STAGED INTIMACY. THE ATMOSPHERIC LOGIC OF CARLO MOLLINO'S BEDROOM FOR A FARMHOUSE IN A RICE FIELD

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CARLO MOLLINO
ATMOSPHERE
INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE
SPATIAL PERCEPTION
ARCHITECTURAL DRAWING

The concept of atmosphere extends beyond its physical definition as a «gaseous envelope surrounding the Earth», encompassing a broader sensory and emotional dimension. Drawing on the work of Gernot Böhme, Tonino Griffero and Peter Zumthor, this article explores how architecture, through spatial composition and material choices, functions as a medium for generating specific atmospheres. Carlo Mollino's interior design serves as a compelling case study, particularly his Bedroom for a Farmhouse in a Rice Field (1943), conceived for "Domus". This project exemplifies how Mollino integrated layers of materials, colors, and spatial elements to create an immersive, protective environment. Through archival analysis and a qualitative approach, this study investigates the interplay between materiality, perception, and enclosure, highlighting Mollino's commitment to designing spaces that are not only evocative but also feasible. The article contributes to the discourse on atmosphere in architectural interiors, demonstrating how Mollino's design strategies transform space into a sensory and narrative experience.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of atmosphere has gradually assumed an increasingly significant role within contemporary architectural discourse, revealing a distinctive capacity to connect perception, technique, and imagination. While the term originally refers to the «gaseous envelope surrounding the Earth» , its etymology –from the Greek *atmòs*, meaning "exhalation, vapor, breath, air"– already suggests an immaterial dimension, composed of sensory conditions rather than tangible matter. Like breath, atmosphere eludes direct tactile and visual comprehension, manifesting instead through subtle variations of light, thermal modulations, and impressions that precede language and address the perceptive body directly. It is through this conceptual shift that atmosphere can be understood as a quality of space offered to the senses.

Since the mid-1990s, authors such as Juhani Pallasmaa, Alberto Pérez-Gómez, and Harry Francis Mallgrave have reinterpreted the question of spatial experience by reaffirming the centrality of perception, often through a renewed engagement with the work of Merleau-Ponty. More recently, these and other scholars have introduced the notion of atmosphere more explicitly into architectural debate, following the writings of the German philosopher Gernot Böhme, who established a direct connection between atmosphere and architecture (2006; 2010). Böhme identifies atmospheres as the "primary object of perception" (Böhme, 2010, p. 81), that is, what a subject senses immediately upon entering a space, prior to any process of cognitive interpretation.

Similarly, in Tonino Griffero's study (2010), atmosphere is described as a collection of immaterial feelings: "There is a conviction that atmosphere, at least in its prototypical sense, is not so much in the eye of the beholder as it is a relatively objective (and intersubjective) experience encountered in external space" (Griffero, 2010, p. 150). It emerges from the interplay between the objectivity of a place and the subjectivity

of those who inhabit it. "To enter a place means to step into a different (atmospheric) world" (Griffero, 2010, p. 86).

In the same way, Peter Zumthor defines atmosphere as an immediate and intuitive experience, shaped by specific elements that enhance spatial perception: materials, light, and proportions. "Materials react with one another and have their radiance, so that their composition gives rise to something unique" (Zumthor, 2006, p. 25). His theories suggest that spatial composition –and architecture itself– functions as a *medium* capable of evoking precise sensations, perceptions, and emotions typically associated with the concept of atmosphere.

Although this theoretical constellation is, in many respects, relatively recent, it enables a retrospective reading of Carlo Mollino's work, and, in particular, of the notion of *ambientazione* (setting), which appears frequently in his projects. In Mollino's vocabulary, the *ambientazione* does not correspond to the domestic interior nor to a simple scenographic arrangement, but rather to a form of inhabitable *mise-en-scène* –a device in which materials, surfaces, furnishings, and light converge to construct a sensible world. It is in this perspective that certain reflections on the term *environment*, developed from the 1960s onward, become relevant as a counterpoint.

