

MODERN  
HERITAGE  
BETWEEN  
Venice, 4-5th May 2021  
CARE  
AND RISK

Edited by Maria Bonaiti, Sara Di Resta

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The International Conference “Modern Heritage between Care and Risk” (Venice, 4-5th May 2021) was held at Università Iuav di Venezia, in collaboration with Fondazione Le Corbusier and Docomomo Italia. The event offered an opportunity for an international exchange on crucial issues of documentation and preservation of the 20th century architectural heritage in a time of rapid social, cultural and political changes. The first day has been dedicated to “Ahmedabad. Laboratory of Modern Architecture”, a site-manifesto threatened today by the demolition of relevant dormitories of the Indian Institute of Management by Louis I. Kahn. The second day has been dedicated to “Living the Architectural Preservation. Modern Houses in the Conservation of 20th Century Heritage”, focused on recent conservation/restoration works of Modern authorial houses and neighbourhoods. The proceedings collect selected papers presented by international researchers and architects involved in the fields of History of Architecture and Architectural Preservation.

**Maria Bonaiti** is a Full Professor in History of Architecture at Università Iuav di Venezia. In her research Bonaiti investigates twentieth-century architecture, focusing on post-World War II architecture in Europe and the United States, with particular emphasis on the debate that develops around the complex relationship established in those years between modernity and tradition. Among her publications are the monograph *Louis I. Kahn 1901-1974, Electa, Milano 2012*, and *Le Corbusier in India. Villa Sarabhai, Ahmedabad, 1951-1956, Electa, Milano 2021*.

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## CONTENTS

- 10 Modern Heritage between Care and Risk  
*Maria Bonaiti, Sara Di Resta*
- 14 PART I. AHMEDABAD. LABORATORY OF MODERN  
ARCHITECTURE
- 16 Architects and Patrons: Gira and Gautam Sarabhai  
*Elisa Alessandrini*
- 36 Between Modernity and Tradition. Le Corbusier's Villa  
Sarabhai  
*Maria Bonaiti*
- 60 Between Indian Tradition and Corbusian Modernity: The  
Case of the Villa Hutheesing Shodhan  
*María Candela Suárez*
- 80 "L'argent est autre, le climat est autre, l'âme est autre". Le  
Corbusier Sanskar Kendra Museum in Ahmedabad  
*Elena Sofia Moretti*
- 104 Le Corbusier's Architectural Work, an Exceptional  
Contribution to the Modern Movement, a Serial and  
Transcontinental Inscription on the World Heritage List  
*Bénédicte Gandini*
- 118 Steel like straw. The Case of the Indian Institute of  
Management in Ahmedabad Designed by Louis I. Kahn  
*Alessandra Rampazzo*

- 140 Conservation Plans for Modern Architecture: The Case of IIM. A Conversation with Brynda Somaya  
*Alessandra Rampazzo, Brinda Somaya*
- 154 Ahmedabad: Architecture within Spirit and Body  
*Giovanni Leone*
- 178 PART 2. 'LIVING' THE ARCHITECTURAL PRESERVATION.  
MODERN HOUSES IN THE CONSERVATION OF 20TH  
CENTURY HERITAGE
- 180 *Introduction*
- 182 Inhabiting the Fragilities of Modern Heritage  
*Sara Di Resta*
- 202 Innovative Conservation Policies for 20th-Century  
Architectural Heritage  
*Ugo Carughi*
- 218 *Research Studies and Restoration Works*
- 220 Restoring the Interiors of Le Corbusier's Apartment-studio:  
Conserving Intimacy  
*Bénédicte Gandini*
- 242 Carlo Scarpa, the House for Loredana Balboni in Venice  
*Roberta Martinis, Francesco Magnani*
- 264 The Restoration of Villa Saracena  
*Paolo Verdeschi*

- 282 *Inhabitants*
- 284 Conservation vs Musealization. Notes for an anthropology  
of Inhabiting the Modern Heritage  
*Andrea Canziani*
- 306 Dialogue as an Action of Preservation  
*Giorgio Danesi*
- 322 Learning from the Inhabitants. A Conversation with  
Giovanni Vergani and Hannia Gomez on Casa La Scala  
(Villa Bloc) and villa Planchart  
*Sara Di Resta, Hannia Gomez, Giovanni Vergani*
- 340 *Art and Vision*
- 342 My House is a Le Corbusier  
*Cristian Chironi*

**16** DIALOGUE AS  
AN ACTION OF  
PRESERVATION

GIORGIO DANESI  
*Università Iuav di Venezia*

The term *dialogue* (from Latin: *dialōgus*, made of *dià*, “through”, and *logos*, “speech”) suggests a “formal discussion between two groups of people, especially when they are trying to solve a problem”<sup>①</sup>.

