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(Article begins on next page)

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Chiara Monterumisi, Ines Tolic

The Omega Project: Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni's Last Lesson on Architecture and the City

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, Omega Centre, Milan, Commercial Architecture, Socially Responsible Architecture, Urban Project

/Abstract

The Omega Centre (1967–1970) represents a remarkable yet largely overlooked achievement by Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Situated directly on Milan's Piazza del Duomo, the project distinguished itself amid the contemporary proliferation of shops and showrooms that emerged in the final years of Italy's economic boom, thanks to the originality of its spatial and material solutions. In this sense, the Omega Centre stands as one of the Castiglioni brothers' most refined architectural works–and, notably, the last they completed together.

Despite the attention it initially drew from critics both in Italy and abroad, the Omega Centre has since remained on the margins of scholarly interest, overshadowed by the Castiglionis' celebrated contributions to industrial design. Its commercial nature and eventual dismantling in the 1980s may have further contributed to its neglect, limiting both critical and scholarly engagement with the project. Yet the significance of the Omega Centre lies precisely in its ability to reflect the urban context it inhabits. It embodies a combination of interpretation and innovation, where materials and form engage in an open and synergistic dialogue – becoming, in turn, a lens through which to read the Milan itself.

Drawing on extensive archival research and previously unpublished materials from collections in Italy, Switzerland, and Japan, this paper aims to address that historiographical gap by critically reconstructing both the Castiglioni brothers' design process and the building's relationship with the city. The analysis unfolds across multiple scales – from the urban setting of Piazza del Duomo to the detailed design of interiors and objects, and back again – offering a coherent narrative that links object-scale innovation with urban meaning. Ultimately, the paper delivers a compelling lesson on the responsibility of commercial architecture – and of architecture as a whole – in shaping and interpreting the contemporary city, standing as the final statement to the Castiglioni brothers' enduring legacy.

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Considered an "irreplaceable point of reference for the entire urban fabric,"[1] Piazza del Duomo hosts some of Milan's most significant commercial buildings. Among the most notable is the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II – an eclectic structure designed by Giuseppe Mengoni (1829–1877) and constructed between 1864 and 1878 as part of the wider redevelopment of the square[2] – as well as the near-contemporary department store *Alle Città d'Italia*, later renamed *La Rinascente*, a label proposed by poet Gabriele D'Annunzio (1879–1882).[3] **[Fig. 1]**

1

During the interwar period, the porticoes of Piazza del Duomo became a setting for a series of smaller-scale architectural masterpieces, attesting to the area's enduring vocation for experimentation. Among these was the Motta pastry shop (1933), designed by Melchiorre Bega (1898–1976), which introduced

Fig. 1

Piazza del Duomo and the Mengoni complex comprising the Vittorio Emanuele II gallery (1947). The scaffolding at street number 25 were used to repair damage from the war and to raise the upper floor. The Omega Centre was located on the ground floor of that building (Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la Città Metropolitana di Milano, Ref. 43089 10/11/1947 submitted by Società Quartiere Centrale).

1 Giuseppe De Finetti, *Milano: costruzione di una città*, eds. Giovanni Cislaghi, Mara De Benedetti, and Piergiorgio Marabelli (Milan: Hoepli, 2002 [1969]), XXXII. Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Italian are by the authors.
The article was carried out entirely as a collaboration between the authors, who discussed all its aspects and developed the introduction and the conclusions jointly. The chapters "Architecture as profession, the city as project" and "From the Omega Centre to the city" were written by Chiara Monterumisi, while "From the city to the Omega Centre" and "The Art of Advertising" were authored by Ines Tolic.

2 For an overview of the life and works of Giuseppe Mengoni, with particular attention to the design and construction of Piazza del Duomo and the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan, see: Laura Gioeni, *L'Affaire Mengoni. La Piazza Duomo e la Galleria Vittorio Emanuele di Milano: i concorsi, la realizzazione, i restauri* (Milan: Guerini, 1995).

3 Franco Amatori, "La Rinascente. A Brief History," in *LR100. Rinascente, Stories of Innovation*, eds. Sandrina Bandera and Maria Canella (Milan: Skira, 2017), 69.

modernist principles into the very heart of the city.[4] Another key example is the Lagomarsino mechanical calculator store (1941), the first collaborative project by architects Angelo Bianchetti (1911–1994) and Cesare Pea (1910–1985), whose display window featured a rhythmic sequence of identical objects set on an inclined plane.[5] Also noteworthy is the Galtrucco fabric store (1933–1934), designed by Guglielmo Ulrich (1904–1977), which was praised by contemporary critics for the "practical simplicity of the furnishings" and the "purity expressed in the interplay of its spaces and surfaces."[6] As is often the case with shops and showrooms, all of these interiors have since been replaced, swept away by a tireless process of *rinnovamento*[7] that would continue into the postwar period.

Italy's so-called economic miracle of the 1950s and 1960s concealed an architectural paradox: while consumer activity was booming and the demand for spaces suited to this new culture of consumption was rapidly growing, retail architecture remained largely excluded from contemporary architectural discourse. A telling example is offered by architect and historian Giovanni Klaus Koenig (1924–1989), a key figure in postwar Italian culture, who wryly observed that he risked "moral lynching [...] if he did not join intellectuals' universal jeremiad on the mistreated civilisation of consumption." Instead, he insisted on the need to "make some distinctions" and "create some rankings" to avoid "muddying the waters any further."[8]

While Koenig was calling on his contemporaries to engage critically with commercial architecture, the Omega Centre – commissioned by the Swiss luxury watch manufacturer[9] – was inaugurated on 11 April 1969 in Piazza del Duomo. The design was entrusted to the Milanese architects Pier Giacomo (1913–1968) and Achille Castiglioni (1918–2002)[10] by the Società Fratelli De Marchi, which, as noted in a 1970 report, "[held] the exclusive right to sell the brand's watches as general agents" in Italy for an indefinite period.[11] **[Fig. 2]**

4 See: Raffaello Giolli, "L'opera di Melchiorre Bega," in *L'architettura razionale. Antologia*, ed. Cesare De Seta (Bari: Laterza, 1972), 231–236.

5 Dario Scodeller, *Negozi. L'architetto nello spazio della merce* (Milano: Electa, 2007), 110; Chiara Baglione, "Negozi in serie nell'Italia tra le due guerre. Lagomarsino e l'architettura pubblicitaria," in *Storia e futuro*, eds. Elena Dellapiana and Roberto Parisini (Bologna: Bologna University Press, 2022), 29–48.

6 "Rinascita dell'arredamento del negozio in Italia," *Domus*, no. 79 (July 1934): 32–35.

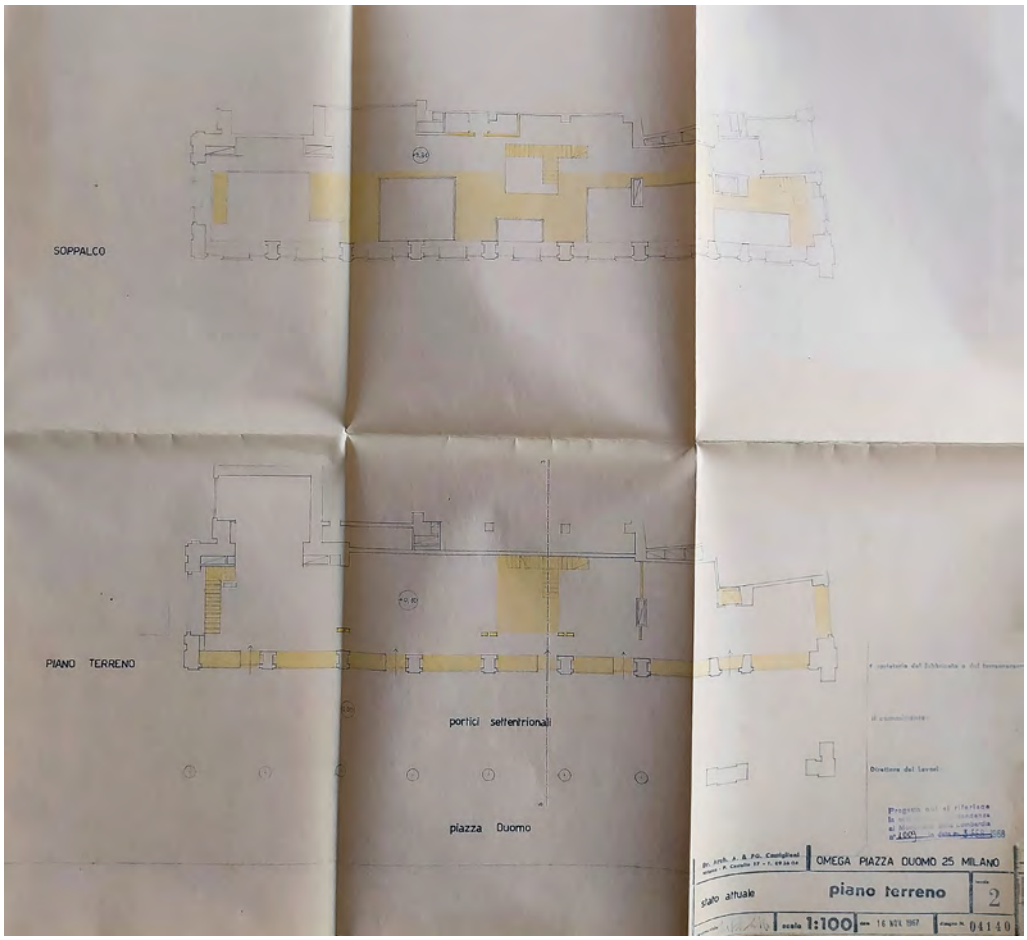
7 "La città che si rinnova" ("The Renewing City") was the title of a series of articles published by Italian art critic Edoardo Persico (1900-1936) in the magazine *La Casa bella* in the 1930s. The series aimed to draw readers' attention to the modernisation – more aspirational than actual – of Italian cities, focusing in particular on the transformation of social habits and the emerging architecture of retail spaces.

8 Giovanni Klaus Koenig, "Riviste che nascono," *Casabella*, no. 338 (June 1969): 4. On Giovanni Klaus Koenig's critical work, see *Giovanni Klaus Koenig nella cultura progettuale del Novecento*, eds. Lorenzo Ciccarelli, Lorenzo Mingardi, and Isabella Patti (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2024).

9 In 1848 Louis Brandt opened the first atelier in La-Chaux-de-Fond, a renowned centre of watchmaking, and in 1880 his two sons moved the company to Biel. It was only in 1903 that the manufacture would take on the name Omega, after the revolutionary calibre movement it had mass produced. See Nicolas Hayek, *The Omega Chronicle: The Story of Omega* (Biel: Omega Museum, 2012).

10 In 1952, the eldest brother, Livio (1911–1979), ceased to collaborate regularly with the other two, turning his attention instead to sound, light, and the "design of the immaterial". See Dario Scodeller, "Lo Studio Castiglioni nella cultura italiana del design 1936–2002," in *Il design dei Castiglioni: ricerca, sperimentazione, metodo* (Mantua: Corraini, 2019), 21.

11 In the official document, the European Economic Community Commission regulated exclusive distribution and maintenance agreements for Omega products, as well as the use of the brand name in advertising with certain European companies: Fratelli De Marchi of Turin, Italy; Maison Brandt Frères of Paris, France; Kinsbergen of Amsterdam, the Netherlands; Uhren-Handelsgesellschaft of Frankfurt, Germany; and Ultimo Watch of Brussels, Belgium and Luxembourg. See "70/488/EEC Decisione della Commissione, del 28 ottobre 1970, relativa a delle procedure ai sensi dell'articolo 85 del trattato CEE". In *Gazzetta Ufficiale delle Comunità Europee*, no. 13, Law 242, November, 5. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:1970:242:FULL Accessed March 14, 2024.



2

Upon its completion, the Omega Centre was met with enthusiastic acclaim from contemporary critics both in Italy and abroad.[12] The Italian magazine *Domus* particularly appreciated the juxtaposition of new and pre-existing elements that had guided the architects' design choices,[13] while the German journal *Md. Moebel Interior Design* praised the project's spatial quality and coherence, underscoring the effective use of a limited palette of refined materials that enhanced the presentation of the Biel-based company's products.[14] The project was admired for many legitimate reasons – an outcome not uncommon in the Castiglioni brothers' work – but one aspect stood out above all: the relationship with the city, which profoundly shaped the design of both the exterior and the interior spaces. Seen in this light, the Omega Centre remains a project yet to be fully discovered.

Unfortunately – though perhaps not unexpectedly – the Omega Centre was demolished in the 1980s for a new commercial development. Since then, the space undergone continuous modifications to accommodate the evolving

Fig. 2

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, plans for the ground floor and mezzanine illustrating the state of the site before their intervention, where the yellow highlighting corresponds to demolition required before proceeding with their project, scale 1:100 (Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la Città Metropolitana di Milano, Authorization Ref. 1009 - 3/02/1968).

12 In 1971, material was also requested by the magazines *Detail* and *Architects' Journal*. The latter addressed its request to Pier Giacomo (who was already deceased at the time), asking specifically for "working drawings, and not presentation drawings," and expressed a willingness to commission an additional photographic campaign from Fortunati Fototecnica or another Milanese studio. Although the original material was sent, it was never published. Fondazione Achille Castiglioni (Milan), hereafter FAC. Please note that, in accordance with the guidelines of the Achille Castiglioni Foundation, archival materials are cited by mentioning only the institution, without specifying the document's location or inventory number.

13 "In Piazza del Duomo a Milano: mille metri quadrati di Omega," *Domus*, no. 477 (August 1969): 16.

14 "Achille und Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Omega, Piazza Duomo Milano," *Md. Moebel Interior Design*, no. 12 (1969): 59.

needs of successive brands. As a result, the building quickly faded from both public consciousness and critical discourse. Today, it is only sporadically mentioned in monographic studies[15] or featured in celebratory exhibitions,[16] and has been largely relegated to the margins of a narrative that, following Pier Giacomo's premature death (27 November 1968) slightly before the inauguration,[17] increasingly centred on Achille's successful career in product design, showrooms' settings, and his influential role as professor of Artistic Design for Industry at the Politecnico di Torino (1969–1977), then Interior and Furniture Design as well as Industrial Design at the Politecnico di Milano (1977–1993).[18] Yet between 1944, the year of Achille's graduation, and 1968, the year of Pier Giacomo's passing, the two brothers developed "a relationship of creative interdependence so strong that the projects produced by the studio [...] are indistinctly attributed to both."[19] Pier Giacomo's death in 1968 "marks a tragic caesura"[20] in the individual carriers and, as noted by Lambertucci, it "makes one feel the peculiarity of his contribution to the couple's spatial attitude."[21]

Pier Giacomo's sensibility had been cultivated since his early experience at Luigi Caccia Dominioni's (1916-2013) studio even before graduating in 1937. He further refined it as assistant to Renato Camus (1891–1971), Piero Portaluppi (1888-1967), Gio Ponti (1891–1979) and Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1909-1969) at the Politecnico di Milano, before becoming professor of Architectural Composition (1958) and chair of Drawing and Surveying (1964–1968).[22] Building on the reflection proposed by Lambertucci, the present paper seeks to foreground the collaborative nature of the Castiglioni brothers' design process, attributing to that very collaboration the semantic richness and urban quality of the Omega Centre. By focusing on the urban dimension of the project, this paper moves

15 Sergio Polano, *Achille Castiglioni. Tutte le opere* (Milano: Electa, 2001); Sergio Polano, *Achille Castiglioni* (London: Pall Mall, 2012); Silvia Cattiodoro, ed., *Pier Giacomo, 100 volte Castiglioni: materiali, progetti, testimonianze di un maestro del design* (Vicenza: Edibus, 2013).

