



THE ACCADEMIA NAZIONALE DI SAN LUCA
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CESARE CATTANEO 1912 - 1943

PENSIERO E SEGNO NELL'ARCHITETTURA

Thursday 4th October 2012 at 11.30am
Exhibition opening: Thursday 4th October 2012 at 6pm

The exhibition will be open to the public from 5th October - 17th November 2012
opening hours: Monday-Friday 10am-7pm, Saturday 10am-2pm

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This year marks the centenary of the birth of the Como-born rationalist architect **Cesare Cattaneo** (1912-1943). Only 31 years old when he died, Cattaneo left an indelible mark in the form of a handful of major buildings (the Garbagnati infant school at Asnago, the Camerlata fountain, the Casa d’Affitto at Cernobbio and the Palazzo dell’Unione Lavoratori dell’Industria in Como), as well as numerous architectural designs which are exceptional in their extraordinary sculptural experimentation, and a number of particularly acute pieces of architectural criticism in which he outlined the innovative concept of “polydimensionality”.

At the heart of the exhibition, which is curated by Pierre-Alain Croset, are over 160 sketches and original drawings, which illustrate the evolution of Cattaneo’s architectural thinking – an approach to architecture which is characterised by a powerful tension between ideas. Here the act of drawing becomes, to all intents and purposes, a form of writing, in the sense that it is the graphic transcription of an idea: many of his sketches reveal the intensity and quickness of a design process that generated variations, changes of mind and sometimes-radical alternatives. This analogy between drawing and writing forms what is effectively a leitmotiv for the exhibition, evident both in the selection of the material to be exhibited and in the design of the exhibition’s layout. In fact the exhibition layout suggests two different levels of reading, clearly separating the original material, which is exhibited on the

tables and in the display cases, from the printed material which is displayed on the walls of the exhibition space, and which includes texts, quotes, photographs, films and photographic enlargements representing architectural details. The drawings, which are either single or grouped by series, are accompanied by brief explanatory texts to help visitors decipher their specific meaning. In turn, the prints displayed on the walls form a “visual narrative” connecting the drawings, the critical texts, the recurring stylistic themes to be found in many of Cattaneo’s projects, fragments of individual drawings and examples of details from his built work.

The exhibition is divided into two sections. The first presents a retrospective selection of sketches and original drawings, representing Cattaneo’s student years as well as the evolution of his architectural oeuvre (which was produced in the space of only eight years), and illustrating how, in an extraordinarily short period of time, the architect proved capable of revolutionising his own research. An architecture of notable intensity and rigour, with rapid and surprising shifts in its use of an abstract language which over the years became ever-more personal and original, Cattaneo’s work owes what is only an apparent debt to the work of his contemporaries Terragni, Le Corbusier or Richard Neutra.

The second section offers a more detailed analysis of Cattaneo’s most famous building, the Casa d’Affitto at Cernobbio (1938-39), with original drawings and models, new models, old photographs, and images of the building in its current state, along with videos that have been produced specifically for this exhibition. The aim is to achieve a closer acquaintance with this house that is so extraordinary both in the quality of its sculptural presence and in the particularly refined way it is inserted into the historical context. Unique and little-known details emerge of the complex and troubled story of its conception and construction. In particular, the first (relatively unknown and rarely-studied) phase of the project is illustrated in detail, as are the spectacular mechanisms that open and close the windows and the sliding shutters in accordance with the idea that living space should be dynamic.

CESARE CATTANEO (1912-1943)

A leading member of Como’s second generation of rationalists and a friend and colleague of Giuseppe Terragni and Pietro Lingeri, Cesare Cattaneo is notable for his remarkable experiments with plasticity and for the detailed theoretical research that he applied with great constructive and functional coherence. Graduating in architecture from the Politecnico di Milano, and already having acquired practical experience in the sector, in 1935 Cattaneo began work as an independent professional architect, constantly in touch with the leading exponents of the rationalist movement in Lombardy as well as with the group of abstract artists who were based in Como, in particular Manlio Rho and Mario Radice. Covering a period of only eight years, in a time of political and economic upheaval, his intense professional career included the realisation of astonishing “episodes of expressivity” such as the Giuseppe Garbagnati infant school in Asnago (1935-1937) with Luigi Origoni, the Camerlata fountain (1935-1936) with Mario Radice, the house at Cernobbio (1938-1939) – which has been defined the “masterpiece of polydimensional abstraction”, and the headquarters of the Unione Lavoratori dell’Industria in Como (with Pietro Lingeri and Luigi Origoni, 1938-1942), which Kenneth Frampton has described as “the most brilliant solution to the themes of composition and typology addressed by the rationalists of Como, so much so that one might even maintain that it represents one of the principle source of inspiration for the so-called autonomous architecture [that was a product of the] ‘Italian school’.” Cattaneo’s premature death on 24th August 1943, at only 31 years of age, interrupted his ongoing work on numerous projects and designs. Expressed with great clarity in the essay *Giovanni e Giuseppe. Dialoghi di architettura* (Milan, 1941), his poetics are of particular theoretical importance thanks to the innovative concept of “polydimensionality” which marks him out in the panorama of the rationalist architecture of the period.

An initiative organised by:



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