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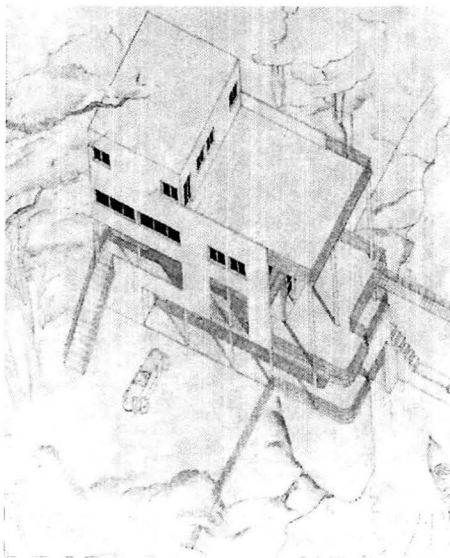
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Five Houses by Giuseppe Terragni

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This article addresses the research on the theme of single-family houses of the well-known Italian rationalist architect Giuseppe Terragni (1904–1943), author of *Novocomum*, *Casa del Fascio*, and *Asilo Sant'Elia in Como*, which are discussed in all of the major texts of modern architecture. The article is accompanied by computer reconstruction drawings of two houses. These drawings are important because one of these buildings—*Casa sul lago per l'artista*—has been demolished. The drawings for the second building—*Villa sul lago*—represent new three-dimensional views of an unbuilt, but crucial, project.



1. Casa per vacanze, Como, 1932, axonometric (Archivio Tezzagni, Como).

IN THE FIVE HOUSES DISCUSSED HERE, GIUSEPPE Terragni puts into action a series of elements derived from the modern language of architecture and explores their expressive character. He experiments in *Casa per vacanze* of 1932 with pilotis and the double height loggia. For the first time in his domestic architecture, he adopts the frame as definition of the construction in *Casa sul lago per l'artista* of 1933. In *Villa per un floricoltore*, Terragni employs a large-scale frame that gathers the variations of the outside panels in a nexus that has its origin in Michelangelo's "giant order." This scheme is brought to completion with the project of a *Villa sul lago* of 1936, creating the possibility of a syntactic connection between container and content—between the large-scale frame that unifies the building and the panels that define the inhabitable spaces. This organization is then overcome in a dialectic contrast between pure volume and free elements in the project for *Villa Bianca*. In this last work, the frame becomes a free-standing object and, in unison with the ramp, the platform, and the balcony, attacks the static box of the building.

In these five projects Terragni reveals the Mannerist attitude of his expressive search. The works of Le Corbusier, Mies, and Rietveld are the origin of his language, but the result is original because it is reached through the combination and successive contamination of the primitive models.

Two Experiments: Casa per vacanze, 1932, and Casa sul lago per l'artista, 1933

The first project, *Casa per vacanze* (House for Vacation), unbuilt but shown in the exhibition of Rational Architecture in Florence, is a project on the shore of Lake Como with a dockyard that sinks the structure of the house into the water. Along the street, the volume

of four stories is compact, while a series of stepped articulations face the lake.¹

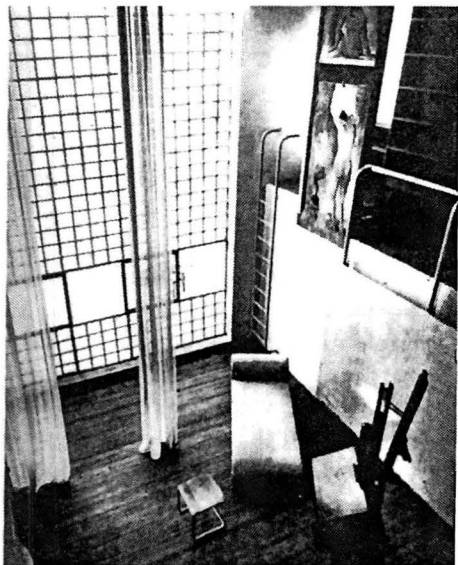
The openings vary in proportion and shape: in the portico and the entry loggia, they are square; in the rooms of the first floor, they form a horizontal strip; in the living room, they appear as vertical cuts; in the rooms of the top floor and in the double height space of the living room, they are square again.

