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The politics and enchantments of interpenetration: Albini and Terragni via Benjamin

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There arises — as with certain lighting conditions in snowy landscapes — that dematerialisation of solid demarcation that distinguishes neither rise nor fall and gradually produces the feeling of walking on clouds.¹

1.

Architectural modernity differs, fundamentally, from tradition; buildings are created as transitional spaces and bring about what Walter Benjamin calls a 'poverty' of experience where the interior of both building and human subject undergoes radical upheaval. Modern architecture obliterates the difference between inside and out by generating spaces with no fixed boundaries, where light, air, permeability and floating prevail. The merging of interior and exterior by technology, or the merging of the exteriority of technology with interiority, becomes an ongoing project to overcome this impoverishment.² In both the German orbit and in Italy, despite divergent ideologies, the idea of interpenetration offered the possibility of turning a perceived poverty into re-enchantment. Along the way, images were thrown up where an architecture of sober rationality and objectification was taken to the verge of an Edenic or paradisiacal lightness. This is the condition to be found in two of the most highly charged examples of interpenetration in Italian Rationalism: the *Paradiso* of Giuseppe Terragni's *Danteum*, where interpenetration is programmatic but existent only in representations, and Franco Albini's *Living Room in a Villa*, where it is suggested but only as an installation.

With the loss of 'solid demarcation', the significance of the traditional threshold shifted elsewhere; buildings became understood as *all* threshold. The modern dweller was to find the home no longer simply an interior or an exterior, "living" is somehow now to occupy the space between the two, inhabiting the threshold'.³ One consequence of this shift is that the limit becomes seen, as Benjamin discovers, no longer as a defensive barrier but as an intermediate space which 'allows the gathering of things as a tension, as a constellation of events and possibilities'.⁴ For Benjamin, the techniques and technologies of interpenetration configured this *intermediate* realm, however immediately the participant was intended to be struck, or shocked. In fascist architecture, they configured an *unmediated* realm, as a phantasm of immediate total participation, which ultimately did not alter a 'one-way direction of communication'.⁵ Another consequence was that interiority became displaced. The interior of the modern subject found itself outside itself. Benjamin's understanding of this condition led to the definition of a new subjectivity modelled on transparency, where, through immersion in the material, in fusion with things, the subject could go outside itself, become something else, become other. In fascism, it led to the merging of the Subject and an Absolute.

At the same time, an ideological blurring between the Germany of Gropius's Bauhaus and the Italy of Terragni's Casa del Fascio resulted in the adoption, by a fascist politics of totality, of the very technologies

of interpenetration and montage which the Bauhaus employed in the service of total design,⁶ and which Benjamin associated more clearly with anti-fascism and the proletariat.⁷ Young, ardently fascist architects like Terragni drew their theoretical inspiration, and much of their formal vocabulary, from Dessau. Such convergences also existed within Italy, most conspicuously in the pages of the journal *Casabella* under the editorship of Giuseppe Pagano, a fascist (while editor) and Edoardo Persico, an anti-fascist. There were others, such as Albini, Persico's friend and acolyte, who remained loyal adherents to the Bauhaus, whilst not quite subscribing to the Regime.

2.

Umberto Boccioni was most probably the first to theorise the idea of spatial interpenetration, employing the term *compenetrazione dei piani* (interpenetration of planes) to define a means of 'making the objects of the surroundings participate in the object which is immersed there.'⁸ In sculpture, his intent was to 'hollow out form and enclose the ambient space within it'. In paintings, such as 'The Street enters the Room', exterior space penetrates into the core of the interior. Interiority is constituted by exteriority. Conditions of mutual penetration, participation, immersion, along with blurring, fusion, intermingling, permeation and porosity, also attracted the attention of Sigfried Giedion, who introduced the term *Durchdringung* (interpenetration) into architectural discourse in *Building in France* (1928) as the key characteristic of the new building condition of the nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries, although it was already the theme of exercises by Lissitzky and others at the Bauhaus. Here, it meant the penetrating of one element or volume by another, the merging of volumes without clear contours; the intermingling of spaces on different floor levels and of interior with exterior through permeable walls or openings.⁹ In tracing construction in France, Giedion was struck by open transparent girder works, such as the air-flooded stairs of the Eiffel Tower and the *Pont Transbordeur* in the harbour of Marseille (Figs 1,2). The latter's 'interplay with the city', he states, 'is neither "spatial" nor "plastic." It engenders floating relations and interpenetrations. The boundaries of architecture are blurred'.¹⁰ Thus, 'fields overlap'.¹¹ Steel and concrete frames, and glass, merge the difference between inside and out, Corbusier's houses:

are neither spatial nor plastic: air flows through them! Air becomes a constituent factor! Neither space nor plastic form counts, only RELATION and INTER-PENETRATION (*DURCHDRINGUNG*)! There is only a single, indivisible space. The shells fall away between interior and exterior.¹²

Benjamin cited these words in *The Arcades Project*.¹³ Giedion's material and his term struck him profoundly. In what was probably a creative misunderstanding, Giedion's *Durchdringung* suggested possibilities of a new way of constructing history. Moreover, Corbusier's melting contours and the hallucinatory picture puzzle of things floating and passing through one another, such as Dadism and Surrealism presented, came together in the term. The non-synchronic, unconscious, hallucinatory

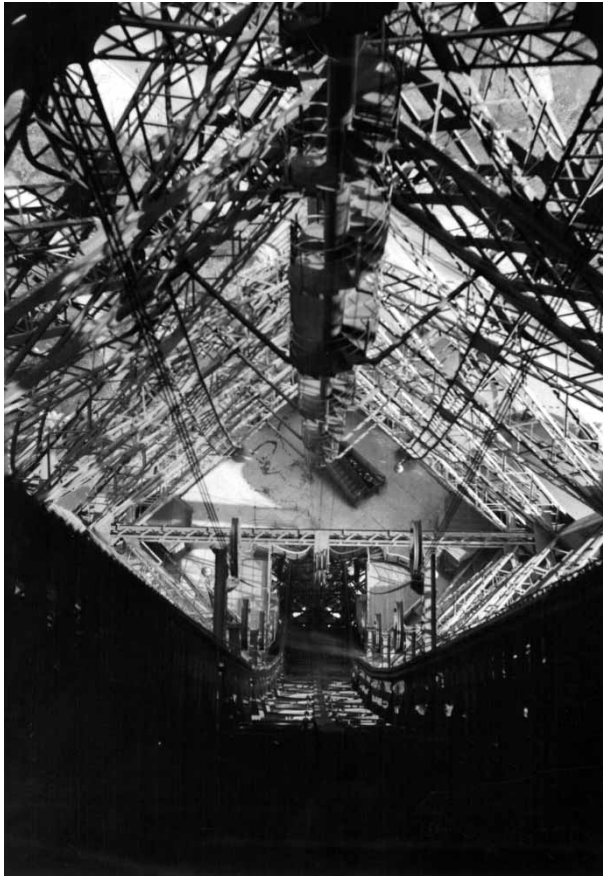


Figure 1. Eiffel Tower (1889). (From Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich* p.60; photograph by Giedion; courtesy of the GTA / Archiv, ETH, Zürich: Nachlass Sigfried Giedion.)

perception, typified by Breton, converged here with the chronological, rationalist and constructivist perception that sweeps away masks and falsehood, typified by Corbusier. Interpenetration offered new compounds of meaning in an oscillating

and blurred realm between the conscious and unconscious.¹⁴ And it did not escape Benjamin's notice that only the engineer and the proletariat climbed the steps of the engineering structures that made it possible to recognise what was new: 'the feeling of space'.¹⁵

Figure 2. Pont
Transbordeur (1905)
and harbour of
Marseille. (From
Giedion, *Bauen in
Frankreich*, p. 6;
photograph by Giedion;
courtesy of the GTA /
Archiv, ETH, Zürich:
Nachlass Sigfried
Giedion.)



