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A practitioner re-evaluates the critical commentary on the Casa Rustici in Milan following a week long stay in the sometimes overlooked Rationalist work.

Inside out: observations on Terragni

Simon McCormack

Casa Rustici was a building I admired when I lived in Milan in the mid 1980s, so the opportunity to stay there for a week when it registered on a list of apartments for rent was appealing *[1]*. Before I undertook the visit I was well aware of the prestige of the building as an important Rationalist project, and after some initial research became intrigued by the divergent accounts of it given by different commentators. The best known critique of Terragni's work is Eisenman's investigation of its abstract composition.[1] Patetta exposes the constraints on the design process imposed by the building codes, while others emphasise the historical precedents that underpinned the Rationalist project.[2] Vitale and Bell provide an insight into the ambiguous character of the central court or lightwell of the building.[3] What I hope to add to these is an account which addresses not just the abstract quality of the building, but also its phenomenal qualities, and its social and historical origins. My intention is that this material will present the building in a way which is relevant for current practice.

Popularly known as 'the Blackbird's Cage', Casa Rustici (1933–35) is Giuseppe Terragni's most impressive and innovative Milanese building.[4] It is one of five apartment blocks designed by Terragni in collaboration with Pietro Lingeri over a two year period. These were built for developers, and consequently their form was constrained by the need to reconcile commercial demand with new development and planning controls. These Milanese projects have tended to be eclipsed by the buildings in Como: the Casa del Fascio, Novocomum apartments, Sant'Elia primary school and Giuliani-Frigerio apartments; and unbuilt projects such as the Danteum *[2]*. The critique of the Milan projects offered by Daniele Vitale is typical.[5] He describes the apartment blocks as '"middle-of-the-road" in both social and qualitative terms, aimed at a predominantly bourgeois market'. He goes on to commend Terragni, who '[...] comes across through these particular buildings as a competent professional; disenchanted, ready to compromise with existing constraints and ready to take on board the most mundane, everyday architectural solutions only to superimpose upon them a highly refined and cultural employment of architectural language.' A measure of the obstacles which Terragni faced designing Casa Rustici is that the scheme was rejected by the authorities nine times: the city engineers department did not accept his unusual interpretation of building regulations and the building committee took exception to the aesthetic of the building.[6]

Originally the brief for the trapezoidal site eventually occupied by the Casa Rustici was for a two-storey villa.[7] In the final scheme this is transformed into a penthouse located above six storeys of residential and commercial accommodation *[3–7]*. The building comprises two parallel blocks, each accommodating two, or sometimes three, apartments on each floor and linked with spectacular '*balconate a ponte*' (bridge balconies), to form the frontage onto the broad boulevard of Corso Sempione. Rather than follow the oblique line of the side street, Terragni extends the accommodation of the apartments on this side into a slender full-height wing or tower *[8]*. Commercial premises occupy the upper ground level and part of the lower ground level. The apartment for the owner of the building is set amid roof terraces and gardens: living areas above one block are linked to bedrooms above the other by a corridor bridging the court, and creating a lateral axis which extends into enfilade reception rooms *[6, 9, 11]*.

At street level a glazed steel entrance screen is formed in three sections. These can be automatically lowered into the ground, to provide access for pedestrians and, via the side ramps, for vehicles. When the concierge is off duty the screens are raised and access is through a gate in the central section. The ramps lead down to several garages, service and plant areas. Paired flights of entrance steps lead from Corso Sempione to a raised terrace monitored by the centrally located concierge's office and sheltered by an expansive glass block canopy *[12]*. On each side, entrances to the side blocks are served by stairs, small passenger and external service lifts. Marble lines the entrance lobbies. The lift car, a modern reconstruction, is small and cabin-like with timber panelling and glazed doors; beyond is the main stair. Characteristically for Terragni, the stair balustrade is formed from cast glass panels in a steel frame with a heavy black lacquered timber handrail *[13]*. As Vitale

