

INSPIRATION: VILLA NECCHI CAMPIGLIO

'It's just waiting for people to come in and have a great evening'

GARDEN ROOM
David Kohn in his favourite room. Its interwoven marble floor and distinctive window-sill garden escaped changes to the house in the 1950s.

The ambiguous, eclectic style of Portaluppi's Milanese villa keeps drawing **David Kohn** back to experience the magic of its interior

Pictures by Ed Tyler

Inspiration
Villa Necchi Campiglio
Architect
Piero Portaluppi
Completed
1932-5
Location
Milan

If you know of Piero Portaluppi's work you are likely to have a connection to Milan — as there's nothing published on the architect in English. I was introduced to his work by a Milanese friend and architect, Massimo Curzi, a few years ago while taking students on a study trip to the city. Massimo is interested in the role of crafts in domestic architecture, which was one of the reasons he showed me Villa Necchi. I remember it felt like an ancient house in a modern idiom. I've been back four times since: there's a kind of magic there and I find it very inspiring.

Portaluppi is not a pivotal historical architect like his near-contemporary Giò Ponti, who has been much more influential. His work is sometimes quite awkward while Ponti's is fluent and immediately engaging. Portaluppi's work is a more difficult prospect. Villa Necchi is quite testing as a building in parts, but I think it has something very special about it.

There's a tension in the house between architectures of the 19th century and the 20th century. Is it a proto-modernist villa or is it a 19th-century villa brought into the 20th century? Is it art deco? Ponti's work is far more heavily synthesised, but I quite enjoy the ambiguity of Portaluppi. The term eclectic is sometimes used pejoratively but I really appreciate the things that hover in between. It represents the promise of and the antidote to the modern project — sufficiently modern to not be a stiling 19th-century pastiche or

spatial straitjacket, but not throwing the baby out with the bathwater and becoming a mechanistic intellectual exercise in newness and eradicating distinctions.

Villa Necchi is in a very well-to-do part of Milan. It was commissioned by a wealthy family who made their money from sewing machines. I appreciate the kind of patronage where the client and architect clearly went into great detail about every aspect of the house. It's rare.

Formally, the house is simple, with no gymnastics. Rather, the architecture is fascinating for how it sets up nuanced relationships between different uses, between different times of day, and between inside and outside. Everything is choreographed to have a legible hierarchy. There's a pleasure imagined in every corner that is palpable. It would be lovely to live there, for a while.

Inside, there's a grand enfilade of rooms but within these are separate datums and the spaces of the rooms are often much larger than the social settings themselves which sit happily within them. The lessons for public and semi-public spaces at a different scale are evident. There's both intimacy and space for conviviality. It's just waiting for people to come in and have a great evening.

The entrances are significant because being enfilade rooms, there are no corridors and you have to pass through every room to get to the next. All the doorways have sliding screens that disappear into the wall so that it can be read either as one space or as separate rooms. There's a kind of theatre to it — the time of days and seasons are ascribed to the architecture... at a certain point it was time to come through from the garden room into, say, the library.

The garden room is one of my favourite rooms in the world. It is like a dream space. There are these very big expanses of window on two sides with a sliver of ferns ▶



FRONT FACADE

INSPIRATION: VILLA NECCHI CAMPIGLIO

between two planes of glass. It's like the garden is stored in the walls. If you sit down on the sofas, you can't see the ground outside so it feels like you're up in the trees. Everything in the room has been carefully detailed by Portaluppi. There's also a delicious Portaluppi-designed lapis lazuli table which almost borders on the kitsch, and a marble floor that appears woven like tartan. But it all reads as a delightful whole.

Heightening pleasure

In the library, the ceiling is quite brilliant. It has this asymmetry, this theme of weaving that you also see in the marble floors. It creates a sense of tension across the room. This is integral to one's perception of the form and weight and structure overhead, which seems as light as fabric, as though stretched.

The level of craftsmanship right down to the hinges is extraordinary — Portaluppi designed amazing details and dozens of people would have been required to make something this sophisticated. There's a huge amount of effort and know-how, and the architect would have had to co-ordinate all of that. It's a bit like conducting an orchestra to get the most out of all the different players.

Although it's very well made, it does not feel glutinous. This kind of luxury is elevated so that it has an intellectual value I imagine was highly appreciated by its patrons. There are other, less well-designed houses that foreground their expensive finishes and are only able to say: "Understand my wealth." Here, it feels like a background, a setting that is well made to heighten the comfort and pleasure of those using it.

There's the incredible, venerated staircase opposite the entrance; the mirrored diamond-patterned screens to the dining room; the goat's leather panelling on the dining room walls; the personalised Portaluppi-designed crockery; and the decorative radiator covers, for example.