3. Beyond architecture, interpenetration came to characterise the expanding unification of the whole order of society, compared with the bounded units of nineteenth-century society. In relations of power and consensus within the modern democratic state, flows of capital, arrangements of social space, ways of thinking, and in everyday life, previously separate domains became interpenetrated.¹⁶

Giedion finds in *Befreites Wohnen* (1929), 'there are no longer separate affairs, all domains

interpenetrate'.¹⁷ Benjamin, keenly aware of the manifold senses of threshold and porosity,¹⁸ was also struck by Giedion's recognition of this broader interpenetration, which he also cites:

The nineteenth century: singular interpenetration (*Durchdringung*) of individualistic and collectivistic tendencies.

As in hardly any age before, all actions were labelled 'individualistic' (the ego, Nation, Art), but underground, within disdained everyday fields, it had to create the elements of a collective formation, as in a delirium.¹⁹

In architecture, interpenetration became a means of, and figure for, the implementation of this collective formation. Art, technology, the everyday interpenetrate in the new architecture, which becomes a synthesis but also a construction of reality, its revolutionary potential.

In Benjamin's project, to make the entire nineteenth century recognisable as a prehistory of the present, he found the imprint of material and social causes in the rationalisation of building which, in pursuing its own logic through technology, progressively foreshadowed a new order. Thus,

[i]t is the peculiarity of *technological* forms of production (as opposed to art forms) that their progress and their success are proportionate to the *transparency* [*Durchsichtigkeit*] of their social content. (Hence glass architecture).²⁰

In his 1933 essay 'Experience and Poverty', the new architecture of glass and steel fulfils modernity's promises by providing a pure expression of its 'poverty'. Glass makes it hard to accumulate commodities and keep any kind of secret or private space. What is desecrated, in glass, and in the uninterrupted flow of stimuli in the city of glass and steel, is experience (*Erfahrung*) as something passed on. This would make way for the possibility of experience (*Erlebnis*) as un-integrated, disconnected, lived moment.²¹ For Benjamin, the potential of glass is at once destructive and constructive. The constructors must first clear a *tabula rasa*, make a drawing table, before they can bring about what they foreshadow, the coming of a new subjectivity and a transparent, classless society. Already, the spatial perception of 'the interpenetrating and superposed transparency [*Durchdringungs - und Überdeckungstransparenz*]



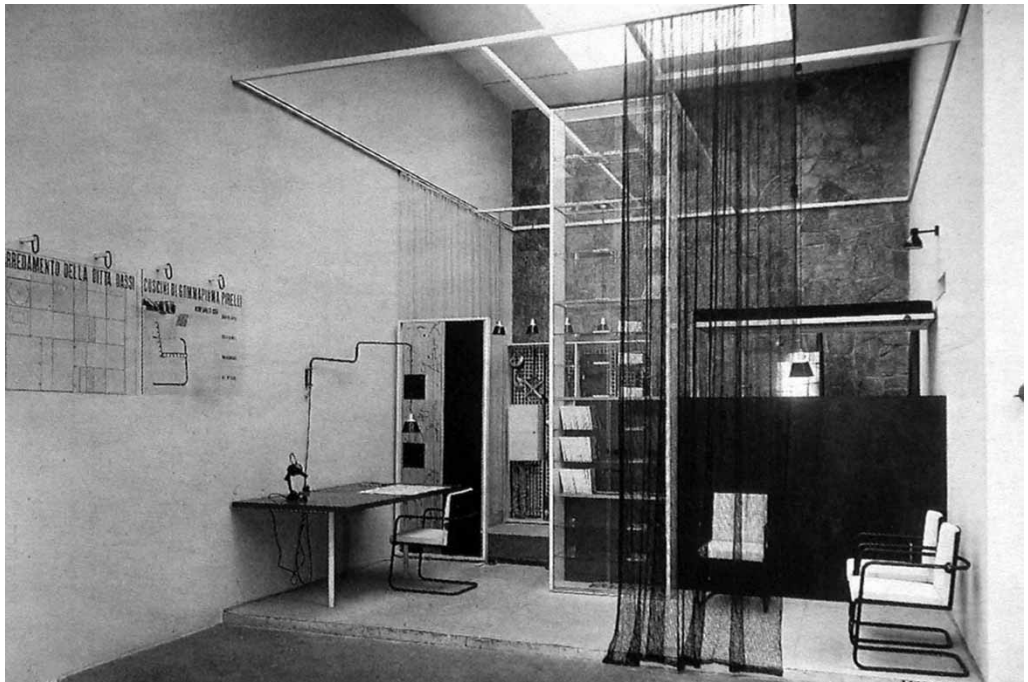
Figure 3. Franco Albini, Wireless, 1938. (Courtesy of Studio Albini Associati, Milan.)

of the world of the *flâneur*²² had provided a nineteenth-century anticipation of what would characterise the new architecture. Now, it becomes sober reality, abolishing any sense of enclosure:

the cult of 'dwelling' in the old sense, with the idea of security at its core, has received its death knell. Giedion, Mendelsohn and Corbusier are converting human habitations into the transitional space [*Durchgangsraum*] of every imaginable force and wave of light and air. What is coming is found under the sign of transparency²³

At a miniature scale, Albini's 1938 wireless, stripped of casing and suspended between two planes of the new Securit glass, might stand as a model for this interpenetration by the very waves it receives

Figure 4. Franco Albini,
'Room for a Man',
Exhibition of Dwelling,
Triennale di Milano,
1936. (Courtesy of
Studio Albin Associati,
Milan.)



and emits (Fig 3). The apparatus floats in space. As the writer Paul Scheerbarth had noted, glass supports do not appear to function as support, as if everything were self-supporting.²⁴

Scheerbarth had predicted a civilisation of glass and a new glass milieu which was to transform humanity completely. The radical lack of interior in his characters, their very 'liteness', had led him to champion the new glass architecture, as Benjamin explained.²⁵ They provided a model of the new subjectivity, just as glass, a material overcoming of the

material, provided an antidote to the closed bourgeois *intérieur*, where anything broken threatened the inhabitant with the obliteration of 'the traces of his days on earth'. For Benjamin, 'this has now been achieved by Scheerbarth with his glass and the Bauhaus with its steel: they have created spaces in which it is difficult to leave traces'.²⁶

Albini's 'Room for a Man', in the *Exhibition of Dwelling* at the 1936 *Triennale di Milano*, demonstrates this conjunction of rationality and levity, which was to compensate for the losses of

community, tradition, stable social identity and place (Figs 4, 5). The space is divided functionally on a 1 m × 1 m module, by a glass bookshelf and shower, into zones of study, exercise, cleaning and sleeping. Sober, hardly homely, it derives from the Bauhaus *Existenzminimum* and is designed for a solitary man, as a Taylorisation of life functions inscribed in a programme that has superseded experience. However, there is an anomaly: the bed is poetically elevated. It is reached first by ladder, then by walking atop the wardrobe. An acrobatic element of childlike enchantment emerges as a subtle irony. Reverie displaces the weight of rationality's laws; the innocence of the bed defies gravity. The Room approaches the 'revolutionary virtue'²⁷ of André Breton's project in *Nadja*:

As for me, I continue to inhabit my glass house where one can see every hour who is coming to visit me, where everything that is suspended from the ceilings and walls holds on as if by enchantment, where I rest at night on a bed of glass with glass sheets, where *who I am* will appear to me, sooner or later, engraved on diamond.²⁸

By contrast, Terragni, hailed as the most complete architect of Rationalism, applied transparency to fascism itself. Thus, in his Casa del Fascio in Como (1936), bureaucracy, deprived of its aura of secrecy, was intended to be delivered to the view of passers-by, while automatic glazed doors, all of which opened and closed in unison, provided for the penetration of the gaze of the masses and of troops on the march (Fig. 6). Following Mussolini's dictum: 'Fascism is a house of glass into which everyone can look', Terragni understood transparency as the removal of all barriers between interior and



Figure 5. Franco Albini, 'Room for a Man'. (Courtesy of Studio Albini Associati, Milan.)

exterior, surface and depth, individual and collective.²⁹ The writer, Massimo Bontempelli, also saw only unity in its porosity:

Here all sense of mediation disappears, we see it dissolve into air before our eyes. Here man can and should not exist except in function of his neighbour, and learning of that other, and the other again, in unison, first inside, then outside (but where the inside finishes and the outside

Figure 6. Giuseppe Terragni, Casa del Fascio, Como, 1936: the entry doors seen in file. (Courtesy of the Centro Studi Giuseppe Terragni, Como.)



begins you find out with difficulty) and so in all directions, along all the radii of the circle, others, other men again, everyone like you and you like them, the phalanx, the mass. The individual — concentration, meditation — this architecture abolishes him with a flight of glass.³⁰

For Bontempelli, the use of glass in the walls and roof made the most distant spatial elements active everywhere within the building, where ‘everything is born from the exterior, from the piazza, from

the air’.³¹ Terragni’s deployment of photographs and photomontages promoted this show, but fascism did not invite entry into its airy house (Fig. 7).³²

4.

Glass is a hard, cold, smooth, sober material to which nothing can be fixed and, moreover, ‘[t]hings made of glass have “no aura”’.³³ Benjamin’s celebrated ‘aura’ defies interpenetration. Aura is ‘the unique

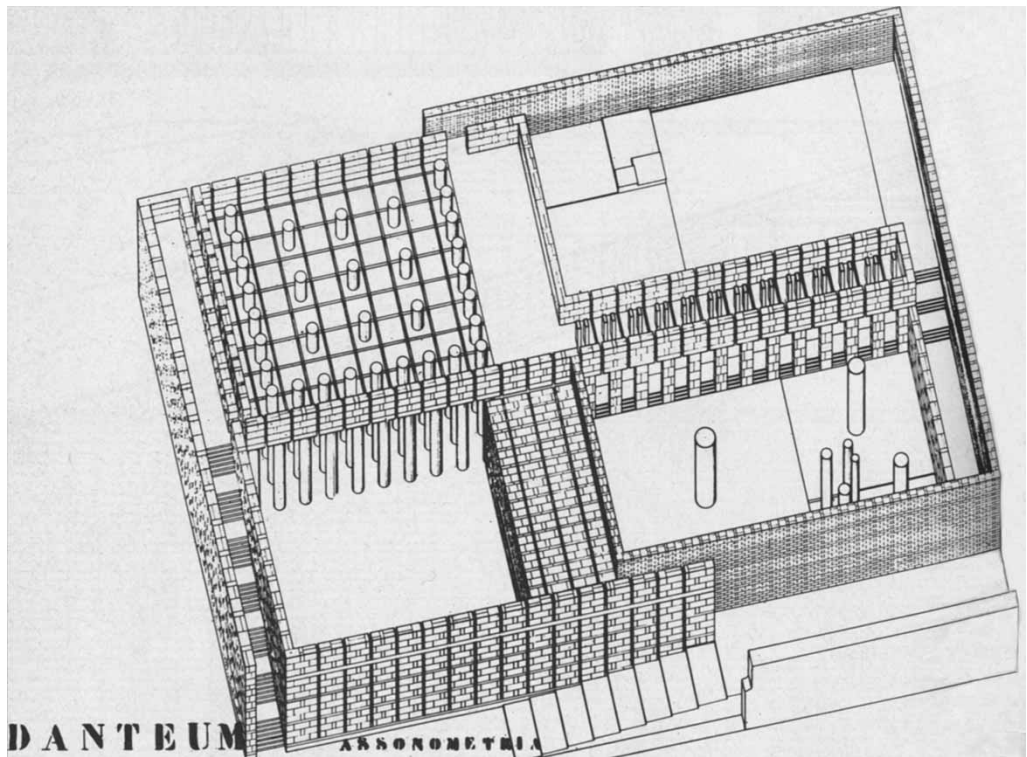


Figure 7. Casa del Fascio: interior view towards Duomo. (Courtesy of the Centro Studi Giuseppe Terragni, Como.)

phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be'.³⁴ One cannot get near it: 'The essentially distant is the inapproachable [*Unnahbare*]. In fact, inapproachability is a primary quality of the cult image'.³⁵ Thus, its disappearance implies new possibilities of penetration, interpenetration, and even confusion, between spectator and art work, as happens with the new glass buildings, but also with the new technologies of reproduction such as photography and cinema. In a cryptic note Benjamin probably alludes to this: 'Interpenetration [*Durchdringung*] as principle in film, in new architecture, in colportage'.³⁶ In photography, 'the peeling away of the object's shell' destroys aura.³⁷ With

the annihilation of distance, the art work becomes ceaselessly accessible to all, always and everywhere, no longer guarded by a unique threshold. Interpenetration also answers the urge 'to get a hold of an object at close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction'.³⁸ This strange conjunction implies a doubled mimesis, as imitation or copy, but also as sensuous, even visceral, touching and merging.³⁹ Such is evident in Benjamin's famous comparisons between the magician and the surgeon, as well as between the painter who maintains a 'natural distance from reality' and the cameraman who 'penetrates [*dringt . . . ein*] deeply into its web'. Film offers a new aspect of reality 'precisely because of the

Figure 8. Giuseppe Terragni, Danteum Project, 1938, *Paradiso*. (Courtesy of the Centro Studi Giuseppe Terragni, Como.)



thoroughgoing permeation [*Durchdringung*] of reality with mechanical equipment'.⁴⁰ At the same time these practices, which engage the sphere of images less with the contemplative than with the embodied mind, demand a penetration of the body of the perceiver as much as the perceived.

Like cinema (of which it is the prototype), architecture is received collectively and distractedly as a reality shattered, scattered, multiplied by the

in-depth penetration of people passing through it. Not only do the masses penetrate buildings but also buildings penetrate the masses. They absorb buildings into themselves and envelop them.⁴¹ Building and body merge. Architecture, whose presence is never total, furnishes Benjamin with the example of a knowing, built in parts from bodily habit and tactile appropriation. Only at this level is radical change possible. Here, a new subject can

