



When I Dream of Michelangelo: An Exhibition on Postwar Italian Architects

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A review of *Architetture a regola d'arte: Dagli archivi BBPR, Dardi, Monaco Luccichenti, Moretti*. An exhibition in Rome at the Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo (MAXXI), 7 December 2022 to 15 October 2023, curated by Luca Galofaro, Pippo Ciorra, Laura Felci, and Elena Tinacci. The exhibition displays materials from collections recently acquired by the museum and publicly shown for the first time. The numerous sketches, perspectives, and technical drawings featured in exhibition indicate that the exhibition's goal is to show how architecture uses the common language of drawing to interact with other art forms.

Keywords: exhibition; Italian architecture; postwar architecture



A full-scale copy of Michelangelo's *Pietà Rondanini* (1552–53/1555–64) dominates one of the galleries on the first floor of the Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo (MAXXI) in Rome. The reproduction of the famous unfinished sculpture is surrounded by a curved wall, which evokes the volume of the *pietra serena* niche designed by BBPR for the Sala degli Scarlioni in the Museo d'arte antica at the Castello Sforzesco in Milan (**Figure 1**). This dramatic setting introduces the exhibition *Architetture a regola d'arte: Dagli archivi BBPR, Dardi, Monaco Luccichenti, Moretti*, that opened on 7 December 2022 and closes on 15 October 2023. Curated by Luca Galofaro, Pippo Ciorra, Laura Felci, and Elena Tinacci, the exhibition is organised around four leading firms in Italian architecture of the second half of the 20th century: BBPR, Costantino Dardi, Vincenzo Monaco and Amedeo Luccichenti, and Luigi Moretti.



Figure 1: Castello Sforzesco, room 15, trials for the setting of Michelangelo's *Pietà Rondanini* – BBPR Restoration (first phase 1953–56). © Mario Perotti. Studio Fotografico Perotti. Civico Archivio Fotografico, Comune di Milano.

Their archives were recently acquired by the museum, and this is the first time many of the drawings, hitherto held in private collections, have been exhibited in a public setting. It is a great opportunity to make drawings, documents, and models of key designers in the history of postwar Italian architecture available to the public.

These firms played a significant role both in the Italian architectural practice and theory. The two that bookend the exhibition, BBPR — a firm founded by Gian Luigi Banfi (1910–45), Lodovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso (1909–2004), Enrico Peressutti (1908–76), and Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1909–69) — and Luigi Moretti's (1906–73) firm are perhaps the two most famous of the group. They built internationally renowned buildings, such as the Torre Velasca in Milan and the Watergate complex in Washington, DC, respectively. Moretti and Rogers were also involved as directors in the editorial lines of architectural magazines such as *Casabella-continuità* and *Spazio*. Although the political beliefs of the firms were diametrically opposed and they were managed differently, the two epitomised the developments in Italian architecture after World War II. The studios owned by Costantino Dardi (1936–91) and Vincenzo Monaco (1911–69) and Amadeo Luccichenti (1907–63), of lesser international fame, in turn, represent the typically Italian (if not Roman) predisposition towards design and craftsmanship. What stands out among all of them is the willingness and ability to relate to artists from various fields with the aim of creating works in which architecture is inextricably linked to the other arts.

In line with this idea, the title of the exhibition recalls the concept of art. Specifically, it refers to an expression which is still used in everyday Italian and its legal language, 'a regola d'arte' (literally, 'according to the art's rule'), indicating the general execution of craftwork according to the highest quality standards. This expression dates to the mediaeval period and was used in reference to prescriptions guaranteeing correct workmanship in sculpture. The title highlights the fact that the exhibition's focus is the relationship between architecture and art.