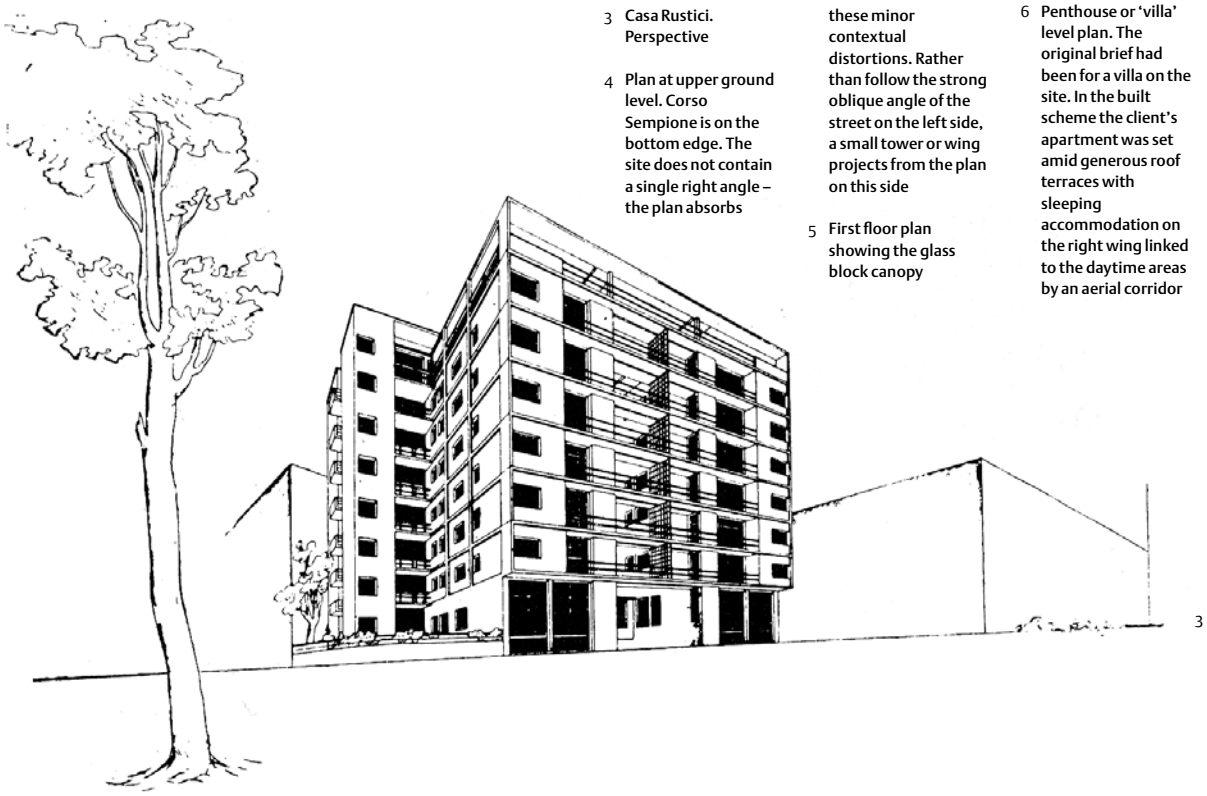
1 Casa Rustici seen from Corso Sempione. Note the oblique side street on the left, which forms an angled edge to the site

2 Giuliani-Frigerio apartments, Como by Giuseppe Terragni. Detail of the facade illustrating the typically rich material character of Italian Rationalism. The surface is clad in small pieces of white marble

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points out, this is typical of the period: 'the internal courtyard is reduced from an "architectural statement" to a "technical space" for daylighting and the staircases become less important as they are substituted by lifts, etc.'[8]

The dramatic modelling and monumental character conveyed in the high contrast, tightly cropped contemporary photos of Casa Rustici are inevitably diluted in reality, not least by haphazard subsequent development, which dwarfs the building and contributes to Corso Sempione's disparate character *[14]*. Nonetheless, the gravity defying slenderness of the balconies remains a striking three-dimensional composition: the span between the blocks is extended visually past setbacks in the accommodation and, at each end, a marble band on the facade *[15]*. The residential accommodation and associated linking balconies project forward from



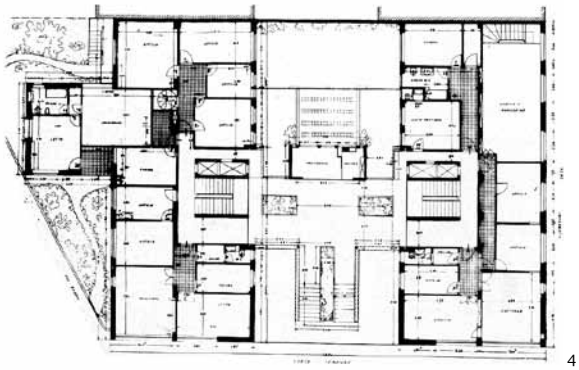
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3 Casa Rustici. Perspective