In *La speranza progettuale* Tomás Maldonado (1970) redefines the environment as a complex system of material, technological, and perceptual conditions capable of shaping human experience. Maldonado conceives the human environment as a fragile structure, the outcome of interactions between ecological, behavioural, and informational processes, and calls for a form of design able to assume responsibility for these interdependencies. If the notion of atmosphere allows one to grasp the sensible quality of space, the idea of environment reminds that such quality is always the result of multiple factors –material, technical, and social– that converge in a single place.

Within the broader debate on design understood as a complex system, Mollino's *ambientazioni* reveal a remarkably

early attention to that interplay of material, technical, and perceptual conditions that Maldonado would later identify as the foundation of the human environment. It is precisely at this intersection that Mollino's work can be situated: his *ambientazioni* are spaces in which functional devices, symbolic elements, and perceptual conditions are woven together in an integrated manner, anticipating a way of thinking about space as a unified field.

One particularly insightful example is his *Bedroom for a Farmhouse in a Rice Field*, designed for "Domus" as part of the *The House and the Ideal* series in 1943. This bedroom is conceived not merely as a place for rest but as a protective shell that gradually guides its occupant from sleep to wakefulness —a liminal space mediating between the dream world and reality. Analyzing this project not only deepens the understanding of the relationship between inhabitable space and atmosphere but also highlights how such environments can be tangibly realized. Mollino placed great importance on the viability of his ideas, consistently striving to translate his most intimate and dreamlike visions into spaces that could be constructed

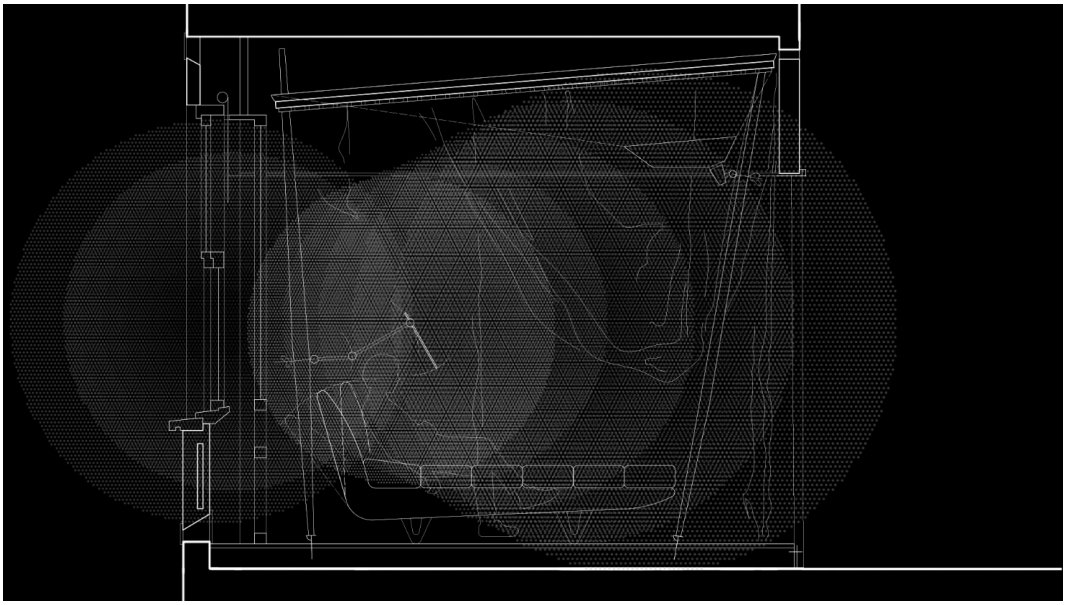


Fig. 1 *Inhabitable Atmospheres*, 2025, digital drawing, author's elaboration. Section of the *Camera da letto per una cascina in risaia*, illustrating the sense of enclosure and intimacy. The image makes visible the spatial and atmospheric stratification, emphasizing the layered construction that defines the protective nature of the space.

and inhabited. Conceived as a self-contained retreat within a rural context, the bedroom presents a compact and meticulously choreographed interior: a rotated plan that generates two lateral alcoves, a central bed partially enclosed by layers of drapery and mosquito nets, padded walls that soften the perimeter, and a concealed access from an adjoining gallery. The space unfolds as a sequence of thresholds –fabric, upholstery, mirrored surfaces– through which the occupant moves from exposure to increasing degrees of protection. Although modest in scale, the room is articulated through a surprising complexity of devices, whose interaction forms the basis for the atmospheric reading developed in the following sections.