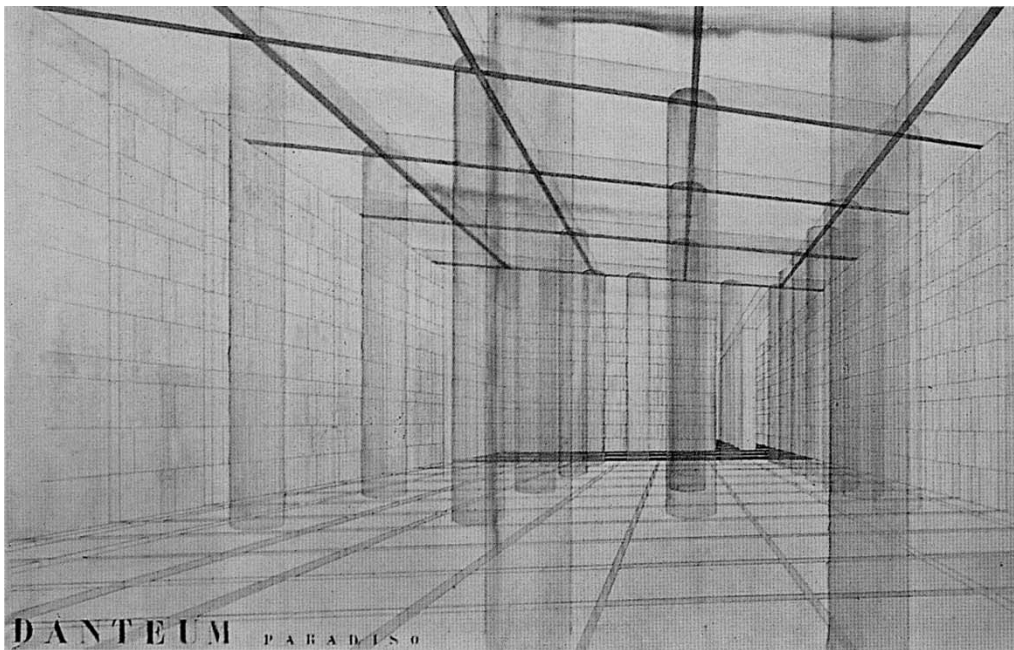


Figure 9. Terragni, Danteum Project, *Paradiso*. (Courtesy of the Centro Studi Giuseppe Terragni, Como.)

be created. Through immersion in the material, through fusion and blurring with things, the subject can penetrate outside itself.

The new technologies of reproducibility turn the aura into a different, secular phenomenon of wonder. Slow motion, for example, opens entirely unknown qualities from the optical unconscious which 'give the effect of singularly gliding, floating, supernatural motions.'⁴² They shock, they desecrate, they re-enchant.

The work of art merges with technology, exploiting marketed reality to provoke the 'profane illumination' which Surrealism offered and of which, in the fetish of the commodity, the culture

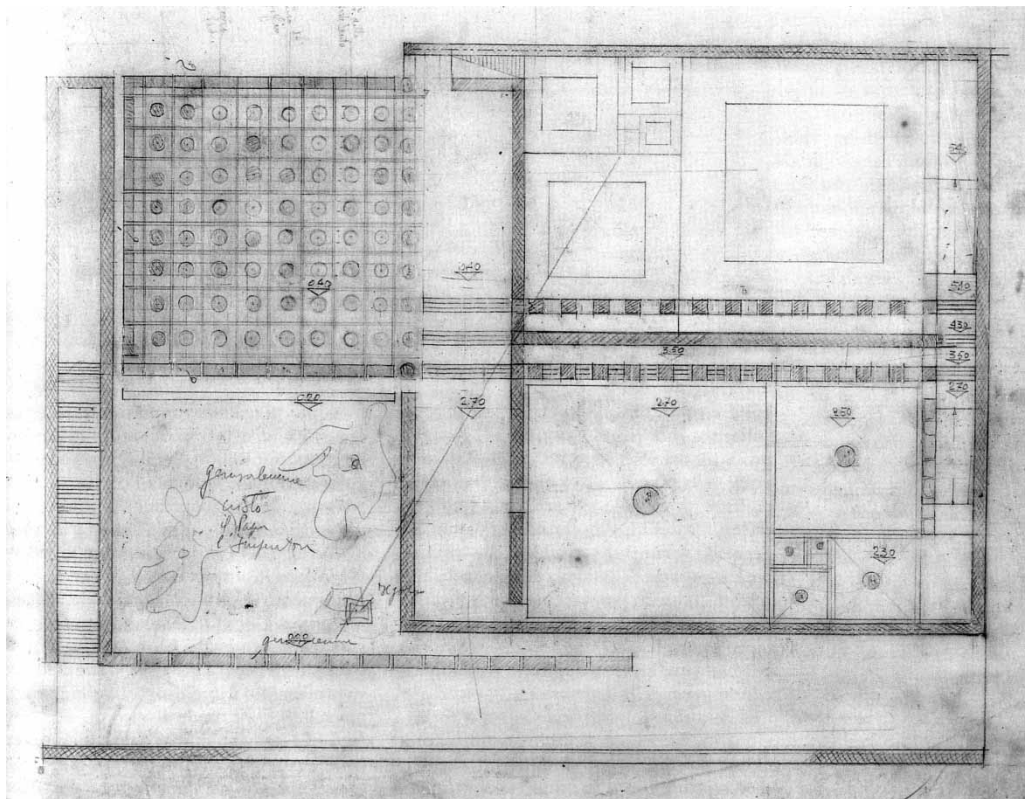
of capitalism provided surreal and revolutionary potential for its own undoing and surpassing:

Only when here, in profane illumination, body and image-space so interpenetrate [*durchdringen*] that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary detonation, will reality have surpassed itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*.⁴³

5.

In Benjamin's conception, interpenetration applies as much to time as to space.⁴⁴ Past and present interpe-

Figure 10. Terragni,
Danteum Project, Plan.
(Courtesy of the Centro
Studi Giuseppe
Terragni, Como.)



netrate; different epochs are not linked to each other by simple chronology, rather, each moment in history contains everything: the entire past and a potential redemption or realisation of utopia. The historical materialist and the theological are strata that simultaneously overlap and influence each other. History is a process consisting of an original paradisiacal state, a fall (the prevailing state) and an utopian

goal: redemption.⁴⁵ However, these are not conceived sequentially but as layers of meaning at any given moment; they are thresholds within time. The present exists in historical time; historical time persists in the present as an afterlife (*Nachleben*) that, carried into the present, can potentially perform 'a renewal of life as the afterlife',⁴⁶ in which each moment is both new and a renewal:

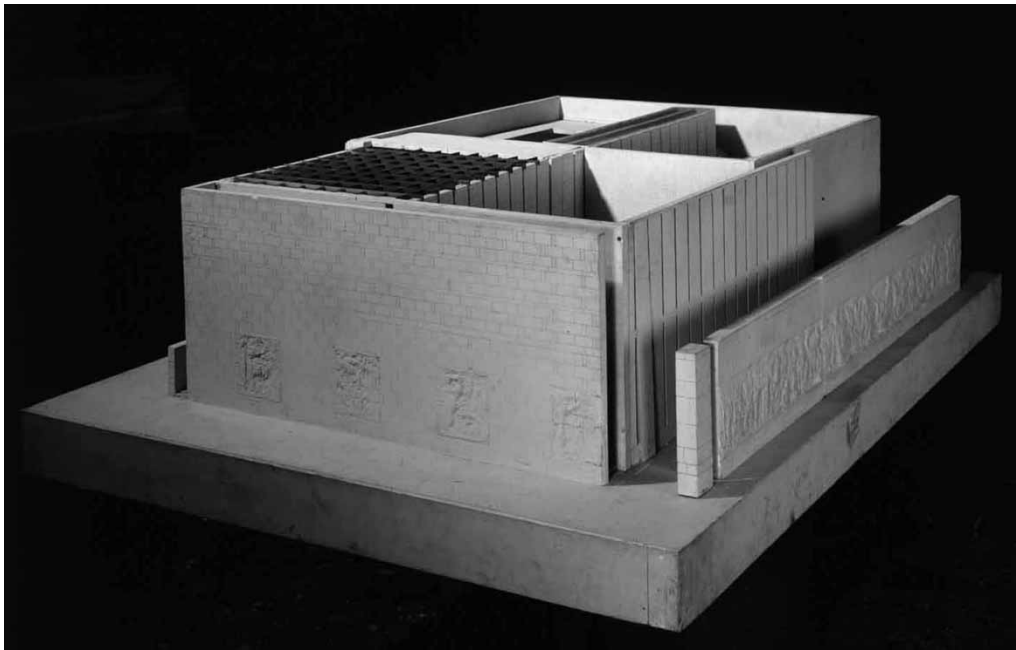


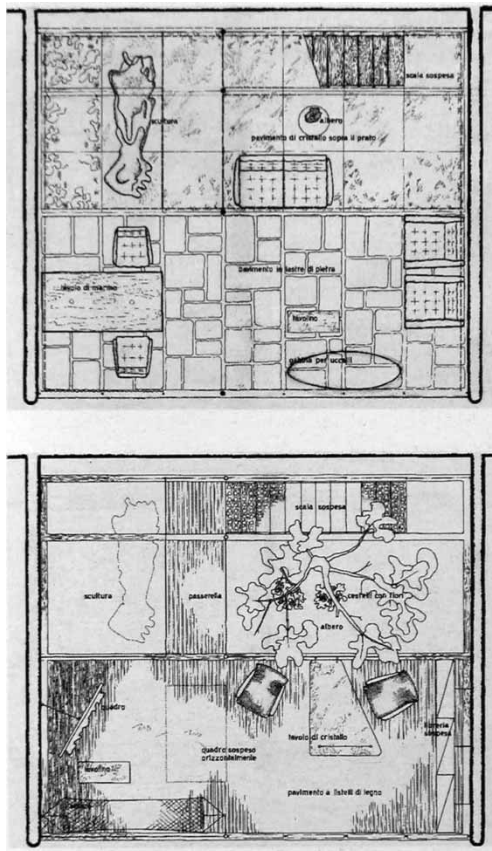
Figure 11. Terragni, Danteum Project, Model. (Courtesy of the Centro Studi Giuseppe Terragni, Como.)

And this dialectical penetration [*Durchdringung*] and actualisation of former contexts puts the truth of all present action to the test. Or rather, it serves to ignite the explosive materials that are latent in what has been (the authentic figure of which is fashion). To approach, in this way, 'what has been' means to treat it not historiographically, as heretofore, but politically, in political categories.⁴⁷

Benjamin counters the dominant linear narrative of 'progress' by using montage. Its interacting, discontinuous elements remain tense and

unreconciled rather than fused into one harmonising continuity. Where the historicist fills the continuum of 'homogeneous empty time' with data, the historical materialist has the capacity to stop in a configuration pregnant with tensions and to blast a specific interval of time 'out of the homogeneous course of history'.⁴⁸ Benjamin, however, counters these conceptions of continuous time with a 'time of the now' (*Jetzt-Zeit*), conceived as 'the sign of a Messianic suspension of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past'. Embracing the entire

Figure 12. Franco Albini, 'Living Room in a Villa' (*Stanza di soggiorno in una villa*), 1940: plans of ground and upper floors. (Courtesy of Studio Albini Associati, Milan.)



history of mankind in an enormous abridgement, this is a present that keeps itself immobile on the threshold of time 'in which every second was the small door through which the messiah might enter'. Since time, in authentic revolutions, is always experienced as an arrest and break in

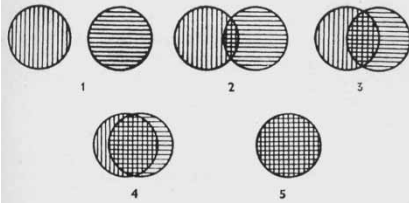
chronology, this time is experienced not as the restoration of a lost state, a millennium to come, or an eternal present, but as a *now*.

6.

It was this very notion of an eternal present that underpinned fascist architecture in Italy, conditioned as it was by the need of a totalitarian regime to transform its initial revolutionary charge into immutable celebration — to signal the new, while spanning to the primordial. Rationalism, in particular *Gruppo 7*, founded and legitimised itself in the echo of its absolute antiquity, removed from historical contingencies, to achieve a 'new archaic period'. Bontempelli proclaimed: 'restore time and space to their immutable eternity and infinity' through the re-separation of the material from the spiritual, to 'reconstitute the lost harmonies' and achieve 'the rediscovery of the Individual'.⁴⁹ The ability to construct became a primordial act.⁵⁰ At the shrine inside the Casa del Fascio 'the weapons and medals of the dead fascists were embedded within a block of glass as if in transubstantiation of matter into crystalline spirit'.⁵¹ *Paradiso* in the *Danteum* project, Rome (1938–1941), took this process a stage further (Figs 8, 9). The overall plan, dimensioned according to the Basilica of Maxentius opposite, is composed of two interpenetrating squares formed according to the myth of the golden section, from which the project is set out (Fig. 10).

In a numerical, material, and spatial re-enactment of the Divine Comedy, Terragni establishes a *promenade architecturale*, intended to immerse visitors in a series of highly allusive atmospheres (like those

un succedersi « in crescendo » di compenetrazioni non sarà storicamente vero,



ma solo potrà esprimere per sintesi una graduazione di quanto fino ad oggi si è compiuto, per tappe, sempre indipendentemente da ogni ordine cronologico o spaziale. E se la fase 5 può corrispondere al limite teorico di perfezione delle origini (quando « il mondo esterno si identificava con la casa dell'uomo e la casa dell'uomo con il mondo esterno ») (1), la stessa fase può anche esprimere il medesimo limite teorico verso il quale tendiamo, irraggiungibile dopo la colpa del primo uomo. Con la quarta fase — che corrisponde ai massimi toccati in diversi tempi e in diversi luoghi, e oggi più che mai dalla nuova architettura — siamo ad una tappa ultima, oppure attraverso a nuove scoperte e a nuove tecniche potremo arrivare più in là?

Non lo sappiamo. Ma certo anche qui è posto un limite non superabile all'orgoglioso « Nihil mortalibus ». Certo un giorno, con legge fatale, meteorologia e fisica ci imporranno un alt su questa strada, forse alla vigilia di raggiungere l'irraggiungibile e di chiudere il ciclo millenario col sovrapporsi dei due cerchi nel diagramma.

•
« Les champs envaissaient les rues
et les salons aux lustres de cristal,
des futaies s'établissaient dans les cours,
des chênes se nouaient aux lucarnes »

(Georges Hugnet)

« ... la flamme d'une allumette-bougie lui permit
de voir la pièce où il venait de pénétrer. Une
pelouse de gazon verdoyant, bien arrosé et tondu
vas l'occupait. Au milieu, un parterre de jacin-
thes légèrement bombé et surmonté d'un mi-
mosa fleuri... »

(Benjamin Péret)

A distanza di secoli dalle anticipazioni del primo '400 (cfr. pag. 20), Rousseau il doganiere dipinge il divano rosso nella foresta tropicale (Yadwigha); De Chirico un bosco nell'interno di una stanza, e l'interno di una stanza in una valle.

(1) Vedi più addietro, a pag. 11.