16 Andrea Branzi, "Achille, Pier Giacomo e Livio Castiglioni," in *Ritratti e autoritratti di design* (Venice: Marsilio, 2010), 83–91; Andrea Branzi, "I fratelli Castiglioni," in *Achille e Pier Giacomo Castiglioni*, ed. Matteo Vercelloni (Pero: 24 Ore Cultura, 2011), 4–21; Marco Sironi, *Sul luogo del design. Intorno al lavoro dei fratelli Castiglioni* (PhD diss., University of Sassari, 2012) later developed as book (Milan: Greco & Greco, 2014); Dario Scodeller, "Lo Studio Castiglioni nella cultura italiana del design 1936–2002," in *Il design dei Castiglioni: Ricerca, sperimentazione, metodo*, 2019, 21–50; Filippo Lambertucci, *Lo spazio dei Castiglioni* (Siracusa: LetteraVentidue Edizioni, 2020).

17 Although the Omega Centre was still under development at the Castiglioni studio when Pier Giacomo passed away, references to it are notably absent from the obituary literature. Dino Buzzati, writing in *Il Corriere della Sera*, stands out as the sole voice to acknowledge it, while neither *Domus*, *Casabella*, nor *Ottagono* made any mention of it. Dino Buzzati, "La scomparsa di Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Un grande designer," *Il Corriere della Sera*, December 3, 1968: 3; Agnoldomenico Pica, "Pier Giacomo Castiglioni," *Domus*, no. 470 (January 1969): 1–2; "Pier Giacomo Castiglioni 1913–1968," *Casabella*, no. 332 (January 1969): 67; Vittorio Gregotti, "Ricordo di Pier Giacomo Castiglioni," *Ottagono*, no. 12 (January 1969): 20–23.

18 Eugenio Bettinelli, *La voce del maestro. Achille Castiglioni. I modi della didattica* (Mantua: Corraini, 2014), 38. For further references on Achille Castiglioni, see also: Paolo Ferrari, ed., *Achille Castiglioni*, (Milan: Electa, 1984); Sergio Polano, *Achille Castiglioni. Tutte le opere*; Sergio Polano, *Achille Castiglioni*; Domitilla Dardi, *Achille Castiglioni* (Turin: Testo & Immagine, 2011); *Achille Castiglioni visionario: l'alfabeto allestitivo di un designer regista*, ed. Ico Migliore et al. (Geneva: Skira, 2018); *A Castiglioni*, ed. Patricia Urquiola, in collaboration with Federica Sala (Milan: La Triennale di Milano and Electa, 2018).

19 Giuliana Ricci, "Castiglioni, Pier Giacomo," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 22 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1979): https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pier-giacomo-castiglioni_(Dizionario-Biografico)/. Accessed June 25, 2024.

20 Polano, *Achille Castiglioni. Tutte le opere*, 9.

21 Lambertucci, *Lo spazio dei Castiglioni*, 159.

22 Scodeller, "Lo Studio Castiglioni nella cultura italiana del design 1936–2002," 28; Silvia Cattiodoro, "Affresco di famiglia," 25; Giorgina, Castiglioni. "Ricordando Pier Giacomo Castiglioni," in *Il design dei Castiglioni: Ricerca, sperimentazione, metodo,* 183.

away from the recurring emphasis on the "poetic lightness" often associated with the Castiglioni brothers' achievements in industrial and exhibition design,[23] or their deft handling of the ephemeral vocabulary of exhibition design. This focus on lightness and ephemerality may inadvertently "suggest [that the work of the Castiglioni brothers was] superficial or merely circumstantial."[24] This is certainly not the case with the Omega Centre, which – on the one hand – offers a remarkably profound reflection on the city, on Piazza del Duomo, and on Milan more broadly, and – on the other – presents Omega's products through a display language that is both original and architecturally expressive. [Fig. 3]

To fully account for the project's complexity, this study unfolds across multiple scales: from the urban context of Piazza del Duomo to the interior design details and object-level interventions, and back again. This dual movement generates a cohesive narrative that links innovation at the scale of the object with meaning at the scale of the city, inviting a broader reflection on the role of commercial architecture in shaping the modern urban experience. In an era increasingly defined by digital platforms and virtual retail environments – and within the context of Milan's ongoing urban transformation – revisiting today a project so intrinsically conceived in and for the city appears more necessary than ever. Not only does it reassert the centrality of commercial architecture within the urban discourse, but it also affirms its potential civic role. As this paper ultimately seeks to demonstrate, the Omega Centre was not merely a sophisticated design exercise, but a compelling lesson in the civic responsibility of architecture: a project that actively engaged the public realm, contributing to the making of the city – and to our ability to read and interpret it.

In an effort to restore the Omega project to its rightful place within the histories of architecture, the city, and the Castiglioni oeuvre, this research draws on a wide range of previously unpublished materials sourced from both national and international archives and private collections. These include the Fondazione Achille Castiglioni (Milan); the Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione (CSAC) at the University of Parma; the Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la città metropolitana di Milano; the Sportello Unico per l'Edilizia (Milan); the Giorgio Casali photographic archive at the Archivio Progetti IUAV (Venice); the Max Huber Archive (Novazzano, Switzerland); and the private collection of Masanori Umeda (Tokyo, Japan).

Architecture as Profession, the City as Project

Centred on Piazza del Duomo, Milan's first metro line – the now-iconic Linea Rossa – was inaugurated in November 1964. Designed by architects Franco Albini (1905–1977) and Franca Helg (1920–1969), in collaboration with graphic

23 Dardi, *Achille Castiglioni*, 7.

24 Lambertucci, *Lo spazio dei Castiglioni*, 11.

3

designer Bob Noorda (1927–2010), this "great work of social design"[25] began to link the city's north-eastern suburbs with its south-western districts, helping to redefine Milan as an integrated urban system. It was precisely in Piazza del Duomo – directly opposite the northern exit of the newly built underground line – that the Omega company decided to establish a new centre for the display and sale of its products. Notably, the shop integrates seamlessly into city's multi-level mobility infrastructure, connecting both with the surface level of the piazza and, below the ground with a secondary access entrance from the metro stop. Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni were approached in early 1967 by Fratelli De

Fig. 3

Giorgio Casali, the movable glazed cabinets hung from the shop's mullions as a visual mediator between the urban scale and the small, precious watches and jewels, 1969 (Università Iuav di Venezia, Archivio Progetti, Fondo Giorgio Casali).

25 Giovanni Luca Minici, *La metropolitana milanese. Evoluzione urbanistica e architettonica* (Milan: Silvana, 2018), 63–89.

Marchi, Omega's general agents for Italy.[26] With a number of commercial interiors already to their credit – including the Gavina furniture showrooms in Milan and Turin (1960), the Gavina headquarters and display space in San Lazzaro di Savena (Bologna), the Splügen Bräubeer house-restaurant (1960), and the Flos showroom in Milan (1968–1969) – the Castiglioni brothers had earned a solid reputation in the field of retail architecture. Already by the early 1960s, they were described as "a good example of comradely understanding and professional teamwork,"[27] exemplifying a model of architectural practice that integrated design culture and commercial commission.

At the same time as the commission from Fratelli De Marchi,[28] in January 1967, the Japanese designer Masanori Umeda (b. 1941) joined the Castiglioni brothers' studio as their first intern. He remained there for nearly three years, until December 1969, closely following the development of the Omega project.[29] Trained at the Kuwasawa Design School in Tokyo, Umeda had arrived in Milan in September 1966 through the intermediation of Swiss graphic designer Max Huber (1918–2022),[30] who often collaborated with the Castiglioni studio as well as in the Omega project.[31]

From the outset, the language barrier between the Italian team and the young Japanese designer[32] was bridged by what Umeda described as "the universal [and well-coded] language of drawing […]. When something needed to be clarified, especially about details, communication was done through drawing [because it's] an immediate and extremely understandable language."[33] This reliance on drawing as a medium of communication also helps explain why Achille and Pier Giacomo produced an extraordinary number of sketches during the design process – sometimes starting from blank sheets, at other times working over pre-existing schematics – which Umeda would then copy and translate

26 In the same years, in Zurich's central Bahnhofstrasse, Omega had commissioned Swiss architect Paul Steger (1925–2020) and J. Flückiger to build an entire city block, the so-called Omega-Haus (1968–1971), which housed the local headquarters as well as four levels of showrooms and sales areas. See: "Omega-Haus, Zürich: Architekt Paul Steger," *Das Werk* 60, no. 8 (1973): 956–957.

27 Arturo Belloni, "Interview mit Achille und Pier Giacomo Castiglioni," *Md. Moebel Interior Design*, no. 10 (1963): 59–60.

28 The company requested the involvement of one of their trusted collaborators: architect Andrea Caimi (1926–2012), who joined the Omega project as a consultant for technical and architectural matters. His responsibilities included supporting site supervision as well as coordinating contracts and payments with the numerous companies involved in the construction. After spending three years (1956–1959) in Switzerland with Omega's commercial design department, Caimi began a twenty-year collaboration with Fratelli De Marchi, during which he oversaw and/or designed more than 200 retail spaces. See Alessandro Caimi, *Ricordanze con disegni* (Turin: Genesi, 2011), 30–31; 40–41.

29 The two had met while Umeda was working as an interior designer (1963–1966) at the graphic design agency DESKA (DESigners Kono Associates), founded by the renowned Japanese duo Takashi Kōno (1906–1999) and Shigeo Fukuda (1932–2009); Kōno was also Huber's father-in-law.

30 Written interview with Masanori Umeda conducted through his daughter Nanae on 22 June 2022. Oral Interview with Giorgina Castiglioni on 23 July 2022. Oral interview with Aoi Kono Huber and Stefano Galli on September 9, 2024.

31 Max Huber, *Max Huber. Progetti grafici 1936–1981* (Milano: Electa, 1982), 3. With the construction site open for a few months, the Castiglioni brothers and Max Huber were awarded first prize at the 3rd Biennial of Applied Graphic Arts (Brno, 19 June – 22 September 1968) for the exhibition "Le vie d'acqua da Milano al mare" (Palazzo Reale, Milan 1964) and the Montecatini Pavilion entitled "Chimica. Un domani più sicuro" (Fiera di Milano, April 1967).

32 Informal talk with Carlo Castiglioni on 14 March 2022.

33 Written interview with Masanori Umeda conducted through his daughter Nanae on 24 June 2022. Notes of Masanori Umeda on journal page depicting the Omega project on 28 June 2022.

into finalized construction drawings and finished ink plates for magazines' publications.[34] Today, this graphic material – created primarily to visualize the ideas and contemporaneously to overcome linguistic limitations – offers a rare, almost frame-by-frame record of the project's evolution, allowing us to reconstruct the conceptual points around which the design process revolved and to appreciate the collaborative nature of architectural practice in a transnational and highly professionalised context.

Demolition work began in March 1968,[35] and by the end of April the Municipality of Milan (Ripartizione Edilizia Privata) was officially informed that "the position of director of works for the technical, structural, and construction aspects was assumed by engineer Cesare Fermi."[36] His appointment helped streamline communication with the authorising offices and improve the management of what was already proving to be a highly complex construction process – at a time when Pier Giacomo's involvement had begun to wane due to his declining health. In the final stages of the project, Pier Giacomo continued to follow its development from his hospital room, receiving detailed updates from Umeda,[37] who had by then joined Achille on the building site. As the novelist Dino Buzzati (1906–1972) recalled in a conversation with Achille following his brother's passing, "for several months my brother had significantly slowed down his work, but here [referring to the Omega Centre] his influence is still present."[38] In every respect, then, the shop in Piazza del Duomo stands as the last project jointly signed by the Castiglioni brothers – even though Pier Giacomo never lived to see its completion.[39]

Construction work on site was not without complications or adaptations. As documented in drawings, photographs, notes, and correspondence with suppliers, the process was shaped both by unforeseen conditions encountered during excavation and by evolving requests from the client. [Fig. 4] Among the most critical technical challenges was the need to reinforce the foundations and retaining walls, which had been partially compromised by earlier work related to the construction of the metro.[40] [Fig. 5]

In addition, the decision to expose the original vaulted arches on the underground level required substantial modifications, further delaying the building's completion. These obstacles did not lead to compromises. On the contrary, they compelled the architects to pursue a highly customised design approach,

34 Notes of Masanori Umeda on journal page depicting the Omega project on 28 June 2022.

35 Achille Castiglioni, "Negozio Omega di Piazza Duomo," *Fenarete* 22, no. 127 (1970): 63.

36 Sportello Unico per l'Edilizia (Milan), Ref. 10992 of 24/04/1968. Herafter, SUE-MI.

37 Written interview with Masanori Umeda conducted through his daughter Nanae on 22 June 2022. Oral interview with Giorgina Castiglioni on July 23, 2022.

38 Buzzati, "La scomparsa di Pier Giacomo Castiglioni."

39 Oral interview with Giorgina Castiglioni on July 23, 2022. Informal talk with Carlo Castiglioni on March 14, 2022.

40 See: Castiglioni, "Negozio Omega di Piazza Duomo," 63.

one acutely responsive to the physical and spatial characteristics of the site.[41] The Castiglioni brothers were acutely aware of the significance of the project and the responsibility it entailed – not only toward their client, but also toward the urban fabric and the Milanese public. In a letter from October 1968, while acknowledging "the difficulties at the building site" and the resulting delays, they clearly stated: "The national and international importance of the Omega, our commitment to the De Marchi organisation, and our responsibility to the Milanese public do not allow us to make hasty decisions, but require us to seek first-rate architectural solutions with an indispensable perfect execution."[42] This affirmation of responsibility – extending beyond technical success to encompass the civic and cultural implications of building in the historic heart of Milan – reinforces the idea that, for the Castiglioni brothers, architecture was never merely a profession, but always a public act.