The dining room is a place where the mix of architects involved — Portaluppi and Buzzi, who worked on the house after the second world war — is really problematic and it lapses into kitsch. Portaluppi's work can be on the edge, and while it feels like it can incorporate many different decorative styles it still needs a great eye to stop it falling apart.

I love the star window — from the outside you wonder which room it's in and then you go upstairs and find he's put it in the toilet. It's usually a no-no to put toilets on a representational facade, but here it's very playful. I also particularly like one of the

LIBRARY
The asymmetry of the ceiling contrasts with the strict formality of the bookshelves and furniture.



ENTRANCE HALL
Rooms lead off the entrance hall enfilade.

other bathrooms, which has an enormous porthole window surrounded by giant black tiles and feels so alien to the rest of the house.

In the work we do, I often try to find extremes — something very open yet very intimate and comfortable. A trick is to create smaller spaces through openings and niches like at Villa Necchi, where the architecture invites movement and change.

Tensions at play

Portaluppi was influenced by different things at different periods in his life. I try to look at different architectures in history and how these can be assimilated into a new language. Villa Necchi has also taught me how the divisions between rooms are important, and how the architecture is inflected to invite certain kinds of uses, whether it's a huge window overlooking the garden, or the lobby to a dining room where you gather before the doors are opened. It has informed my idea of architecture as background.

Despite the materials and the geometries, Villa Necchi forms a background, a setting for its inhabitants' use. But it's clearly not saying that a background has to be neutral and bland. Here it is rich and retains a kind of informality that allows you to choose to occupy it rather than feel that you're being put on show.

There are a few things my practice has referenced directly from Portaluppi's work. We have designed an interior for an apartment in Barcelona following a Portaluppi pattern but in different colours and framed glass spaces that are like internal winter gardens. We designed a scheme for an extension to a 18th century



SLIDING SCREENS
All the building's doorways have screens that slide into the walls allowing flexibility in the way spaces are divided.

barracks in Leamington Spa with a brick facade that's austere apart from an amoeba-shaped window that looks into the kitchen, a nod to the star window at Villa Necchi.

Our house in Norfolk for Stuart Shave, which was recently completed, has a sequence of rooms partly informed by the Villa Necchi. The house revolves around a large living room with expansive views across the Norfolk landscape. We introduced enough architecture to imply different social occasions within this room. All of the key rooms are without doors, with one space flowing into the next. For the refurbishment of a courtyard house beside the Forbidden City in Beijing we proposed a sequence of geometrically shaped enfilade rooms with rich finishes that reordered this traditional house.

On one of my previous visits earlier this year, I was working on an exhibition for the Milan Furniture Fair. I came here for lunch and the villa made me aspire to achieve something with a similar level of sophistication, and to have the patience and tenacity to sustain that in the design without it feeling too laboured. So that the work feels like there's been some pleasure in its making.

The Villa Necchi is not perfect, or rather it is not trying to be perfect. Instead, there are tensions at play in the architecture that make it challenging and invigorating. That was perhaps a source of pleasure for Portaluppi when designing the house. And so it is for me.

David Kohn was speaking to Pamela Buxton.



BLACK BATHROOM
Black tiles and a giant porthole window in one of several splendid bathrooms.

A HISTORY OF LOVE AND LUXURY



The villa, designed by Piero Portaluppi in the 1930s, has recently been restored and opened to the public.

Villa Necchi Campiglio was built for the wealthy Lombard industrialist family — Angelo Campiglio, his wife Gigina Necchi and her sister Nedda Necchi — between 1932-5. They commissioned Piero Portaluppi, a fashionable society architect, to design a home that was modern but at the same time luxurious, comfortable and suitable for their sociable, entertaining lifestyle.

Tomaso Buzzi updated the house in the 1950s, replacing some of Portaluppi's modern designs with his more traditional look, preferring antiques, draperies and elaborate chandeliers. When Gigina Necchi died in 2001 at the age of 99, she



bequeathed the house to the FAI (the Italian equivalent of the National Trust) and it was restored, and then reopened for visitors. It now houses a collection of mid 20th century Italian art that was not part of the original interior. It was also recently the location for the Tilda Swinton film I Am Love. www.fondoambiente.it

The villa was designed to suit the sociable lifestyle of its patrons.

PHOTO: PIERO PORTALUPPI

How Kohn picks up Portaluppi



1. In two recent projects, Flash, a temporary restaurant at the Royal Academy (left) and Skyroom the temporary events venue for the Architecture Foundation, Kohn has created large interiors for social occasions that hold within them smaller spaces for more private encounters.

2. The Carrer Avingó apartment in Barcelona follows a Portaluppi pattern but in different colours.

3. Stable Acre, a house in Norfolk for Stuart Shave, has a



sequence of rooms that draws on the layout at Villa Necchi. The house revolves around a large living room with expansive views across the landscape.

