

NEW ARCHITECTURAL TYPOLOGIES FOR NEW CONSUMER PRODUCTS

Enrico Bordogna

*la***Rinascence**
[prima della Rinascence]

1865 - 1915

After the epic struggle for freedom and national unity in the north of Italy and in particular in Milan and hinterland, diverging and at times even conflicting factions emerged regarding the future development of the city and its architecture.

As early as the first half of the century there were opposing sides: the supporters of the neoclassic option, hugely innovative at the outset with the magnificent Napoleonic projects of the *'Foro Bonaparte'* by Giovanni Antonio Antolini and the *'Piano degli Artisti'* in 1807, but progressively weakened by repetitive codification; and those who supported the line of Carlo Cattaneo aiming at reviving the style of Donato Bramante and Italian medieval architecture. The Romanesque evocative of the age of free city-states went beyond being a simple revival of style as it expressed, in fact, a precise conceptualisation of the city and the entire society.

Even after the Unification this divergence of opinions not only persisted but became ever more complex. The neoclassical movement, which had progressively weakened, continued to oppose not only the Romanesque of industrial architecture and of the new facilities for the working classes, but also the emergence of a new Neo-Renaissance style from central Italy, which had been absent from Milan and its territory until then, that was being adopted

by the new operations of banks, finance and the institutions of the new central government that had just been proclaimed.

It is enough to survey the northern outskirts of Milan, i.e. Lambrate, Greco, Niguarda and Bovisa, or the main roads through the valleys of the River Olona and Lambro to come across, still today, the wonderful industrial buildings and connected facilities – dormitories, canteens, vocational schools, workers' houses, housing estates, public baths – that

show how the Romanesque was the expression of pride of a managing class fully aware of the fact that the success of their manufacturing also meant the overall progress of society. In the same way it is enough to wander through the city centre – Piazza Cordusio, Via Dante, Piazze degli Affari – in order to find the power houses of banks and financial institutions built in the cold Neo-Renaissance

style. This style is coldly and rhetorically celebratory, nearly out of place when juxtaposed with the industriousness of the city of Milan, and only the Galleria by Giuseppe Mengoni stands as an example in which the architectural typology mitigates this effect.

However in these years of economic growth a third component makes an appearance, the one linked to mass consumerism. Here the architec-



Parade of trams in Duomo square, Milan, beginning XX Century

ture of iron and brick evolved into more modern forms, more transparent, more pleasing in order to facilitate and incentivise the purchasing of merchandise, products and produce that had to be displayed, advertised and illuminated in the most persuasive of ways. The first most striking example of this model was the 'Grandi Magazzini Bocconi', established by the brothers Luigi and Ferdinando Bocconi. After starting out in 1865 with a modest fabric shop in Via Santa Radegonda, they leased

and turned the Hôtel Confortable into a department store with the significant name of Aux Villes d'Italie in 1877. This was then replaced by the famous department store 'Alle città d'Italia' purposely built in 1889 by Giovanni Giachi in Piazza Duomo, as an extension to northern the portico of the piazza itself that had been designed by Mengoni.

The building conceived by Giachi immediately had a major impact on the city's panorama: not only because it marked the commercial invention of the department store, in reality the idea had been imported from France, but above all because of its architectural character. A building that had a portico along its whole length facing the piazza that was symbolically the very heart of Milan so that the Milanese out for a stroll passed by a continuous row of shop windows displaying their merchan-

dise in full view of passers-by. The windows were illuminated by electric lights that had only recently displaced gas lamps, thus drawing people into the store where vast spaces with settings and architecture frequently alluded to the sophisticated provenance of the merchandise on display.

In the building by Giachi next to the structures built with iron and bricks, there was a good use of glass, indispensable for opening up as much as possible the view from outside the building of the merchan-

dise and goods on display and the animated scenes of the public and customers inside the store.

Two further buildings followed this new tendency.

A short distance from Piazza Duomo, in Via Tommaso Grossi, Luigi Broggi built the store 'Magazzini Contratti' in 1903 (still standing today but used for other purposes). It was a very innovative construction in moderate Liberty style, in-



Luigi Broggi, Magazzini Contratti,
via Tommaso Grossi 8, Milan, 1901-1903

spired by contemporary Belgian and French designs and characterised by the systematic use of reinforced concrete with a façade almost entirely made of glass interrupted only by the rhythm of the structure, almost like a curtain wall ante litteram, fulfilling the same requirements as the building by Giachi.