The architect develops the project with free elements connecting with the outside. An exterior stairwell unites the first floor to the ground. A second staircase runs along a curvilinear wall allowing for the entrance of the boats into the dockyard.

The architectural elements used in the project (the pilotis, the exterior connections, the wall planes, and the unelaborated cuts of the openings) are derived from Neoplasticist and Purist sources. However, the syntax that guides the conceptual connection between the elements seems uncertain. More particularly, one can read the ambiguity that is born of the indecision as to whether to treat the walls as abstract planes or as solid volumes.

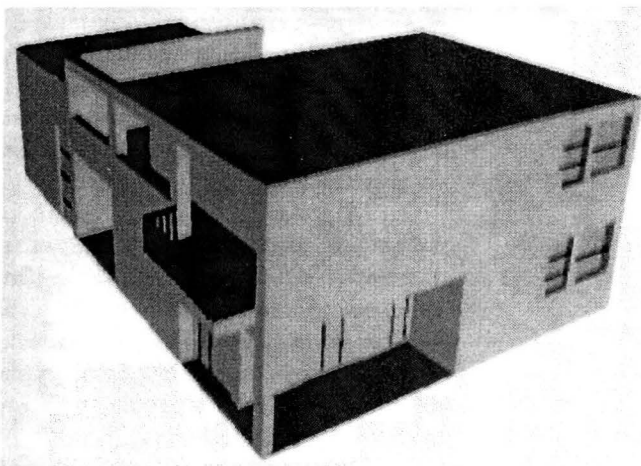
The second experiment is *Casa sul lago per l'artista* (House on the Lake for an Artist) built by Terragni and the "Group of Como" at the Fifth Triennale of Milano in 1933.² The house is divided into two parts connected by a portico. The two-story side is the dwelling and has bedrooms on the first floor and day zones on the ground floor. The other single level side, which is approximately five-and-one-half meters high, contains the studio.

The building displays such a variety of styles that it is difficult not to think of compromises made among the many designers. The back of the dwelling is painted white, while the adjoining studio, whose interior is characterized by the vertical impulse of the glass block wall that bends and continues on the roof, is of a contrasting color, perhaps

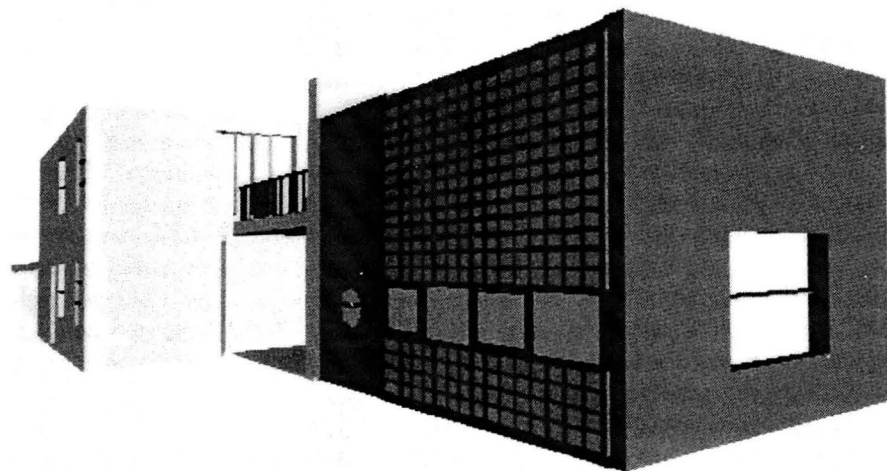


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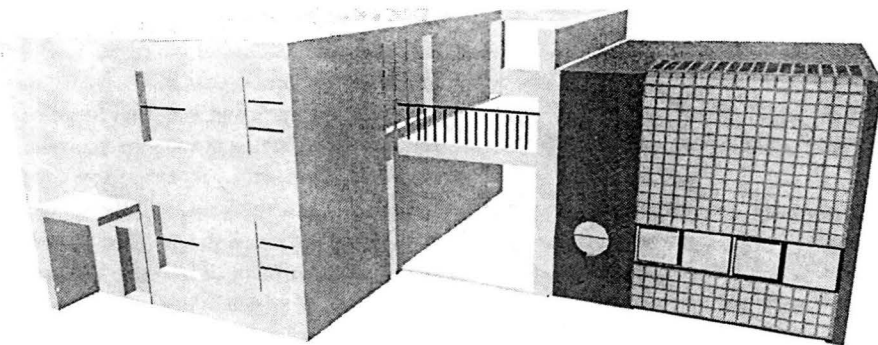
2. Casa sul lago per l'artista, Milan, 1933, with Lingeri, Cereghini, Giussani, Mantero, Ortelli, Dell'Acqua, and Ponci. (A) View of the atelier (Archivio Tezzagni, Como); (B) Perspective, computer reconstruction by the author; (C) Perspective, computer reconstruction by the author; (D) Perspective, computer reconstruction by the author.