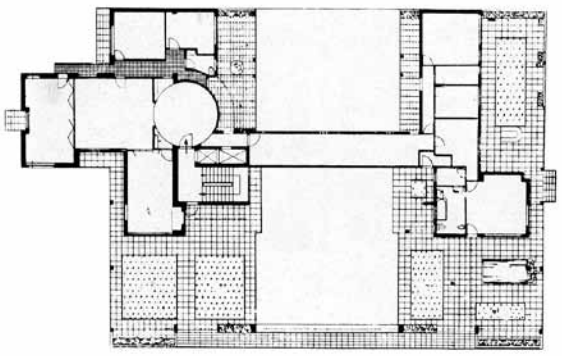
4 Plan at upper ground level. Corso Sempione is on the bottom edge. The site does not contain a single right angle – the plan absorbs these minor contextual distortions. Rather than follow the strong oblique angle of the street on the left side, a small tower or wing projects from the plan on this side

5 First floor plan showing the glass block canopy

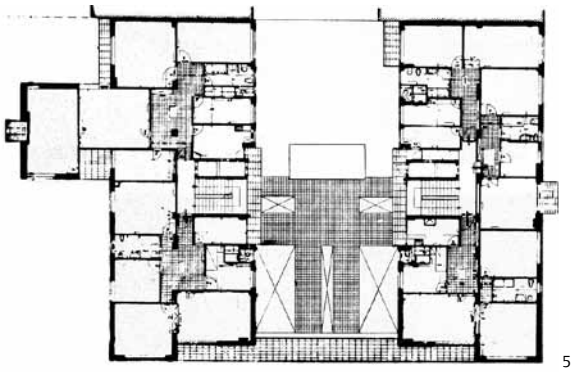
6 Penthouse or 'villa' level plan. The original brief had been for a villa on the site. In the built scheme the client's apartment was set amid generous roof terraces with sleeping accommodation on the right wing linked to the daytime areas by an aerial corridor



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7 The tiny polemical diagram that Terragni published beside the floor plans for Casa Rustici. His proposal is juxtaposed with the layout expected by the new building codes, which Terragni rejected and has crossed out

8 The side of the building 'folds out' towards the oblique side street

9 The roof garden. The aerial corridor to the bedrooms is in the centre of the picture

10 View from the back of the court

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the lower storeys framing the entrance, to create a frontal emphasis *[16]*. At roof level the penthouse apartment is set back from the perimeter and the top edge of the perimeter frame is exposed for the full width of the building; an abstract cornice that unifies the whole composition *[17]*.

