



COMUNICAR LA ARQUITECTURA

DEL ORIGEN DE LA MODERNIDAD A LA ERA DIGITAL

eug

The background is an abstract composition of swirling, layered brushstrokes in various shades of teal and dark blue. A prominent, dark, textured square, resembling a piece of fabric or a woven material, is positioned in the center-right area, overlapping the swirling patterns.

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TOMO I

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a la era digital

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(EDS.)

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del origen de la modernidad a la era digital

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Architecture and Photography in the Modern Era. The Italian Setting between the Two Wars (1920-1945)

Arquitectura y fotografía en el movimiento moderno. El entorno italiano entre las dos guerras (1920-1945)

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Abstract

La difusión de la nueva fotografía de arquitectura (vinculada a una forma inédita de concebir el espacio y al desarrollo de la arquitectura moderna) en los años veinte del siglo XX acercó también en Italia a los arquitectos al aparato fotográfico. Este artículo pretende examinar cómo estos arquitectos utilizaron la fotografía entre la primera y segunda guerra mundial, un periodo en el que, como en otros países, siguió representando no sólo un instrumento fundamental para su formación, sino también un potente canal de difusión y propaganda de la arquitectura moderna.

The dissemination of the new architectural photography (linked to an unprecedented way of conceiving space and the development of modern architecture) in the 1920's also brought architects in Italy closer to the use of the camera. This article has the objective of examining in what way these architects used photography during the years between the two world wars, in which, as in other countries, photography continued to represent not only a fundamental tool for their formation, but also as a powerful channel for the dissemination and propaganda of modern architecture.

Keywords

Arquitectura moderna en Italia, fotografía

Modern architecture in Italy, photography

Introduction

The undisputed union between architecture and photography represents an area of study (and of experiments) extremely vast due to the innumerable arguments that inevitably interwind. They are seemingly very similar or they merge, almost always stimulating reflection on the subject as well as current research. On the other hand, the ways in which different intellectuals (architects, photographers, historians, scholars, photography enthusiasts, editors etc.) relate to architecture can be infinitely different. For these reasons those who intend to examine and study these “ways” are bound to have different approaches. However, with reference to the matter, Hugh Campbell claims in one of his recent articles that: “On the spectrum of approaches, at one end are those that focus on the ways in which architects use the photographic image to depict buildings (photography serving architecture); at the other end are those who consider how photographers use architecture as subject matter (architecture serving photography)”¹.

A significative example of the two approaches, according to the author, is given by the two written volumes, respectively by Claire Zimmerman, *Photographic Architecture in the Twentieth Century*, and by Alona Pardo - Elias Redstone, *Constructing Worlds – Photography and Architecture in the Modern Age*, both from 2014².

One can infer from the title of the first, the predominate argument is architecture while in the second, it is photography. The investigative methodology adopted by the authors is obviously completely different, however, on the whole, both books not only give testimony to the vast and extensive details of the research study in question, but also suggests the possibility that the interweaving between the two approaches could be useful to both, with reciprocal reinforcement.

Drawing from the last considerations, the present article intends to examine in which way the architects in an Italian setting used photography in the years between the two World Wars, era in which, as in other countries, photography continued not only to represent a fundamental tool for their formation, but was also a powerful vehicle for the diffusion and propaganda of modern architecture.

The New Aesthetic Look of Photography

The relationship between photography and architecture, states Giovanni Fanelli, is as ancient as the invention of photography, in which its development is generally said to be 1839; architecture, and in particular, monuments, gave the effect of stillness with light, representing the ideal feature for photography³. During the course of time, they affirmed the way of taking photographs that remained fairly unaltered up to the beginning of the 1920's. The

¹ Hugh Campbell, “Architecture And Photography, Photography and Architecture”, *Journal of Architecture* 20, n.º 1 (February 2015).

² Claire Zimmerman, *Photographic Architecture in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Alona Pardo and Elias Redstone (with essays by Kate Bush and David Campany), *Constructing Worlds – Photography and Architecture in the Modern Age* (London: Prestel, 2014).