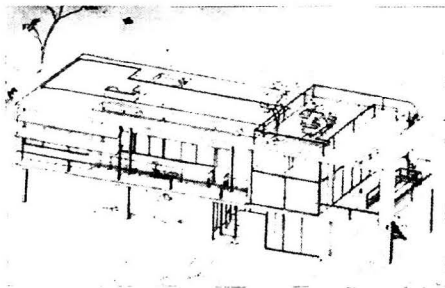
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3. Villa per un floricoltore, Rebbio, 1935, axonometric (Archivio Tezzagni, Como).

red.³ The connection between the two units is simply a thin horizontal slab and the curvilinear metallic structure of the outside tents.

While the rear facade is characterized by the contrast between the two parts of the building, the composition of the hypothetical front on the lake presents an opposite theme: that of the continuity of the edifice. The two parts are consequently tied together, both painted white and marked by a rhythm of three great openings framed by pilasters and beams incorporating the portico.

This work marks Terragni's first use in domestic architecture of the frame to create rhythm and depth of light and shadow on a facade. The house is an attempt to use and to assemble different elements (even in reciprocal contrast); it represents a preparatory step leading to future constructions whose more relevant success is the integration of painting, interior design, and articulation of interior spaces.

The Large-Scale Frame: Villa per un floricoltore, 1935–1937

In the projects already discussed Terragni experiments with such elements as pilotis, long strip windows, framed loggias excavated inside the volume, exterior interconnections between volume, and landscape. The synthesis governing the compositions of the previ-

ous two works is still uncertain but makes a decisive step in Villa per un floricoltore in Rebbio, whose design vicissitudes, lasting until 1937, began after Casa sul lago per l'artista at the Fifth Triennale, but probably before the project for Villa sul lago of 1936.⁴

The ground floor of the house is open except for a service room and a stair to the upper level, which is enclosed. On the first floor along the elongated rectangle of the plan, bedrooms are distributed on one side, with the dining room and living room on the other side. The kitchen, service area, and stairs are located in the center.

The work is based on an original effort to combine the syntax of Purism and Neoplasticism, and not merely the appearance and architectural elements coming from those examples. From one side, the volumetric organization is, in fact, that of a pure prism: the free ground floor and the meter-deep setback of the pilasters define the suspension of the built volume, as in the Ville Savoye. While in Purist planning, wall defines volume, here the architect reintroduces in the modern vocabulary an architectural element that has its origin in Michelangelo's "giant order." Terragni creates a large-scale frame that gathers together the inhabited spaces of the house and unifies them. This frame, supported by the setback pilasters of the ground level, is an empty, transparent box that confines the panels defining interior spaces while allowing them to move with freedom: with forward and backward shifts, with different shapes of windows, and with loggias of different depths.

The suspended volume, large-scale frame, and variations of walls are expressed in the axonometric study that describes the two main facades of the house. However, on the remaining two sides, the architect goes back to a Purist treatment of the strip window on the solid wall, which is unresolved with the other two facades. It is precisely from this implicit contradiction that Terragni works, giv-

ing two different solutions to the balance of unified volume and free elements that has been posed here.