MAPPING THE INTERIOR: DRAWINGS AS ATMOSPHERIC TOOLS

As an unrealized work conceived solely for publication, the analysis of the *Bedroom for a Farmhouse in a Rice Field* is necessarily grounded in its surviving documentary traces. The primary sources include the archival materials preserved at the Politecnico di Torino (figs. 5, 6), the article published in *Domus*, and the staged photographs accompanying the same publication (fig. 4). These are complemented by a broader reading of Mollino's theoretical and design writings, which provide an essential framework for contextualising the project within his architectural imagination.

The analytical methodology adopted here is qualitative and reconstructive, relying on the multilayered integration of diverse sources. Their heterogeneity –technical drawings, interpretative sketches, staged photographs published in *Domus*, and the accompanying text written by Mollino himself– makes it possible to read the project from multiple and complementary perspectives. The approach is philological insofar as it interrogates the available documentation, yet it becomes phenomenological when it seeks to identify the sensible conditions that emerge from the project: materials, light, geometries,

chromatic and tactile surfaces, and the array of spatial devices. Bringing these elements into a single system does not aim to reconstruct an existing atmosphere – an impossible task for an unbuilt work – but rather to identify the atmospheric potentials inscribed within the project's internal logic.

Within this framework, the interpretative drawing proposed (fig. 1) should not be understood as a philological reconstruction but as a critical tool for exploring the sensory density of the space. The aim was to render the spatial impression experienced by the imagined inhabitant, giving 'thickness' to the perception of being inside the room while simultaneously being projected outward through the spatial devices conceived by the designer. Following Federico De Matteis's reflections (2019), architectural drawing is structurally unable to represent the transient, immaterial, and atmospheric components of space, as it is conceived to measure stable objects and configurations. For this reason, the interpretative graphic elaboration becomes a crucial tool for probing those sensory qualities and perceptual relationships that escape technical representation, revealing tonalities and nuances that orthographic drawings cannot express.

To clarify the interpretative process underlying the atmospheric reading of the bedroom, the analysis builds upon two complementary graphic devices: the analytical plan and the stratified sectional sequence.

The plan (fig. 3) isolates and numbers the architectural and material components of the room –padded enclosure, textile membranes, dressing alcoves and concealed access from the gallery– clarifying the project's operative structure independently of its perceptual effects. This preliminary step establishes the spatial framework within which Mollino's design unfolds, showing how the room functions as a constellation of devices rather than as a homogeneous interior. It also reveals the oblique geometry of the composition, a fundamental aspect that cannot be grasped from the elevation alone and that conditions the distribution of perceptual densities within the space.