At the center of the dialogues between inhabitants and architects on the conservation of Modern houses there is the quest for solutions to all those issues that both parts recognize in these buildings nowadays.

We can identify two categories of communication: firstly, the dialogue between the inhabitants and the technicians in charge of preserving their manors; secondly, the imaginary interaction between the inhabitants and the architecture itself. This non-verbal contact is crucial to understand the tenants’ idea of *Living the Architectural Preservation* and, consequently, to suppose the potential future of the place in which they are living. The maintenance of a building may heavily depend on the connection that the owners establish with the piece of architecture they manage. On one side, the architect feels the responsibility of the conservation from the technical point of view. On the other hand, the owner should subscribe to the preservation strategies and act to support them. The protagonists of this dialogue should act together to guarantee protection to the architectural heritage that is under their own responsibility. The recognition



of tangible and intangible values strongly depends on the active role played by the current owners and inhabitants.

The interaction between man and architecture has to be interpreted as a listening process, constantly evolving over time. Therefore, the first approach between designers and clients can be searched in the past, studying the design proceedings of those houses recognized as architectural heritage nowadays. Most of the times, the legacy of the first owner embodies the bases on which the contemporary preservation practices have to be set.

In 20th-century, several times the cooperation between customer and designers gave life to heartfelt projects through shared design processes. In the heterogeneous tales of Modern houses, we can identify a privileged kinship between the wealthy clientele and the architects. The common cultural environment and interests in arts often fostered a cultured and proactive dialogue for the mansions' realization paths. For example: the strong friendship between Le Corbusier and the art collector Raul La Roche, owner of the house that *they built* ● in Paris, shows a communion of thought, intentions, and spirituality (Maison La Roche-Jeanneret, Paris, 1923–1925). Following, the controversial dynamic between Mies van der Rohe and his client Edith Farnsworth, woman of science and arts ● (Farnsworth House, Plano, 1945–51), which started as a strong relationship characterized by a sympathetic feeling ④, to result in a lawsuit against the architect just for economic reasons. Or, giving another example, the American businessman and philanthropist Edgar J. Kaufmann, who promoted the construction of the iconic Fallingwater House (Pennsylvania, 1935–37), giving Frank Lloyd Wright the opportunity to realize his far-sighted idea of building a manor over a waterfall ●.

Among these examples, there are the case studies that we selected with the purpose to interview ● the actual owners of two significant 20th-century houses: casa La Scala (or

villa Bloc) by Vittoriano Viganò in S. Felice del Benaco (1956-58) and villa Planchart by Gio Ponti in Caracas (1953-57) (fig. 1). The story of the first building well represents the cultured relation established between the architect and the original client ●: his friend André Bloc, who was the editor of some important art and architecture magazines highly appreciated by Viganò ● (L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, Art d'aujourd'hui, and Aujourd'hui: art et architecture). The second case study embodies one of the most interesting tales of *human connection* in Modern Architecture history: the long friendship between Gio Ponti and the couple Armando and Anala Planchart, the original owners of villa Planchart in Caracas. A particular aspect of its *construction story* lies in the conspicuous contribution that the clients made to defining the project design ●. They influenced the genesis of the idea, as well as the executive drafts ⑩. Their contribution extended into the construction phase, thus establishing a respectful and proactive dialogue with Ponti:

*“Vitruvius says that in architecture the client is the father, while the architect is the mother. The clients in Caracas have been exemplary parents. Not only due to the large amount of funding they decided to dedicate to their house, but also for the human sympathy, the rare discretion, the understanding, and the trust with which they accompanied the work of the architect, by multiplying his enthusiasm” ⑪.*

The importance of the inhabitant's role is also clearly visible in the way Gio Ponti characterizes his first sketches of villa Planchart: in the famous plan published in *Domus* in 1955 ⑫, the designer emphasizes the connection between humans and architecture by drawing silhouettes that populate the ground floor of his project, giving life to the interiors even before they were built ⑬ (fig. 2).

The double interview reported in this volume establishes a proactive dialogue with the current owners of the two well-known houses by Vittoriano Viganò and Gio Ponti (figs. 3-4). Giovanni Vergani gives us his point of view as private owner of casa La Scala, his family's holiday home since he was younger, when his father bought it from André Bloc. Hannia Gomez, president of Docomomo Venezuela, testifies her experience as curator of villa Planchart, fulfilling the role of overseeing the property. The interviews give us two different perspectives, carrying out a valuable discussion on many aspects of *living the Architectural Preservation*. The aim is to understand how these houses are currently used, what factors changed the original conditions, and, in particular, the difficulties to take care of these icons of the 20th century in a society that has quickly changed.

A considerable topic is the *change of use*. None of the actual owner lives the buildings continuously: Giovanni Vergani still uses casa La Scala with his family, but they stay there only for short holiday periods. On the other side, Hannia Gomez does not live in villa Planchart, even though she often visits it, as it is the headquarter of the Planchart Foundation <sup>(14)</sup>.