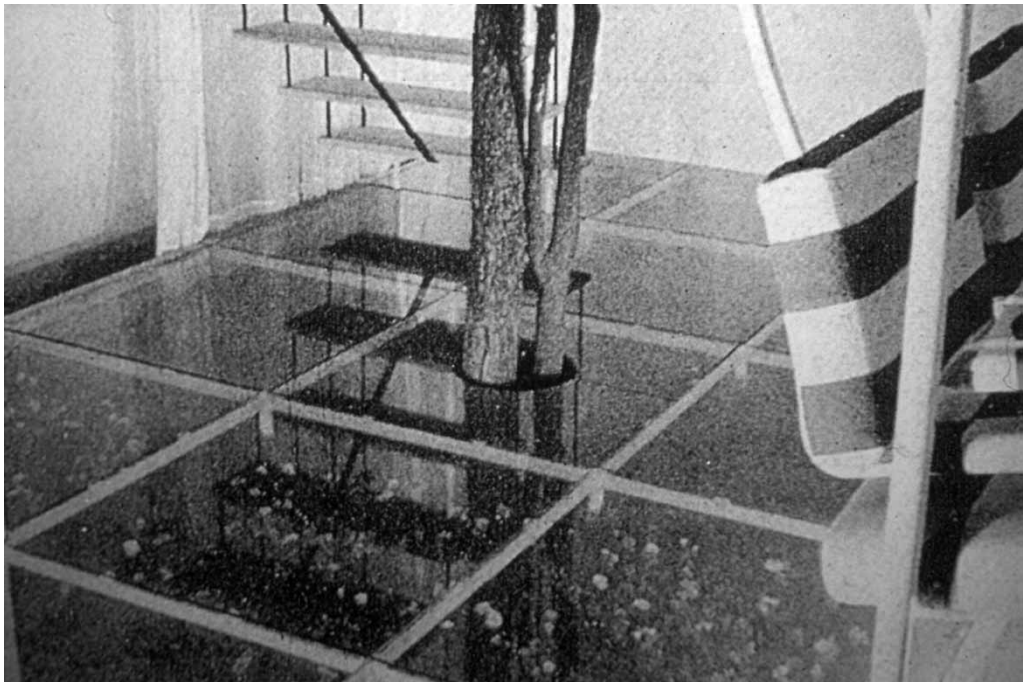
Giorgio De Chirico - « Interno ».



Giorgio De Chirico - «Interno in una valle».

Figure 13. Luigi Figini,
page 27 from
*L'elemento 'Verde' e
l'abitazione*, 1950.

Figure 14. Albini,
'Living Room in a Villa'.
(Courtesy of Studio
Albini Associati, Milan.)



of the great state exhibitions of the 1930s) in ascending progression from *Inferno* to *Paradiso*, from oppressive confinement to celestial release, darkness to light, opacity to transparency, materiality to dematerialisation, earthly gravitation to divine levitation. *Paradiso* is figured as a courtyard with a grid of glass columns reflecting and reflected in the grid of glass-filled slits which penetrate its floor. Above, a grid of glass beams opens to the sky. 'The entire space floats', states Thomas Schumacher,⁵² who relates the glass columns to Dante's

conception of transparency where 'the excellence of God is received in one way by separate substances, that is by angels, who are free of all coarseness of matter, being, as it were, transparent by reason of the purity of their form.'⁵³ Thus, the columns would be architectural mimeses of the soul freed from the body or in an angelic state.⁵⁴ Alberto Cuomo sees here the place without space of the Divine mind, where, in Dante's Ptolemaic cosmology, the angelic presences describe the concentric circles of the Prime Mover, 'refigured'

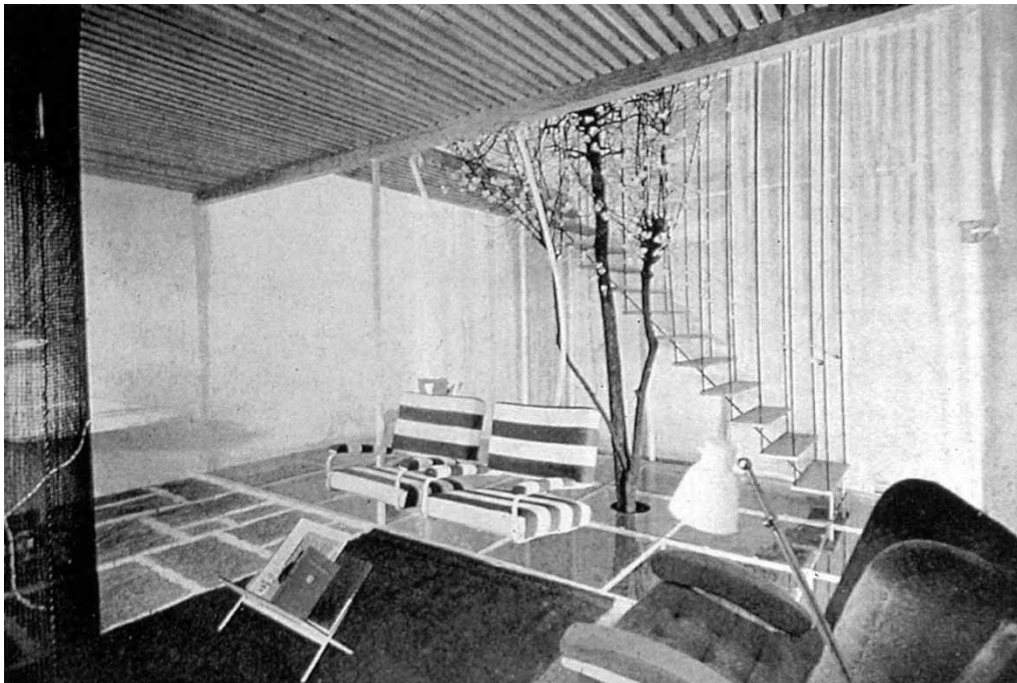


Figure 15. Albini,
'Living Room in a Villa'.
(Courtesy of Studio
Albini Associati, Milan.)

by reference to the engraving in Doré's edition of the Divine Comedy (found in the studio of his partner Lingeri) where heaven is represented 'by figures of the multiplication of angels'.⁵⁵ According to Richard Etlin, '[t]he field of clear glass columns can be understood both as the Divine Forest of original innocence at the summit of Purgatory, and the heavenly spheres of Paradise itself', the nine central columns symbolising the nine crystalline skies of Heaven and the peripheral columns the Empyrean.⁵⁶ None of these writers seems

concerned with the fact that, after the golden section spirals of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, and possible allusions to heavenly spheres, paradise should be figured in grid form. It remained to Jeffery Schnapp to observe this contemporary element, which 'is nothing other than the degree zero of representation and projection: be it the millimetre grid of the architect's paper or the white canvas of Malevich, etc.'⁵⁷ Terragni's paradise is like a *tabula rasa*, a non-place of potentiality, where all process is suspended.

Figure 16. Albini,
'Living Room in a Villa'.
(Courtesy of Studio
Albini Associati, Milan.)



Terragni's two 'schemes' (cruciform partitioning and vertical differentiation) are 'intersected' by a third, the perforated longitudinal spine, defining the nave-like room, dedicated to Dante's Imperial

concept, at a level with *Paradiso*. 'This room', notes Terragni, 'of fundamental spiritual importance comes to represent the germ of the architectural whole as the conclusion of the experiences of the

spaces traversed[.] . . . [T]he reference to the theme is clear: The universal Roman Empire'.⁵⁸ It terminates in the figure of an eagle, referring to the transformation of the letter 'M' into the image of the Eagle in Canto XVIII of Dante's *Paradiso*. 'M' is also for Mussolini.

Interpenetration thus occurs as the merging not only of subject and absolute, profane and sacred, but also of past and present. Continuing the glazed slits in the floor of *Paradiso*, the open vertical slits penetrating the walls of the *Danteum* permeate the interior with the aura of the surrounding monuments, posing the simultaneous interpenetration of ancient and modern *imperium* in one place and one time (Fig. 11).

7.