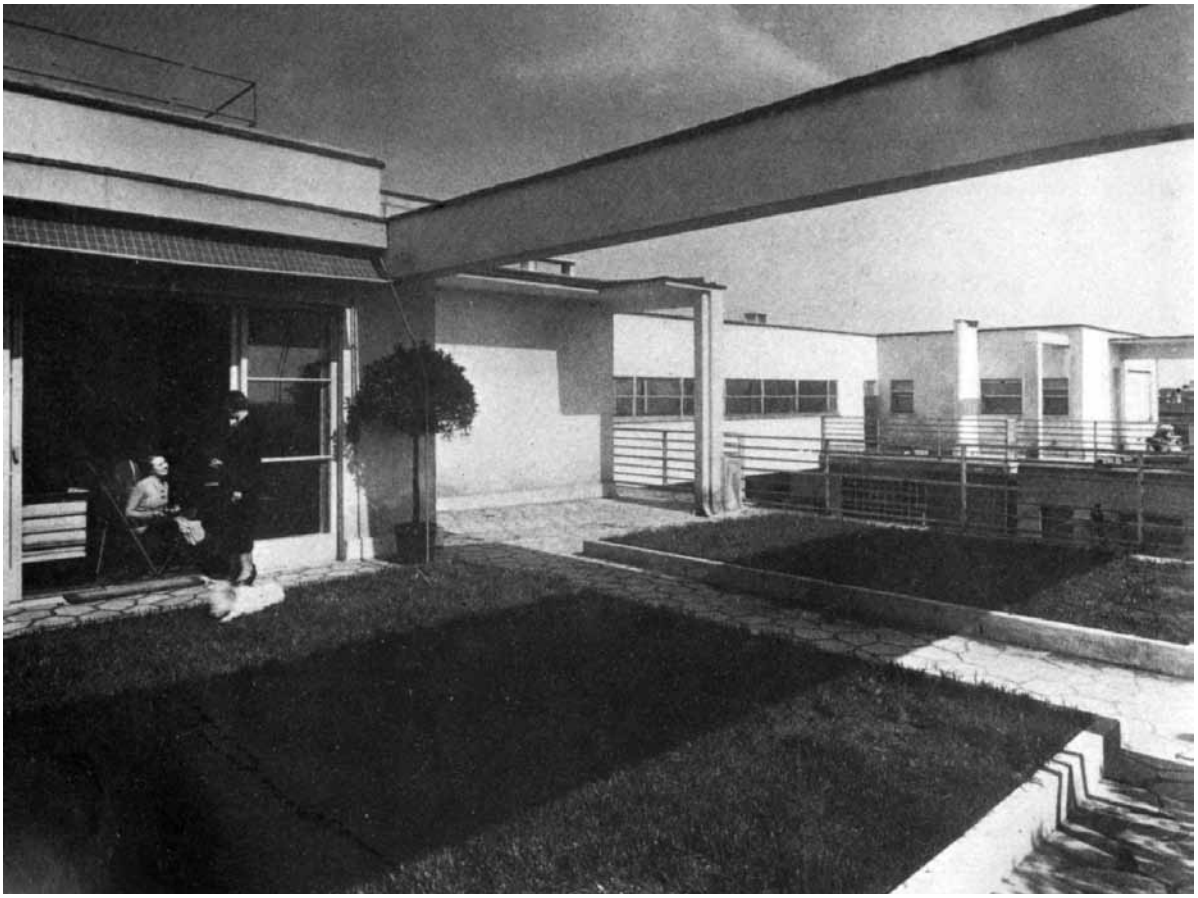
The *balconate a ponte* are the defining feature of Casa Rustici, plausibly associated by Dennis Doordan with bridges linking each floor of Sant'Elia's rhetorical skyscrapers to their lift towers *[18]*.[9] Casa Rustici was designed after Terragni had completed work on the Sant'Elia inspired monument to the fallen in Como and major exhibitions of the Futurist's work in Como and Milan. The formal similarities are striking, however, the balconies were also a consequence of the decision to develop two parallel blocks at right angles to the main street. Development constraints limited the height of new



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buildings and required that courtyards had a minimum surface area. There was also an expectation that the block would follow the geometry of the street. Terragni's defiance of this formula is illustrated in diagrams published alongside his own solution, which show the officially sanctioned approach scored through with a large cross *[7]*. Paradoxically, the city engineers considered the balconies compromised the court while the planners did not like service accommodation exposed on the principal frontage. Bell perceptively describes the unusual effect of the balconies, which '[...] seem to span the voided center of the building [to create] a space more akin to a vacuum than to a simple absence'.[10]

By contrast, the side elevations have a more static character and are defined by an elaborated grid of marble framing and solid panels with rendered infill, which characterise Casa Rustici as a Rationalist building *[8, 16]*. Doordan explains: 'the grid emerged as the emblematic feature of northern Italian Rationalism in the 1930s. [...] the grid symbolized the Rationalists' commitment to a uniform yet flexible architecture, predicated on a conception of rational geometric order rather than (to cite a favourite Futurist phrase) "lyrical intuition" or personal whimsy.'[11] At street level the commercial accommodation is distinct from the residential accommodation and entirely faced in marble, while the penthouse is set back to fully expose the frame. This elaborate transition from solid to permeable spatial enclosure occurs not only from the base to the top, but also from the sides to the front. Unlike the street frontage, which is highly articulated, both courtyard elevations are neutrally faced in render. Tight control is relaxed and surfaces are disrupted by projecting flues and the unresolved junction between the service balcony structure and the bridge corridor above *[19]*.

