6. *Design Convivio*: polytechnic dialogues, between meta-design and research

Giampiero Bosoni, Marta Elisa Cecchi

Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano

6.1 Framing

In 2021, when we started to think about how to celebrate the year anniversary in 2023 of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Graduate Programme in Design (originally still called the Graduate Programme in Industrial Design), it was immediately apparent that this appointment would be necessary to carry out careful historiographic research and a great deal of archive work to retrace this journey. Reflecting on this first phase of historical reconstruction of the first 30 years of the School, it soon became apparent that it was not sufficient to limit this review to the specific period since the 30 years since the official establishment of the Degree Course in 1993, but that it was also necessary to reconstruct the debate and all the groundwork that had led to this milestone over the years. Indeed, some of the seminar and experimentation steps that had constituted the necessary prelude to the creation of this Degree Course a few years earlier were already known. However, when talking about the design culture in Milan, and especially within the polytechnic culture of our university, it immedi-

ately became clear that it is essential and urgent to track down the heated and wide-ranging cultural debate on the subject that had seen inside and outside the Politecnico di Milano central figures of this history act, teach, design and confront each other inside the lecture halls of our university, in particular in the then Faculty of Architecture, long before a specific degree course was set up dedicated to what even in the university curriculum had begun to be known, first in a karstic manner since the early 1950s, and then more and more explicitly from the mid-1960s under the English term *Industrial Design*.

6.2 Key figures

After careful study and consideration, it was deemed that the date 1963 (another 60th anniversary) refers to the academic year 1962/1963, during which the new ministerial teaching subject called *Progettazione artistica per l'industria* [Artistic Design for Industry] was introduced into the curriculum, representing a milestone for interpreting the entry and growth of the culture of design within the Politecnico. This teaching was entrusted to Alberto Rosselli, but in the Milanese context, Marco Zanuso had already obtained national qualification for this teaching. For this reason, Rosselli and Zanuso became among the first significant figures to play a role in this context. However, their masters and the forerunners of this quest for design, starting above all with the design of modern furniture, were undoubtedly some of the most authoritative teachers in the discipline of *Architettura degli interni, arredamento e decorazione* [Interior Architecture, Furnishing and Decoration], which from the 1930s onwards had seen personalities such as Gio Ponti, Franco Albini[1], Carlo De Carli and Vittoriano Viganò stand out. As a result of several considerations[2], the decision was made to identify eight protagonists to be showcased as the main precursors of the debate and presence of design culture within the Politecnico, prior to the birth of the first course of studies from which the current School of Design of our University derives. Also counting in this choice was the fact that the exhibition had to constitute a historical narrative

Note 1.
He became a full professor of *Architettura degli interni, arredamento e decorazione* [*Interior Architecture, Furnishing and Decoration*] in Venice in 1958 before moving to the Faculty of Architecture at the Politenico di Milano in 1964 as a full professor of *Composizione architettonica* [Architectural Composition].

Note 2.
The choice of personalities who had been students and then teachers of relevance, showing a degree of consistency, for design disciplines at the Politecnico di Milano; figures who had contributed to the development of Italian design, even outside the polytechnic institution, from the post-war period to shortly before the institution of the first experimental course of studies dedicated to *Industrial Design* at the University.

which, before being directed at the Politecnico, had to be accessible and attractive to a public that was also external to various representative spheres of culture and productive society in the city and the country, as well as to foreign visitors. Once the eight precursors had been chosen (in chronological order, Gio Ponti, Franco Albini, Carlo De Carli, Marco Zanuso, Achille Castiglioni, Vittoriano Viganò, Alberto Rosselli and Raffaella Crespi), it was then a matter of conceiving a possible exhibition/installation that would highlight not only their indisputably recognised role as established designers, but above all their teaching activity and academic career, by finding all the possible documentation of the various stages of their careers in the Politecnico's historical archives. For this first edition, the choice of the eight personalities fell on those polytechnic figures who represent examples of how, according to different approaches and intentions, the theoretical reflections formulated in different years and historical periods were translated into practical and design actions of significant national and international relevance.