Drawings from the archive are exhibited alongside artwork, photos, and various materials that help reconstruct the genesis of various architectural projects, such as museum layouts; installations and ephemeral apparatuses; monuments; pavilions; shops and residences decorated by artists; and architectural and spatial studies of artworks by the masters. The exhibition's focus on sketches, perspectives, and technical drawings suggests that its goal is to demonstrate that architecture aims to establish a common language, namely, drawing, as a means of interacting with other art forms. If, as Vasari argued, what distinguishes art from craftsmanship is the use of drawing, then through it, architects are able to interface with sculpture and painting by putting architecture on the same level. At the same time, the use of drawing in architecture is an indicator of a progressive reduction of the distance between painting, sculpture, and architecture. Indeed, these arts became indistinguishable as they merged into a whole from Michelangelo onwards, making his practice a model for architects who approach architecture with a marked sculptural intuition.

It is thus no coincidence that the reconstruction of the setting for the *Pietà Rondanini* opens the space dedicated to BBPR or that references to Michelangelo and the idea of the unity of the arts can be found in several of the works on display in the exhibition. For instance, the BBPR space includes the firm's collaborative works with established sculptors, illustrators, and composers from the second half of the 20th century. A narrow corridor leads to the space dedicated to Costantino Dardi, an architect of a later generation (known as the Silent Generation) whose projects exhibit a geometric layout that is linked to the crystalline clarity of Platonic solids (spheres, pyramids, prisms, and grids). Seemingly establishing an imaginary dialogue with minimalist artists like Donald Judd and Sol Lewitt, whose works are displayed on the walls next to Dardi's designs for film sets and exhibitions. The space dedicated to Monaco and Luccichenti displays pictures by photographer Giovanna Silva depicting artworks in the architects' elegant bourgeois interiors and public spaces, such as halls and offices, designed by these architects that feature paintings and sculptures. The second section is meant to highlight cosmopolitanism, despite the fact that the works on display in it show a profoundly Roman patronage, typological nature, and artistic influence. The third room is dedicated to Moretti, one of Rome's most famous post-war architects (**Figure 2**). The materials on display include Moretti's his studies on the optical fruition of the Sistine Chapel and his analyses of the Palazzo dei Conservatori on the Capitoline Hill. The final element of the section is a documentary film on the work of Michelangelo (1964) directed by Moretti and Charles Conrad.

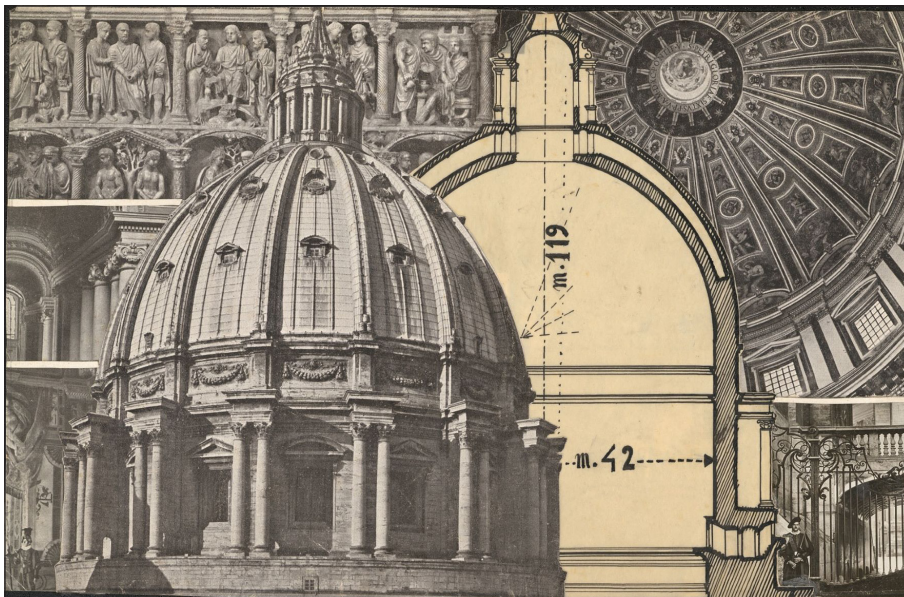


Figure 2: Luigi Moretti, Collage. Collezione MAXXI Architettura, Archivio Moretti-Magnifico.