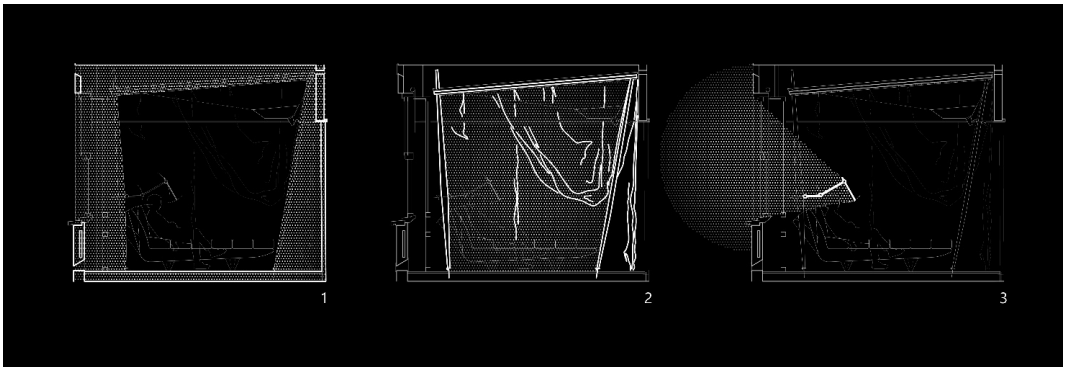
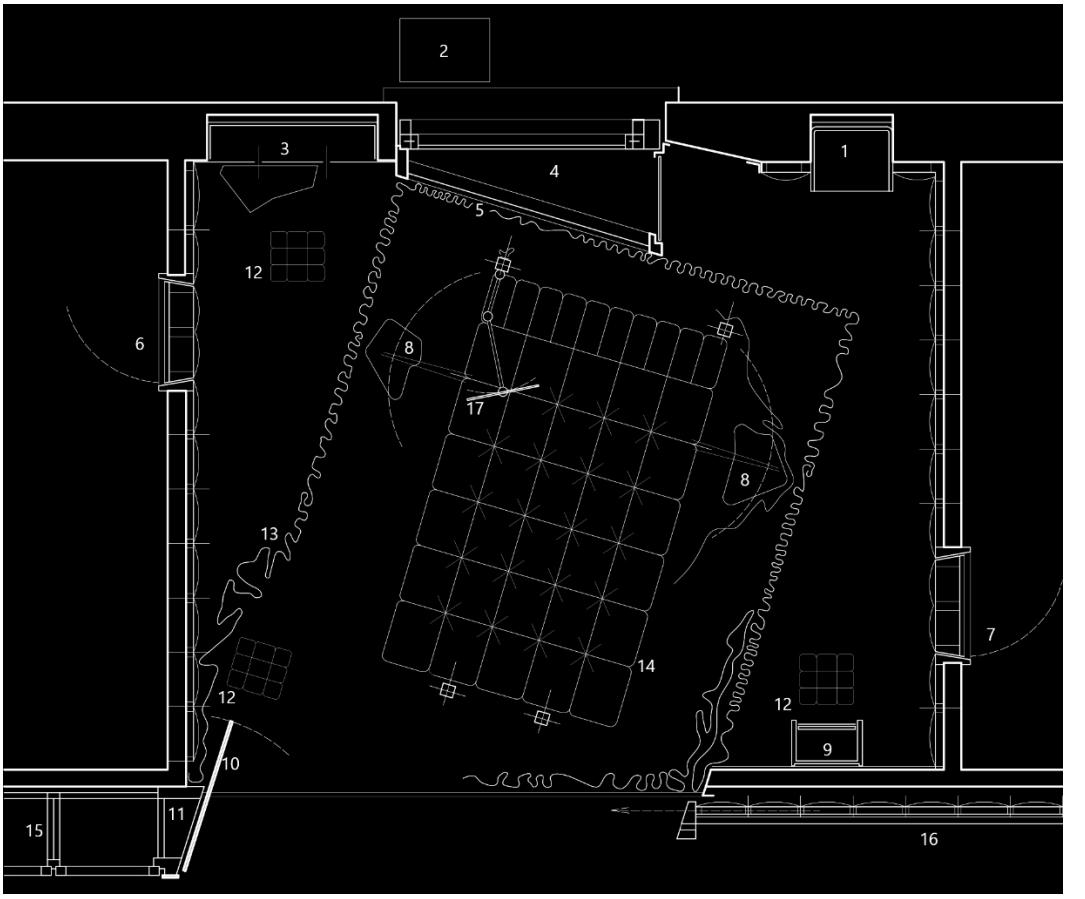


Fig. 2 *Atmospheric stratification* sequence, 2025, digital drawing, author's elaboration. Primary enclosure (1): the padded perimeter wall defines the first layer of spatial protection, establishing the room as a soft, acoustically insulated shell. Filtering membranes (2): system of draperies and mosquito nets introduces a second atmospheric layer, thickening the perceptual density of the space through graduated opacity and textile stratification. Perceptual device and outward projection (3): the adjustable mirror above the bed acts as a directional device, redirecting vision and modulating the room's relation to the exterior. The diagram visualizes the emergence of a perceptual field that anticipates the atmospheric gradient developed in the final elaboration.