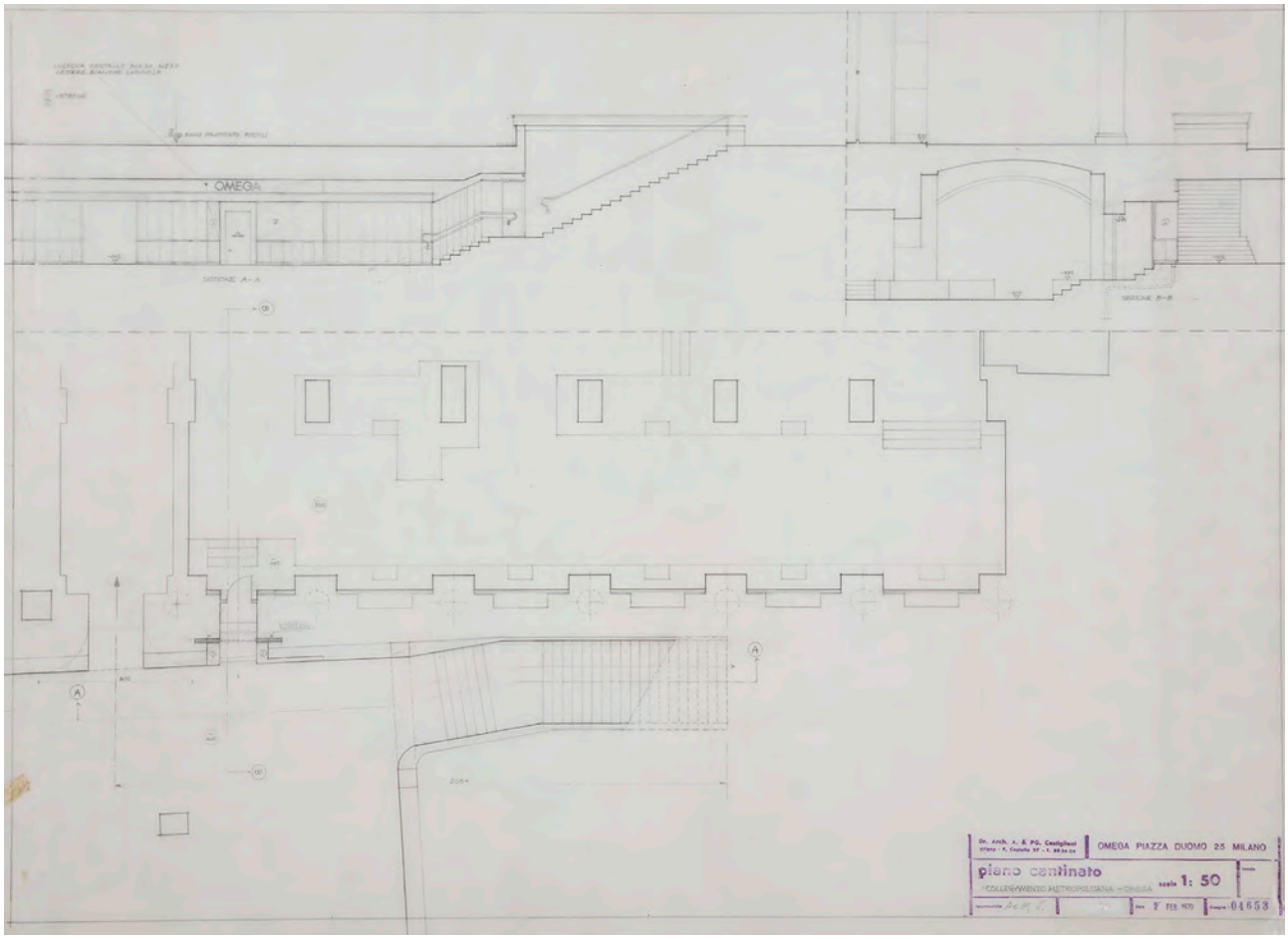
4

41 The first detailed schedule prepared by Fratelli De Marchi projected the opening for March 1968. When it became clear that this deadline could not be met, the Castiglioni brothers and the company, between September and October of that year, considered two alternative strategies: either waiting until full completion in March 1969, or organising a temporary opening of the main floor during the Christmas holidays. As a further possibility, they also discussed placing advertising behind the large shop window. FAC.

42 FAC.

Fig. 4

Photographs of the construction site: ground floor (top) and basement (bottom) (Fondazione Achille Castiglioni, Milan).



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The execution of the Omega Centre was further complicated by the involvement of a substantial number of specialised firms, whose names have been identified through the extensive documentation preserved at the Fondazione Achille Castiglioni. This complex network of collaborators sheds light on the national and international relationships that underpinned the project and reveals the multiplicity of expertise, mainly Italian, mobilised in its construction.[43] Each of these companies contributed a distinct area of technical expertise, moving fluidly between industrial precision and artistic experimentation. Their coordinated effort reflects a model of project execution grounded in collaboration and mutual trust, where craftsmanship, innovation, and architectural vision converged. From this perspective, the Omega project emerges as a paradigmatic example of what Capitanucci has described as "cultured professionalism"[44] – a distinctly Milanese approach embraced by certain generations of designers, where to

Fig. 5

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, plate comprising a portion of the basement plan where the shop is connected to the spaces of the metro line, and two sections of the connection system, 2/02/1970, no. 04653, scale 1:50 (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni, B022287P, Folder 99/3, B058855S).

43 Among the firms involved were Alfredo Redaelli of Lecco, supplier of velvets and carpets; AP–Allestimenti Portanuova s.r.l. (Milan), responsible for masonry, building systems, lighting, and external linoleum flooring; Arredografica (San Lazzaro di Savena, Bologna), which managed the glazing and the fixed and movable glass display units; Cave Marmi Vallestrona (Milan), supplier of the porch pilasters; Conforti (Varese), provider of safes, security boxes, and alarm systems; Flos (Merano), which produced both catalogue and custom-designed lighting fixtures by the architects; Giesse Legni (Bassano del Grappa), responsible for the cladding of the staircase and some interior wall treatments; FIAM – Fabbrica Italiana Ascensori (Milan); Raum Technik System (Filderstadt, Germany), for the laboratory partition walls; Reimsa Italiana (Milan), for the heating and cooling systems; and Zanotta (Milan), which supplied the armchairs. FAC.

44 Maria Vittoria Capitanucci, *Il professionismo colto nel dopoguerra/Cultured Professionalism in the Postwar Period* (Milan: Solferino Edizioni, 2015).

architectural formal refinement and technical precision go hand in hand with a shared sense of responsibility toward the city, the client, and the public sphere. This sensibility is rooted in the particular historical conditions in which Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni were trained and began their practice: between the Second World War and the immediate post-war period, when architectural work, poised between culture and technique, was shaped by the urgent demands of reconstruction, and professionals were also called upon to reorganised the very structure of their field of action.[45] This formative context profoundly influenced their approach to architecture and their relation with the city. Architecture as a profession is to recognise that the designer, as one of the many operators of the process, commands a distinct expertise, training, and skill – qualities that define vocations which, as noted by Dana Cuff, profess to have a specialized territory of knowledge that is expressed everyday through their own practice as an embodiment of professional ethos bound to circumstance, action, or performance, in other words a very a method of action. "Ideally professions are bound with a social contract with the public: they retain certain privileges and rights in society in return for bearing certain responsibility."[46] Those generations of Milanese architects truly conceived of architecture as a "social construct", and thus as cultural operator of the profession, their work is grounded in the critical mediation of form, material, and place.

From the City to the Omega Centre

The Omega Centre was inaugurated on 11 April 1969. While most architectural magazines promptly praised the result, some failed to recognise the profound and meaningful relationship that the Castiglioni brothers succeeded in establishing with the urban environment.

Ottagono classified the project as an example of "interior architecture",[47] while in *Casabella*, Giovanni Klaus Koenig described it as "a sub-species of urban furnishing."[48] These assessments appear markedly reductive, especially when considered in light of the Omega Centre's capacity to transcend conventional architectural categories and operate across multiple scales. Nevertheless, they reflect a broader tendency to dismiss commercial spaces as interchangeable urban accessories – limited in scope, marginal in impact, and often equated with little more than shop windows. In contrast, the full significance of the Omega Centre becomes evident when the project is examined in close relation to its urban context – specifically, in its ability to translate the city into architecture and to engage with the dynamics of Piazza del Duomo. Moreover, the design

45 See: Augusto Rossari, "L'attività professionale tra cultura e tecnica," in *Il movimento di studi per l'architettura 1945–1961*, eds. Matilde Baffa, Corinna Morandi, Sara Protasoni, Augusto Rossari (Rome: Laterza, 1995), 27. Pier Giacomo Castiglioni was one of the founding members of the Movimento di Studi per l'Architettura (MSA), led by Rogers since its establishment in 1945.

46 Dana Cuff, *Architecture: The Story of Practice* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 23.

47 "A Milano in piazza Duomo. Architettura d'interni di Achille e Pier Giacomo Castiglioni," *Ottagono*, no. 14 (July 1969): 21.

48 Giovanni Klaus Koenig, "La città arredata," *Casabella*, no. 339–340 (August–September 1969): 70.

development reflects their personal interpretation of, and response to, the client's specific functional and representational requirements. According to the meeting notes of 13 November 1967, these included: 1) ensuring direct access to the shop from *La Rinascente*; 2) magnifying the importance of the basement level by widening the access staircase and potentially introducing further attractions; 3) positioning a portion of the shop window near the flow of foot traffic from *La Rinascente*, intended for particularly prominent displays.[49] Rather than treating these requests as constraints, the architects transformed them into core design themes – challenges that shaped the architectural response through a process of iterative experimentation. The resulting built space is thus not a simple resolution of technical demands, but a refined outcome that synthesizes client needs with conceptual clarity and spatial invention.

In the 1960s-1970s Italian architectural discourse, not all designers appear eager to reinforce the connection between commercial interiors and the urban fabric. Few sought to move beyond the idea of the store as a mere "poster" and instead embrace a three-dimensional form of communication embedded within the city's structure and social habits.[50] The Castiglioni brothers' approach in the Omega Centre remains, in many ways, rooted in their earlier training and experiences, and stands apart from the emerging international experiments of a younger generation (designers such as Gae Aulenti (1927–2012), Hans Hollein (1934–2014), Norman Foster (b. 1935), Shiro Kuramata (1934–1991), and Ugo La Pietra (b. 1938)) who were exploring new relational models and shifts in scale, using retail space as a projection of their broader "urban visions" from a theoretical perspective.[51] What links the Castiglioni duo to these contemporaneous projects, however, is a shared concern with innovation and material experimentation. While the younger generation oscillated between a celebration of the communicative and expressive potential of new technologies and a nostalgic, utopian reading of modernity – often resulting in fragmented, symbolic gestures – the Castiglioni legacy lies in a design strategy based on grafting and juxtaposition: the strategic insertion of new elements into existing architectural, urban, or material frameworks, creating continuity through contrast and layered dialogue with historical context, much like Carlo Scarpa's Olivetti showroom in Venice (1958).[52] The shop integrates itself seamlessly into the spatial and cultural identity of Milan. Through a subtle yet assertive imposition of brand identity, the design negotiates a balance between visibility and discretion. In this context, the display of merchandise participates in and even extends the narrative of the surrounding cityscape.

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49 FAC.

50 See. Ines Tolic, *Il negozio all'italiana. Spazi, architettura e città* (Milan-Turin: Bruno Mondadori, 2018), 97.

51 See: Scodeller, *Negozi. L'architetto nello spazio della merce*, 149–150.

52 The literature on Carlo Scarpa's Olivetti project is extensive. The following is a selection of the most relevant contributions: Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, "La 'Crosera de piazza' di Carlo Scarpa," *Zodiac*, no. 4 (1959): 128-147; Stefania Portinari, "1957-1958. Negozio Olivetti a Venezia", in *Carlo Scarpa e la scultura del Novecento*, ed. Guido Beltramini (Venezia: Marsilio, 2008), 187-196; Elena Tinacci, *Mia memore et devota gratitudine: Carlo Scarpa e Olivetti, 1956–1978* (Rome: Edizioni Comunità, 2018), 202–225; *Negozio Olivetti: piazza San Marco, Venezia*, eds. Francesco Dal Co and Lucia Borromeo Dina (Vicenza: Edibus, 2024).

Located at street number 25 within the complex designed by Mengoni, the Omega Centre occupied the stretch between Via Ugo Foscolo and Via San Raffaele. [Figg. 6-7] The project skilfully capitalised on its proximity to *La Rinascente*, establishing an informal alliance articulated through the strategic management of pedestrian flows along the segment of street connecting the two retail destinations. At the same time, the Omega Centre entered into a respectful – yet intentionally distinct – dialogue with the Duomo, distancing itself in both architectural language and material expression. Nestled beneath the eclectic northern porticoes, the shop ran parallel to the cathedral, with its layout supporting the natural movement of pedestrians and vehicles circulating from the square toward Via Vittorio Emanuele II and Piazza San Babila, and vice versa. Adding a further layer of complexity to an already articulated spatial composition, the architects chose to recess the storefront slightly behind the line of