Visitors can navigate the exhibition by starting in BBPR's section and then moving to Moretti's or vice versa, or even by starting in the room dedicated to Monaco and Luccichenti, thus circumventing the linear sequence of spaces (**Figure 3**). Entering the hall dedicated to Monaco and Luccichenti first forces visitors to choose one of the two other directions and retrace their steps. It would have been interesting if independent access had also been granted for the Dardi room, which would have made each room seem as if it were presenting a small monographic exhibition. However, that was not feasible due to the layout of the gallery.

The difference between the rooms is also reflected in the variety of ways the relationship between architecture and art is presented, such as in the form of an exhibition, through the inclusion of works of art in buildings, via an investigation of the confrontation and collaboration between architects and artists, and in a given architect's reading of historical works of art.

A regola d'arte also highlights the reciprocity between the firms and the content of exhibitions, a collaboration that has been undermined in the present time. Nowadays, although architectural firms increasingly design exhibition layouts, the dialogue with artists is no longer direct, as it was in the past, because curatorial requirements often come between artists and architects, limiting the spatial potential of the exhibition. The only time now that artworks and architectural settings communicate with each other without an intermediary is when the artists themselves strongly influence the exhibition project, as in the recent exhibition *Vita Dulcis: Paura e desiderio nell'impero romano*, organised at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome (22 April–27 August 2023) and curated by Francesco Vezzoli and Stéphane Verger, with installations by Filippo Bisagni, a designer at Studio Vezzoli, and in the exhibition of Roman antiquities *The Torlonia Marbles: Collecting Masterpieces*, designed by David Chipperfield, at the Palazzo Caffarelli in Rome (14 October 2020–27 February 2022).

The MAXXI exhibition can be read as of a piece with other exhibitions on architectural drawings organised in the Italian capital, exhibitions that point up the centrality of graphic production in the work of Roman architects, such as those addressing the intersections between art and architecture curated from the 1980s to the 2000s by Francesco Moschini for the Architettura Arte Moderna (AAM) gallery in Rome. The artists that participated in Moschini's exhibitions enjoyed an equal relationship with the architects, which helped forge a dialogue between the disciplines and relocated architecture within the visual arts. Moreover, monothematic shows, such as *Costantino Dardi per Peter Greenway* (1994) curated by the AAM and recalled in the MAXXI exhibition, reflected a dual interpretation of the world, that of the architect and that of the artist/filmmaker.

While *Architettura a regola d'arte* moves architecture to the forefront, the use of recently acquired materials in the exhibition prevents a more wide-ranging discourse. If the museum had drawn on other long-standing architectural archives and thereby avoided a rigid monographic organisation, it would have been possible to broaden and deepen the thematic nuclei of the show, such as the idea of historical architecture as a model, the usefulness of a plastic approach to architectural design, the contribution of art and architecture in the definition of a multi-sensorial experience, and the shared authorship between artists and architects.

