

PIERO PORTALUPPI

L'arte del disegno



\ Piero Portaluppi is not only the elegant and sophisticated architect of bourgeois Milan between the two wars: he is, above all, a draughtsman. And in his case, drawing is never a mere technical tool, but a way of thinking: a device for the ironic distortion of reality, a mise en abyme between architecture and surprise.

\ During his training at the Politecnico di Milano between 1905 and 1910, Portaluppi worked as a caricaturist and developed a satirical vein that he would never abandon. He collaborated with magazines such as «Guerin Meschino» and «Babau»: in his cartoons he experimented with the speed of the line, the ability to reduce a character to a few strokes, and the art of making a profile, a gesture, a hat, or a disproportion speak. This caricatural vein then passed into his architecture, clearly visible in the 44 drawings exhibited in the show. When he draws perspectives, façades, interiors, or imaginary cities, Portaluppi retains a taste for visual wit. A misplaced quotation can distort reality; a volume may swell like a character; a city can turn into a caricature of modern urbanism.

\ In his satirical architectural drawings, wordplay and linguistic puzzles also burst onto the scene. Meanwhile, the S.K.N.E. skyscraper (1920) distorts the acronym into a kind of acrostic that warns us — SKappaNE — about the vertigo of the vertical city.

\ In these drawings, the architecture is impeccably rendered: perspective, shadows, proportions, and graphic execution are all tightly controlled. And yet, beneath this precision, a sharp irony flows subterraneously. Portaluppi does not design the future city as a promise, but as a paradox. Efficiency becomes monstrous, and progress takes on an unsettling expression. It is a satire without captions: it does not mock but instead challenges the idealistic imagination of modernity.

\ If Portaluppi's initial debt is to Yambo — the pseudonym of Enrico Novelli — from the outset the Milanese architect develops a highly personal and fantastical tone that merges with architecture. Rather than people, he invents places; he baptises buildings with enigmatic names; he constructs perspectives as if they were theatrical scenes. In his drawings, façades, houses, and cities are never silent: they narrate, they wink, they disguise themselves, they pursue paradox.

\ This lesson would shape the early work of Saul Steinberg, one of his most famous students at the Faculty of Architecture of the Politecnico, later destined for the covers and drawings of «The New Yorker». And, in a broader sense, it also resonates in the work of Aldo Rossi, who graduated from the Politecnico with Portaluppi as his supervisor.

\ Of course, this influence is neither stylistic nor temperamental. In Rossi, metaphysical melancholy replaces Portaluppi's overwhelming irony. Nevertheless, Portaluppi's experience — among others — helped establish the idea that architectural drawing can represent an autonomous space of thought. Drawing, with its autonomy, becomes a tool for distorting, shifting, and testing the project in different contexts. It reveals itself as a critical theatre of architecture.

Roberto Dulio

ENG



Drawings on display

\ To speak of Piero Portaluppi's drawings is to cross the threshold into the freest workshop of his creativity. Portaluppi began as a satirical draughtsman, and this origin remains visible throughout his work: *In me, rid'io* (1924) and *A Ulisse Stacchini* (1919), for example, reveal his ability to turn drawing into commentary. This taste for distortion soon migrated into his architectural projects as well. In the drawings for the *Centrale idroelettrica di Crego* (1917), the *Centrale idroelettrica di Sottofrua* (1922) and the *Centrale idroelettrica di Crevola* (1913), Portaluppi cloaked technical modernity in the invention of a fairytale, idealised landscape.