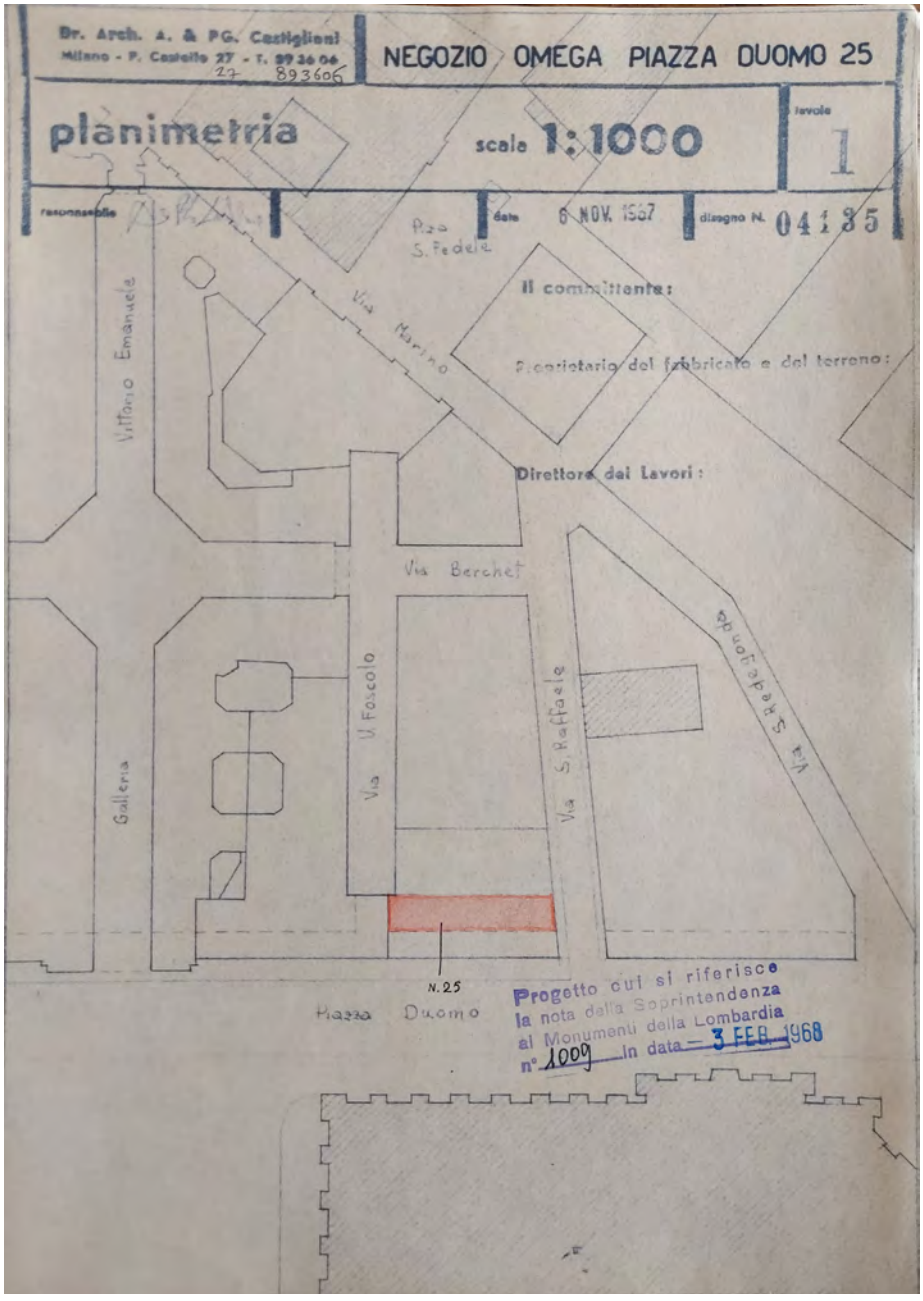

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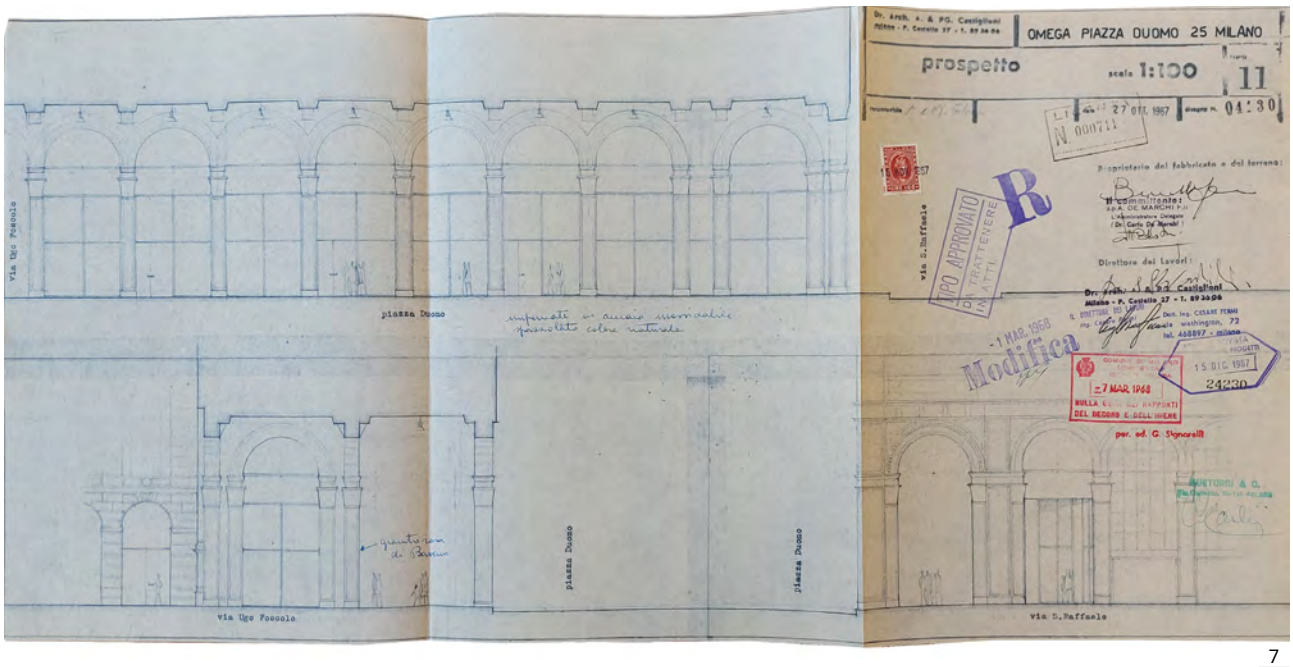
Fig. 6

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, site plan where the Omega Centre footprint is highlighted in red, scale 1:1000 (Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la Città Metropolitana di Milano, Authorization Ref. 1009 - 3/02/1968).



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the colonnade, creating a continuous walkway along the display windows. This subtle intervention not only reinforced the protective character of the portico but also carved out a threshold space – an architectural pause – where passers-by could step out of the urban flow to engage with the products on display.

This subtle offset was maintained with consistent depth up to the final two bays of the portico at the corner of the building block on Via San Raffaele. Precisely at this junction, the Milanese duo introduced an even more refined solution, taking advantage of the pre-existing oblique orientation of one of the interior walls. At this point, the glazing receded further, aligning with a sloped surface that incorporated a recessed niche – creating a veritable spatial funnel designed to "draw in" pedestrians approaching from *La Rinascente* and guide them onto the newly defined walkway along the display windows. At a time when cars still played a central role in the urban life of Piazza del Duomo, the Castiglioni brothers reorganised the space with remarkable clarity, articulating it into distinct lanes of circulation for different types of movement: the area between the porticoes and the cathedral remained accessible to vehicles; the Mengoni porticoes were reserved for pedestrian flow; and, as Buzzati noted, an "ingenious solution" introduced an "additional route" specifically conceived for prospective Omega customers.[53] [Fig. 8]

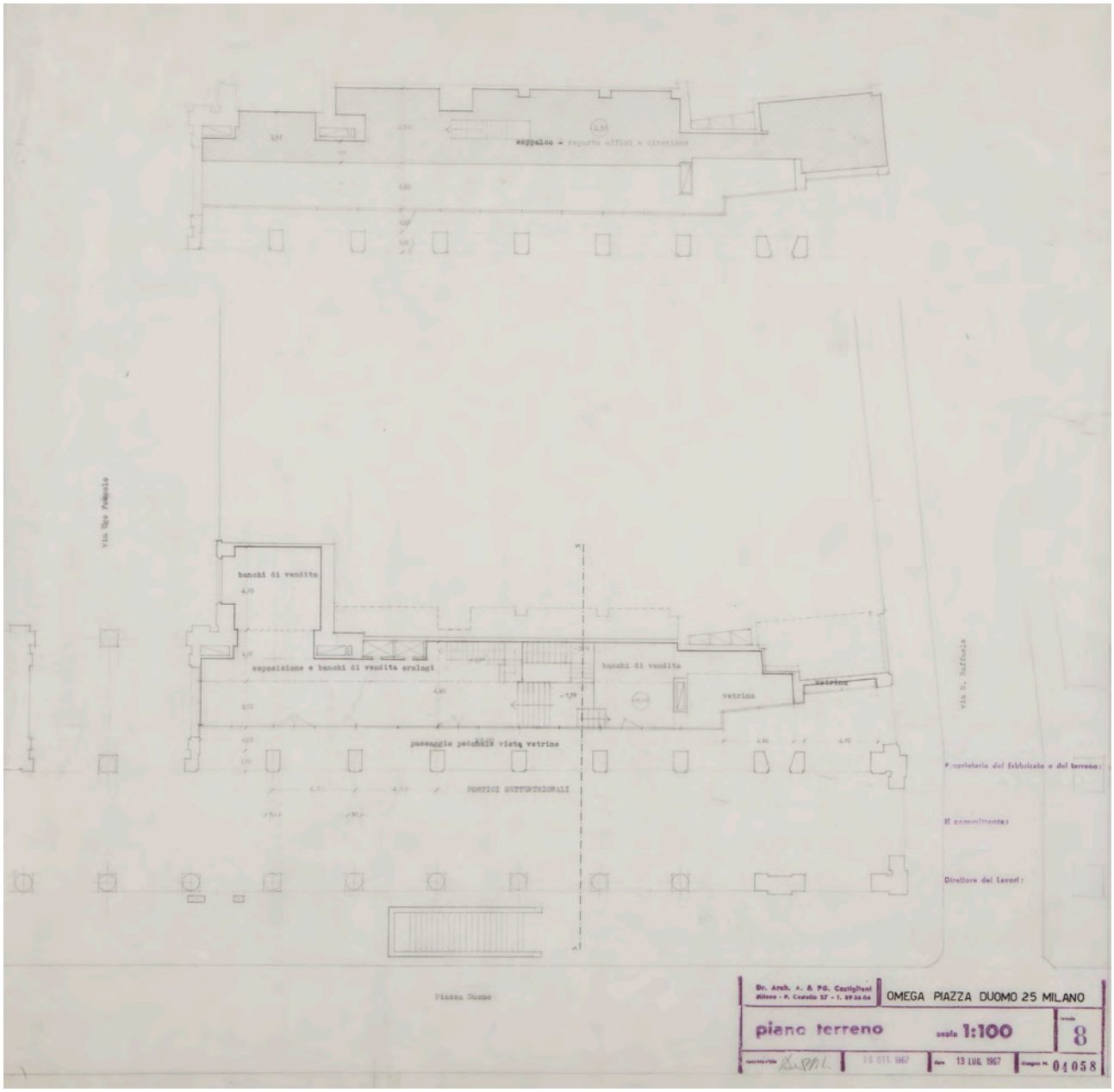
As Achille Castiglioni later recalled, interpolation "constituted the most challenging of problems to be solved."[54] The solution ultimately adopted not only created a complex spatial articulation, but also ensured "integral [respect], struc-

Fig. 7

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, plate illustrating the first proposal for the shop's main elevations: Piazza del Duomo façade (top), via Ugo Foscolo façade (bottom left) and via San Raffaele façade (bottom right), scale 1:100 (Sportello Unico per l'Edilizia, Milano, Licence ref. 711 of 25/03/1968, municipal records no. 39137/577/68).

53 Buzzati, "La scomparsa di Pier Giacomo Castiglioni." The setback of the shop front was authorized in February 1968 by the Soprintendenza alle Belle Arti e ai Monumenti della Lombardia (today Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la città metropolitana di Milano), Authorization Ref. 1009 3/02/1968. Hereafter SABAP_MI. It was subsequently approved without reservation by the Commissione Edilizia a month later, SUE-MI, Licence ref. 711 of 25/03/1968, municipal records no. 39137/577/68.

54 Castiglioni, "Negozio Omega di Piazza Duomo," 64.



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turally and formally," for Mengoni's architecture. Moreover, "the setback had made it possible to restore façade elements that had been altered by the previous configuration of the old shop,"[55] thereby reinforcing the legibility of the two distinct architectural languages: Mengoni's 19th-century eclecticism and the Castiglionis' modern intervention. The threshold between the two was articulated through the treatment of the portico's internal pilasters, which – "hollowed out at the back [but clad in slabs of pink granite from Baveno]" – were transformed into fully three-dimensional pillars, enhancing the depth of the portico and intensifying the play of shadow and light within it.[56] [Fig. 9]

Fig. 8

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, plan for the shop's ground floor contextualised within the building and porticos (top) and the mezzanine plan (top), 13/07/1967 (drawing revised on 16/10/1967), no. 04058, 1:1000. The drawing illustrates the original solution of a traditional advertising display case for the niche occupied later by the watch-scultpure (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/3, B058851S).

55 Castiglioni, "Negozio Omega di Piazza Duomo," 64.

56 Cesare Blasi and Gabriella Padovano, "Omega Milano," in *Inox e spazio pubblico* (Milan: Editrice Casabella, 1972), 43.

9

The ceiling of the recessed area was finished with minimalist coffering in brushed steel, supported by folded sheet metal beams positioned at the height of the capitals and set back from the line of the pilasters – now transformed into freestanding pillars – both on the cathedral-facing side and along Via San Raffaele. The flooring, set in deliberate contrast to the inlaid marble of the original portico, combined marble thresholds with vinyl surfaces patterned with small black dots. This latter material subtly echoed the design language of Milan's metro flooring, underscoring the Castiglioni brothers' sensitivity to the urban codes of the city and their ability to translate them into architectural detail within the Omega Centre. [Fig. 10]

The backdrop of the recessed space was composed of glass and steel window frames with a fine satin finish. With the exception of the three glazed access points [Fig. 11] and the span framing the staircase to the basement level, all remaining windows incorporated pairs of movable glass display cabinets. According to the torsional deformation report by engineer Rinaldo Troili (28 March 1968), each cabinet was estimated to weigh approximately 50 kg and was mounted on articulated arms anchored to the two main mullion uprights.[57] Positioned at eye level, these display cases were conceived either as double-sided vitrines, fitted with shaped internal panels, or as transparent optical boxes devoid of internal partitions, framing a dynamic visual dialogue between the

Fig. 9

Fortunati Fototecnica, the state of the arcade shop windows before the renovations for the Omega Centre (left). The offset space liberating the pilasters according to the project (right) (Fondazione Achille Castiglioni, Milan).

57 FAC.

interior of the shop and the surrounding city. Within these carefully orchestrated settings, watches, timepieces, and jewellery assumed a central role in the interplay between the interior and the city. [Figg. 12-13]

A distinctly different solution was adopted for the span running parallel to Via Ugo Foscolo: here, the space between the floor and the extrados of the capitals was configured as a mute diaphragm composed of paired slabs of brushed steel. This rigorously minimal surface was interrupted at just two points: one slab, slightly extruded, displayed the Swiss brand's illuminated white lettering set into a perforated stainless-steel panel; the other housed a framed shop window, visible only from the outside. In the evening, three sliding panels concealed the view into the interior, while a tilting mechanism allowed for the staging of a compact, self-contained display – transforming the façade into an autonomous

Fig. 10

Giorgio Casali, the additional space between the porticos and shop mullions is a refined juxtaposition of new materials with the historical context (Università Iuav di Venezia, Archivio Progetti, Fondo Giorgio Casali).

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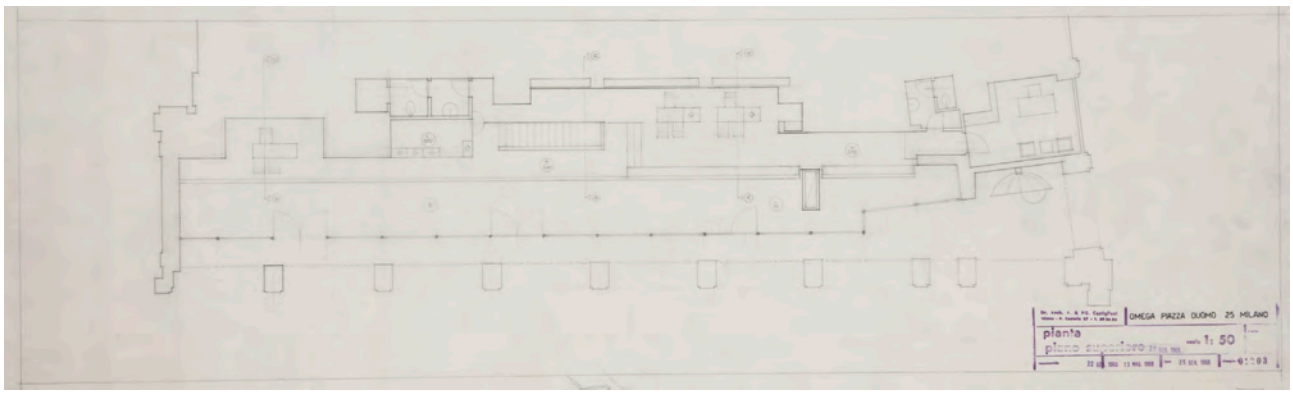
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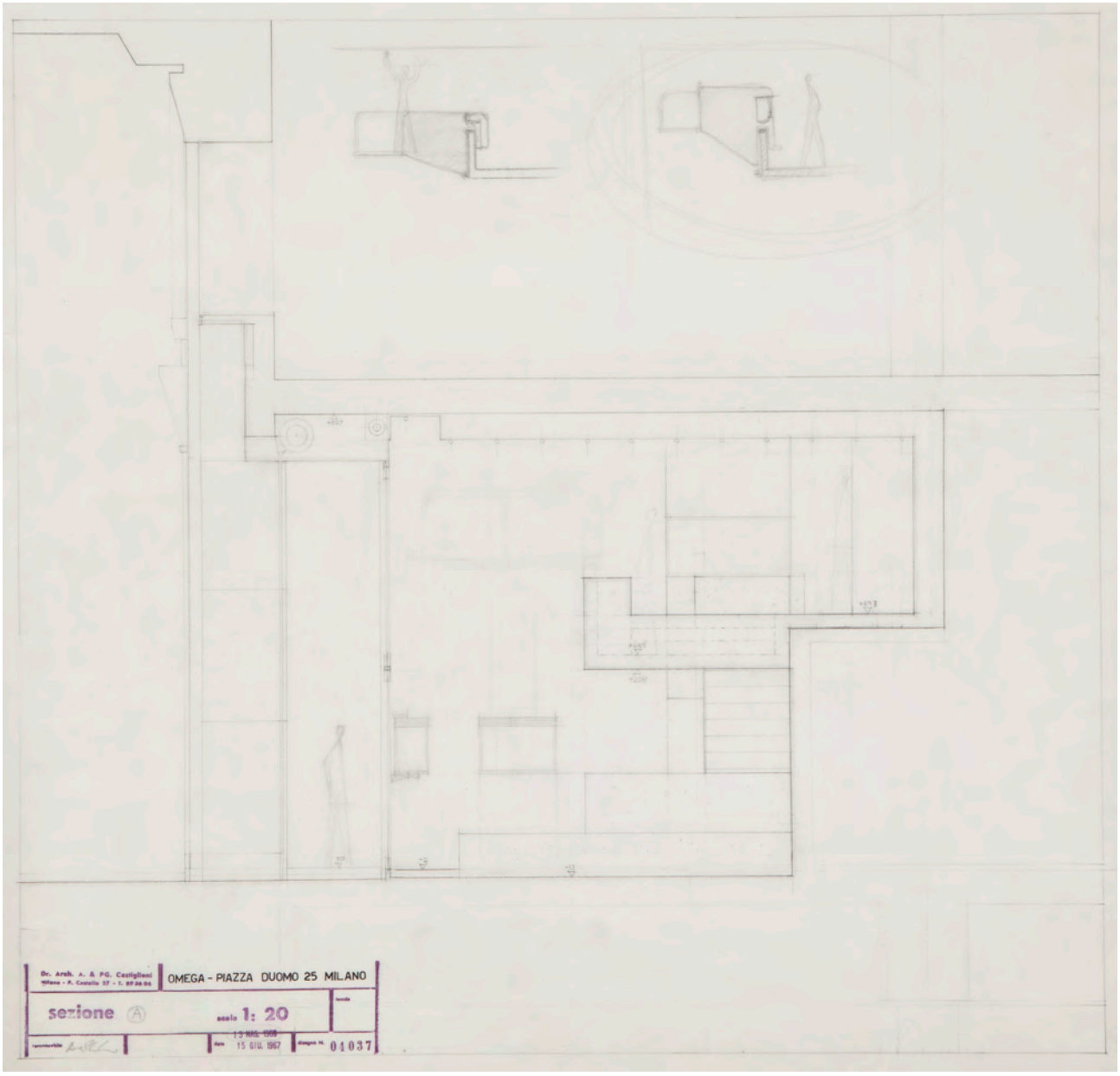
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Fig. 11

