the most interesting projects developed by the design group and their profound experimental character. Nothing like this work could be observed elsewhere in Spain at the time.

The exhibit encompassed the most important designs by a large group of architects (G.A.T.C.P.A.C. had nearly ninety members), including practitioners and students. Architects represented by rationalistic works of undeniable merit included Sixto Illescas, Jaume Mestres, Germán Rodríguez Arias, Francesc Fàbregas, and Ramón Durán. However, the most important works corresponded to Sert and Torres Clavé, some of them with the collaboration of Juan Bautista Subirana. The central space of the exhibition was devoted to new architecture for a new city, largely consisting of housing projects and urban design elements (such as schools and hospitals). These projects were aligned with the republican desire to improve living conditions in the city according to the motto “the human spirit looking after the common good,” posted in the exhibition. Among the several projects that were featured, two by Sert, Torres Clavé, and Subirana from 1933 in Barcelona best represented the idea of a modern architecture put to the service of a new social program: a group of 207 workers’ houses referred to as the “Casa Bloc” and a center for treating tuberculosis. Both of these projects exemplify the design principles and construction technology of modern architecture while fulfilling the urban prescriptions of G.A.T.C.P.A.C.’s Plan Maciá that responded to the social needs outlined by the republic.

The three-dimensional models in the exhibition, executed by a studio of design students, showed these buildings to advantage and contributed to a better appreciation of their historical and cultural significance. If Torres Clavé served as the principal cultural and ideological agent of the group through his publica-

tions in AC, Sert remained unchallenged as the most active practicing architect. The exhibition also brought to light Sert’s concern about negative criticism of his work, which had been described as “too Germanic.” In response, he defended the inherent “Mediterranean” qualities of his architecture, pointing out that its simple forms and dominance of horizontal planes were the essence of Latinidad. Sert saw his own work as representative of the avant-garde but filtered through the roots of popular Mediterranean architecture.

The exhibition concluded by explaining the demise of the group marked by the war, the political conflict of the republic, and a chaotic Barcelona with a population of nearly three million inhabitants at the end of the war immersed in a revolutionary process. As an epilogue, the exhibition described the pavilion of the republic at the Paris Exposition of 1937, designed by Lacasa and Sert with the collaboration of Antonio Bonet. In this simple, modern pavilion, the contribution that the republican government made with its limited resources was to exhibit Picasso’s Guernica, a powerful work of art that revealed the reality of Spain at the time, the disaster of war. 4

The death of Torres Clavé, the defeat of the republic, and the exile of Sert, who was judged and condemned in absentia, caused the dissolution of the design group, which could not survive without their leaders. But the exhibition gave no definitive answer how the group could have proceeded without them, nor did it look at any of the contradictions surrounding these important events in Catalan modern architecture.

JUAN LUIS DE LAS RIVAS SANZ
Escuela de Arquitectura
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain
Translated by HUMBERTO RODRIGUEZ-CAMILLONI

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3. Some writers refer to a “real rationalism” to differentiate Madrid from the Barcelona developments; cf. Miguel Angel Baldellou and Antón Capitel, Arquitectura española del siglo XX, Summa Aris XL (Madrid, 1995).
4. See Baldellou and Capitel, “Epílogo. De Barcelona a París (1937),” in Arquitectura española, 351: “If Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion came to represent a turning point in the architectural consciousness of Spanish professionals, then Sert and Lacasa’s Paris Pavilion could be considered the swan song of the utopia.”
Turin; these ties are important in understanding Mollino’s creative work.

With his design for the Fascist Farmers Federation in Cuneo (1933–34, with B. Baudi di Selve), Mollino moved out of his father’s orbit and began to work on his own; soon after, he produced his most important work of the 1930s. In those years, he began designing interiors of private residences and individual objects as well as taking photographs.1 During the 1940s, Mollino focused his attention on architecture for the Alps surrounding Turin, nimbly merging local traditional forms with those born of his design imagination. The later part of his career was marked by large-scale designs in which structural issues were paramount, thus bringing to fruition a long-standing strain in Mollino’s architectural research.

The historian Manfredo Tafuri called Mollino an enfant terrible and argued that his “structures, shrunk to look like the live skeletons of some aerodynamic organisms, [were] a personal and ironic version of organism.”2 Tafuri thus proposed an interpretation of Mollino that has not been subsequently developed, particularly in studies of the Italian reception of organic architecture. Yet, Mollino’s distinctive qualities—his quixotic character and the extravagant, sometimes gratuitous forms of his designs—have for years locked our view of his personality into a facile stereotype, that of the eccentric artist divorced from reality.

