those of the immediate post-war period of a country coming to terms with reconstruction, show a questioning of the pragmatic reasons for drawing

that rediscovers the dimension of a genuine instrument of control and verification of human and non-magniloquent architecture, the sketches of the 1960s instead denote a growing attention to the themes of the relationship with places and their history (Sacchi, 2003).

Just as Magistretti imagines architecture as a simple organism, possibly made up of technically complex elements, his sketches, if critically observed and placed in their historical context, can be considered expressive systems organized by overlapping semantic levels: in a single drawing, the use of several techniques –and sometimes even several methods– of representation denotes the designer-draftsman’s desire to describe all the characteristics and peculiarities that he considered indispensable to the understanding of architecture, which until then had only been imagined.

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