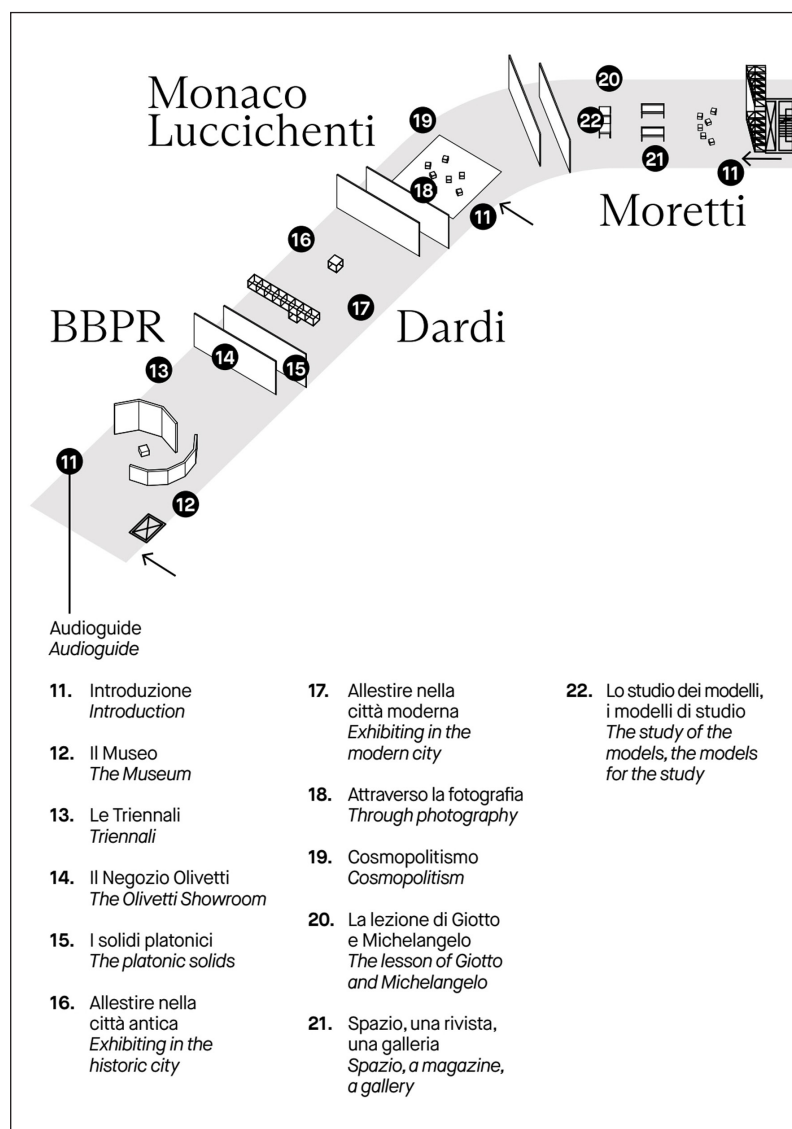


Figure 3: Scheme of the exhibition design. Courtesy MAXXI.

Not only does *Architettura a regola d'arte* have the merit of showing pieces that have not often been exhibited before, but it is also a rare exhibition of this kind in Rome, where, unlike in Milan, there are few private foundations and design archives contributing to the popularisation of and in-depth scientific studies on architecture. The MAXXI's initiative has thus filled a gap in the offering of exhibitions focusing on architectural drawings, which are difficult to communicate to the general public. It builds upon the legacy of Moschini's curatorial efforts and the interdisciplinary approach promoted by AAM, aiming to showcase contemporary architectural works as artistic expressions. For this reason, the exhibition displays architectural drawings, including more technical ones, alongside works of art, thereby eliminating any hierarchical distance between the pieces, an approach reminiscent of that employed by Alfred Stieglitz in the joint exhibition of photographs, sculptures, and paintings in his gallery 291 in New York (1905–17). Through the combined use of photographs, artwork, reconstructions, and models, the curators have also succeeded in the arduous task of enhancing the appeal of architectural drawing, a genre that includes sketches, renderings, illustrations, working drawings, graphic layouts, and collages. Certainly, drawings made for presentations and in a larger format capture the audience's attention with their visual eloquence. However, those less visually powerful impromptu sketches, drawn on makeshift sheets and usually smaller in size, bring out the intimacy of design practice.

Indeed, in their variety, the materials on display permit different kinds of interpretation, which suit the various types of viewers to whom the exhibition is addressed. In the end, the quality of the materials and the fact that diverse audiences can find ways to appreciate them increases the impact of this small exhibition, mitigating its limitations. Perhaps, just as the power of the *Rondanini Pietà* lies in the intrinsic beauty of its contradictions wrought by the incompleteness of and inconsistency in its anatomical superimpositions, the strength of *Architettura a regola d'arte* lies precisely in its own contrasts. Hopefully, this exhibition paves the way for future ones that also draw on the museum's architectural archives and thereby facilitate critical and unprecedented approaches to reading the works.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