11 The aerial corridor spanning between the day and night accommodation located on top of each wing of the building

12 Entrance

13 Stair

14 The main frontage overlooking Corso Sempione (contemporary photo)

15 The main frontage from Corso Sempione (2009)



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Italian Rationalists were preoccupied with the architectural past and Casa Rustici has been subject to several interpretations which rely on this interest. Schumacher, for example, finds the tripartite organisation of the building (solid-void-solid volumes, with facing stairs on either side of the court), reminiscent of the Venetian palace type.[12] He suggests Terragni's treatment of the balconies is derived from the '*portego*', or galleried central bay of the Venetian palace, in which flanking rooms are



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inset rhetorically. Schumacher eulogises the 'frame' in Terragni's buildings: 'the frame – as in Palladio's Palazzo Chiericati in Vicenza – recalls the colonnade of the ancient town; it announces that the new Roman Empire will once again boast streets of colonnades like the fora of ancient Rome or the canals of Venice.'[13] Perhaps there is a more prosaic explanation: in Italian 'palazzo' also means 'block of flats'. Should it come as a surprise that the arrangement of domestic accommodation in urban blocks may produce archetypal forms? Even less convincing than Schumacher's argument is Mantero's suggestion that the organisation of the building is reminiscent of the Romanesque basilica, with three aisles and a lateral bell tower.[14] Surely the court is experienced as a void – a utilitarian space that cannot be occupied and is not comparable to the nave of a church. His description of the projecting lateral block as a 'tower' is adopted by others, but is less persuasive than Schumacher's suggestion that it should be read as a 'folding out' of the side facade *[8]*.[15]

Our apartment, in the east corner of the building and with a single bedroom balcony overlooking the lightwell, was the most basic – all the other apartments are provided with balconies linked to their living spaces and overlooking the street. Comparison with the published plans of the building, and consideration of changes to the floor finish (both to the hall floor, which is formed of richly coloured fragments of marble, and to the parquet in the rooms), led us to the conclusion that the layout of the flat had been altered over the years *[20]*. These modifications had been easily accommodated within the original concrete



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16 The side of the building. Note the projecting zone of the balconies articulated on the left-hand side. The repeated pattern of windows set into varying backgrounds of marble or render and left as void on the top floor is a typical Terragni compositional device

17 Panels of sky are framed by the '*balconate a ponte*' in the frontal view

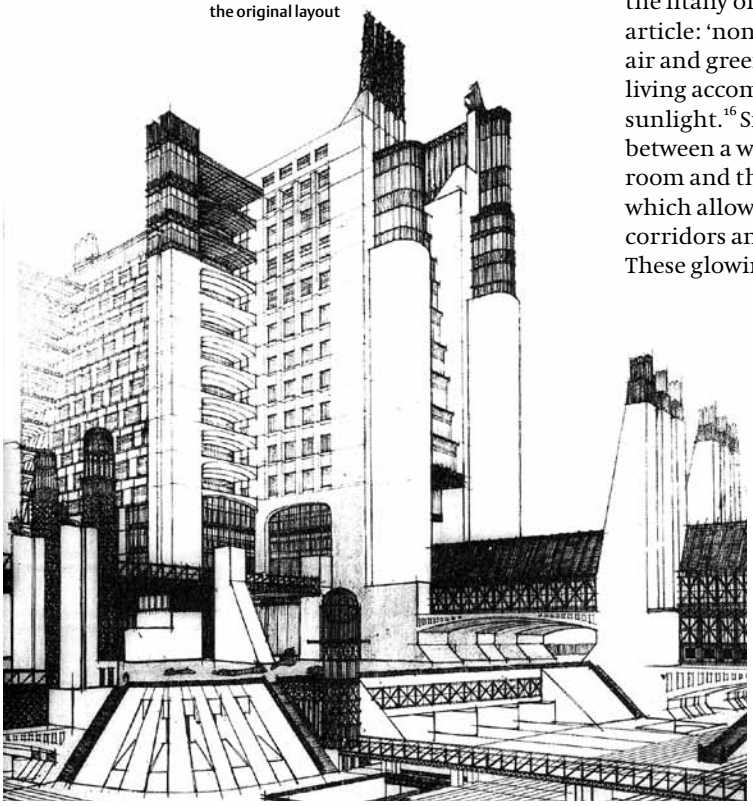
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18 Sant'Elia, casa gradinate for the Citta Nuova, 1914. The bridges linking the lift towers to the building may have been Terragni's inspiration for the '*balconate a ponte*'

19 Casa Rustici. The interior of the court has a prosaic character

20 Small pieces of marble line the hall floor. More crudely laid areas may indicate changes to the original layout

structure. High ceilings and cellular planning, with conventional window layouts, create a comfortably scaled, if unexceptional interior. Contemporary photographs published of the building tended to neglect the ordinary apartment interiors in favour of the freer form penthouse apartment and the elegant furnishing of the concierge's office *[21]*. Etlin repeats the litany of a contemporary *Rassegna di Architettura* article: 'non-service' rooms offer the benefits of 'sun, air and greenery' and the front balconies protect living accommodation from direct south-western sunlight.[16] Similarly he describes sliding glass doors between a wide entrance foyer and its adjacent living room and the staggered arrangement of rooms which allows 'the elimination of long blind corridors and the better aeration of the rooms'. These glowing descriptions should be treated with