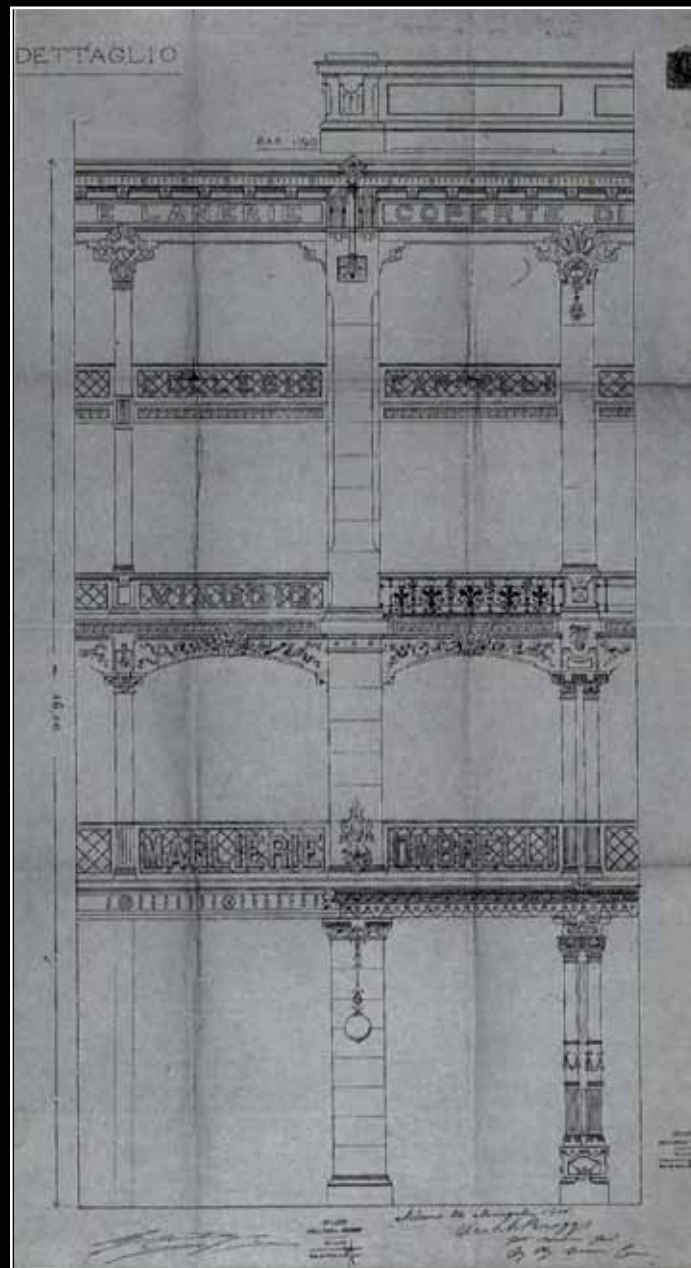
Comparable to the preceding two constructions is the building belonging to the company Gondrand which is still standing today in Via Pontaccio. It

was put up in 1906 by Luigi and Cesare Mazzocchi as a warehouse for the famous shipping company founded by the Gondrand brothers in 1866 with their head office in piazza San Carlo. This too was a utilitarian design of iron and brick and large amounts of reinforced concrete. The façade is in a sober Liberty style with extensive glazing on the first and a grand atrium lit from above.

It was not by chance that in the 1990s after having undergone restructuring by

the architect Marco Zanuso, the property was purchased by the fashion house Gianfranco Ferré, as if to symbolise how the architecture and the typologies of the economic growth of Milan between the end of the nineteenth century and the First World War are still likely to be productively reclaimed by a modern businesses from the world of fashion, design,

the most up-to-date the tertiary sectors giving them a renewed image of extraordinary appeal and symbolic significance.



Luigi Broggi, detail of the main facade of Magazzini Contratti in Milan. 1901