Open to the gaze of the masses, but quite unlike Terragni's monumental mimesis, Albini's *Living Room in a Villa (Stanza di soggiorno in una villa)* for the 7th Milan Triennale (1940) was an exhibition installation, a virtual space alluding to a virtual condition. The room is formed through the splitting, splicing and eliding of two worlds. In a review, Carla Zanini noted: 'The house . . . lives in the garden, it merges with it, the house becomes garden, the garden becomes house' (Fig. 12).⁵⁹ The meadow, blooming with flowers of the field, enters beyond the glazing at ground level and invades half the space. The other half, a rustic floor of split stone, brings the paving inside from the open space or terrace outdoors. A tree from the meadow below carries blossoming branches to the upper level. The birds, with their own diminutive tree in their cage, are motifs that entwine interior and natural world 'outside'. Zanini

saw in 'this plunging of man into nature' the awareness of a moral value: the 'desire not to contain oneself egoistically but to remain open and tied to the living elements of the world'.⁶⁰

In a neglected book (Fig. 13), *L'elemento 'Verde' e l'abitazione* (1950), the architect, Luigi Figini, posed a diagram of the relationship between dwelling and the natural element, as two circles in successive stages of interpenetration that, ideally, would finally perfectly interpenetrate. For him, they once did, when 'the outside world was identical with the house of man and the house of man with the outside world'. However, consciousness itself precludes such a point: 'the same phase can also express the theoretical limit to which we tend, unreachable after the sin of the first man'.⁶¹ Thus, any image of complete interpenetration implies a strong metaphysical note of dreamlike unreality that he exemplifies by two paintings of De Chirico: *Interno (Intérieur forestier)* (1926), portraying a forest and surf *inside* a room, and *Interno in una valle* (1927), portraying furniture, floorboards and items of a living room *outside* in a valley.⁶² Quatroceto depictions of dining and music-making in the open air anticipate them.⁶³ There are also echoes of the motif in poetry. Quotations from French Surrealist poets contribute to the sense that a perfect overlap is enigmatic, if not already in the domain of the impossible. It constitutes a moment held beyond the reach of physics, meteorology and the human condition. The last pages of the book illustrate Albini's *Living Room*.

The 'room' is Albini's most dreamlike and unreal installation,⁶⁴ which epitomises Pagano's account of exhibition design:

Perhaps in no other field have modern architecture and the most contemporary sense of interior design tried to fight such a harsh battle against the laws of statics and the conventional to obtain surreal effects, to attain new balances, to split up space in lyric images[.]⁶⁵

Nothing really prepares for the surprise of the floor. The plate glass laid out to cover the meadow produces an extraordinary inversion.⁶⁶ The glass ungrounds. It opens downwards. The floor is a window. The strange power of this work results from the physical suspension of every possible element, including the floor. The daisies sprout thickly, the tree blossoms. It is spring and the floor is dressed, made ready in its finery, prepared, a *prato*. From the turn of the century to the 1980s, there are few instances of glass floors. It was in Securit glass, with its load-bearing potential, that Albini conceived new and paradoxical possibilities: a material that could astound traditional perceptions of the fragility of glass by allowing one to walk on it, and hence give the impression of skating on ice or walking on air (Fig. 14).

The whole room pulsates in an abstract rhythmic game through the slatted floor with slatted chair, the striped swinging chairs, the net, lines in *moiré*, the white lines between the dark grey stones, the white framing of the glass floor, the splits, slats, stripes, strips. Everything is intended to give the sensation of a life in the open. The desire to make the house communicate with nature was, in Zanini's words, 'fulfilled precisely in the ambit of an Impressionist research. It is precisely the atmosphere that is essential here'.⁶⁷ Arriving at the installation, she had a sensation of 'going out into

the open' and 'being plunged into the air' (Fig. 15).⁶⁸

The atmosphere of spring time conveyed was doubly tied to the historical situation. On the one hand, it was literally in tune with the season — the 7th Triennale opened on 6th April, 1940, and closed on 9th June, on the eve of the declaration of war. On the other, the vibrancy of the installation contradicted the closing of political and ideological debates. Zanini was writing six months after the finish of the Triennale, reviewing a moment historically concluded by the war. For her, 'the feeling of living at the end of an epoch' had been 'transposed into the aesthetic field'. By 1940 the architects conforming to the Regime prevailed, and with them, its newly founded cities, interventions in historic centres and, above all, E42 (now the EUR; a grand exhibition complex planned by Mussolini to open in 1942) became the celebration of the power of the new imperial Rome.⁶⁹ Albini's room, relegated to the sidelines, was a form of protest against the heavy monumentality of state architecture, a refusal to participate in it. A temporary work in the twilight of an epoch, on the eve of war, but also an oneiric vision in the bright blue of day, it caught what is most fleeting — like the original meaning of *soggiorno* — the quiet flutter of the ephemeral in the temporality of a sojourn, a stay for a day, a moment out of time. The installation crosses the contingency of the 'here and now' with another time, that suspension of the endless happening of linear time which is the realm of pure pleasure. Pleasure, as Giorgio Agamben reminds us, does not unfold in the space of quantifiable time, being incommensurable with it:

True historical materialism does not pursue an empty mirage of continuous progress along infinite linear time, but ready at every moment to stop time, because it holds the memory that man's original home is pleasure. It is this time which is experienced in authentic revolutions, which, as Benjamin remembers, have always been lived as a halting of time and an interruption of chronology[.]⁷⁰

In this ephemeral setting, the transparency of glass and attenuation of structural members are taken to the edge of playfulness (Fig. 16). The whole space is conceived in terms of levity, balance, agility and ease: the metal armatures, the larch slats of the loft spanning between them, the hanging rocking-chairs dangling beyond the brink of the stone floor, the net of the aviary, the hammock, the lamps suspended or hung off slender vertical uprights, the staircase hung from the loft by fine iron rods, poised to touch the floor... Other elements bend, cantilever, squat; nothing simply stands upright on straight legs. Albini's suspended objects resemble Kleist's marionettes, pure mechanical pendulums following the basic laws of gravity unbound to the earth. Their completely unconscious grace of movement was, as Kleist suggests, a symbol of the utopian grace to be attained only after having tasted anew the tree of knowledge in a 'fall back into the state of innocence'.⁷¹ Loos and Corbusier had already cited the engineer as the exemplar of obedience to necessity. That everything must be and appear as necessary — that is, as natural — is a principle that applies also to Albini's rationalism, as it does to Klee's 'engineered' figures, which are essentially marionettes.⁷² In Benjamin's words:

For just like any good car, whose every part, even the bodywork, obeys the needs above all of the engine, Klee's figures too seem to have been designed on the drawing board, and even in their general expression they obey the laws of their interior. Their interior [*Innern*], rather than their inwardness [*Innerlichkeit*].⁷³

A disarming innocence overcomes a disenchanting rationality. 'Paradise', writes Kleist, 'is locked and bolted and the cherubim behind us. We must journey around the world, to see if a back door has perhaps been left open'. Albini's paradoxical, interpenetrated 'room' is a glimpse through this back door.

8.

Paradise cannot be built, but adherence to necessity and rationality, for Albini, assured an ideal where interiority and exteriority would, without a hint of primitivism, approach each other through the interpenetration of the constructed and the natural worlds. Here, there is a dilemma within Rationalism: can architecture be so intimately at one with physics and function that imagination must move within them alone, or is something else required? In the words of Bontempelli, the inventor of *Realismo magico*, architecture 'works *within the margin* of the functional, and this is its freedom'.⁷⁴ In Corbusier's words, '[f]or me, the term "architecture" has something more of the sorcerer than the rational or the functional, something which dominates, which predominates, which imposes. . .'.⁷⁵ Albini resists the latter's expression; in its absence an irony and quiet surrealism emerged in his work, quite without prompting. Terragni, for all his faithful adherence to

the programmatic, was allied to a sorcery from the outside, which is to say, from 'inwardness'.