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, plan of the mezzanine level superimposing the ground floor level, where the main access from the shop windows is indicated, 25/01/1968 (drawing revised on 13/05/1968, 22/01/1969, 29/01/1969), no. 04203, scale 1:50 (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/5, B055483S).

Fig. 12

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, section A showing the system of connections between the shop window mullions and the movable cabinets positioned at eye level, 15/06/1967 (drawing revised on 13/05/1968), no. 04037, scale 1:20 (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/5, B058879S).

exhibition device even after closing hours. The Omega Centre thus participates in a broader tradition of architectural experimentation in which the shop window is reimagined not as a passive display surface, but as an active threshold – a space of interaction, staging, and urban engagement. In this regard, it can be productively read alongside Carlo Scarpa's Olivetti showroom in Venice, which similarly explores the expressive potential of architectural display.

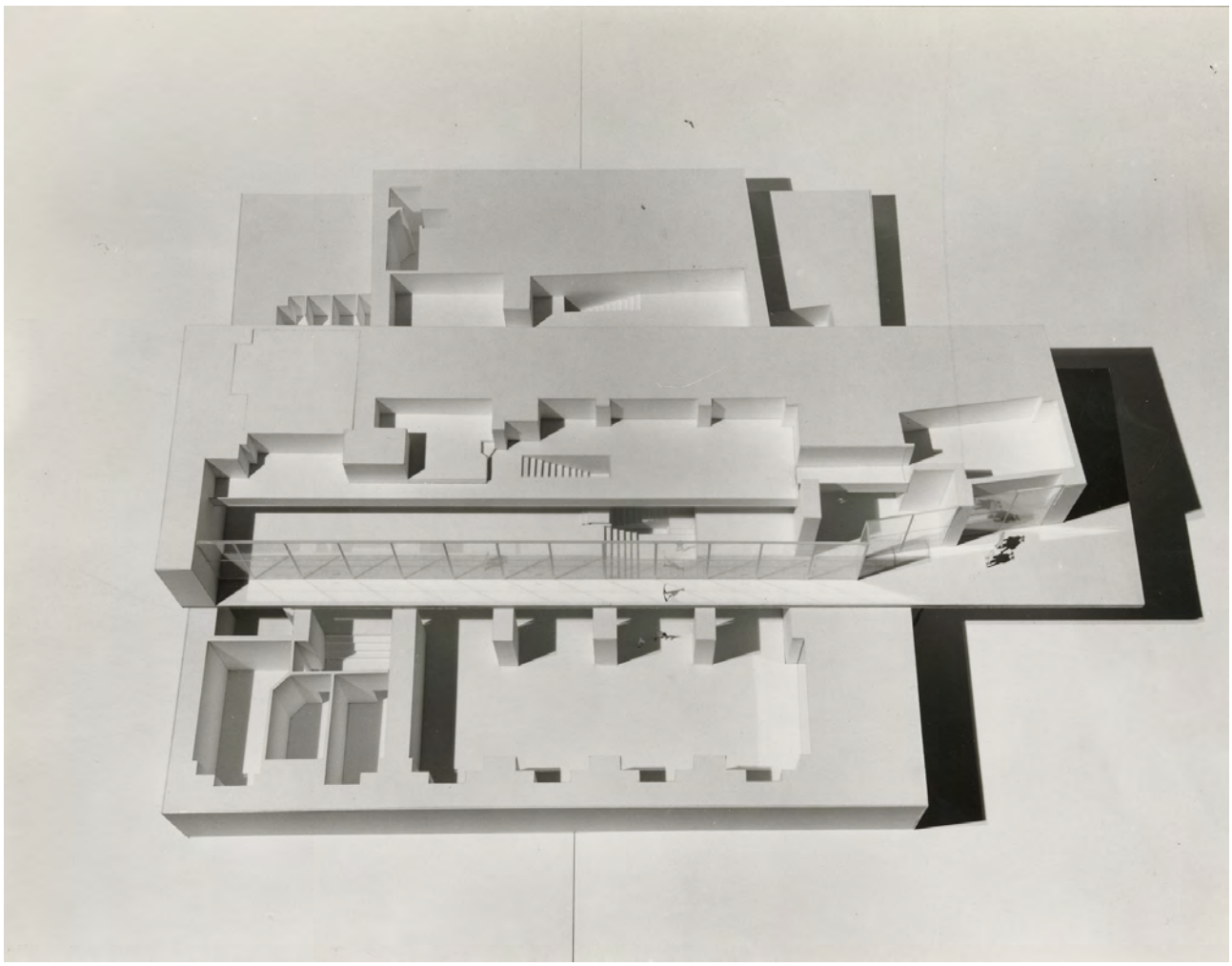
To grasp the intellectual rigour underpinning the the Omega Centre design, one need only examine the permit applications submitted to the Soprintendenza and the Commissione Edilizia. In addition to a rich array of architectural drawings, the submission included a daytime photomontage and three evocative night-time images: one depicting the elevation facing the Duomo, and the others showing the long side along Via San Raffaele – the narrow street separating the Omega Centre from *La Rinascente*. Particularly remarkable is the architectural model crafted by Masanori Umeda using balsa wood, fine timber, and plexiglass.[58] **[Fig. 14]** Embedded within urban dioramas-like compositions crafted from photographic cut-outs of Mengoni's building façades, the three-level model emerges against a sort of scenic backdrop. These scenic constructs, populated by silhouetted and animated by internal lighting, blur the line between model and *mise-en-scène*, evoking a theatrical vision of the city, especially in nocturnal compositions. **[Fig. 15]** The resulting play of artificial light is almost electrifying, anticipating what Michael Neumann would later define as "a potential new material for architecture."[59] Through the transparent diaphragm of the mullioned façade – which appears to dissolve – one can discern a composition of intersecting planes, carefully balanced volumes, and the intricate stair sys-

Fig. 13

A couple of glazed cabinets hung from shop mullions using movable supports (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/5, B058813S).

58 Written interview with Masanori Umeda conducted through his daughter Nanae on June 24, 2022.

59 Dietrich Neumann, *Architecture of the Night: The Illuminated Building* (Munich: Prestel, 2002), 6.



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16a

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16b

tem connecting the shop's three levels. For the Castiglioni brothers, it is worth recalling, "the model precedes the drawing, which is understood as verification, support, and feedback for execution."[60] In this sense, the Omega Centre's relationship with the city owes much to these miniature urban stage sets – laboratories of spatial experimentation, where architectural hypotheses were not only tested but made tangible. [Fig. 16 a-b]

Fig. 14

Fortunati Fototecnica, photograph of the architectural model featuring the three levels of the project (basement, ground floor and mezzanine). This is the model used in the previous photomontages (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/5, B058821S).

Fig. 15

Castiglioni Studio, daytime photomontage illustrating the Via San Raffaele façade: the architectural model behind the cropped photographic backdrops (taken by Fortunati Fototecnica) of the state of the site before the Castiglioni's renovation. In the model, the niche occupied later by Huber's watch-scultpure is still conceived as traditional advertising display case (Sportello Unico per l'Edilizia, Milan, Licence ref. 711 of 25/03/1968, municipal records no. 39137/577/68).

Figg. 16 a-b

Castiglioni Studio, photomontages (day and night) illustrating the Piazza del Duomo façades: the architectural model behind the cropped photographic backdrops (taken by Fortunati Fototecnica) of the state of the site before the Castiglioni's renovation. A light source was used to accomplish the night-time effect (Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la città metropolitana di Milano, Authorization Ref. 1009 del 3/02/1968).

The Art of Advertising

One of the most striking episodes in the Omega Centre's interplay with the city is the sculptural installation by Max Huber, positioned within a niche carved into the oblique side of the building. Originally conceived as a traditional advertising display case, the space was later reimagined as a backdrop clad in the same Baveno granite slabs used for the portico pillars, ultimately serving as the setting for the sculpture.[61] [Figg. 17-18]

The stainless-steel installation, clearly alluding to the world of watchmaking, was impossible for passers-by to overlook. The final version – reached after several iterations – retained a consistent circular form and fixed diameter. Unafraid to engage with three-dimensionality, as demonstrated in earlier works,[62] Huber conceived a spherical sculpture resembling a stylised, modern reinterpretation of a stereoscopic astrolabe,[63] into which a small semi-sphere was embedded. Huber's interest in this ancient measuring device reflected his boundless curiosity and his receptiveness to diverse and unconventional sources of inspiration – always grounded, however, in graphic clarity, proportional balance, and formal harmony.[64] [Fig. 19] As a symbolic expression of changing times, the sculpture was devoid of traditional hands; instead, it featured a digital display embedded in a horizontal slit within the semi-sphere – an element that seemed to anticipate a future shaped by technological innovation. That future, in fact, was already taking shape, one in which both humanity and the Omega Speedmaster would soon reach the moon.[65]

Reflecting on Huber's watch-sculpture, architect and graphic designer Italo Lupi (1934–2023) observed that not even the most distracted passers-by could "escape the grasp of this occult persuader that forced them to check their watches. Almost everyone fell for it."[66] [Fig. 20] Yet this was only the most con-

60 Marco Sironi, *Sul luogo del design: intorno al lavoro dei fratelli Castiglioni* (Milan: Greco & Greco, 2014), 94.

61 Only two proposals are still preserved in the archives, though undated: one with steel wedges and another with multiple blue sub-circles. Moreover, there is also a 1:20 scale model of the final version in coloured wood, with no author attribution. FAC; Archivio Max Huber (Novazzano, Switzerland), hereafter AMH.

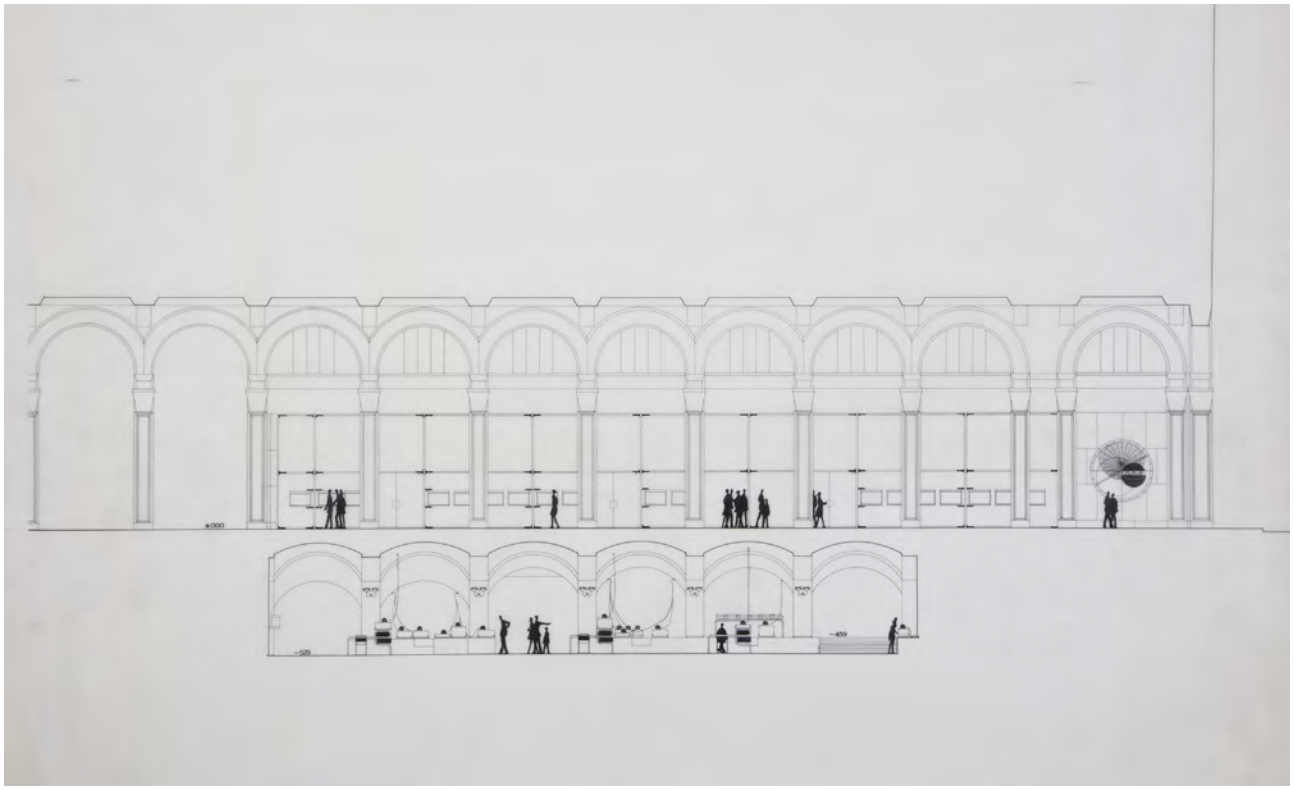
62 Oral interview with Aoi Kono Huber and Stefano Galli on September 9, 2024.

63 This attribution was made possible by the discovery of a photograph of a finely decorated Arabic astrolabe, complete with all the traditional elements, such as the mater, tympan, rete and rule. FAC.

64 Oral interview with Aoi Kono Huber and Stefano Galli on September 9, 2024.

65 Grégoire Rossier, *A Moon Watch Story: The Extraordinary Destiny of the Omega Speedmaster* (La Croix-sur-Lutry: Watchprint.com, 2019).