This view started to change after his substantial archive was acquired in 1973 by the library of the Architecture School of the Turin Polytechnic University, then headed by Roberto Gabetti, and new information concerning Mollino’s role as a professional architect came to light. In 1989, funding was found for a preliminary inventory and for an exhibition, which took place at the Mole Antonelliana in Turin. In conjunction with the exhibition, a collection of essays was published revealing the more relevant aspects of Mollino’s personality, and a systematic list of his works was produced. In 1991, Bruno Reichlin organized an exhibition of Mollino’s Alpine work, which provided the occasion to inventory part of Mollino’s extraordinary corpus of drawings. Inventory of the whole archive was finally concluded in 1996, and its materials are now available to researchers.3

On Mollino’s birth centennial, three exhibitions took place in Turin to highlight the multifaceted work and personality of this master of Italian modernism. Mollino’s activity as photographer and designer was the subject of Carlo Mollino arabeschi, organized in two parts and curated by Fulvio and Napoleone Ferrari, admirers and collectors of his work. Through a far-reaching network of loans they tapped many public and private collections, among them the substantial one of Bruno Bischofberger.

The first exhibition, at the Castello di Rivoli—Museo d’Arte Contemporanea near Turin, showed a selection of some 150 photographs made by Mollino between 1934 and the end of his life. In those of his own architecture, such as the Fascist Farmers Federation in Cuneo or the Turin Horse-Riding Club (1937–40, with V. Baudi di Selve; demolished in 1960), we sense Mollino trying to render on paper the three-dimensional force and the dynamism of his actual buildings: for Mollino, taking photographs meant regaining control over the perception of architecture, similar to the control he had exerted initially through drawing in the design phase. Many photographs of house interiors taken by Mollino in the 1930s and 1940s, together with his portraits of people and objects (often anonymous), reveal an obvious surrealist bent.

The exhibition at Turin’s Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea provided a rich sampling of design objects by Mollino from circa 1936 through 1970, plus some original drawings, the whole further enlivened by the Twin Torpedo (1955) and by a life-size model of the Championship Car (executed by the automobile manufacturer Stola in 2006), which testify to Mollino’s interest in automobile design and airplanes in the mid-1950s. The exhibited pieces—chairs, desks, lights, suit hangers—were set on low platforms against the background of colored walls. These objects clearly arose from a vital and up-to-date artistic culture allied with sophisticated technical skill, impossible to square with the extravagant and capricious stereotype often applied to Mollino. His oeuvre as both photographer and designer holds the key to a complex creative process. By carefully reconstructing the steps of this process, one might possibly explain the concerns of the architect, but neither the exhibition nor most essays in the catalog pursued this goal. Instead, they aimed for a learned display of objects, which in the end gave the sense of “a sort of sunset lane where are aligned in succession the photographs and so many other memories . . . : all nice, or almost,” in Mollino’s words.4

Of a different cast was the exhibition devoted to Mollino the architect. Curated by Carlo Olmo, Sergio Pace, and Michela Comba, Carlo Mollino architetto. Costruire le modernità was set up in the Archivio di Stato, in the Royal Palace complex on the most important square of Turin, and it displayed in a simple, effective procession the principal stages of Mollino’s professional career. The installation by Alessandro Colombo (office of Cerri & Associates) consisted of a sequence of large exhibition cases, composed of inclined planes, that occupied the center of each of the nine rooms on the archive’s two floors. Besides enabling a good view of the exhibited material and its labels, the cases suggested by their orientation and bulk how to move through the exhibition; some rooms also offered computerized reconstructions. The rigorous scholarship with which the material was assembled went together with an effort, mostly successful, to make the exhibition accessible to the lay public.

The ground floor comprised three rooms. The first covered Mollino’s little-known formative years, which were strongly marked by the teachings of his civil-engineer father. The documents on view—from university mementos to Mollino’s thesis project of 1931 to his proposal for the Fascist Farmers Federation in Cuneo—revealed the beginnings of several important aspects in his archite-
tural research. Foremost among them is the peculiar culture that sets him apart: a balance between the building traditions of his city, which he pursued both in architectural and urban dimensions, and his explorations of international breath. Blessed with a deft hand, Mollino began to use drawings to articulate volumes in space, their interaction with the surrounding context, and the effect of changing viewpoints on form. The many drawings exhibited here, all of exceptional quality, testified to his skill: they were the true protagonists of the exhibition.

The second ground-floor room was devoted to Mollino’s relationship with the artistic milieu in Turin. It showed his tight links with such artists and critics as Felice Casorati, Italo Cremona, and Mino Maccari among others. Their works exhibited here—for example, the painting Metamorfosi (1936–37) by Cremona—allowed a dialogue with photographs of the “enchanted chambers” that young Mollino set up for the houses Miller (1938) and Devalle (1939–40), both rich in ideas that he later would pursue in his architecture. The dialogue continued with proposals for “the ideal house,” whose purpose was to “break out of modernist orthodoxy” and “return architecture to a world of fantasy.” The proposals were developed in 1942–43 and published in the reviews Domus and Stile, the latter edited by his friend Gio Ponti. The first part of the exhibition concluded with the most important work of Mollino’s early years: the Società Ippica Torinese (Turin Horse-Riding Club), illustrated by drawings, documents, excellent photographs by the architect himself, and a large-scale wooden model.