\ In the staircase of *Casa degli Atellani* (1919), Portaluppi emerges as a creator of interiors, in an almost theatrical key. The same *Casa degli Atellani* would return after the War (1946) as a subject of reconstruction and continuity. The 1920s were the years of his most liberated inventions. The *S.K.N.E. skyscraper* (1920) transformed the symbol of American modernity into a monumental caricature. *S.T.T.S.* (1926) — three elevations of the same building, *iSTTeS* ("the same" in Milanese dialect) — marks the migration of Portaluppi's graphic textures onto building façades. *Hellytown* (1926), presents a futuristic and dystopian urban condition. Meanwhile, the views of the winning proposal for the *Concorso per il piano regolatore di Milano del 1927*, *Ciò per Amor* (1927), created with Marco Semenza — the motto being an anagram of the names Piero and Marco — articulate a precise series of proposals for the city, far more pragmatic than their imaginative viewpoints might suggest.

\ The projects for the *Albergo della Formazza* (1923) and the *Villa per le otto coppie* (1930), in the same location, once again reveal the oscillation between fantastical design and a real possibility of construction, which would have enabled the tourist development of the electrical landscape invented through the power stations. The *Negoziò STIPEL* (1928) and the *Barcelona International Exposition of 1929 Italian Pavilion* (1929) — the same year as the masterpiece by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe — intertwine, through Portaluppi's wandering Greek motif, the themes of identity, architecture, communication, and public image. The *Planetario Hoepli* (1929), *Villa Necchi Campiglio* (1932), and *Casa Corbellini-Wassermann* (1934) represent those fragments of Milan that increasingly, throughout the 1930s, testify to Portaluppi's authorial character: defined by invention, comfort, and refinement of materials, before his irony was shattered by the collapse of the World War II.

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- 01**
Ritratto di Piero Portaluppi,
fotografia di Ghitta Carell, 1935 ca.,
stampa vintage su carta ai sali d'argento,
collezione privata, Milano
- 02**
In me, rid'io, 1924,
grafite e china su carta, 26 x 15 cm
- 03**
INDEX, 1927,
grafite e china su carta, 29,5 x 69,8 cm
- 04**
Villa Necchi Campiglio a Milano, 1932,
grafite e china su carta da lucido, 58 x 71 cm
- 05**
Enigmistica: Anagrammi I, (1919-21 ca.),
grafite e china su carta da lucido, 34 x 57 cm
- 06**
Piazza Cavour. Piano regolatore di Milano, 1927,
grafite e china su carta da lucido, 72 x 82 cm
- 07**
Ciò per Amor, 1927,
china e inchiostri colorati su carta, 26,2 x 38,7 cm
- 08**
Progetto per l'edificio S.T.T.S. a Milano, soluzione I,
1926, china, inchiostro seppia e acquerelli su carta,
101 x 66 cm
- 09**
Progetto per l'edificio S.T.T.S. a Milano, soluzione II,
1926, china, inchiostro seppia e acquerelli su carta,
101 x 66 cm
- 10**
Progetto per l'edificio S.T.T.S. a Milano, soluzione III,
1926, china, inchiostro seppia e acquerelli su carta,
101 x 66 cm
- 11**
Ricostruzione della Casa degli Atellani a Milano,
1946, china su carta, 75 x 81,2 cm
- 12**
Interno della Casa degli Atellani, 1919,
grafite, china e acquerelli su carta, 29 x 33 cm
- 13**
Progetto per la Casa dei pittori a Milano, 1920,
grafite e china su carta da lucido, 78 x 57 cm
- 14**
L'aurea Laurea, 1960,
grafite e china su carta, 56,3 x 46 cm
- 15**
Almanacco Guerrino: La smorfia in tre clichés, (1920 ca.),
grafite e china su carta, 48,5 x 65,3 cm
- 16**
Elefante, (1920 ca.),
grafite e china su carta da lucido, 29,4 x 42 cm
- 17**
Pesci, (1920 ca.),
grafite e china su carta da lucido, 29,5 x 41,7 cm
- 18**
Uccelli, (1920 ca.),
grafite e china su carta da lucido, 29,5 x 41,8 cm
- 19**
Tavolo e sei sedie per la casa Oda Gadda, 1949,
legno di rovere e specchio, 210 x 90 x 78 cm
- 20**
Studi per i pavimenti di Villa Govi a Sestola, 1942,
grafite e china su carta da lucido, 35 x 44 cm
- 21**
Tomba Bianchi, 1937,
grafite e china su carta da lucido, 44,8 x 51,9 cm
- 22**
Studi per ringhiere nella sede di Milano del Monte
dei Paschi di Siena, (1964 ca.),
grafite e china su carta da lucido, 55 x 100 cm
- 23**
Cancellata Bombelli alla IV Esposizione
Internazionale di Arti Decorative a Monza, 1930,
grafite e china su carta da lucido, 59 x 37 cm
- 24**
Sedia con schienale a losanghe, anni Trenta,
donazione R. D.
- 25**
Villa per le otto coppie in Val Formazza, 1930,
grafite, china e acquerelli su carta, 60 x 75 cm

