

# FROM CHANGE TO USE Case Study: Casa Albergo, Milano- Italy, 1948

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**Abstract**—As a vocation that never simply makes physical environments, architecture continues to act in space and time through all its intersections as a critical and cultural agent of change in society. Its presence is marked from time of its construction – “change and use” by commune and people, for it stirs up thoughts upon which the only way to move forward is by looking into past.

Casa Albergo designed by architect Luigi Moretti is series of works commissioned in City of Milan at the end of II World War starting the reconstruction of the city devastated by bombing. Administration in purpose, the project of single occupancy living was succeeded on resolution that it will contribute as solution to the problem of unemployment and will make a major aid in reorganization of civil life and strengthen the effective economic recovery for the city.

The house hotel, situated in central area of the city near palazzo and cathedral Duomo is an H shaped plan consisting of two main blocks elevated on six and fourteen-storey with reinforced concrete structure, a flat roof and terrace. The building has been residence to unemployed - migrated single men and women, leased and occupied as a hotel after which failing health authorization because of battered use and neglect taken as municipality office and police quarter by commune di Milano on ground floor before shutting down.

The author puts forward with timeline, case study of historically significant - Casa Albergo- 1948, a structure “built for a purpose”, space “changed” for utilization by city commune and today’s “adaption” in built environment as International residence for students of Politecnico di Milano. Transformation of built space and architectural interventions breathe new life into an existing context, whilst revitalize its economic and social value.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Romanesque forums, Baroque Piazzas, Aqueducts & Baths, Gothic Basilicas, Palaces and Palladian Villas constitute the imagination unto Italian architecture. From a western view, its architecture and culture represent a timeless history of endurance and grandeur. Modernity in Italy could never become the ordinary language of the built environment. Rooted under it’s bequeathed classical past, Modernization was a thorough attempt in continuing tradition with compliant inception of new forms. The postwar reconstruction period witnessed an intense struggle to determine the Italy’s new political, economic and cultural orientation. It saw profound transformation of Italian society and built environment. The aftermath of War left much of the country, particularly north, in a state of chaos.



**IMAGE 1 Mussolini undertaking the demolitions for the via Dell’Impero**



**IMAGE 2 A German Panzer tank in Piazza del Duomo, Milan, 1943.**

While Rome remained Italy’s political capital, Milan initiated the country’s economic and financial setup. During the early 1900s, Milan led the industrialization process of the young nation, being at the very center of the economic, social, and political debate. It was also part of Mussolini’s Italian Social Republic puppet state, and an important command center of

the German Army stationed in Italy. As a crucial center of Italy, Milan was target of continuous carpet-bombing during World War II. When war in Italy was finally over, April 25, 1945, Milan was heavily damaged. Bombs inflicted extensive destruction on city centers and major public buildings- Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, La Scala, the Brera, the Palazzo Ducale, and the Castello Sforzesco.

## 2. POST WAR RECONSTRUCTION

The new republican government opted for economic development on all levels. Period between 1950-1970 coincided with the Italian economic miracle, an era of extraordinary growth based on rapid industrial expansion and massive public works, that brought to the city a large influx of over 400,000 people, mainly from rural and overpopulated Southern Italy [6]. Milan experienced two main distinct epochs of massive immigration: the first period, dating from the 1945 to the early 1970s, saw a large influx of immigrants from areas within Italy; the second period, starting from the late 1970s, has been characterized by the preponderance of foreign-born immigrants.

A preliminary plan for the construction of residences for homeless and immigrants following the war was prepared in 1946 by the City. It acted upon buying groups of house-hotel or other buildings to be built on land owned by public and destined for rental at low rents to small families, bachelors, employees, workers and students. Administration in purpose, the project of single occupancy living was succeeded on resolution that it will contribute as solution to the problem of unemployment and will make a major aid in reorganization of civil life and strengthen the effective economic recovery for the city.