³ Giovanni Fanelli, *Storia della fotografia di architettura* (Bari: Laterza 2009), 19.

photos, in fact, as observed by de Seta, were substantially all constructed according to a cut and a personal perspective of a concept relating to space that is said to belong to the Renaissance tradition (for example, photos of monuments by Anderson, Brogi and Alinari, but also the images of Paris by Atget or Marville). Within them, the object is seen from a frontal view or slightly foreshortened, the light is diffused in an even manner and the observation point is higher than the human scale⁴. This visual typology, which was influenced by 19th Century Vedutism and the principles of architectural composition taught in the academies, had been challenged by the new investigative system of reality inaugurated by Cubism and Futurism⁵. In particular, with the new and innovative artistic research, experimental research of photography was developed “with a tendency towards new perspective experiences (optical), to abstract images and that even if limited, also gave life to a new way of perceiving architecture as a photographic object. Such a classic moment is attributed to Neues Sehen”⁶. The principal protagonist of this research was László Moholy-Nagy, operative in Bauhaus from 1923 together with his collaborator and partner Lucia Moholy. Photography, for him, an art, was a moment of productive creation and not of objective reproduction. During his research, he pursued with the importance of the creative value and constructive value of light, the dynamic vision (angled viewpoints, radical image cuts), the idea of sequencing, the collage as a possible mass production⁷.

The new architectural photography (connected to an unedited way of conceiving space and the development of modern architecture), began to supplant the old visual typologies mainly due to the diffusion of the publications of the era. Fundamental were those German as the well-known series of the *Bauhausbücher*, several magazines such as *Moderne Bauformen* and *Innen Dekoration*, but above-all the volume *Malerei-Fotografie-Film*, by László Moholy-Nagy published as number 8 of the *Bauhausbücher* (1925)⁸. In such, the author is determined to acknowledge photography and cinema as a form of art at the same level of painting, claiming radical rethinking of visual arts and a further development of photographic design.

In the same way, of great importance were other ambitious initiatives of the period in Italy, of which the *Weissenhofsiedlung* (1927), a neighbourhood of Stuttgart, gave an example of the new architecture, the international photographic exhibition *Film und Foto*, held in the same German city in 1929, that had animators besides Moholy-Nagy, several colleagues of Bauhaus. As Settimeli wrote, the exhibition had an “enormous influence on photography in all the world. Via magazines that reported extensive repertoires, there was a direct comparison between the experiences between the American photographic experiences as well as those from the ancient continent”⁹.

⁴ Cesare de Seta, *Giuseppe Pagano fotografo* (Milan: Electa 1979), 5; Fanelli, *Storia...*, 256-274.

⁵ de Seta, *Giuseppe Pagano...*, 5.

⁶ Fanelli, *Storia...*, 175.

⁷ Fanelli, *Storia...*, 175-176.

⁸ De Seta, *Giuseppe Pagano...*, 5.

⁹ Wladimiro Settimeli, *Storia avventurosa della fotografia* (Rome: Effe ed., 1976, 2nd ed.), 277, in De Seta, *Giuseppe Pagano...*, 6.

Those who embraced this cultural enthusiasm in Italy were above-all architect-photographers, and in particular those who were strongly attracted towards the magazine *Domus*, produced by Gio Ponti (1928 al 1940), Enrico Peressutti, Giuseppe Pagano, Gian Luigi Banfi and Ernesto Carboni.

These architects, claims Turrone, with their images, offered a notable contribution to the research of original compositions that went beyond every aesthetic and academic pseudo-pictorial model. However, these images reveal a common tendency, an elegance in the use of shades of colour, a subtlety of angles that represent almost a school of thought¹⁰.

In 1932, with the intention of publishing reflections and considerations relating to ideas of the new photographic aesthetics, a magazine named *Fotografia* directed by Ponti himself and curated by photographer Guido Pellegrini was founded. It represents the expression of a well-known article that Ponti published on *Domus* in May of the same year (*arguments relating to the art of photography*). *Fotografia*, was the only magazine of "intellectual" nature that emerged in those years in Italy and was capable of laying the foundations of a future aesthetic even though it had been published for only few issues. Fundamental in such a sense were the writings by Ponti, Pagano, Pellegrini, Ornano. Turrone states that "the magazine *Fotografia* launched lively ideas, discovered new energy, elaborated messages and tendencies in those years, in synthesis it was a 'manifesto' of fine Italian culture"¹¹.

Other significant initiatives were taken into consideration a little over a year later: in 1935 the same *Domus and Casabella* (another important contemporary architectural magazine founded in 1928 with the name of *La Casa Bella* by the same editorial team *Domus*) produced by Giuseppe Pagano together with Edoardo Persico, promoted a photography competition with the objective of gathering interesting photos for the magazines, that would have had for "subject modern or traditional architecture, furnishings, furniture, vases, silver ceramics, glass, in brief, everything that is related to architecture, furnishings and gardens"¹².