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Villa per le otto coppie in Val Formazza, 1930,
grafite, china e acquerelli su carta, 48 x 48 cm

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Padiglione Italiano
all'Esposizione Internazionale di Barcellona, 1929;
grafite e carboncino su carta, 56 x 61 cm

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Padiglione Italiano
all'Esposizione Internazionale di Barcellona, 1929,
eliocopia, 49 x 80 cm

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La Fagiania Sede del Golf Club a Milano, 1928,
grafite su carta, 87,8 x 65 cm

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Negozi Stipel, 1928,
grafite, china, inchiostro rosso e pastelli colorati su
carta, 49 x 57 cm

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Posacenere per il negozio Stipel di Milano, 1928,
metallo e legno, diam.15, h 60 cm

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Hellytown, 1926,
grafite e china su carta da lucido, 61 x 80 cm

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S.K.N.E. Progetto per un grattacielo a New York,
1920, grafite, china, inchiostri colorati e acquerelli su
carta, 105 x 68 cm

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Casa Corbellini-Wassermann a Milano, 1934,
grafite e china su carta da lucido, 46,7 x 48,5 cm

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Casa Crespi a Milano, 1928,
grafite e china su carta da lucido, 68 x 93,5 cm

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Casa Crespi a Milano, 1928,
grafite, china e inchiostri su carta, 90,6 x 60,5 cm

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Planetario Hoepli a Milano, 1929,
copia eliografica, 59 x 76 cm

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L'inaugurazione della nuova Stazione di Milano,
"Guerin Meschino", 6 aprile 1919,
grafite e china su carta, 33,2 x 48,5 cm

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La sempre maggiore regolarizzazione della
circolazione, "Guerin Meschino", 17 settembre 1924,
grafite e china su carta, 15 x 23,4 cm

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Palazzo della Banca Commerciale Italiana a Milano,
1929, eliocopia, 74 x 61 cm

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Casa Lentati a Milano, (1934),
grafite e china su carta da lucido, 53 x 49 cm

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Due sgabelli per l'Albergo Diurno Venezia attribuiti
a Piero Portaluppi, 1926, legno di castagno e abete

43

Albergo della Formazza, 1923,
china, inchiostri colorati e acquerelli su carta, 80 x
69 cm

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Centrale idroelettrica di Crego, 1917,
grafite, china e acquerelli su carta, 64 x 97 cm

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Centrale idroelettrica di Sottofrua, 1922,
grafite, china e inchiostro bruno su carta da lucido,
29,3 x 44,6 cm

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Centrale idroelettrica di Crevola, 1923, grafite, china
e acquerelli su carta, 39,9 x 51,1 cm

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Centrale idroelettrica di Verampio, 1913, grafite,
china e acquerelli su carta, 40 x 51 cm

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Centrale termoelettrica di Piacenza, 1925, grafite,
china e inchiostro rosso su carta da lucido, 34 x 52
cm

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Centrale termoelettrica di Piacenza, 1925, grafite e
china su carta da lucido, 61 x 47 cm