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circumspection, since he also describes the lower ground level offices receiving 'light and air from the small garden areas of the open internal courtyard' – this level in fact contains garaging. Despite the abstract composition of the exterior, the fenestration is well detailed, with integral roller shutters and timber windows set into the openings incorporating a recess below for the radiator *[22]*. Marble cills provided with a drip project beyond the external wall face. Following the typical nineteenth-century pattern of construction technology, Terragni ensured that the building is properly weathered, a far cry from the naive detailing of Early Modern architects elsewhere.



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21 The streamlined original interior of the concierge's office

22 Windows are well detailed with marble cills and integrated shutters

23 View from the bedroom balcony across the narrow court

24 View out from the court. Balconies on the right provided discreet access for domestic staff and deliveries via the service lift

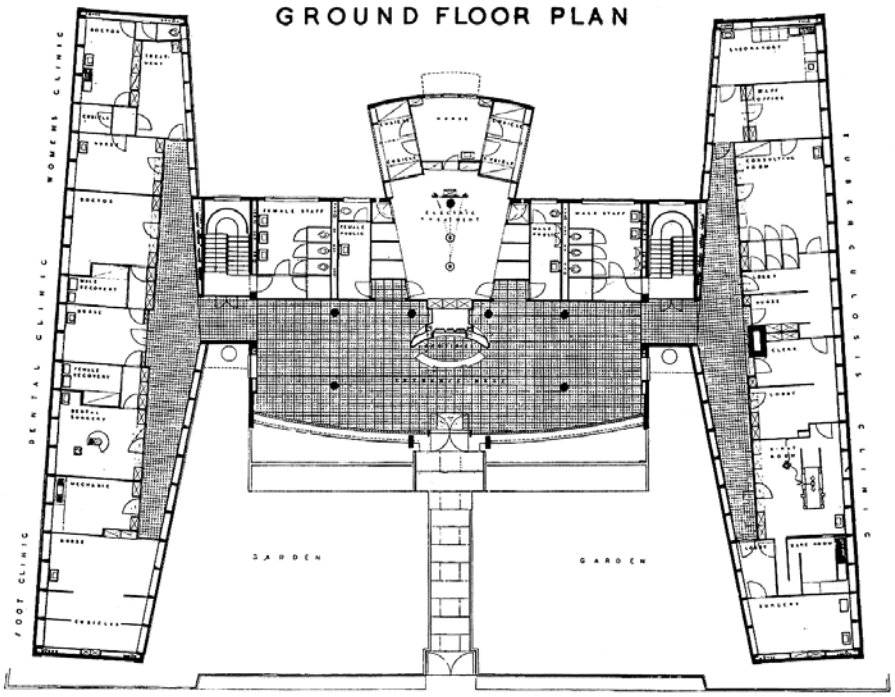
25 Oblique view from Corso Sempione, in which the sides of the service accommodation lining the court are more visible. It was this view that the planners objected to, feeling that it was not appropriate for the main frontage

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Although our bedroom had a balcony with French windows providing a welcome release from the confines of the apartment, this was compromised by the proximity of neighbours across the narrow lightwell *[23]*. The wide balconies that run across the glass block screens of the stairwells are even more utilitarian in character *[24]*. They originally provided discreet access for domestic staff and deliveries from the service lift to the 'back doors' of the kitchens. Viewed from our apartment the heroism of the '*balconate a ponte*' was tempered by these balconies, and the glass block and asphalt roofs which define the character of the court. The form and materiality of the building also created an intense acoustic. Sounds of the city were transmitted into the interior with uncanny directness, whether street noise and the clash of trams in the echo chamber formed by the parallel blocks, or the nocturnal pacing of an upstairs neighbour.