6.3 Communicating the research

Although we had found interesting documents to study and highlight, particularly concerning Gio Ponti, Franco Albini, and Raffaella Crespi, we faced the challenge of presenting this history in an engaging manner without resorting to repetitive biographical themes that might reduce Politecnico's documents to mere curiosities appreciated only by insiders. Concurrently, we initiated closer collaboration among units established by the Department of Design and the School of Design for

Design Philology. Platform→   the 30th anniversary initiative, known as Design Philology, along with the Politecnico Archives, overseen by Federico Bucci, the esteemed colleague delegated to Culture by the Rector, and the Rectorate's Communication Office. It was Federico Bucci who suggested the Historic Library of Politecnico, located on the first floor of Building 9 in Piazza Leonardo da Vinci, as an ideal venue for our exhibition/event – an underappreciated yet courtly setting presenting both an opportunity and a challenge.

Amidst these considerations and challenges, we invited esteemed colleague Ico Migliore, an internationally renowned expert in exhibition

projects, museums, and communication events, to join the scientific committee curating the event. During our presentation, as Professor Migliore reviewed the research, documents, and project goals, he sketched a conceptual drawing on the back of a summary report – a table surrounded by figures, suggesting a dynamic and innovative installation within the Historical Library. Migliore proposed moving away from traditional exhibition methods, such as framed panels and original documents, which, while precise, might only resonate with a limited audience of insiders. Instead, his sketch envisioned a large *dining table* layout, resonating with the library's resemblance to an old aristocratic palace dining hall, where the eight characters would engage in lively conversations akin to a convivial dinner – an approach that inspired the event's title.

Thus, the project not only involved creating the table display but also scripting and constructing dialogues among the diners. Structuring these conversations required meticulous research into available documents to extract quotations, both direct and indirect, and key passages to interweave in a lively exchange among the characters.

6.3.1 Setting up the script

The documentary resources encompassed texts authored by the eight protagonists, alongside more prosaic materials such as interviews, newspaper articles, excerpts from broader concepts, and concise yet impactful expressions drawn from various publications spanning different years. Each author's selected bibliography included a range of texts: theoretical treatises (e.g., Gio Ponti's *Amate l'Architettura. L'architettura è un cristallo* from 1957), monographs featuring transcribed texts (e.g., Giancarlo Bonsiepe's contributions to *Marcatre 41/42* in 1968), dedicated volumes (e.g., Alessandra Stocchi's *Vittoriano Viganò. Etica brutalista* from 2004), teaching materials (e.g., Raffaella Crespi's *Notes on Design* from 1967), authored books (e.g., Carlo De Carli's *Architettura, Spazio primario* from 1982), compilations of texts and articles (e.g., Roberto Grignolo's edited volume on Marco Zanuso from 2013), conference proceedings (e.g., contributions to the formation of the Industrial Design and Furnishing degree edited by the relevant degree course), famous prefaces (such as Franco Albini's excerpt from Bosoni and Bucci's *Il Design e gli Interni di Franco Albini* in 2016), among others.

Additionally, the project involved employing actors to portray the various characters. Therefore, specialists in theatrical scriptwriting were enlisted, along with a director to oversee their performances. As suggested by Migliore, the exhibition was planned with a maximum of eight dialogues, each lasting no more than four to five minutes, aligning with the average visitor's attention span along the exhibition route to ensure engagement in the narrative. Professional scriptwriters experienced in design and architecture topics, namely Paola Albini and Gianni Biondillo, collaborated with an editorial content research team (Giampiero Bosoni and Marta Elisa Cecchi) to craft scripts for six dialogues around different discussion topics. Preserving the historical context of the various authors' passages was paramount to avoid distorting their theoretical reflections within the interactions among the protagonists. Terms specific to architecture were adapted to concepts more broadly associated with the broader theme of design[3], such as *project* and *planning*.

Furthermore, the scriptwriters revised selected passages to enhance fluency and auditory comprehensibility when delivered live. Thus, while not all sentences were direct quotations faithful to the originals, they were edited to flow seamlessly and suitably when interpreted by diverse voices during the convivial dinner dialogues. The dialogue script was enriched with theatrical and narrative elements – exclamations, mutterings, and other expressive forms indicating puzzlement, assent, and agreement – alongside ambient sounds of dishes and cutlery, creating a more immersive spatial and auditory experience. Each character's dialogue was carefully crafted to reflect their individual approach to the thematic references, ensuring authenticity in their voices and perspectives.