Building on this spatial foundation, the three-step sectional sequence (fig. 2) reconstructs the progressive emergence of the room's atmospheric conditions. Each drawing isolates one of the layers that contribute to the modulation of perception: the padded shell as primary enclosure; the system of draperies and mosquito nets as filters that thicken and soften the interior; and the adjustable mirror as a directional device that reorients the inhabitant's gaze and subtly reconnects the enclosed space with its exterior surroundings. Far from being independent additions, these elements operate cumulatively, producing a gradual intensification and differentiation of the sensory field.

The final atmospheric elaboration (fig. 1), which visualises a gradient of perceptual intensity through concentric, fading spheres, should therefore be understood not as an autonomous interpretative gesture but as the synthetic outcome of this analytical process. The gradient renders visible the 'field of presence' generated by the interplay of enclosure, filtering, and projection, giving graphic form to an atmospheric thickness that cannot be represented by technical drawings alone. In this way, the combined use of plan, sectional stratification, and phenomenological diagram establishes a methodological continuum that grounds the atmospheric reading in the project's own spatial and material logic, while simultaneously revealing the sensory potential embedded in Mollino's design. These tools provide the analytical foundation for the reading of the project developed in the following section.



MATERIAL LAYERS AND ATMOSPHERIC EFFECTS

A close reading of the floor plan and of the textual notes published in *Domus* reveals a spatial composition designed to produce a gradual modulation of perceptual intensity. The rotated geometry of the room creates a subtle displacement of the inhabitant's orientation: the two lateral recesses generated by the bed's alignment act as pockets of retreat, guiding movement and perception along an oblique axis rather than a frontal one. This slight torsion already introduces a differentiated atmospheric field, in which the centre of the room is never fully static.

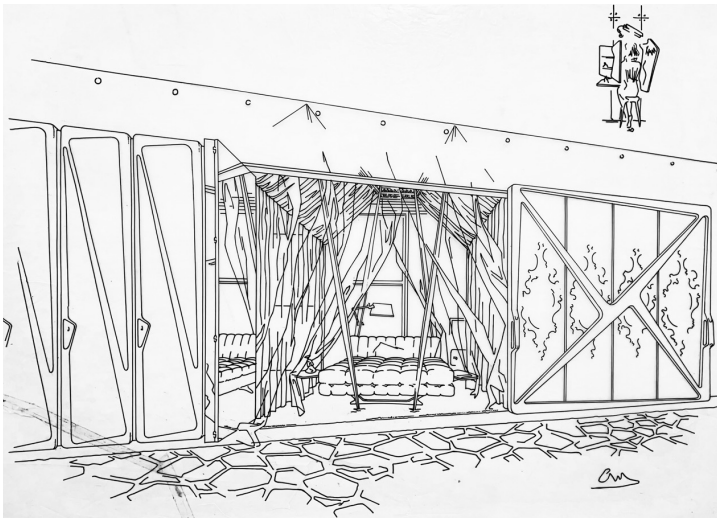
Fig. 3 Plan of the *Camera da letto per una cascina in risaia*, 2025, digital drawing, author's elaboration. The plan reveals the rotated geometry of the space and the articulated system of devices that structure the room: the padded enclosure, the suspended draperies supported by metal rods and the mosquito nets surrounding the bed, the dressing alcoves, the concealed access from the gallery. The diagram clarifies the spatial logic behind Mollino's composition, showing how the room operates as a sequence of thresholds and micro-enclosures that prepare the conditions for the atmospheric field analysed in the drawings. 1. Food warmer and icebox; 2. Weather station on the windowsill; 3. Psyche mirror on the wall; 4. Air-chamber ventilation window frame; 5. Curtain; 6-7. Access to the respective bathrooms; 8. Glass shelves on movable brackets; 9. Cabinet set into the mirrored wall; 10. Hinged mirror; 11. Coat closet; 12. Stools; 13. Mosquito net; 14. Bed; 15. Wardrobes; 16. Sliding door; 17. Adjustable mirror above the bed.