The new cultural orientations and new tastes did not take long to diffuse in Italy: in 1943, always the Editorial *Domus*, published the first book on modern photography titled *Fotografia. First review of photographic works in Italy*, with articles written by Ermanno Federico Scopinich, Alfredo Ornano and Federico Patellani¹³. The objective of the volume, as Editor, Gianni Mazzocchi claims, was to give value as well as to diffuse the works of the Italian photographic artists and together, try and eliminate the ancient prejudices of foreign superiority in the photography field. Over 200 photos were selected, of which one by Carlo Mollino, one by Enrico Peressutti (fig. 1) and four by Pagano (figs. 2, 3).

¹⁰ Giuseppe Turrone, *Nuova fotografia italiana* (Milan: Schwarz, 1959), 10-11.

¹¹ Giuseppe Turrone, *Nuova...*, 11.

¹² *Domus*, 1935.

¹³ *Fotografia. Prima rassegna dell'attività fotografica in Italia* (Milan: Ed. Domus, 1943).



Figure 1. Rifless, Enrico Peressutti. Source: *Fotografia. Prima rassegna...*, 1943.

The Architect and their Photographic Collection

Zimmerman, by examining due arguments strongly connected as photography and its diffusion and the impact that it had on architectural design, concludes by claiming that photography profoundly influenced the design of the past century, carrying out a predominant role in the evolution of modern architecture. In particular, with the diffusion of illustrated and printed articles in Germany, constructions, together with the interaction of photography, would have irreversibly changed starting from the 1920's up to the Post-War Era by commercial advertising (1960's)¹⁴.

In effect, there is no doubt that German publicity played a dominant role in the development of modern architecture in Europe. In Italy, a fundamental contribution in such sense was given above all by the magazines quoted in *Domus and Casabella* of which –apart from the ideological contents– the objective was to highlight above all, with the images, that of concrete modern realisations. A relevant aspect that these magazines had in common with foreign

¹⁴ Zimmerman, *Photographic...*, 49-204.

magazines was the importance attributed to the photographic image: generally numerous, large in size and of high quality¹⁵. Unfortunately, even today there are no historical records of the use of photographic images in trade magazines as Fanelli himself points out (p. 337), which nevertheless, is a valuable frame of reference. Several interesting contributions have recently been produced, such as that of Luigi Spinelli with regards to the magazine *Domus*¹⁶.

Vice-versa, always more often, scholars focus their research on the personal archives of architects, a valuable documentary source that offers the possibility to not only better understand the relationship that these professionals had with the camera, but also how they used the image and if this contributed to the creative process of their projects as well as in the phases of their realisations.

One of the first archives that was studied appears to be that of Giuseppe Pagano who was known, in 1979, to have arranged an extraordinary photographic exhibition curated by Cesare de Seta. Only in the last decade, as will be mentioned further on, studies have been carried out relating to other personal archives such as those of Giovanni Michelucci, Luigi Figini, Franco Albini, Gian Luigi Banfi, Alberto Sartoris. Similar research was also conducted for the photographic archives of Le Corbusier's¹⁷.

As the history of Architectural-Photography of the 1920's and 1930's demonstrates, photography was fairly used by architects in that period for both working requirements and recreational reasons. For some, it represented a true and real investigative tool as well as for documentation, for others, for experimental and disciplinary formation.

Giuseppe Pagano appears to be the most emblematic and complete figure of the architect-photographer in the Italian scenario of the 20's and 30's: for him photography represented a fundamental component of his work, which encompassed not only his work as a designer, but also as a writer and editor (from 1933, as mentioned, he directed *Casabella*).

The exhibition *Giuseppe Pagano fotografo* has amply demonstrated how close his connection was with photography, or rather with his Rolleiflex; Pagano himself, in an article of 1938¹⁸ claims that this interest realistically started with the study of the rural architecture¹⁹ (1935-36) consolidating itself further in the future years. Later on, he also published his photos in other magazines and periodicals.

A part from the systematic work for the rural house, its photos, claims de Seta, "are all taken in the most diverse circumstances of everyday life: while travelling, on holiday, at war, at a work site, in a town, on a market day, etc."²⁰.

¹⁵ Fanelli, *Storia...*, 328, 337.