Note 3.
Since all the protagonists come from the world of traditional architecture, inevitably, some expressions derive from those circumstances and lexicons. In today's context, however, those same expressions are no longer intended in the same way or may not be perceived in the same perspective as when they were expressed, so some expressions have been revised and corrected in a more contemporary viewpoint that respects their more profound meaning and only changes their external form. Expressions such as *architecture of space* have therefore been changed to design of the environment as they belong to the same matrix and are more evident to understand within the framework of the *Design Philology* research project.

6.3.2 Themes

The construction of the dialogues was structured around six central themes, broad enough to encompass different reasoning and interpretations and, at the same time, specific enough to define the areas through which polytechnic design culture had focused, i.e. the fields of significant criticism and potential, and which defined its foundations. The theme of *design*, or instead of project and design for the

community and industry, could be included, as well as the theme of *living*, also considering the origin of interior design within the School of Architecture. Other issues to be addressed were indeed *teaching*, given the educational context of the University, and *industry*, given the focus of the polytechnic project on the world of production and new technologies. Regarding the theme of teaching, which was also central to the context of the *Design Philology* research project, it was essential to highlight the different approaches to teaching the protagonists – which inevitably also translated into practice using different design methods – in order to comprehend better the development of the various workshops and courses of study that gave rise to the School of Design in the following years. Two other themes were dedicated to important deontological and research issues, such as *ethics* and *innovation* as foundations and objectives of design and research.

6.3.3 Narrated multimedia archive

The research drew on materials recovered by Prof. Maria Teresa Feraboli in the Historical Archive of the Politecnico di Milano. These are documents of different types and natures from which it was possible to correctly define all the academic career passages of the chosen protagonists, but above all, to understand more clearly the historical periods and main courses from which the school of design was to be born. For example, Gio Ponti graduated in Architecture in 1921 and in 1936-1939 became a tenured professor and then full professor of the *Architettura degli interni, arredamento e decorazione* [Interior Architecture, Furnishing and Decoration] course in which Carlo De Carli and Vittoriano Viganò were to be his principal assistants. De Carli graduated in 1934 and became Ponti's assistant in 1953. In 1962, when Ponti retired, he took over his chair, later becoming a full professor in 1965. Later, from 1965 to 1968, he was also Dean of the Faculty of Architecture. While Viganò, starting in 1946, was first a voluntary assistant to Gio Ponti in that course, then he was appointed tenured assistant from 1958 to 1968. Finally, after being granted tenure in 1966, in 1969, he became a full professor of the *Architettura degli interni, arredamento e decorazione*. Marco Zanuso, who graduated from the Politecnico di Milano in 1939, also obtained a professorship in *Progettazione artistica per l'industria* (Artistic Design for Industry) in 1961 and was

called to teach several courses (*Elementi costruttivi* [Constructive Elements] in 1966-1968, *Tecnologia dell'architettura* [Architecture Technology] in 1969-1972), in 1973 he was appointed extraordinary and in 1976 full professor in *Progettazione artistica per l'industria*. Subsequently, from 1979, his teaching activities focused exclusively on teaching Industrial Design, so much so that in 1984, he became a full professor in *Disegno Industriale* [Industrial Design][4].

Achille Castiglioni followed a similarly similar path and, graduating in Architecture in 1944 from the Politecnico di Milano and, after obtaining a teaching fellowship in 1970 in *Progettazione artistica per l'industria* he became an associate professor in 1977 in the *Arredamento* [Furniture] course and then and full professor (1980) in *Progettazione artistica per l'industria* at the Politecnico di Torino. In 1981, he obtained a transfer to the Politecnico di Milano and the chair in *Architettura degli interni, arredamento e decorazione*. Then, he held a professorship in *Disegno industriale* from 1986 to 1988.

A similar path to Castiglioni's is that of Raffaella Crespi, who graduated in Architecture in 1955 and immediately began university activities, ob-