More than seventy years after it was completed, what lessons does Casa Rustici offer for current practice? The form, scale and materials engage inventively and sympathetically with the city. The interplay of wall and frame elements articulated with different materials, creates a subtly scaled composition. The bravura gesture of the '*balconate a ponte*' exploits the private space fronting the apartments to mediate between the public domain

26, 27 Finsbury Health Centre, Tecton, 1935–38. Tecton's building shares many features with Casa Rustici: an axial entrance serving paired wings and stairs, with a roof terrace and glass blocks associated with the entrance. Although both buildings incorporate highly controlled envelopes, their concrete structures have facilitated flexible internal planning and progressive adaptation to reflect changing requirements and expectations



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28 Entrance paving is articulated with differently scaled pieces of stone

29 At night the lights from the street and glowing through the glass block screens of the stairwells transform the character of the internal court

of Corso Sempione and the 'service space' of the internal court. Desultory planting and an absence of domestic occupation seem to have characterised the balconies from their inception, conceived as a response to technical and legislative constraints or the urge for rhetoric, rather than a desire to provide domestic amenity *[14, 15, 24]*. Were the concerns of the building committee about views of the service court being exposed on Corso Sempione justified? In close axial views, the voids in the front facade frame glorious panels of sky, but from a distance and obliquely, the banality of the courtyard is all too apparent: it is more like a lightwell or service yard *[17, 25]*. Although the view 'out' to Corso Sempione through the screening elements of the facade may be enticing, the view 'down' onto the glass block screen and garage roofs is less appealing *[24]*. The effect has been exacerbated by subsequent infilling of the slots in the glass block canopy, which would have allowed a direct view back to the entrance. Lacking formal ambition, the court cannot be occupied and is a void at the heart of the building.

Then there is the question of the corridor spanning the court and linking the two halves of the penthouse *[11]*. It is an idiosyncratic arrangement and inconsistent with the objective of eliminating corridors in the more standard flats below.[17] One senses that this device, like the '*balconate a ponte*', is Terragni's response to the futuristic and dramatic spatial potential offered by new construction techniques. Otherwise the clarity of the overall planning is admirable: the entrance to the apartments and spatial separation from the street effectively accomplished by the arrangement of the entrance steps and canopy; the internal circulation is forthright, and the stairs are naturally lit and ventilated. The concrete structure, albeit unintentionally, has allowed adjustments to be made to the internal layout of individual flats. In these respects – in its robust parti, paired blocks and circulation, axial entrance, roof terrace and use of glass blocks – Casa Rustici can be compared to Tecton's later Finsbury Health Centre (1935–38) *[26, 27]*. Terragni's building is soundly constructed and built from materials that have weathered well. Although innovative in appearance, it incorporates tried and tested elements of traditional construction; arguably the architecture gives new expression to established urban form and tectonics. Where the building is less successful, though not untypical of its period, is the poor acoustic separation from the noise of the city and neighbouring flats. Casa Rustici was developed for 'solid' middle class residents; according to Etlin the inventiveness of the building is not confined to the external appearance and the planning of the penthouse.[18] Almost alone among commentators, he notes the importance given in contemporary accounts to the provision of light, flexible and open interiors. Despite the loss of original refinements, the flats are successful domestic spaces.

More recent buildings lining Corso Sempione include slab blocks lateral to the street, devaluing its character. In an age dominated by a questionable vogue for iconic buildings, it is instructive to see how Terragni reconciled the creation of an 'object' with the morphology of the urban block. Achieving a rich material character was an intrinsic characteristic of the work of the Italian Rationalists – several of Terragni's apparently rendered buildings, such as his Como apartment buildings, were in fact faced with tiny pieces of white marble *[2, 28]*.

Though the reality of the building today may not match the brooding glamour of the contemporary photos, Casa Rustici is still a building of compelling character, a convincing model for sensitive urban architecture *[14, 17]*. To inhabit a great building is to be given the opportunity of

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seeing beyond the myths perpetuated by pictorial and theoretical paradigms. Critics tend to dismiss Terragni's Milanese work as no more than a reconciliation with the normative constraints of professional practice. If so, then perhaps there are more pertinent lessons to be learned from these projects than the unfettered polemics of the Casa del Fascio, Sant'Elia School or Giuliani-Frigerio apartments. Preoccupation with the formal properties of his output has deflected attention from the everyday currency and relevance that Terragni achieved at the Casa Rustici.

Notes

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Simon McCormack, 1, 2, 13, 15, 17, 19, 20, 22, 23, 25, 28, 29

Biography

Simon McCormack lived in Milan and worked at Studio Ferrante Villa in 1986–87. He now lives in London and is an architect at Thomas Ford & Partners, having previously worked at Stanton Williams and Avanti Architects.

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