66 Italo Lupi, "Il Duomo allo specchio/The Duomo in the Mirror," *Casabella*, no. 339–340 (August–September 1969): 85.



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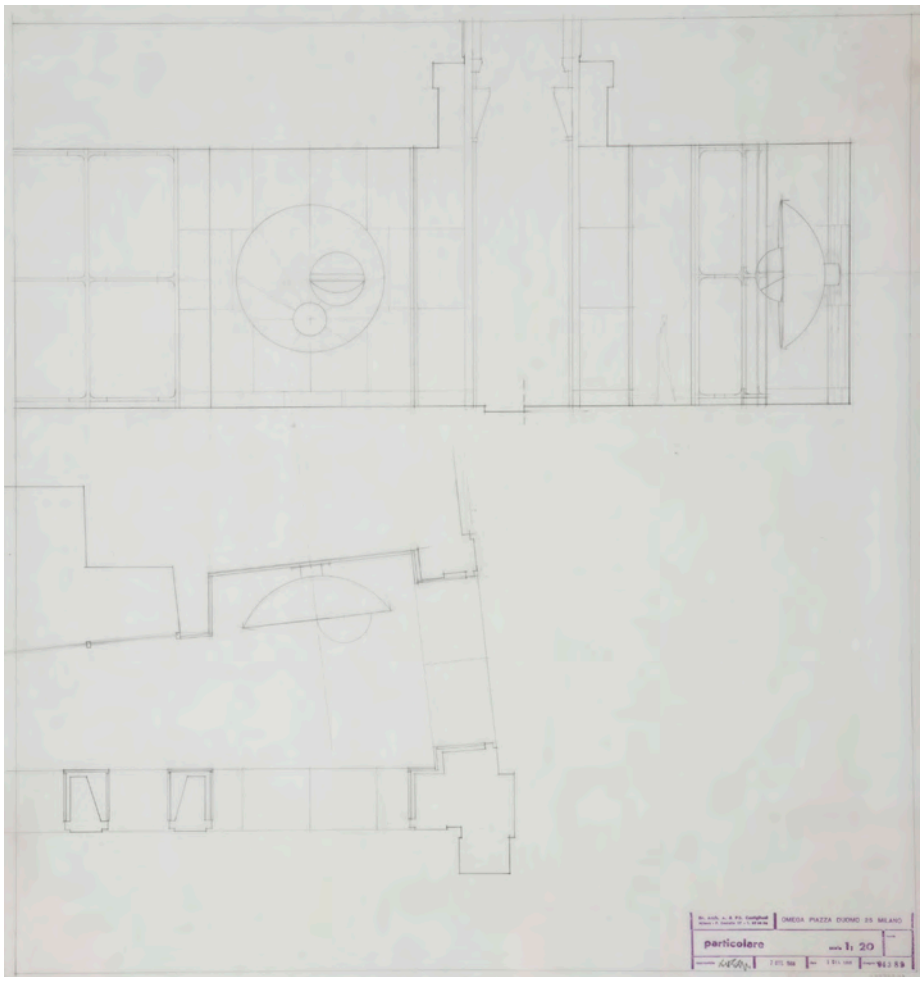

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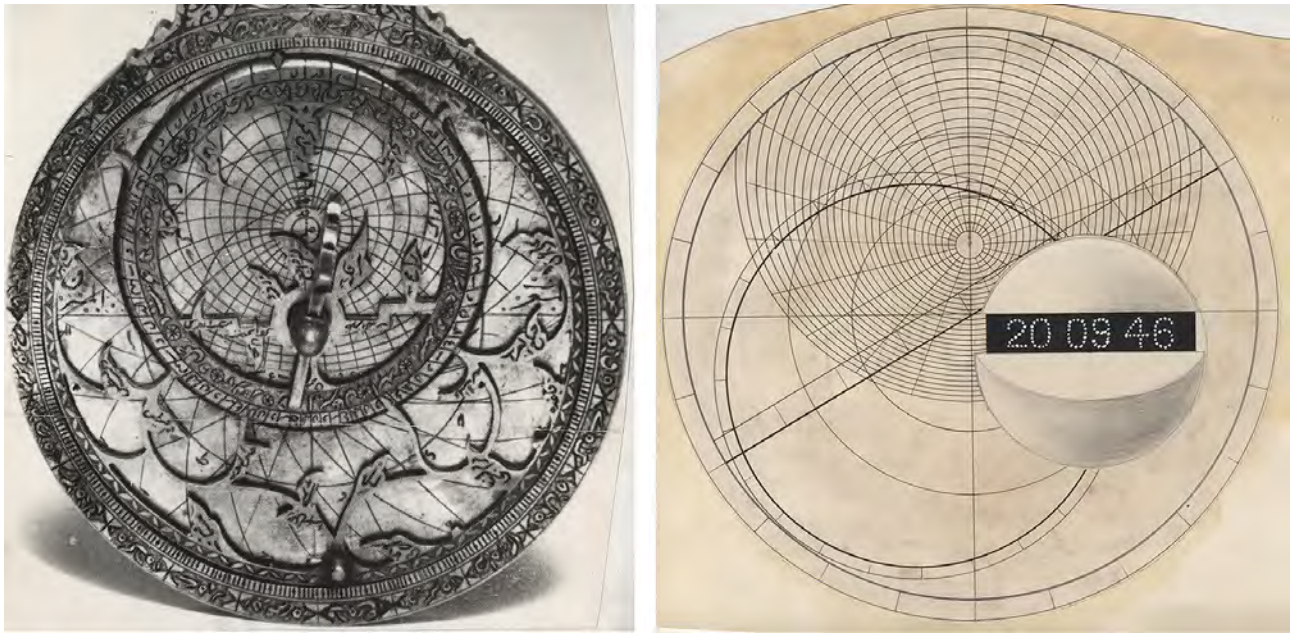
Fig. 17

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, section B crossing the northern porticos of the completed project. This ink drawing was made to illustrate the project in the papers published in magazines. The Huber watch-sculpture is located in the first arcade near the connection with *La Rinascente* portico, scale 1:50 (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/6, B055464S).

Fig. 18

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, plate showing the position of the watch-sculpture (plan, section, and elevation) in the niche clad with Baveno granite slabs, 01/10/1968 (drawing revised on 10/10/1968), no. 04389, scale 1:20 (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/5, B058888S).



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spicuous of Huber's contributions to the project. Having succeeded in capturing even the most inattentive glances, he also undertook the more delicate task of rendering the brand visible without resorting to overt or intrusive solutions. This approach was particularly timely: at the time, Piazza del Duomo was at the centre of a heated controversy over commercial signage, which many considered detrimental to the dignity of the city's historic fabric. The issue had become so pressing that, in 1966, the municipal government issued an ordinance calling for a renewed sense of decorum and more restrained advertising strategies. When the Omega Centre was being developed, the debate – especially around the case of Palazzo Carminati – was still fresh in the public memory,[67] offering Huber a valuable opportunity to critically reflect on the relationship between visual communication, advertising, and the urban environment. After all, this was familiar ground for the Swiss designer, whose approach did not merely layer meanings and elements, but constructed them in a foundational way – working in a kind of binary tension: on one side, a deep dive into morphology, artistry, and playfulness; on the other, the shifting flow of real-world, practical situations.[68]

Huber approached the project with a spatial and material sensibility, treating signage not merely as graphic information but as an integral part of the architectural composition. He strategically placed the word Omega in carefully selected locations along the portico, discreetly asserting the brand's presence.

21

67 Giulia Caffaro, "La città delle insegne luminose nella nuova città dei consumi," in *La città altra. Storia e immagini della diversità urbana: luoghi e paesaggi dei privilegi e del benessere, dell'isolamento, del disagio, della multiculturalità*, eds. Francesca Capano, Maria Ines Pascariello, and Massimo Visone (Naples: Federico II University Press, 2018), 1037–1046, https://doi.org/10.6093/978-88-99930-03-5.

68 See: Giovanni Anceschi, "L'ideogramma cinestetico di Max Huber," in *Max Huber: Progetti grafici 1936–1981*, 5–8.

Fig. 19

Photograph depicting an astrolabe (left). Drawing showing the Huber final proposal reinterpreting the geometry of the astronomic device in a modern perspective and adding a semi-sphere with a horizontal slit for the digital clock (Fondazione Achille Castiglioni, Milan).

Fig. 20

The flow of people along the Mengoni northern portico and the Castiglioni's additional path in the wide space provided for admiring the watch-sculpture (Archivio Max Huber, Novazzano, Switzerland).

Fig. 21

Fortunati Fototecnica, looking upwards, the unconventional position of the brand's sign as designed by Huber (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/5, B058831S).

22

The white lettering on burnished steel, applied to folded sheet metal surfaces, occupied what Lupi described as a "completely heterodox" position, producing a "flipping of planes" that challenged conventional hierarchies of visibility.[69]

This strategy of inversion – or at least calculated ambiguity – was also evident in the decision to position some illuminated signage within the retail space itself, thereby softening the boundary between inside and outside. [Fig. 21] One notable example was the white-lit Omega inscription on the rear wall of the ground floor: as photographic documentation shows, its luminosity was further amplified by the glossy white laminated ceiling of the mezzanine, making the lettering clearly legible even during the day. A final, more monumental gesture could be found at the opposite end of the niche containing the watch-sculpture. There, at the terminus of the narrow passage leading toward Via Ugo Foscolo, a vertical Omega inscription carved directly into Baveno granite asserted a presence that was at once discreet and architecturally integrated. [Figg. 22-23]

Huber's graphic interventions harmonised seamlessly with the Castiglioni brothers' architectural vision – particularly at night, when the glass façade seemed

69 Lupi, "Il Duomo allo specchio," 85.

Fig. 22

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, perspective of the Via San Raffaele façade with annotation on the brand's sign and materials, 2/03/1969, no. 04508, scale 1:20 (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/6, B055472S).

23

to dissolve and the interplay of interior and exterior signage contributed to a visually fluid, spatially continuous, and unmistakably modern urban experience.

From the Omega Centre to the City

The large-format photo shoots – primarily conceived for magazine publication[70] – underscore the pivotal role of the display window as a threshold between the interior of the shop and the surrounding city. Extending over thirty metres, this glass diaphragm becomes emblematic of what Jean Baudrillard defines as a "transparency without transition"[71] or, in other words, a surface that simultaneously absorbs and projects space in both directions – from the outside in, and from the inside out.

As a result, much of what unfolds across the Centre's three levels becomes integrated into the city's life – "without demeaning the object on display."[72]

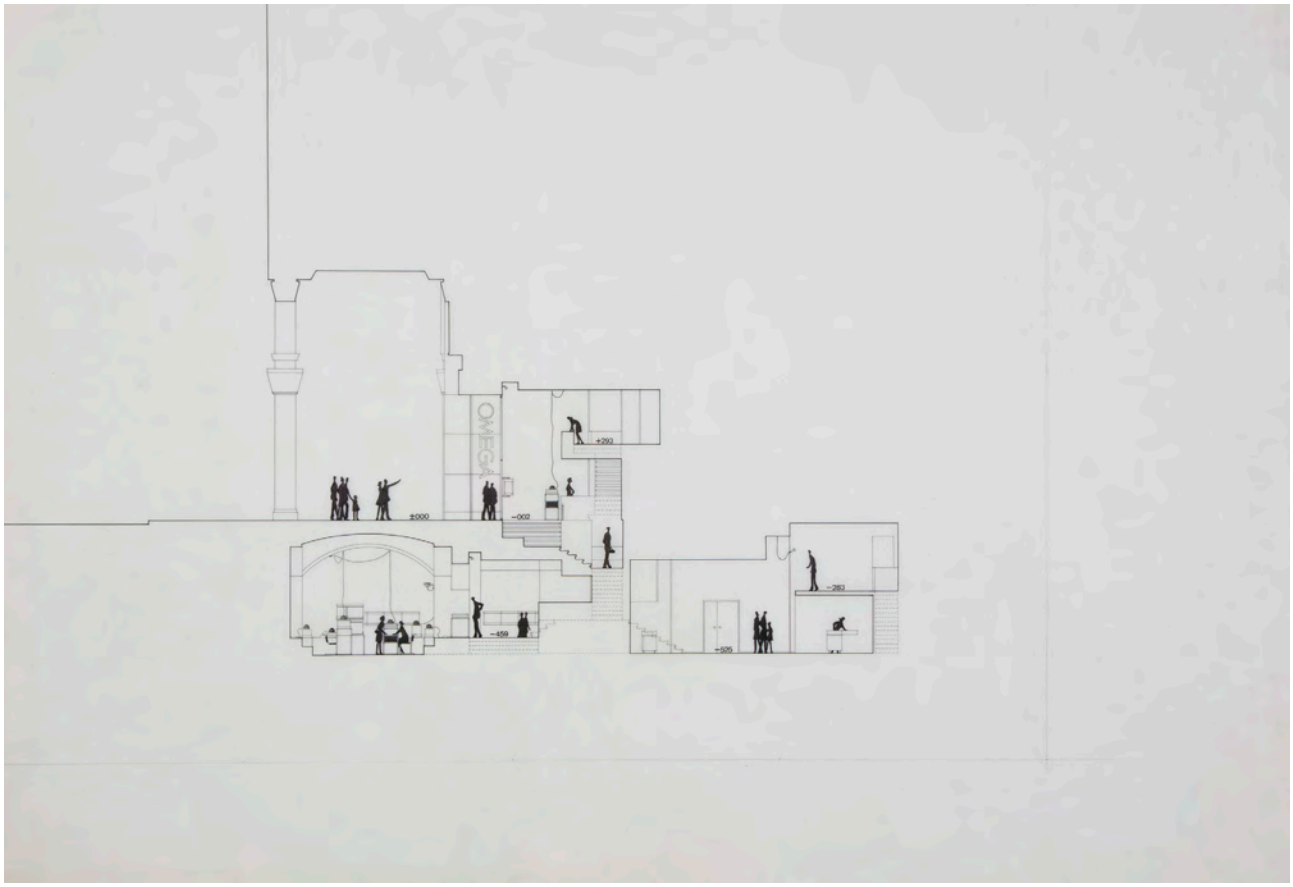
Fig. 23

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, perspective of the Piazza del Duomo façade where there are annotations on the brand's signs positioned on the glass shop windows and the granite cladding, 29/01/1971, no. 04769, scale 1:20 (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/6, B055474S).

70 As a contributor to *Domus* magazine for over 30 years, the photographer Giorgio Casali (1913–1995) took most of the pictures after the project was completed. Fototeca Fortunati in Milan was also tasked with taking pictures of the Omega shop.

71 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 42.

72 Lupi, "Il Duomo allo specchio," 83.



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The interior architecture absorbs the shifting patterns of daylight and shadow throughout the day, establishing a dynamic reciprocity with its urban surroundings. During construction, the positioning of the glazing remained faithful to the scheme submitted to the Soprintendenza and the Commissione Edilizia. What evolved in greater detail, however, were the structural components: the design of the mullions, the configuration of the entrances, and the arrangement of display devices tailored to the small scale of the merchandise – watches, jewellery, and silverware – addressed both to pedestrians walking along the adjacent portico and to those approaching from Via Ugo Foscolo. Particular attention was devoted to the junctions between the vertical and horizontal elements of the mullions. Rather than opting for an obvious or purely functional solution, the architects pursued a detail reminiscent of welded joints – refined, expressive, and technically sophisticated – as documented in original sketches.[73] The final solution was proposed by Umeda, who suggested the use of a cross or half-cross in burnished steel, shaped using three distinct radii of curvature to compensate for the inevitable optical distortions of the glass.[74]

Reflecting on the Omega project a few years after its inauguration, the British magazine *The Architectural Review* noted that the pursuit of radical transparency had been achieved through a "strong architectural framework of metropolitan

Fig. 24

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, section A of the completed proposal. This ink drawing was made to illustrate the project in the papers published in magazines (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/6, B042139S).