taining in 1970 a free professorship in *Progettazione artistica per l'industria*, later becoming an extraordinary professor first in *Elementi costruttivi*, later a full professor in *Tecnologia dell'architettura*, and then in 1986 of *Disegno industriale* until 2001. Alberto Rosselli, who graduated in Architecture in 1947 from the Politecnico di Milano, was called to the chair of *Progettazione artistica per l'industria* in 1962/1963 until 1977 (the year of his untimely death) at the same university, where he has also taught *Tecnologie dell'architettura* since 1969. At last, Franco Albini, who graduated in 1929 in Architecture from the Politecnico di Milano, after being called in 1949 to the IUAV in Venice as a free lecturer in *Interior Architecture, Furniture and Decoration* and to the Politecnico di Torino
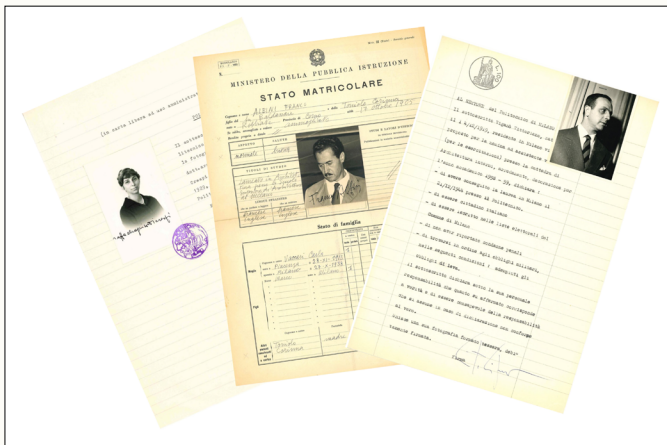
in 1954 as an associate professor for the same discipline, returned to Venice where in 1957 he became a full professor, then in 1964 returned to the Politecnico di Milano as a full professor of *Compo-sizione architettonica* [Architectural Composition] until 1975. In the historical archives of the Politecnico di Milano, admin-

istrative documents such as tenure changes, tenure changes, promotions, per-sonal letters, transfer and re-location requests, resumes, salary slips, certificates and official certificates were also recovered. A selection of these documents dedicated to each protagonist can be accessed via hyperlinks on the *Design Philology* platform dedicated to this part of the research. Having historical documents present, albeit virtually, allows one to savour the quality of these ma-terials and adds another layer to the in-depth study of the birth of the design school.
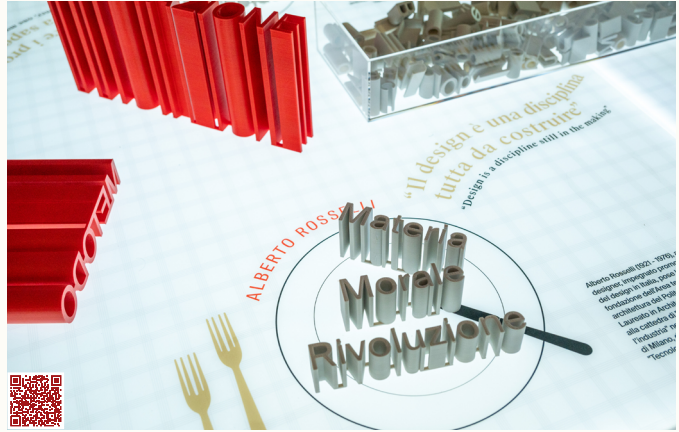
6.3.4 Keywords

The identification of the different personalities has been summarized in keywords that define their preferred fields and the focus on which they primarily dwelled during their careers. For example, *quality*, *art*, and *detail* are linked to Gio Ponti, highlighting his cultured approach and artisanal inclination toward the design of spaces and products. For Marco Zanuso, the theme of *complexity* in design, stemming from the interrelation of various knowledge that designers must consider (Pro-lusione, 1986), is crucial, along with the terms *function* and *industrial*, reflecting Zanuso's commitment to granting greater autonomy to the culture and practice of industrial design.

In Achille Castiglioni, the words *temporary*, *ideas*, and *light* empha-size the more spontaneous and playful aspects of his design approach, shared with his elder brother Pier Giacomo, who also briefly taught de-sign at Politecnico di Milano. Their work is characterized by numerous

small intuitions, particularly evident in lighting design. For Franco Albini, the terms *consciousness*, *utility*, and *tradition* encapsulate the rigor of the master of *atmospheres* and his educational commitment. In contrast, Carlo De Carli is characterized by the keywords *spiritual*, *life*, and *education*, highlighting his poetic impulses.

Raffella Crespi is associated with *ethics* and *technique*, indicating her design philosophy, while the term *future* suggests her vision for the development of Politecnico di Milano's design department. In her book *Note sul Design*, Crespi conveys a final lesson intended as a bequest to her young and future students, aiming to «stimulate in them that desire to design, which is the main condition for recognizing in themselves what we might call […] a vocation for the «most beautiful profession in the world» (Crespi, 1967).