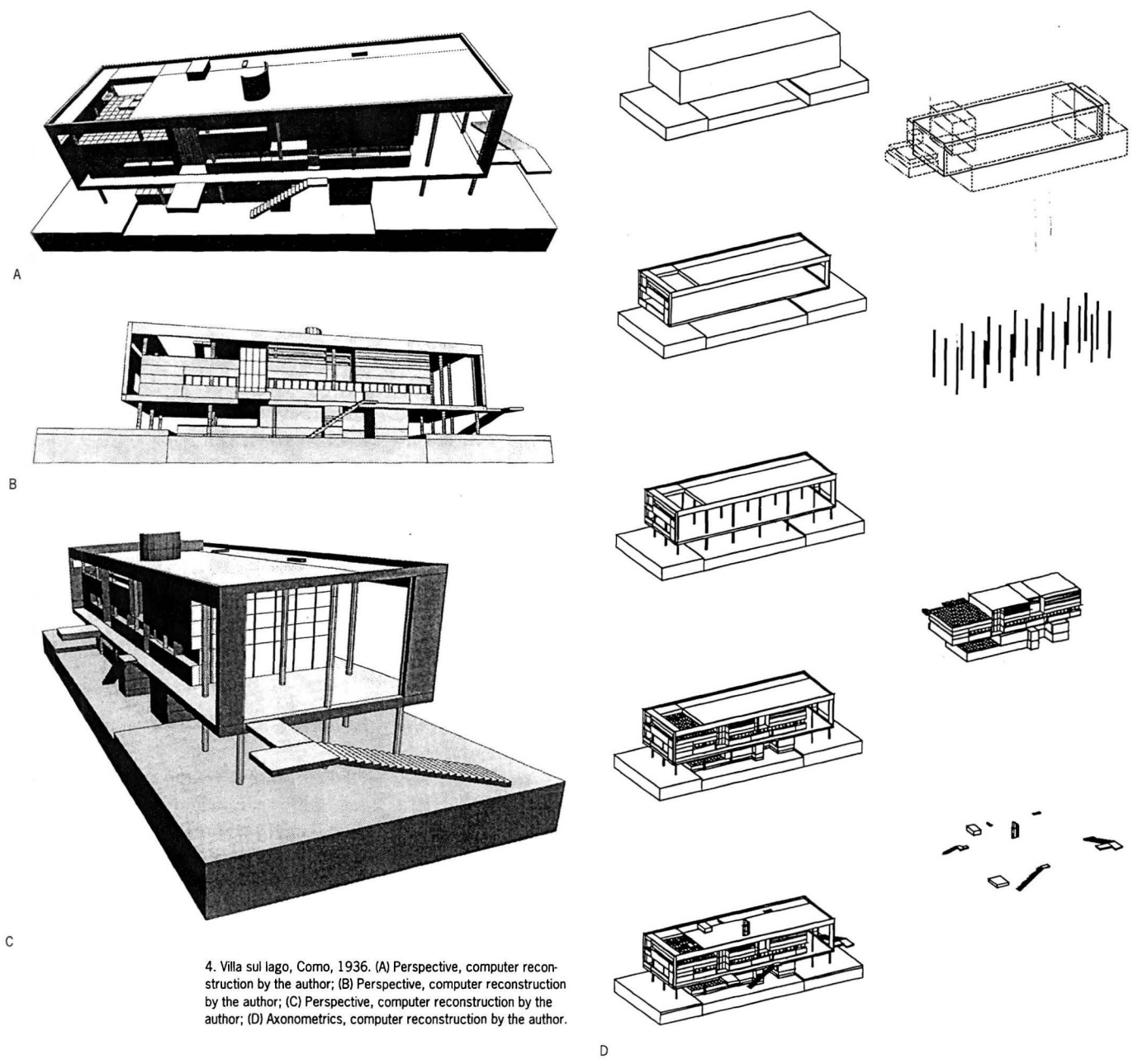
Suspended Prism and Variable Screens: Villa sul lago, 1936

The architectural relationship between container and content anticipated in Villa per un floricoltore finds a convincing resolution in the project of Villa sul lago (Villa on the Lake), 1936. The project creates a solid of about twelve meters wide and thirty-five meters long. In layout and organization, it is similar to Villa per un floricoltore, but possesses a plan enriched by curvilinear elements double heights and by numerous spatial events, among which is a terrace patio that gives access to the roof.⁵

The column grid, the loggias, the exterior connections with the stairway, and the double height of the living room that corresponds with the exterior double level of the loggia defined by the pilotis order are used here, as in the previous project, but with a more unifying and convincing syntax that pervades the whole building.

As in Villa per un floricoltore, the generating idea here is that of the raised prism. An empty box, supported by a grid of recessed pilotis, is marked by a parapet beam approximately one meter and twenty centimeters high, which defines the building against the sky.