73 FAC.

74 Written interview with Masanori Umeda conducted through his daughter Nanae on June 24, 2022; notes of Masanori Umeda on journal page depicting the Omega project on June 28, 2022.

scale," which amplified the dialogue between the interior, the arcaded portico, and the northern profile of the Duomo, producing "a rich if ambiguous effect. In a sense the architects were lucky."[75] Yet when analysing the work of the Castiglioni brothers and their collaborators, attributing the result to luck appears overly reductive. Every design decision was the outcome of thoughtful deliberation – an exercise in calibrating varying degrees of transparency and visual permeability, grounded in a profound reflection on the surrounding urban context. This reflective process is particularly important for accurately situating the Omega Centre within both the historiography of the Castiglioni studio and their broader architectural production. At the same time, it introduces the conceptual framework underpinning the design of the interior – one in which spatial articulation, material expression, and visual continuity all converge in response to the complexities of the city.

The 1,000 square meters dedicated to sales, display, and workshop functions – on the basement level alone – were distributed across three interconnected levels: a spacious lower ground floor **[Figg. 25-26]**, the main ground floor **[Figg. 27-28]**, and a more compact mezzanine gallery overlooking the space below. **[Figg. 29-30]** From the very first variant of the interior floor plan, it is clear that the designers intended to establish "a real, completely free vertical connection between the ground floor and the underground space [so that] from the large windows facing the northern arcades [it would be] possible to see the sales counters located in the large hall below, even without having to enter the ground floor rooms."[76] **[Fig. 31]** From the earliest phases of the design process, the Castiglioni brothers prioritised the client's request to activate the basement level by ensuring visual continuity with the exterior. **[Fig. 32]**

The desired "magnification of space,"[77] requested by the client on the 13th of November 1967, was ultimately achieved by the architects through an iterative design process that yielded several variants. Five different proposals for the basement floor and staircase layout are documented in detail through architectural drawings and sketches produced during building site meetings.[78] These materials offer insight into the dynamic exchange between Mr. De Marchi and the architects, as well as into the parallel dialogue the architects established with the surrounding city.[79] In the earliest design versions, the staircase created a distinct separation within the basement between the sales and exhibition area and the workshop and service spaces, including the vault. Over time, the stair assumed both greater formal autonomy and spatial complexity, eventually taking shape as a sequence of platforms anchored to the bases of existing

75 S. C., "Watchmakers' Shop Milan. Architects: Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni," *AR: The Architectural Review,* no. 894 (July 1971): 105.

76 SUE-MI. Rejection response "Progetto di riordino dei Negozi in Milano Piazza Duomo 25 in atti 252484/24230/1967."

77 FAC.

78 See Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione of the University of Parma (hereafter CSAC), Fondo Castiglioni: Folder 99/3 - B058854S (16/10/1967); Folder 99/5 - B058885S (25/01/1968); Folder 99/5- B058886S (25/02/1968); Roll 99/5- B058895S (25/03/1968); Folder 99/5- B055496S (29/01/1969).

79 FAC.

pilasters and perimeter columns. In the final two variants, all service areas were repositioned behind the staircase, allowing it to serve as the sole architectural threshold to the vaulted gallery. The existing structure – with its characteristic sequence of ribbed vaults and supporting pillars – was deliberately brought into view and incorporated into the project, reinforcing the dialogue between historical architecture and contemporary intervention. Variations in the configuration of landings, ramps, and extruded platform volumes gave rise to multiple strategies for directing customer and employee circulation. To a certain extent, this design strategy stems from a refined evolution of their experimental work in exhibition design, but it is also clearly evident in their earlier project for the Gavina showroom (1960) and, though to a much lesser extent, in their project

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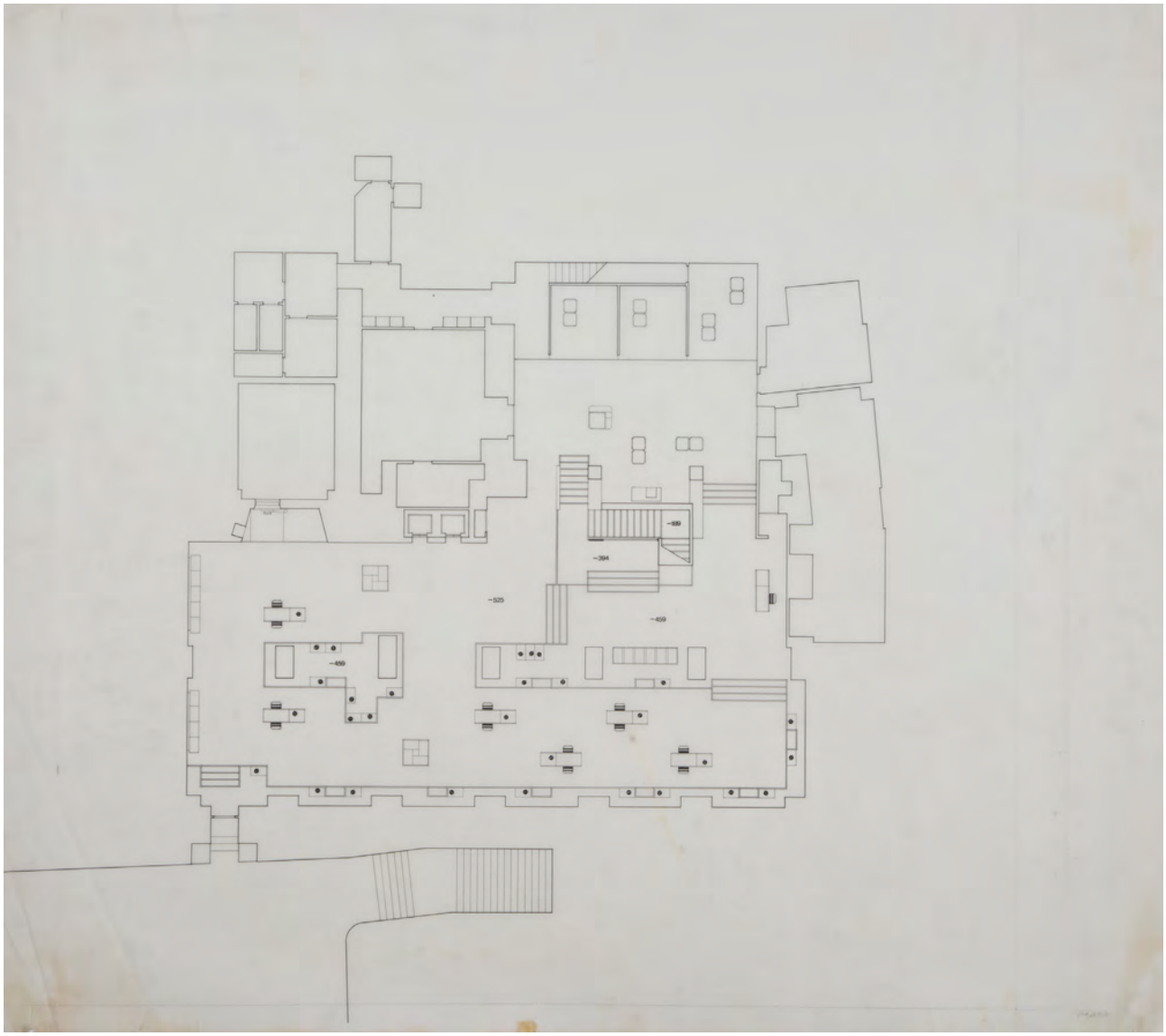
Fig. 25

Photograph of the basement and its vaulted gallery separated by a colonnade with a space with flat ceilings (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/5, B058817S).



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for the Flos showroom (1968–1969), both in Milan, where the space is carefully orchestrated through compositional tactics.[80] During construction, the client requested the addition of a further, albeit modest, access point to the metro level, which included the insertion of side display windows, as reported in a letter from Fratelli De Marchi to the Castiglionis (1 October 1968).[81] Here too, the Castiglioni brothers addressed the complex articulation of vertical circulation, enabling those navigating the underground microcosm of Milan's metro to enter the Omega Centre directly. This reconfiguration of the vertical connection inevitably demanded a new spatial arrangement of the lower level. It is clear, then, that the staircase was not conceived as a mere functional link between floors, but as an autonomous spatial device – an architectural fulcrum integral to the identity of the project. Considered as a whole, the spatial complexity of

Fig. 26

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, plan of the basement as executed. This ink drawing was made to illustrate the project in the papers published in magazines (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/6, B055471S).

80 For further investigate the project, see: Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, "A Milano, un nuovo negozio di mobili," *Domus*, no. 392 (1962): 7–14; Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, "Lampade sotto osservazione," *Domus*, no. 474 (1969): 35–37.

81 Although the access was already present in several drawings in sketched form, its detailed study and construction (1970–1971) would follow the inauguration of the store. FAC.

the Omega Centre can be seen as an interpretation of the equally layered urban context it faces – particularly the intertwined system composed of the Duomo, the piazza, and the subterranean infrastructure of the metro. Considered as a whole, the Omega Centre's spatial configuration actively interprets the layered complexity of the urban fabric it inhabits. In this sense, the architecture functions as a cognitive tool – a spatial translation of the city itself – guiding visitors almost imperceptibly from the monumental scale of the Duomo to the intimate scale of a timepiece, and back again.

Building on their intent not merely to interpret the city but to make it an integral part of the shop itself, the Castiglioni brothers focused on what, in November 1967, the client had vaguely referred as "further attractions".[82] Among the possible architectural responses to this, one element proved especially significant

82 FAC.

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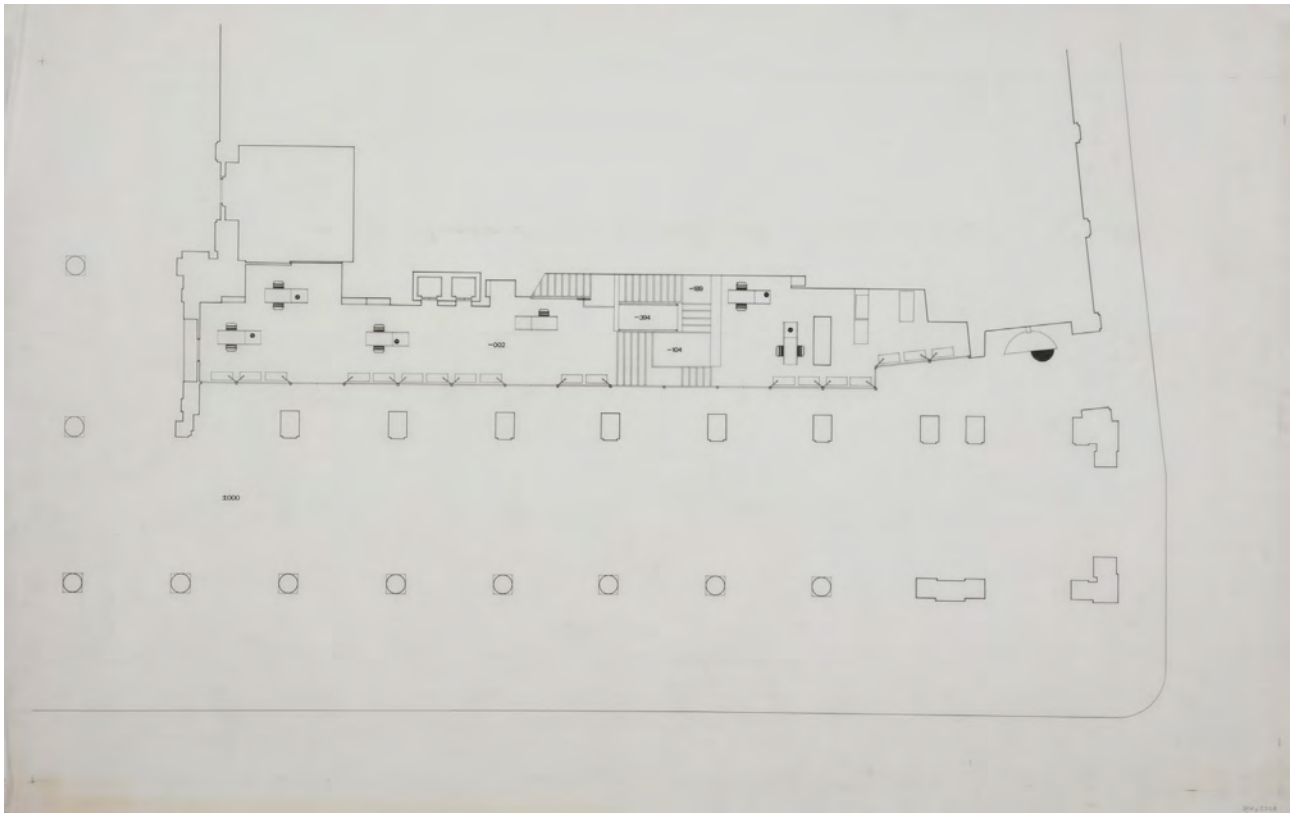
Fig. 27

Fortunati Fototecnica, ground floor shopping area under the mezzanine (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/5, B058824S).



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for its role within the overall composition: a mirror placed parallel to the northern arcades, designed to reflect the Duomo and thereby draw it – at least virtually – into the Omega interior.[83] As noted at the time, "this is not a 'trick' for an easy optical illusion, or an amusement, no matter how sophisticated or clever, but a rare example of how a difficult material such as the mirror can be used not in terms of decoration, but as an integrated element among the components of architecture."[84] The integration of the Duomo into the spatial experience of the shop was further reinforced by the use of glass parapets, strategically positioned to amplify the interplay of reflections and urban references – even during the descent to the underground level. The result was a spatially complex and cohesive system, in which "unity between the floors [was] obtained by the uniform and uninterrupted treatment of floor and wall finishes."[85] [Fig. 32]

The unity of the interior spaces was further reinforced by the deliberate use of a surprisingly restrained palette of materials. Particularly striking was the Castiglioni brothers' distinctive brand of "sarcastic rationalism",[86] evident in their juxtaposition of modest materials – such as grey synthetic carpeting applied to both floors and walls, or studded linoleum used for the so-called "additional route" – with more refined elements like stainless steel and glass. The result was the impression of an inhabited organism which, as noted on 10 July 1967,

Fig. 28

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, plan of the completed ground floor. This ink drawing was made to illustrate the project in the papers published in magazines (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/6, B055470S).

83 Lupi, "Il Duomo allo specchio," 79.

84 "A Milano in piazza Duomo," 21.