¹⁶ Luigi Spinelli, "La fotografia e le riviste italiane di architettura: la 'Domus' di Gio Ponti", in Maria Antonietta Crippa, *Fotografia per l'architettura del XX secolo in Italia. Costruzione della storia, progetto, cantiere* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale), 146-159.

¹⁷ Barbara Mazza, *Le Corbusier e la fotografia: la vérité blanche* (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2002).

¹⁸ Giuseppe Pagano, "Un cacciatore di immagini", in *Cinema*, dic. 1938, cit. in De Seta, *Giuseppe Pagano...*, 155-156; Fanelli, *Storia...*, 331.

¹⁹ Giuseppe Pagano and Guarniero Daniel, *Architettura rurale italiana* (Milan: U. Hoepli, 1936).

²⁰ De Seta, *Giuseppe Pagano...*, 9.

His archives are amazing not only for the number of photos, precisely 3,275, but also for the variety of subjects taken, for which he possessed a personal poetic vision. In this regard, in fact, he wrote that “The worlds evoked become a stimulus for greater ambitions and the subject photographed is resolved, for me, only in a photographic reality that is not only descriptive, just as a poem does not only consist of the literal meaning of words”.²¹

These concepts, in my opinion, represent the key with which numerous photographs by Pagano, carefully named with an appropriate “title” by the author himself and preserved in his archives, should be interpreted. From this elaborate documentation, scholars have been able to identify Pagano’s principal areas of interest that deserve to be remembered even if only briefly: in a naturalistic (n. 400 photos); archaeological (n. 407); urban (n. 610); workplace (n. 180); travels and *reportage* (n. 406). Important to note however, that the vast majority of the 3,275 photos were in fact dedicated to the rural and urban landscapes²².

It is interesting to observe how the four photos of Pagano, selected by the Editorial Domus for publication in the volume *Fotografia* (1943) abovementioned, reflect, with their titles, these specific areas: *Vecchio ulivo*, *Muratore*, *Alla spiaggia* (fig. 2), *Casa a Ischia* (fig. 3)²³. These photographs, as all the others of his elaborate repertoire, demonstrate how Pagano used the camera to document architecture (photography at the service of architecture) to create unusual visual images (architecture at the service of photography) exploiting a series of technical and design details acquired with his personal experience.

Obvious are for example, the well-known images of *Casa a Ischia* (fig. 3) and *Roma E42*²⁴ (fig. 4) that, while reproducing actual architectural parts, evoke abstract or ephemeral geometric compositions.

As Pagano, other architects also used photography, however, according to preserved documentation in the archives, they exploited it less and nearly always for reasons relating to their personal professional career, to document their personal course of studies, and obviously for recreational reasons or personal interests.

Giovanni Michelucci (1891-1990) used it very little in design, while he used it in his personal life with the objective to develop and experiment his extraordinary visual ability²⁵.

Luigi Figini (1903-1984) who shared the studio with Pollini from 1929 to 1984, used photography as an informative element of the design and support to his representation. The documentation preserved in their archives,²⁶ in fact, take into account, primarily the professional activity of the two architects: views of the completed buildings or under construction, documentation of the sites that would have elaborated the constructions, filming of models and reproductions of graphic designs. Less consistent is the documentation related to their

²¹ Giuseppe Pagano, “Un cacciatore...”, 156.

²² De Seta, *Giuseppe Pagano...*, 10-11.

²³ *Fotografia. Prima rassegna...*, 25, 26, 145, 204.

²⁴ Federica di Castro, “Fotografia e Tipografia: immagini di Casabella”, in De Seta, *Giuseppe Pagano...*, 22.

²⁵ Giovanni Fanelli, *Giovanni Michelucci fotografo*, Catalogo della mostra (Fiesole, 4-27 May 2001), Mandragora; Fanelli, *Storia...*, 443.

²⁶ Ornella Selvafolta, “Un architetto moderno e la fotografia: Luigi Figini come caso-studio”, in Crippa, *Fotografia...*, 110-127.

personal interests. We know, however, that Figini took numerous photographs, experimenting compositions and new techniques, but above all, he loved to take photos of nature for both personal and scientific interest²⁷. Furthermore, numerous photos related to his travels, those frequent in the islands of the Mediterranean. The subjects photographed (nature, landscapes and constructions) reflect Figini's cultural background, but also his private world. After World War II, these important interests were resumed and studied in detail, allowing the architect to publish suggestive reflections and considerations relating to the Mediterranean architecture²⁸.