La Cofimprese played a significant role in the management of the operations of the post-war reconstruction in Milan between 1947 and 1956. Architect Luigi Moretti founded the construction company with Adolfo Fossataro, financier, film producer and his former prison mate, reconstructing first in Milan and then Moretti's native Rome [1] Moretti was the only architectural personality imprisoned for his unrepressed political activity in support of Fascism through its last days at Salò. In an interview in 1987 Adolfo Fossataro recalls:

"... After the liberation we met, Moretti and I at the same time, a Communist councilor, Councillor Montagnana, who took a liking to us and accepted the idea of building houses Moretti-hotel, for which I took charge of finding the funding and to recover funds, while Moretti would cure the part planning and execution .... The City Council accepted in full the idea of the houses the hotel because I had committed to finding of financial contributions. I remember well that the contract was about a billion, even though he came to nearly three billion, because the work rather than last eighteen months lasted nearly five years. The initial contract, I said, was exactly 900 million, and this was a big bomb that exploded in Milan, when it became known that two rookies, chiamiamoci so, had

broken with the communist administration while others do not. Indeed Rossi was a fascist one, Moretti was a fascist, I was a fascist , and , despite that we built these houses hotel .. " [13]

Moretti's career in the 1950s, despite his absolute estrangement from the politically corrected currents of thought was secured by his clever attention to the economic realities of the new postwar capitalist society. He embarked on new opportunities with La Cofimprese and worked to develop house-hotel buildings. The original plan was for 20 hotels of which only three were built and made, before breaking up in 1949.

## 3. CASE STUDY: CASA ALBERGO, MILANO-ITALY, 1948

Casa Albergo is located in Via Corridoni 22, in a semi-central area of the city center near Palazzo Ducale and cathedral Duomo. Inserted in a quadrangular area, the building has an H shaped plan consisting of two main buildings, elevated on six and fourteen-storey reinforced concrete structure with a flat roof and a terrace. Aligned to the kerb side is the six storey building intended for female guests, originally for "women graduates", while the tall fourteen storey reserved for males is setback from the edge of the plot and preceded by a front garden with tree plantation.



IMAGE 3: Two Blocks Casa Albergo



IMAGE 4: View from Via Conservatoria

Connection between the two buildings is low lying built block with the main entrance, common reception of the guests and residents along with routing accesses to the two sections. The total floor surface is about 13,000 m<sup>2</sup> and the volume is 42,000 m<sup>3</sup>. The complex was realized like most buildings of those years, without thermal insulation materials and with an old heating system concept.

The facades are mostly covered with mosaic tiles; white finish plaster in the lower parts and marked with repeated openings in series and vertical cuts on the top to illuminate the long corridors. The taller building facing east has two protruding volumes with vertical connections and jumpers on the seventh and top floor conforming to a service and fire entrance. Internal circulation of both the blocks is done by set of two staircase and lifts at each end. The two building blocks accommodate 520 small apartments of 20 square meters each that can be used by one person supported by infrastructure for common services – Kitchen and utility rooms on each floor. Additional to above functions for some community facilities: bar, restaurant, lounges and reading library, a gym in the basement and a room for the thermal baths and sauna are also provided. Luigi Moretti described his work saying-



**IMAGE 5: The entrance block- Casa Albergo**



**IMAGE 6: Façade with Mosaic tiles and repeated openings. Service corridor along the height of the building**

"The building is one of the most daring of modern and unique of its kind in Europe. In its avant-garde style not much attention was made to decorative elements, but all the beauty and effectiveness has been realized with the only window openings, which with their location respond precisely to the needs of the internal rooms. Although no decorative architecture, it has a value particularly lyrical, especially through large fissures of warheads, which mark exactly the space of the central corridors. Corridors that are designed as overlapping roads, each of which is in the service of two rows of houses." [8]

#### 4. TRACING THE HISTORICAL TIMELINE

**1946** – Joint Stock company, La Cofimprese, Milano proposes “Casa Albergo” which later in year is accepted by Henry Ghiringhelli

**1947** – Council of Milan accepts the project buys the plots and signs the contract for three buildings with La Cofimprese. Foundation laid on 2nd September.