The structure is exposed along the length of the building at the ground level and is continuous with the basement, but it is elevated figuratively in a variety of ways. The pilotis are no longer the elements of a measuring grid of universal space; rather, they become formal elements creating an asymmetric and dynamic rhythm. In fact, in the first three bays of the ground floor on the street front, they are visible through the openings, reveal themselves inside a cut, and,



4. Villa sul lago, Como, 1936. (A) Perspective, computer reconstruction by the author; (B) Perspective, computer reconstruction by the author; (C) Perspective, computer reconstruction by the author; (D) Axonometrics, computer reconstruction by the author.



A



B



C

5. Villa bianca, Seveso, 1936–1937. (A) View from the street at the time of construction (Archivio Tezzagni, Como); (B) View from the garden, photograph by Dennis Marsico, 1987; (C) View from the street, photograph by Dennis Marsico, 1987.

in the last bays, leave the wall and are exposed, closing the composition. The same free process is evident in the horizontal cuts that never run for the whole length of the facade but are stopped by deep vertical cuts that pause within the facades.

While this front is an asymmetrically carved solid wall, the lake facade is organized around the transparency of a large expanse window. In any case, despite the different ways with which the walls of the house are treated (transparent and continuous on the lake facade, carved by the strip windows on the street, and hidden by three cuts asymmetrically in the facade containing the bedrooms on the opposite side to the living room), the play of the walls is never directly revealed to the outside; rather it vibrates because of the contrast against the large-scale frame that defines the whole volume. It is in this contrast between the monolithic-raised prism marked by the frame and the variations of the exterior surfaces of inside spaces that the new syntax of this work is affirmed.

Terragni synthesizes the elements that inspire his poetics: the pure volume comes from Le Corbusier, while the free composition of the planes comes from Mies and Rietveld. One device lives within the other; one creates the order for the variation of the other in an original, à la Terragni, manipulation of the formal grammar.

Compact Block and Free Elements: Villa Bianca, 1936–1937

In comparison with the project of 1936 analyzed above, which is based on the *hierarchical* co-presence of two elements (the large-scale frame and the variable walls that tell the changing history of the house), a different architectural strategy is employed by Terragni in Villa Bianca. The project embodies the relationship, this time of a dialectic nature, between the presence of the unified

volume and that of free architectural elements. The volume comes back to its role of solid (abandoning the idea of the large-scale frame) while the architectural elements are all pushed to the outside.

This dichotomy is affirmed by the conceptual connection that governs the pure volume of house and the exterior frame forced toward the outside. The frame becomes, for the first time, as in the contemporary Asilo Sant'Elia, an element autonomous from the construction containing a portion of the living room.

The relationship between the box of the house and the free elements is a theme that affirms itself not only in the contrast between volume and frame on the street but also in the other elements of the project. This is evident in the ramp in the back, in the canopies on the last level, and in the cantilever of the balcony. All of the elements of the composition—frame, exterior connection, balcony, and platform roofings—act here to push the house outward in multiple spatial directions.⁶

Conclusion

In these projects Terragni employs a series of linguistic elements derived from the modern language of architecture. He lists these elements and searches for their values in the first three projects: experimenting in 1932 with pilotis and a double height loggia, adopting the frame as defining the house of 1933, and finding a synthesis in Villa per un floricoltore by way of a large-scale frame that contains the panels' variations. The architect brings this scheme to its logical conclusion with the project of Villa sul lago of 1936, creating the possibility of a hierarchical connection between container and content, which is then overcome in a dialectic contrast between pure volume and free elements in Villa Bianca. In this project, the frame finally becomes a free-

standing object, along with the ramp, the platform, and the balcony, which together attack the static boxiness of the building. In fact, the windows themselves disengage from the wall and conspire with the other elements in creating discord with the volume. The components located one inside the other in the 1936 project become free again and independent: antagonistic elements inventing a new syntax.

In the end what Terragni accomplishes is the analysis and diligent application of elements via a process of experimentation that culminates in two masterpieces. The structures of Rietveld, Mies, and Le Corbusier are the origin of his explorations, but the end point is innovative. Based on the combination and successive contamination of the primitive examples, Terragni's Mannerist approach is that of the second generation of modern architects. For this reason, the *enfant prodige* of Italian architecture is the first "son" of the fathers of modern architecture, and his projects are the most direct progenitors of the work of many of today's designers.