Figure 2. *Alla spiaggia*, Giuseppe Pagano. Source: *Fotografía. Prima rassegna...*, 1943.

²⁷ Selvafolta, “Un architetto...”, 121.

²⁸ Selvafolta, “Un architetto...”, 123; Luigi Figini, *L'elemento verde e l'abitazione* (Milan: Ed. Domus, 1950); Ornella Selvafolta, “El viaje de Luigi Figini a Ibiza en 1949”, in *Imaginando la casa mediterránea. Italia y España en los años 50*, ed. by Antonio Piza (Madrid: Ediciones Asimétricas, 2019), 124-127.



Figure 3. *Casa a Ischia*, Giuseppe Pagano. Source: *Fotografia. Prima rassegna...*, 1943.

Franco Albini (1905-1977), who developed his interest for photography from the early 1930's attracted by the magazine *Casabella*, used the camera primarily as a tool for leisure or to record his travels. The studies recently conducted relating to the photographic

material by him produced,²⁹ have evidenced how one part of these images are influenced by those of Pagano, both published in the well-known catalogue of the exhibition "Italian Rural Architecture" (1936) and in other magazines of that time³⁰. It is important to note how the subjects or the themes photographed by Albini, are often the same as those of Pagano, obviously seen as a perspective of a very different cultural "background". Gian Luigi Banfi (1910-1945), as mentioned, was one of the first architects (together with Enrico Peressutti, Giuseppe Pagano, Ernesto Carboni and Gio Ponti) to have welcomed and continued with the innovative ideas in the field of photography from the German region. His photos, preserved in his personal archives and produced between 1939 and 1944, range from architecture to design, from scenes of daily life to construction sites³¹.

In these reproductions, there are also signs of the Pagano-photographer, both in the adopted patterns (oblique perceptions, architectural details, textured surfaces, etc.) and in selected themes confirming the research towards an innovative photographic language.

Completely different instead, is the relationship that other architects had with photography, used primarily to illustrate their writings or as a tool to broaden their knowledge of the modern architectural culture. In short, a type of photography substantially related to publishing.

Worth remembering is that also in Italy starting from the early 1930's, appear illustrated anthological volumes relating to modern architecture. In this line of thought is that of Alberto Sartoris published in 1932, *The Elements of Functional Architecture*, followed by no less than five editions enhanced with further illustrations. The archives of Sartoris, C/- the Polytechnical Institute of Losanna, preserve a notable number of architectural photographic prints (exactly 8,250) gathered in the course of his career and mostly realized before 1940 by different architects and photographers³². Recent studies have evidenced how Sartoris did not limit himself to using photography only as a means of documentation, but considered the photographic image, as a unique tool for knowledge on an international scale as well as a means of propaganda of rational architecture³³.

²⁹ Stefano Setti, "Giuseppe Pagano e Franco Albini fotografi. Duplici sguardi", *Figure. Rivista della Scuola di Specializzazione in Beni Storico-Artistici*, n.º 3 (2017): 75.

³⁰ Among which *Fotografia, Natura, Tempo Illustrato, Cinema e Domus*.

³¹ Federico Alberto Brunetti, *Nell'obiettivo di un architetto moderno. Le fotografie di Gian Luigi Banfi* (BBPR), in Crippa..., 174-177; Gerardo Doti, *All'Università IUAV la mostra "Comporre, costruire, fotografare. L'architetto Gian Luigi Banfi fotografo razionalista"*, ed. by Giuliano Banfi and Serena Maffioletti, in <https://ilgiornaledellarchitettura.com/2019/02/27/nitidi-particolari-gian-luigi-banfi-fotografo-razionalista/>, consulted in August 2023).

³² Fanelli, *Storia...*, 354.

³³ Cinzia Gavello, "Alberto Sartoris e la fotografia: gli elementi dell'architettura funzionale e le mostre di architettura", *RSF, Rivista di studi di fotografia*, n.º 7 (2018): 58-78.