**1948** – November 23rd the building structure is completed.

**1950** – January 31st completed building is published in Domus magazine. Building is tested for reinforced concrete and later in the year is consigned to co-operative “Casa Della Laureata”.

**1951-** Building is managed under La Maber and by November it is fully occupied and functional.

**1962-69** – La Maber manages the western side of building as “Casa Della Laureata”.

**1967** – Built blocks are divided with different entrances, western and central block from Via Corridoni as “Casa Albergo”, eastern block from Via Respegghi as “Casa Della Laureata”.

**1969** –Commune de Milano and Manlio Bertazzoniane sign contract to rent the eastern side of building is transformed for use as Hotel between from 1st March 1968- 31st March 1978.

**1979-** La Maber submits the report of damage to building done because of poor maintenance and gives up the contract following which the building comes back to Commune di Milano which decides to rent the building until April 1980 to ECCE s.p.a Hotel Michelangelo.

**1980-86** – The building comes back to Commune di Milano, which prepares the project with plans and finance report for renovation. Over the period with limited finances, step by step renovation is done starting from electrical, water supply, heating, painting, floor etc. in southern block during which building is occupied only by 200 residents in capacity of 600.

**1988-** Western tower of the building is rented to Police.

**1990-96** – Building does not get health authorization for living hence Eastern tower is not occupied but Western tower

remains with police, while Municipality office operates in central block. Smaller revenue is generated helping in renovation process.

**1998- 2004** – Commune di Milano decided to sell the building and further renovations are stopped. Contract is signed between Politecnico di Milano for 60 years starting from April 1999. Police leaves the southern block and Politecnico surveys the existing structure for conservation and starts renovation.

**2004-2010** – Recognizing the value, the building is officially considered work of fine art and of particular interest. It comes under protection of the Ministry for Cultural and Environment and heritage restoration is done with co-financing from Ministry of Education, University and research under the law 338/00.

**2010-11** – Fully functional international student residence – Daniel’s Hotel, housing 450 students with services like laundry, gym, TV studio, study rooms, game rooms - snacks area.

## 5. CONCLUSION - RENAISSANCE OF “CASA ALBERGO”

The building of Via Corridoni represented a strong novelty for the design of residential of post war years. It stands among Moretti’s best-known projects of the period, and is considered an early example of postmodern architecture - a blend of innovation and tradition. Moretti wrote in 1950, “*to reach with minimal means a most acute and emotive transfiguration.*” Responsive to need, efficiency, immediacy and purpose, ‘Casa Albergo facilitated commune development and growth, upgrading social conditions and economic opportunities. Although, passage of time caused serious problems of degradation due to ill maintenance and change of uses – The building is restored and renovated today. Occupied by Daniel’s Hotel it houses students participating in international projects - Erasmus and foreign teachers, the residence is managed directly by the Politecnico di Milano.

“There is no doubt whatever about the influence of architecture and structure upon human character and action. We make our buildings and afterwards they make us. They regulate the course of our lives.” - Winston Churchill, addressing the English Architectural Association, 1924

Post war years, Casa Albergo bonded the architecture coming together to human sustainability and need. With radical improvisation, the building stands until today laudable for its architecture and construction. The concern of regeneration is the past, present and future of a building and involves making balanced judgements with regards to history, present day needs and the future adaptability. Reinvigorating the “Casa Albergo” passaged its way into timelessness.

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## Archive Project

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- [13] Translated in English: <http://storiapoliclinicomodena.blogspot.in/2010/07/architettura-minimalista.html> [Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> January, 2015]

## Image Credits

- [14] [IMAGE 1] Cover of *La Domenica del Corriere*, 3 March 1935.
- [15] [IMAGE 2] Found on [historicaltimes.tumblr.com](http://historicaltimes.tumblr.com) [Accessed: 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2015]
- [16] [IMAGE 3] [IMAGE 4] Archive Civic Milan, *Services and Public Works, issue n ° 37/1962*
- [17] [IMAGE 5] [IMAGE 6] Author – Supriya Kukreja, 2011.