Notes

The essay is part of a research on Giuseppe Terragni funded by the Graham Foundation for the Arts of Chicago and conducted jointly by the author and the photographer Dennis Marsico. It follows the articles on "The Workshop for Gas Production" (#391 May 1988) and on the "Novocomum Apartment Building" (#398 December 1988), published in *L'architettura cronache e storia*. The reconstruction drawings are created by the author.

1. The top story rooms occupy about one-third of the front surface, while the remaining surface

consists of a large terrace that covers the double height loggia, framing the view of the lake from the living room. The structure is supported on pilotis, featuring five bays with two different spans along the longitudinal axis. The bay is of 3 x 3 and 3 x 4.5 meters. A small contraction of the dimension of the fourth bay is evident in the plans and the axonometric. This difference demonstrates the extent to which the project has been studied. For Terragni, the structural dimensions (as noted for Casa del Fascio) are strongly dependent on a series of functional and distributive tests. The columns exposed on the first portico floor appear through the openings of the elevations and run free in the loggia in front of the living area. At the corners and on the exterior alignments of the windows, however, they are sunk into the walls. The first two publications of the project are: Plinio Marconi, "Esposizione di Architettura Razionale a Firenze," *Architettura* 21 (May 1932) and "Casa per vacanze," *La Casa Bella* (March 1932). The denominations of the five projects adopted in this article are the same as those used in Bruno Zevi, *Giuseppe Terragni* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1980). In two cases they are slightly different from those used in the recent book by Thomas Schumacher, *Surface & Symbol: Giuseppe Terragni and the Architecture of Italian Rationalism* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991). The author discusses these projects at pp. 96–104 and at pp. 240–246, providing all the necessary visual information and the most direct sources of Terragni's inspiration.

2. The Fifth Triennale of Milano was planned around the theme of the single house. The most relevant temporary constructions, built for exhibition purposes, were those by Giuseppe Pagano, Luigi Moretti, Figini, and Pollini. The group of Como was composed by Terragni, Lingeri, Cereghini, Giussani, Mantero, Ortelli, Dell'Acqua, and Ponci. The house witnesses the relationship of Terragni with the figurative and artistic culture in general and with the abstract school of Como in particular. The inside of the house is enriched by the frescoes of Mario Radice and by furniture designed and built for the occasion. See "Gli architetti di Como alla V Triennale," *Casabella* 6 (June 1933) and "Casa sul lago per l'artista," *Domus* 6 (Oct. 1933).

3. The white volume of the dwelling, moved forward approximately four meters in relation to the part that contains the studio, is treated with a rigor reminiscent of Loos, with four cuts aligned on the two floors. A service door is marked by an L-shaped awning, the only volume projecting from the building. The part of the building occupied by the studio is characterized by a glass block wall that occupies two-thirds of the elevation and by a circular eye that breaks the remaining solid. The frame used in the opposite front resembles Terragni's contemporary Casa del Fascio and tends to create an asymmetrical distribution of solids and voids. The pilotis used in the previous project are transformed to pilasters on square bases, which is needed to create the frame. For a recent analysis of the Triennale of Milano, see Giacomo Polin, "La Triennale di Milano 1923–1947," *Rassegna* 10 (1982).

4. The completion of the project was troublesome, resulting in Terragni suing the client to protect his design. This work is generally dated 1936–1937, but the project to which we refer here had "probably been planned since 1935." See Ada Francesca Marciano, *Giuseppe Terragni, opera completa 1925–1943* (Rome: Officina, 1987), p. 319. The first publication of the project is: "Una Villa di Giuseppe Terragni," *Domus* 14 (May 1941).

5. The first publication of the project is in "Omaggio a Terragni," *L'Architettura cronache e storia* 14 (July 1968). A reconstructed axonometric of Villa on the Lake appears in: Hideaki Haraguchi, *A Comparative Analysis of 20th Century Houses* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989).

6. The way the wall cuts are treated seems to return Terragni to a canonic treatment of Purism by their longitudinal organization, their proportional rules, and their undifferentiated run along the rooms or along the terrace at the top level. However, the cuts of the strip windows exhibit an autonomy and an architectural presence that is foreign to Purism's strip window. Here they are so marked by thick cantilevered cornices that they seem to explode outward. First publication of the house is: "Villa Bianca a Seveso," *Costruzioni-Casabella* 14 (December 1941).