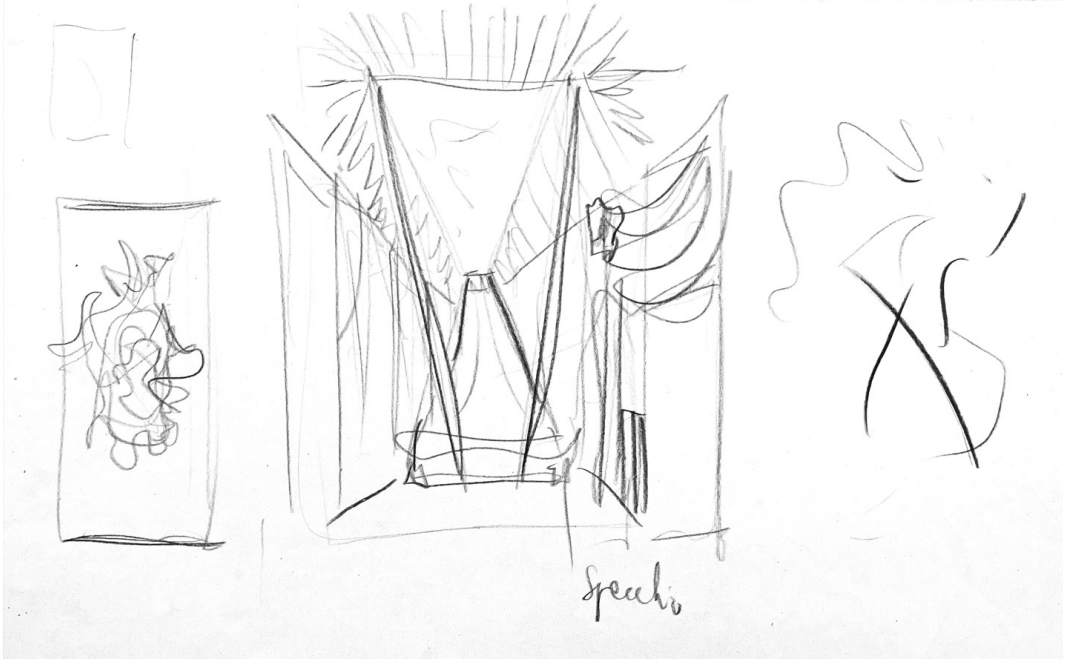
The upholstered perimeter establishes the room's first atmospheric register. Its padded surface softens acoustics, absorbs light, and compresses visual depth, producing an enveloping condition in which the boundaries of the space appear thickened rather than sharply defined. This material shell does not simply enclose the room; it lowers contrast and prepares the perceptual ground upon which the subsequent layers act. Toward the centre, the layered draperies introduce a second modulation. Their overlapping opacity slows the transmission of light and colour, generating a suspended, almost nocturnal quality. The drapes do not divide the space but rather *densify* it, creating a sense of progression from peripheral enclosure to an increasingly intimate core. Their textile thickness operates as a perceptual filter, softening perceptual contrasts and deepening the gradient initiated by the padded walls.

The mosquito nets surrounding the bed form a more diaphanous threshold, delicate yet decisive. Functionally modest, they nonetheless produce a micro-environment within the room: a barely perceptible veil that blurs the boundary between body and space. The bed becomes an atmospheric nucleus –an interior within the interior– where the sensory field is at its most concentrated. The sliding door that disappears into the decorative scheme of the gallery reinforces the sense of seclusion by removing any visual trace of entry. Its vanishing mechanism heightens the transition between circulation and stillness, contributing to the room's calibration of thresholds and atmospheric shifts.

Finally, the adjustable mirror above the bed introduces a controlled opening toward the exterior. Rather than breaking enclosure, it refracts it, producing a mediated relation with the outside world. Through this device, the transition from sleep to wakefulness is staged as a gentle reorientation: the inhabitant remains enveloped while simultaneously perceiving a displaced fragment of the landscape beyond.

Taken together, these devices construct a space in which atmosphere is not an aftereffect but an operative principle.