These residences were designed observing certain standard, such as the number of inhabitants and the type of family hosted. If conditions change, the building's capability to adapt is not obvious. There are some limits to possible modifications, in order not to overturn excessively the original project. We cannot expect the building to adapt easily to new needs, without renouncing some of its characteristics. Lord Peter Palumbo, who lived in Farnsworth House for 24 years (1972-1996), declared: "People ask me how practical is to live in. As a home for a single person, it performs extremely well. It was never intended for anything else" <sup>(15)</sup>. Giovanni Vergani clarifies us which was his family's paradoxical solution in order to live in casa La Scala without drastically changing the main features of the house: "going

somewhere else” ⑯), using the farmhouse for the keeper in the same property as sleeping area. He also describes the technical problems he found about heat systems, thermic assets, and fixtures frames. Should we change our contemporary expectations to adapt to the house, or is the house that should somehow adapt its characteristics to *the new modernity* that we face today? What do we ask to these buildings in terms of comfort and security? They were built in an age of experimentation, and some technical issues were not foreseen even by the original designers: Philip Johnson, who built his own residence surrounded by glass in Connecticut (Glass House, 1948-49), used the building to sleep just for a short period, in which he realized that its big window frames had insulation problems ⑰). Later, he designed new service buildings in the garden, and he began using a brick house as a ‘bedroom’, recognizing how problematic could be the light passing through the full-wall windows ⑱).

As evidenced, casa La Scala has maintained a private use over the years, except for episodic temporary occasions (as fashion photo sets ⑲), whereas villa Planchart hosts many cultural events, and no one lives in the house anymore. Guests reach the place to enjoy concerts, temporary art exhibitions, or to visit the building itself, with its valuable collection of furniture, precious orchids, and works of art. Hannia Gomez reminds us how challenging is to offer these events to the public: it represents a challenge not only for the obvious management difficulties in order to ensure respect and protection for the piece of architecture, but also for the lack of funds. This is the reason why the private foundation is always looking for international collaborations, giving life to another kind of exchange: the dialogue between institutions with the common purpose to preserve cultural heritage. A recent example is the agreement undertaken by Fondazione Planchart with Docomomo Venezuela

and Università Iuav di Venezia, aimed at drawing up the *Conservation Management Plan* of villa Planchart<sup>20</sup>.

The following interviews with the current owners show that these buildings' needs are constantly evolving, in line with the changes of contemporary society. The role of inhabitants is to accept these conditions and manage the physical modifications over the years, without losing the tangible and intangible legacy received by the previous owners. The hope is that, in future, transformations will be wisely managed through cultural projects concerning the evolution of human needs, instead of being completely rejected. In this perspective, Modern houses should be interpreted as objects in continuous transformation: using the words of Vittoriano Viganò, "A piece of architecture is nothing more than a dialogue, or a support for endless dialogues. In this sense, [the building] is always an unfinished thing, not a concluded one"<sup>21</sup>.

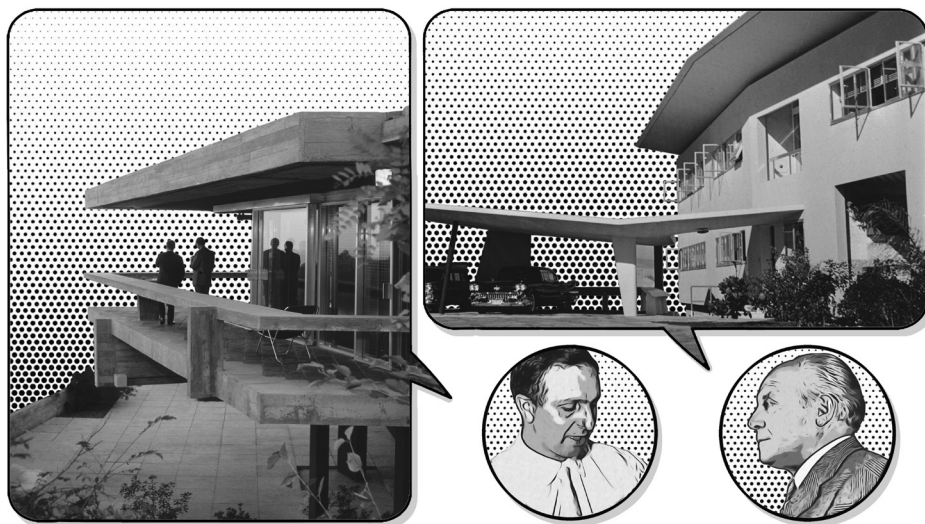


fig. 1. In the speech balloons: on the left, casa La Scala, San Felice del Benaco (IT), and a picture of the architect Vittoriano Viganò. On the right, villa Planchart, Caracas (VEN), and a picture of the designer Gio Ponti. (Image editing by © G. Danesi. Original documents: © Iuav Archivio Progetti, Fondo Giorgio Casali)