85 S. C., "Watchmakers' Shop Milan," 106.

86 Branzi, "I fratelli Castiglioni," 4.

embodied "maximum freedom, breadth of movement, and elasticity,"[87] while subtly and gracefully sustaining the fluid dynamics of commerce.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the custom-designed furnishings created by the Castiglioni brothers specifically for the Omega Centre. The sales counters and the near-continuous bent metal tube supporting the leather-covered wooden shelves stand out for the elegance, precision, and coherence of their design solutions. The process culminated in a refined reinterpretation of the uppercase Greek letter *omega* (Ω) – a result of iterative experimentation and formal distillation.[88] This design ethos exemplifies what architect Vittorio Gregotti (1927–2020) defined as "the idea of an integrated project: a project developed in close connection with production structures, one that re-examines the internal order of the technical system, the reciprocal placement of components, explores new possibilities of materials and workmanship, and redefines the

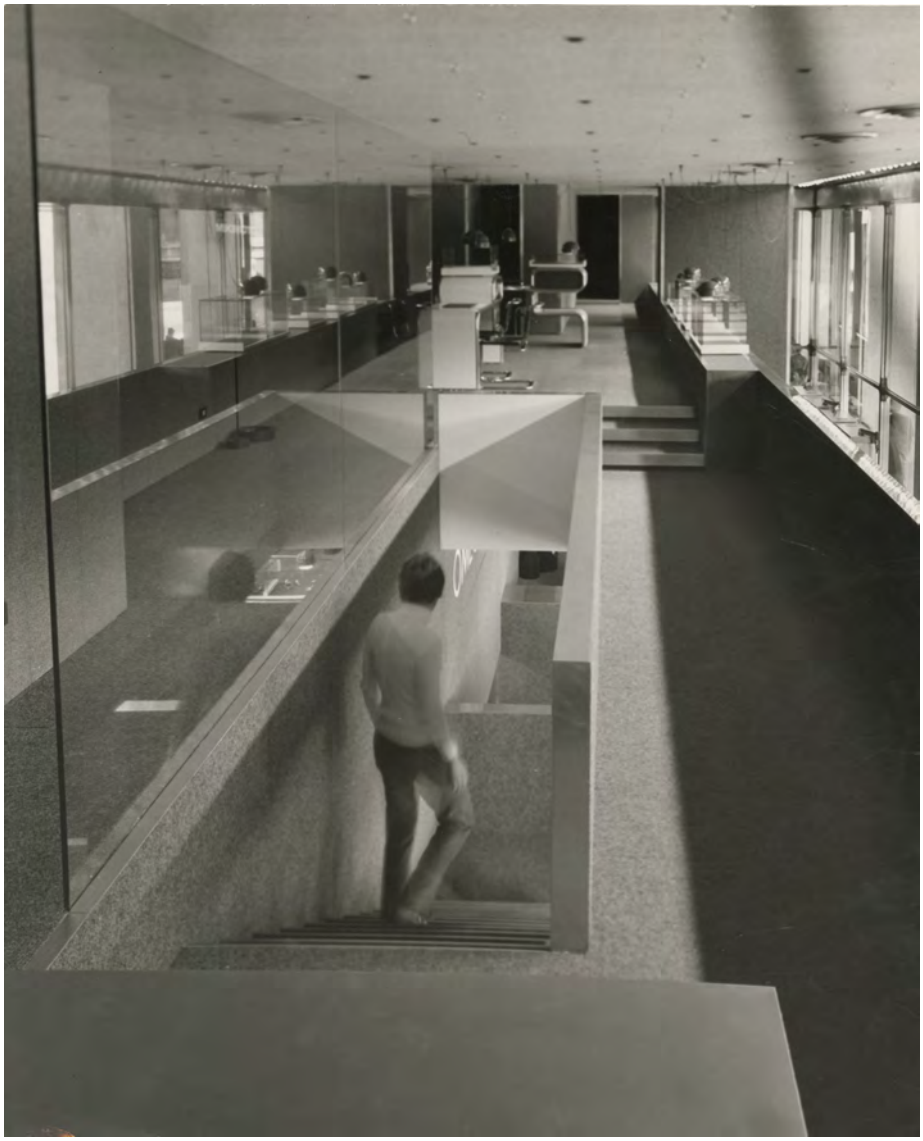

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Fig. 29

Fortunati Fototecnica, the staircase connecting the mezzanine and the ground floor (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/5, B058830S).

Fig. 30

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, plan of the completed mezzanine. This ink drawing was made to illustrate the project in the papers published in magazines (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/6, B055468S).

Fig. 31

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, sections A and B, 25/01/1968 (drawings revised on 20/06/1968 and 01/10/1968), no. 04200, scale 1:50 (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/5, B055493S).

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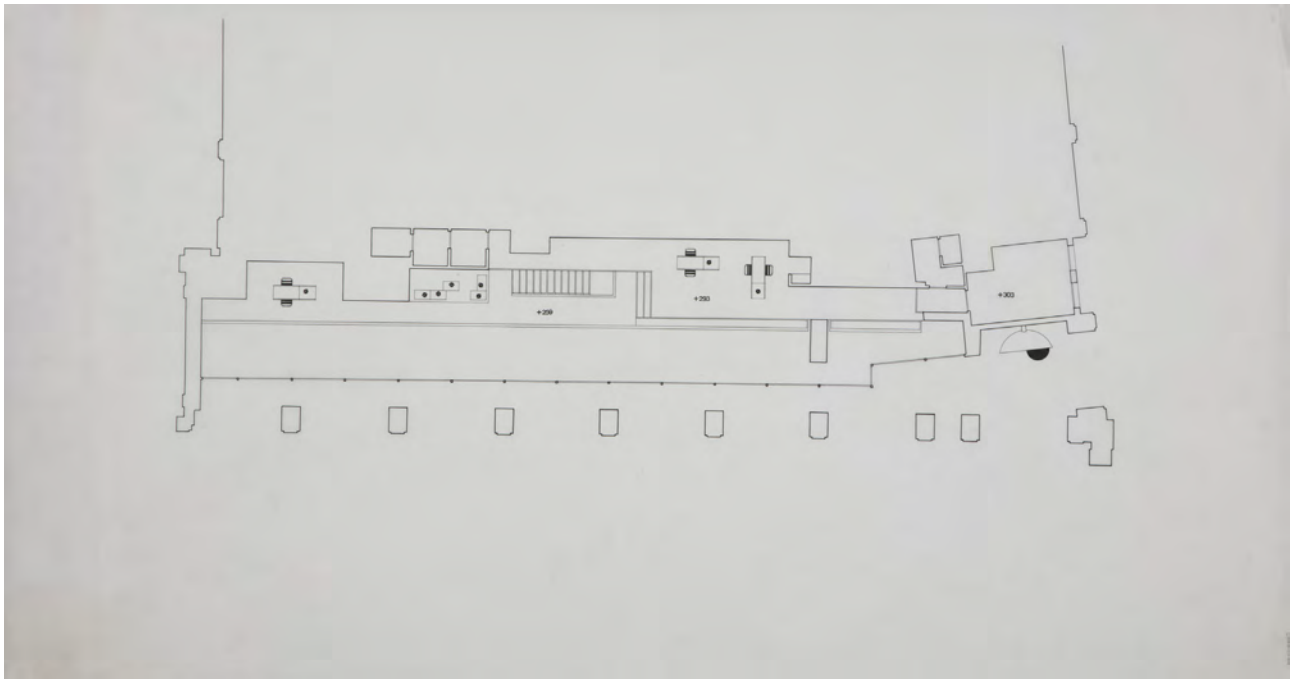

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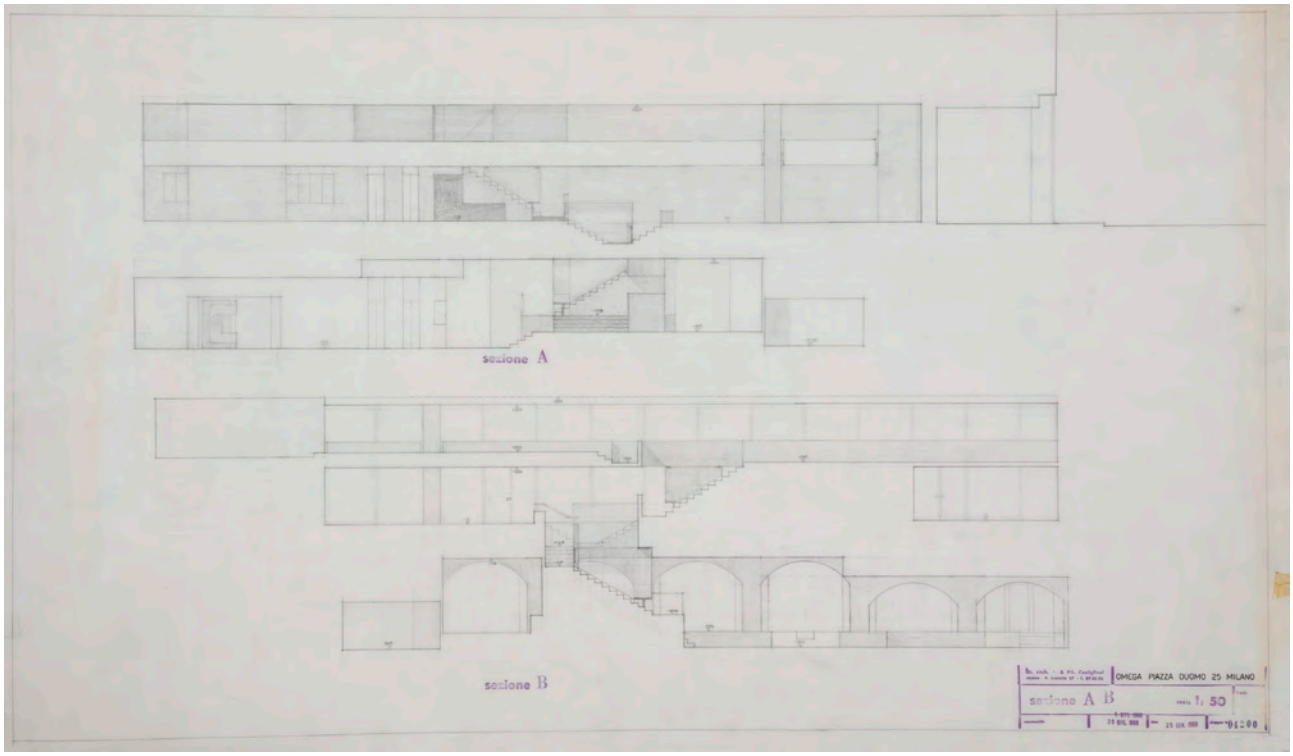

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Fig. 32

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, section B of just the basement floor with custom furniture (e.g. tubular structure of the sales desk with simplified Ω symbol) and lighting systems, 29/01/1969, no. 04476, scale 1:20 (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Roll 99/5, B058868S).

Fig. 33

The Duomo di Milano appears while walking up the staircase from the basement to the ground floor (Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione dell'Università di Parma, Fondo Castiglioni B022287P, Folder 99/5, B058819S).

object's qualities of use."[89] In this light, the furnishings – far from being merely functional complements – should be understood as integral elements of a unified architectural organism. Just like the staircase, the sculpture, or the display windows, they contribute to articulating a spatial narrative that links the city to the shop and the object to the urban experience. With this layered approach, the Omega Centre asserts itself not merely as a commercial project, but as a coherent architectural statement – demonstrating the potential of retail space as a vehicle for cultural, spatial, and urban reflection.

Conclusions

The collaboration between the Castiglioni brothers came to an end in 1968 with the untimely death of Pier Giacomo. Less than two decades later, in April 1986, the relationship between the Omega Centre and the city of Milan was similarly interrupted, when the new tenant – Società Rocca Grandi Magazzini[90] – requested authorisation from the Soprintendenza to carry out substantial alterations. These included the subdivision of the space into two separate units, the removal of the gallery overlooking Piazza del Duomo, and the replacement of the original window mullions.[91] The application – submitted in connection with a redesign by architect Piero Pinto[92] – is accompanied by a set of photographs capturing the Omega Centre shortly before its transformation. These images reveal that what would become the Castiglioni brothers' final joint work was also their most explicitly urban. As Giovanni Klaus Koenig perceptively observed, the project established "a new relationship between shop and city. A relationship [...] whereby the shop is no longer an interchangeable object [...] but has become an integral element of the city."[93] Yet to fully grasp the architectural significance of the Omega Centre, it may be necessary to momentarily set aside its commercial function. To reduce it to the functional category of "shop" is to risk narrowing its interpretive scope and underestimating the cultural and spatial ambition it so clearly embodies.

Turning one's back to the Duomo and focusing on the building itself, one begins to perceive a carefully orchestrated sequence of spatial and visual devices designed to guide both the eye and the body: a progression that moves, almost imperceptibly, from the monumental scale of the city – through arcades, display windows, and circulation paths – to the intimate scale of a watch or a piece of jewellery. Crucially, this sequence also works in reverse. From within the Omega Centre, the gaze is gradually reoriented outward, across a series of thresholds that recalibrate perception and reintroduce the urban scale – culmi-

89 Vittorio Gregotti, "Traviamenti interpretativi," in *Achille Castiglioni*, 3.

90 The Rocca family began its history in 1794 as a watch manufacturer and soon became one of the first Italian importers of Swiss watches, with a shop in Turin (1872): https://www.rocca1794.com/en_eu/history. Accessed May 12, 2024.

91 SABAP-MI, Ref. 3420 of 11/04/1986.

92 Silvio San Pietro, *Nuovi negozi a Milano* (Milan: L'Archivolto, 1988), 144–145.

93 Giovanni Klaus Koenig, "[Untitled editorial]," *Casabella*, no. 339-340 (August–September 1969): 78.

nating in the Duomo itself. In this sense, the Castiglioni brothers conceived not merely a space for commerce, but a mechanism for perceiving and experiencing the city: an architectural device that, just as Huber's installation measures time, measured and articulated the spatial and visual rhythms of Milan. Their final collaborative work was not simply architecture *in* the city, but architecture *of* the city and *for* the city – an urban artefact that, while marked by a formal refinement that might suggest lightness or simplicity, in fact posed complex questions about the role of architecture in shaping civic space and to intervene with the heritage. It challenged the disciplinary boundaries of retail architecture, firmly anchoring itself in Milan's historical fabric, while paying tribute – on one side – to Giuseppe Mengoni's Galleria and – on the other – to the Duomo. The demolition of Castiglioni's realisation did more than eliminate a remarkable architectural work employing a meaningful grafting strategy of dialogue with the context; it erased a unique lens through which the city could be observed, understood, and experienced.

The fate of the Omega Centre is far from unique – especially in the retail sector, where spaces are inherently vulnerable to rapid shifts in taste, commercial strategies, and technological change. Nevertheless, turning today the spotlight on this meaningful work invites a broader reflection on the role of retail architecture in shaping the contemporary city. Revisiting Koenig's invitation to "make some distinctions" and "create some rankings," the Omega Centre may be situated among the most successful commercial projects of the Italian postwar period – alongside such exemplary works as the aforementioned Olivetti Showroom in Venice or *La Rinascente* in Rome by Franco Albini and Franca Helg. In all these cases, the projects not only establish a refined design and cultural dialogue with the urban context they inhabit but also bear witness to "a deeply artisanal humanism, one that is intrinsic to their architects and designers."[94] In this regard, the last lesson of Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni remains highly relevant: it prompts us to consider architecture not as a self-contained object, but as an active and responsive part of the urban culture. The Omega Centre becomes then a case study in architectural responsibility and hence in understanding ones' position within the constellation of knowledge and service.[95] Indeed it – demonstrates how design can mediate between private interests and the public realm, and how it can foster a dialogue between commerce and civic life. As this paper has argued, the true legacy of the Omega project – and of the Castiglioni brothers' collaboration – is a powerful lesson in how to see and understand the city in all its formal, spatial, and economic complexity. [Fig. 34]

94 Lucia Borromeo Dina, ed., *Dimostrazione del prestigio dell'architettura italiana: Intervista a Fulvio Irace*, October 2010, cited in Tinacci, *Mia memore et devota gratitudine*, 225.

95 Cuff, *Architecture: The Story of Practice*, 218.

34

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Fig. 34

Giorgio Casali, the Omega centre façade along Piazza del Duomo from one of the stairways down to the Linea Rossa station, 1969 (Università Iuav di Venezia, Archivio Progetti, Fondo Giorgio Casali).

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