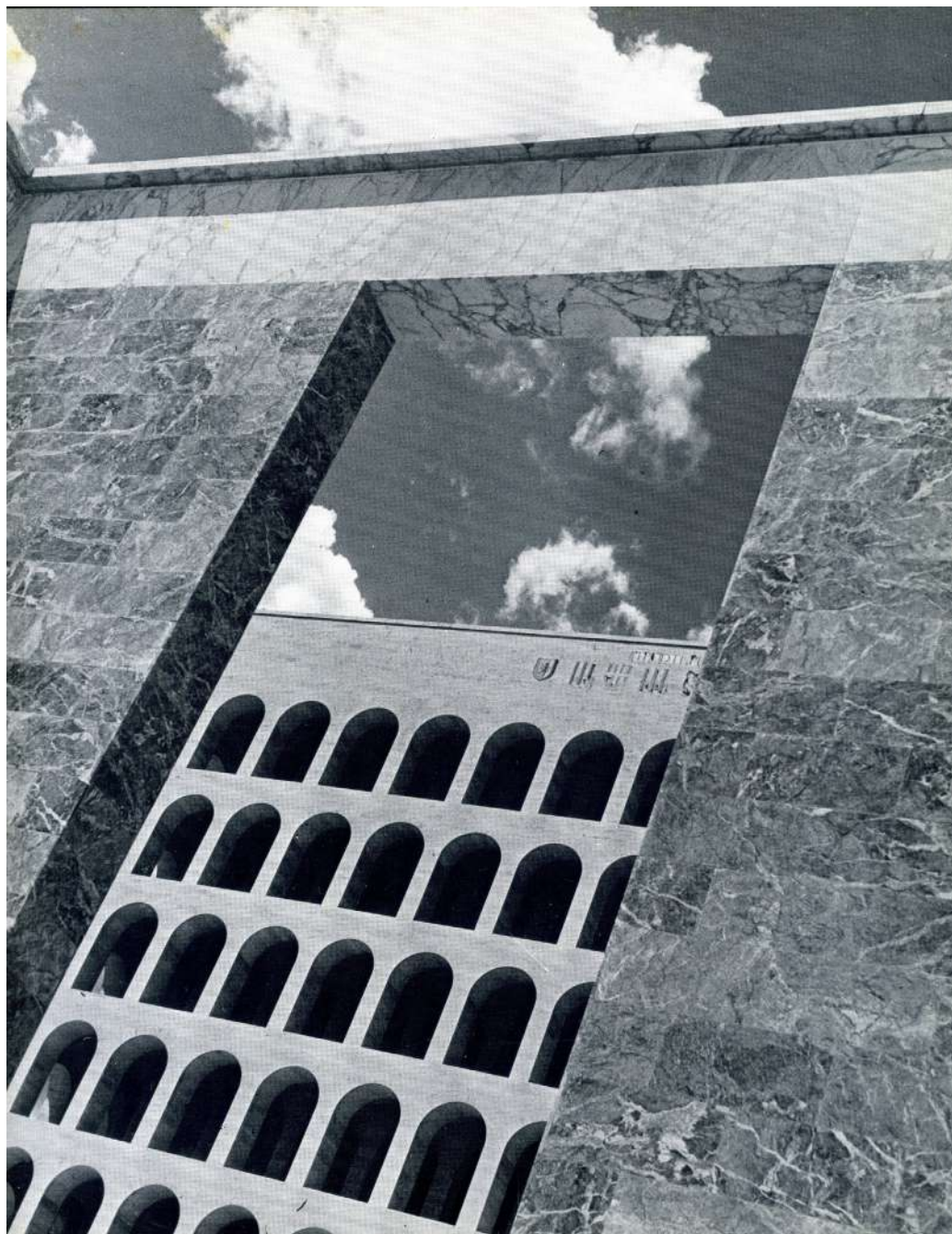


Figure 4. Roma E42, Giuseppe Pagano. Source: Archivio Pagano, vol. 67, n.º 17, in Cesare de Seta, *Giuseppe Pagano fotografo* (Milan: Electa, 1979)

Conclusions

With the beginning of the new photographic aesthetics during the course of the 1920's, numerous Italian architects started to use the camera as a tool for knowledge, documentation and experimenting, by following foreign orientations before, and then experimenting with autonomous research methods both in terms of representational and thematic techniques. For an architect-photographer, a photograph is above all, a visive document capable of setting the objective elements of reality, but also to evoke subjective feelings or to stimulate new research. From here, the necessity to put in order the photos taken, carefully preserved in a personal archive. This immense visual heritage is still today not studied sufficiently, while, on the other hand, it could offer numerous topics for reflection relating to the history of the modern movement in Italy and on the fundamental contribution offered by photography of the architects of that time and in particular by Giuseppe Pagano.



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