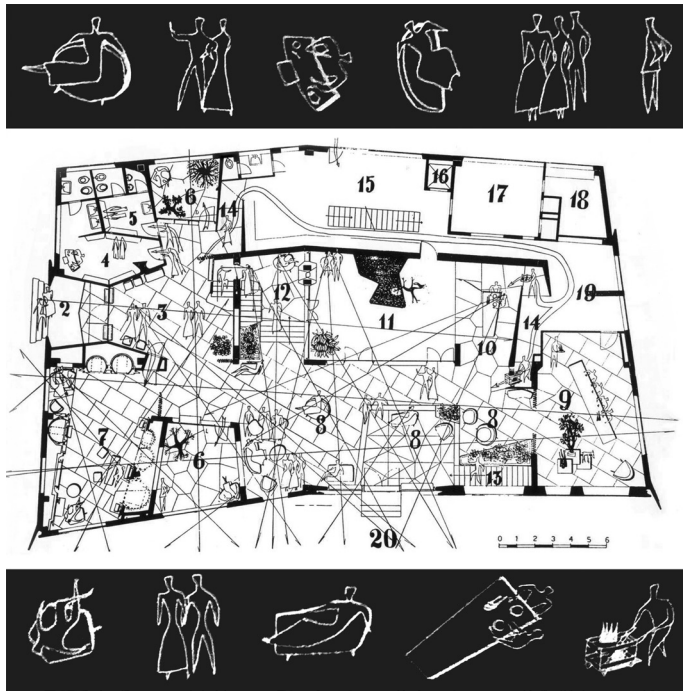


fig. 2. Gio Ponti, Villa Planchart, Caracas, plan of the ground floor, published in *Domus* 303, 1955. (Image editing by © G. Danesi)



fig. 3. Casa La Scala, living room,  
S. Felice sul Benaco, n.d. (© Iuav  
Archivio Progetti, Fondo Giorgio  
Casali)





fig. 4. Fig. 4 Villa Planchart, living room, Caracas, 1954. (© Iuav Archivio Progetti, Fondo Giorgio Casali)

## ENDNOTES

- ①: Definition of the word “Dialogue”,  
Oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com.
- : “Dear Raul La Roche, this is the house that we built 37 years ago...”. Le Corbusier. (1960). [Dedication to the friend Raul La Roche on a copy of the book *L’Atelier de la Recherche Patiente*], E-2-7 (12). Fondation Le Corbusier (from now on FLC), Paris, France. Trans. by the author. The document is mentioned in: Di Resta (2016, p. 21).
- : Vandenberg (2003, p. 15).
- ④: National Trust for Historic Preservation,  
Edithfarnsworthhouse.org, 2022.
- : “Mr. Wright and Mr. Kaufmann had great rapport from the start, each with genuine admiration for each other” (Hoffmann, 1993, p. 12).
- : The interviews are reported further on in this volume, in the chapter: “Learning from the inhabitants. A conversation with Giovanni Vergani and Hannia Gomez on casa La Scala (villa Bloc) and villa Planchart”.
- : Piva and Cao (2008, pp. 36-37).
- : Many of these magazines are conserved by the Archivio del Moderno in Mendrisio, where the main Viganò archival collection is (archiviodelmoderno.org).
- : Cf. Danesi (2021, pp. 116-131).
- ⑩: Cf. Gomez (2009, pp. 114-134).
- ⑪: Ponti (1961, p. 2). Trans. by the author.
- ⑫: Ponti (1955, pp. 8-14).
- ⑬: Cf. Porcu and Stocchi (2003, p. 9).
- ⑭: Villa Planchart is not used as private home since 2004, when Anala Planchart died. The woman had already created the Planchart Foundation in 1970, with the purpose to

preserve the building in its original conditions. After her death, it became the headquarter of the private Institution.

⑮: Palumbo (2003, p. 5).

⑯: Conversation with Giovanni Vergani, further on in this volume.

⑰: Frampton (2002, p. 106).

⑱: Mason (2007).

⑲: During Summer 2021, outdoor spaces of casa La Scala have been used as a fashion photo set for Woolrich Spring/summer 2022 collection. Cf. Felicori (2021).

⑳: Cf. Canziani and Di Resta (2020, pp. 195-210). See also: Heritage in danger. Conservation Plans between protection and emergency in Villa Planchart case, International Research Project, Università Iuav di Venezia, co-founded by Docomomo Venezuela. In collaboration with Fundación Anala y Armando Planchart and Docomomo International ISC Education + Training, AA 2019-20. Scientific responsible: S. Di Resta. Research fellow: G. Danesi.

㉑: Viganò (1994, p. 29). Trans. by the author.

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