Albini's may still have been a bourgeois space but it is quite without 'inwardness'. His glass floor, pre-charged with a paradisiacal iconography of glass in the consumerist paradise of winter gardens and bounteous exhibition halls, exploited a product of the corporate state to provoke a 'profane illumination'. For Terragni's 'Temple', as he called it, the myth of the Mediterranean and the spiritualisation of Empire provided a missing 'inwardness'. His shrine of architecture was a promenade within a mythological suspension of time to an unmediated absorption into the absolute. In its plan, the overlapping squares are the same and of the same substance, being simply a compositional device. Albini's interpenetrate difference — interiority and exteriority — to create an intermediate realm, exploiting the 'here and now' of functionalism to provoke a suspension of happening.

Benjamin stands apart from both architects. For him, 'a storm is blowing from Paradise' to which the angel of history can only look back.⁷⁶ In 'Experience and Poverty', Mickey Mouse, whose existence is a dream, whose life is full of miracles, provides a different model of a disenchanted re-enchantment that veers to blurring and levity. Mickey's body is improvised 'out of the most ordinary pieces of furniture, as well as from trees, clouds, and the sea. Nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort, have completely merged'. Mickey, whose films 'disavow experience more radically than ever before',⁷⁷ offers a way of life 'in which a car is no heavier than a straw hat and the fruit on the tree becomes round as quickly as a hot air balloon'.⁷⁸

Notes and references

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2. See Francesco Dal Co, 'Dwelling and the "Places" of Modernity', in *Figures of Architecture and Thought: German Architecture Culture, 1880–1920* (New York, Rizzoli, 1990), pp. 13–81.
3. Georges Teyssot, 'Soglie e pieghe, Sull'interieur e l'interiorità', *Casabella* LXIV (2000), pp. 26–36.
4. Franco Rella, *Limina: Il pensiero e le cose* (Milan, Feltrinelli, 1987), p. 18.
5. Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics under Fascism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 153–4.
6. See Jeffery T. Schnapp, 'Border Crossings: Italian/German Peregrinations of the "Theater of Totality"', *Critical Inquiry*, no. 21 (1994), p. 83.
7. See Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 134–5; Matthew Affron and Mark Antliff, eds, *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997); Mark Antliff, 'Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 84, no. 1 (2002), pp. 148–69.
8. Umberto Boccioni, *Pittura e scultura Futurista*, Zeno Birilli, ed. (Ascondita, Milan, 2006 [1914]), pp. 111–13.
9. On the concept of interpenetration in Giedion and Benjamin, see Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique* (Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1999), pp. 29–43.
10. *Building in France*, *op. cit.*, p. 90, *Bauen in Frankreich*, *op. cit.*, p. 6. Giedion also notes: 'we confront the basic

aesthetic experience of today's building: through the delicate iron net suspended in midair, stream things, ships, houses, masts, landscape and harbour. They lose their delimited form: as one descends, they circle into each other and intermingle simultaneously', pp. 7–8.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 90
12. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
13. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trs, Howard Eiland, Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge MA, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 423; Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1982), V (1), *Das Passagen-Werk*, p. 533 [M3a,3].
14. For the most comprehensive study of the impact of Giedion's work on Benjamin's theoretical concepts, see Heinz Brüggemann, 'Walter Benjamin und Sigfried Giedion', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, no. 3 (1996), pp. 443–74.
15. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, *op. cit.*, p. 459; *Gesammelte Schriften*, *op. cit.*, V (1), p. 218 [F3, 5] and *Gesammelte Schriften*, *op. cit.*, V (1), p. 572 [N1a, 1].
16. See Walter Prigge, 'Durchdringung', in Volker Fischer and Rosemary Höpfner, eds, *Ernst May und das Neue Frankfurt* (Frankfurt am Main, Deutsches Architektur Museum, 1986), pp. 65–71.
17. Sigfried Giedion, *Befreites Wohnen* (Frankfurt am Main, Syndikat, 1985 [1929]), p. 8.
18. See Winfried Menninghaus, *Schwellenkunde: Walter Benjamins Passage des Mythos* (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1986).
19. Giedion, *Building in France*, *op. cit.*, p. 99 (trans. modified), cited in *The Arcades Project*, *op. cit.*, p. 390; *Gesammelte Schriften*, *op. cit.*, V (1), p.493 [K1a,5].
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21. See Detlef Mertins, 'The Enticing and Threatening Face of Prehistory: Walter Benjamin and the Utopia of Glass', *Assemblage*, no. 29 (1996), pp. 6–23.
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24. Dennis Sharp, ed., *Glass architecture*, by Paul Scheerbarth, and *Alpine architecture*, by Bruno Taut (New York, Praeger, 1972), p. 52.
25. Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', *Selected Writings*, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 733; *Gesammelte Schriften*, *op. cit.*, II (1), p. 216.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 734; *Gesammelte Schriften*, II (1), *op. cit.*, pp. 217–218.
27. Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism', in, Peter Demetz, ed., *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing* (New York, Schocken, 1986), p.180; *Gesammelte Schriften*, *op. cit.*, IV (1), p. 476.
28. André Breton, *Nadja* (Paris, Gallimard, 1945), p. 20.
29. '... it was necessary to study possible access to this vast space by flanked rows of Fascists and the public for big assemblies, thus eliminating any break in continuity between indoors and outdoors so that a leader can speak to his followers assembled inside and still be heard by the masses gathered in the plaza. Thus Mussolini's concept of fascism as a glass house into which everyone can peer gives rise to this interpretation which is a continuation of the former: no obstacles, no barriers, nothing between the political leader and his people.' Giuseppe Terragni, 'La costruzione della Casa del Fascio di Como', *Quadrante*, no. 35/36 (1936), p. 6; translation from Thomas Schumacher, *Surface and Symbol* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1991), p. 143.

30. Massimo Bontempelli, 'L'architettura come morale e politica', in *L'avventura novecentista* (Florence, Vallecchi, 1974), p. 336; originally in *Gazetta del Popolo*, Turin (September, 1936).
31. *Ibid.*, p. 337.
32. For a discussion of the discrepancy between what is veiled outside and what is made manifest within, see Kurt W. Forster, 'Architetture come archive e segrete del sapere', in, Giorgio Ciucci, ed., *Giuseppe Terragni, 1904–1943* (Milan, Electa, 2003), pp. 113–25.
33. Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', *op. cit.*, p. 734; *Gesammelte Schriften, op. cit.*, II (1), p. 217.
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44. See, for example, *The Arcades Project, op. cit.*, p. 546; *Gesammelte Schriften, V (2)*, p. 679 [S2,1].
45. See Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity, op. cit.*, p. 102.
46. Andrew Benjamin, 'Time and Task', in, Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, eds, *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* (Manchester, Clinamen, 2000), pp. 212–45.
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48. Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations, op. cit.*, pp. 261–2; *Gesammelte Schriften, op. cit.*, I (2), p. 701.
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58. Terragni, 'Relazione sul Danteum', paragraphs 12–13; translated in Schumacher, *The Danteum, op. cit.*, pp. 138–9.

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62. *Ibid.*
63. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
64. Maurizio Fagiolo, 'L'astrattismo magico di Albini. Strutture del linguaggio dalle prime mostre alla Rinascente', *Ottogano*, no. 37 (1975), p. 47.
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