On the upper floor, the six-room enfilade opened with some of Mollino’s movie-set and architectural designs from the late 1930s to 1950s, all of them focused on the play between moving bodies and space and clearly influenced by the Italian and international artistic movements of the time. His explorations on this topic came together in the Lutratio Le Roi dance hall in Turin (1959–60), where he turned the virtual presence of bodies, moving rhythmically to measurable time beats, into his motif chosen to organize the spaces through form, light, color, and sound.

The next room, one of the best in terms of thematic clarity, was devoted to Mollino’s work in the Alps that ranged from his documentation of existing traditional buildings to the design of new ones: the work spans two decades from the 1930s to 1953, the year when his father Eugenio died and one that marks a sharp break in the architect’s life. The selected examples—notably the Lift Terminal at Lago Nero near Sauze d’Oulx (1946–47) and various designs for hotels and villas—showed how, starting from the site conditions, Mollino was able to assert for each building a formal autonomy that masterfully married advanced technology and accumulated tradition.

The following two rooms displayed works from the last twenty years of Mollino’s career, most of them starting with his participation in architectural competitions. Common to all was their large scale and their setting within an urban matrix, either given or proposed by the architect. Viewers were again brought back to the theme of modern technology—widespread in the 1950s and 1960s—that Mollino explored not only for obvious practical reasons but especially as a source of forms to express their time. Mollino’s explorations of this theme can be seen, for example, in the machine rhetoric of the Palazzo degli Affari della Camera di Commercio, Industria e Agricoltura in Turin (the Chamber of Commerce Building, 1964–73, with A. Galardi, C. Graffi, A. Migliasso), or in the volumetric virtuosity of the unbuilt Palazzo del Lavoro (the Hall of Industry and Labor, 1959, with S. Musmeci) for the centennial exhibition “Italia 61” in Turin.

The culmination of Mollino’s architectural research, the Teatro Regio in Turin (the Royal Theater, 1965–73) marked a worthy conclusion for this part of the exhibition, devoted to his professional activity. The exhibit included some useful comparisons with his other designs for performing arts buildings. The design history of the Teatro Regio was shown through drawings—some of the most beautiful and eloquent in Mollino’s oeuvre—and an interesting film of those years by the Istituto Luce, which highlighted the challenges faced by both architect and engineers. Finally, a digital animation produced for this exhibition by the Engineering School of Turin Polytechnic University clearly explained the structural workings of the theater’s roof. Adding considerably to the power of the curatorial mise-en-scène, viewers could observe the very work whose generative process they had just retraced in the exhibition: the sinuous lines of the theater’s side and roof appeared through the windows of the Archivio di Stato (which is sited kitty-corner to the Teatro Regio on the city’s main square).

The last room showed a selection of some fifty books from Mollino’s library. His own acquisitions, combined with the books inherited from his father, reflected his being an author himself of theoretical works. The collection included books of literature, art, and history; a substantial section devoted to great architects, first among them Le Corbusier; and journals like Minotauro, which played an important role in Mollino’s formation.

The exhibition closed with a pointed testimonial by Carol Rama, an artist whom Mollino loved; Bruno Reichlin and Carlo Olmo interviewed her in 1989 for RTSI, the television station of Italian Switzerland. A montage of short film clips showing buildings and urban scenes, made by Mollino during his trip to the United States in 1967, followed and conveyed his standing pursuit of a relationship between human vision and the form of the city.

The exhibition in Turin was part of a series called Constructing Modernities. Two other exhibitions were devoted to Franco Albini (at the Milan Triennale, 28 September to 26 December 2006) and Ignazio Gardella (Ducal Palace in Genoa, 24 November 2006 to 30 January 2007), both contemporaries of Mollino. Comparing these protagonists of twentieth-century Italian architec-
ture—one should also add Carlo Scarpa, just one year younger—evokes several themes shared with Mollino: a professional approach to architectural design, a wish to produce an architecture aligned with its own time, a methodical effort to keep up with cultural developments, the primary importance of the visual arts, and finally the far-from-negligible experience of academic teaching. Thanks to these exhibitions, and the related scholarly publications, each of these masters has had his own peculiarities situated within a broad common framework, thus opening paths to new and deeper historical readings.

ORIETTA LANZARINI
Università degli Studi di Udine
Translated by FRANCESCO PASSANTI

Publications related to the exhibitions:

Notes