Finally, *beauty*, *profession*, and *school* are associated with Vittoriano Viganò, particularly regarding his role in renovating areas dedicated to the Faculty of Architecture at Politecnico di Milano. In contrast, *matter*, *revolution*, and *morality* are linked to Alberto Rosselli, resonating with Mendini's words that characterize his presence in the academic realm:

Alberto Rosselli, or rather shyness in design. Among the shy men we know, Rosselli was certainly the most reserved. Always present in every place in the world where a substantial cultural fact was perceptible […] he analyzed and absorbed in silence or intervened with subtle observations. (Centrokappa, 1985, p. 130)

6.4 Conclusions

Design Convivio thus traces, through an interweaving of independent reflections transformed into imaginary dialogues between 8 key fig-

ures in its history, the birth of the polytechnic design culture within the academic context. No longer confined as a subsidiary discipline within architecture, this culture evolved into an autonomous field of research and design practice. The thematic threads shaping the aforementioned dialogues allow an understanding of the education and disciplinary foundations that gave rise to a design culture, not only Milanese but above all Italian, in the university and academic fields. These discussions were undeniably pivotal in the establishment of the School of Design at Politecnico di Milano.

References

Baldini, R. (1959). L'architetto Franco Albini alla scoperta dell'Europa. *Settimo giorno*, n. 552, pp. 52-54.

Bettinelli, E. (2014). *La voce del Maestro. Achille Castiglioni. I modi della didattica*. Corraini Edizioni.

Bonsiepe, G. (1968). *Marcatre 41/42*. Lerici editore.

Bosoni, G., Bucci, F. (2016). *Il Design e gli Interni di Franco Albini*. Electa.

Centrokappa (edited by) (1985). *Il design italiano degli anni '50*. R.D.E. - Ricerche Design Editrice.

Crespi, R. (1967). *Note sul Design*, [S.l. : s.n.]

Crespi, R. (2002). *Personaggi e Storie di Industrial Design*. Mario Adda Editore.

Crespi, R. (1993). Prefazione. In *Sconosciuti e familiari. Oggetti di design 'anonimo' prodotti in Svizzera dal 1920*. Hoepli.

De Carli, C., (1982). *Architettura, Spazio primario*, Hoepli editore.

Faroldi, E., Vettori, M.P. (edited by) (2019). *Dialoghi d'architettura, Vittoriano Viganò*. Lettera Ventidue, terza edizione 2019, pp. 157-170.

Fracassi, A., Riva, S., (edited by) (1981) *Stile industria: Alberto Rosselli*, Università di Parma – Centro studi e archivio della Comunicazione, quaderni 50, Parma.

Fratelli Castiglioni. (2007). Il miglior Design della nostra vita. *L'Europeo*, 6.

Grignolo, R. (edited by) (2013). *Marco Zanuso. Scritti sulle tecniche di produzione e di progetto*. Silvana editore.

Ottolini, G. (edited by) (1997). Carlo De Carli e lo spazio primario. In *Quaderni del Dipartimento di progettazione dell'Architettura del Politecnico di Milano*. Laterza.

Piccinno, G., & Servetto, M. (edited by) (1984). Contributi alla formazione dell'indirizzo di Laurea in Disegno Industriale e *Arredamento, Politecnico di Milano*.

Ponti, G. (1957). *Amate l'Architettura. L'architettura è un cristallo*. Rizzoli Editore.

Tentori, F., Argenti, M., & Cutroni, F. (edited by) (2007). Ricordo di Franco Albini in *Rassegna di architettura e urbanistica*, n. 123/124/125, Edizioni Kappa.

Rizzi, R (2016). *Carlo De Carli 1910-1999. Lo spazio primario*. Franco Angeli.

Rosselli, A. (1973). *I Metodi del Design*. Clup editore.

Rosselli, A. (1974). *Lo spazio aperto, ricerca e progettazione tra design e architettura*, Pizzi.

Rosselli, P., Di Nofa, E., Paleari, F. (edited by) (2022). *Alberto Rosselli. Architettura, design e "Stile Industria"*. Quodlibet.

Stocchi, A. (2004). *Vittoriano Viganò. Etica brutalista*. Testo & Immagine editore.

Viganò, V. (1961). L'architettura degli interni e il mobile italiano dal dopoguerra a oggi. *Argomenti d'architettura, 3*(10), Testimonianza, 45-61.

Viganò, V. (edited by) (1994). *Vittoriano Viganò, Una ricerca e un segno in architettura*, Electa.