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Figs. 4-6 Three different representations of the *Bedroom for a Farmhouse in a Rice Field* – the staged photograph published in Domus, the technical drawing, and the preparatory sketch – all depict the same viewpoint through distinct visual registers. Considered together, they reveal the layered spatial and material construction that defines the room's atmospheric character: the system of draperies, the lightweight structural frame supporting the canopy, the padded bed as the protected nucleus of the space, and the sequence of thresholds that mediate access and perception. The coexistence of photographic documentation, precise architectural drawing, and interpretative sketch makes it possible to approach the sensory experience imagined by Mollino, rendering visible the immersive quality and intimate enclosure that the project sought to evoke.

Each layer –acoustic, textile, diaphanous, reflective– acts upon perception, gradually intensifying the room's interiority. The bedroom emerges as a finely tuned field of sensory conditions, whose cumulative effects prepare the interpretative reading developed in the discussion.

FROM MATERIAL TO IMMATERIAL: THE INTERIOR AS A PERCEPTUAL DEVICE

Ultimately, the spatial composition of this bedroom demonstrates how materials and their arrangement contribute to creating an environment that evokes intimacy and protection, recalling the imagery of a nest, a cave, or the maternal womb. Additionally, the drapery, supported by metal brackets, introduces another archetypal reference: the tent, one of the most ancient forms of human shelter. The layering of these elements defines a deeply enclosed atmosphere, where materiality and sculptural spatiality play a fundamental role. The atmospheric reconstruction presented earlier thus finds its justification in the spatial logic itself, which unfolds as a sequence of perceptual thresholds rather than a static configuration.

While Mollino never explicitly stated an intention to create a specific atmosphere, his design approach suggests a strong narrative dimension –an aspect that consistently emerges in his interior work. His spaces share affinities with theatrical scenography, constructing settings that transport inhabitants into an alternate dimension, detached from the ordinary domestic environment. In this sense, the *Bedroom for a Farmhouse in a Rice Field* is a particularly revealing example of his ability to orchestrate materials and spatial geometries to generate an immersive experience.

A key takeaway from this analysis is Mollino's attention to the feasibility of his designs. Although this work was conceived for publication and never built, the precision of the drawings, the detailed descriptions, and the careful articulation of space suggest that Mollino envisioned the room as something that

could be physically realized. The photographic installation created for *Domus* further supports this idea –it was not a mere conceptual exercise but a meticulously crafted *mise-en-scène* designed to faithfully convey the spatial effect of the project.

While this study does not claim to be exhaustive, it opens the way for further exploration into the role of atmosphere in interior architecture and the strategies through which Mollino constructs complex, sensory-driven spatial experiences.

CONSTRUCTING OTHER WORLDS: ATMOSPHERE AND NARRATIVE IN MOLLINO

In this sense, the atmospheric reconstruction developed here can be positioned within a broader understanding of Mollino's architectural imagination. In the 1950 interview *Tutto è permesso sempre salva la fantasia* (*Everything is permitted, as long as imagination endures*), the architect describes his work as the activity of someone who moves "in a world closely related to utopia" (Mollino, 1950, p. 20), where the constraints of function, convention, or expectation momentarily dissolve to allow the emergence of other worlds. The architect, he suggests, is not merely a technician of forms but a "demiurge" (Mollino, 1950, p. 20), capable of shaping conditions in which life and space are jointly reinvented.

Seen from this perspective, the atmospheric field visualised in the final drawing does not merely describe a perceptual effect: it echoes the deeper logic of Mollino's practice, in which the interior becomes a medium for constructing an alternative reality – an inhabitable fiction that precedes and exceeds the built object. The *Bedroom for a Farmhouse in a Rice Field* (Mollino, 1943) thus appears not only as a carefully orchestrated composition of materials and devices, but as the threshold to a different existential dimension, where the environment is shaped to suspend, intensify, or reconfigure the experience of dwelling.

By engaging with the project through analytical drawings, sectional sequences, and atmospheric mapping, this study

attempts to approach that "other world" not as a metaphor but as an operative principle. Mollino's architecture invites one to consider the interior as a site where perception becomes design material and where the act of imagining space is inseparable from the act of inhabiting it. In this sense, the atmospheric potentials identified here do not represent a departure from his thought, but a continuation of it: a way of recognising how his *ambientazioni* construct worlds that are at once tangible and imaginary, technical and poetic – worlds in which architecture becomes, as he believed, a form of life-making.

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