

PONTI AND THE PIRELLI BUILDING

The photographs and drawings that follow show the final revised scheme for the Pirelli office building, now under construction in Milan. The building is the combined work of two Milanese studios: the Studio Ponti, Fornaroli, Rosseli; and the Studio Valtolina dell'Orto, with whom Pier Luigi Nervi and Arturo Danusso worked.

In order to explain his philosophy of design and criticism for ARCHITECTURAL RECORD readers, architect Gio Ponti has composed a text to accompany the illustrations and has also written the captions.

Gio Ponti, widely known as editor and publisher of the magazine Domus, was born in Milan in 1891 and received his architectural degree from the Milan Politecnico in 1921. He has organized many of the Triennale exhibits; has written books on architecture and the arts; and painted the frescoes at the University of Padua. In addition to designing office buildings, villas, expositions, a college building and a mountain hotel, Ponti has designed furniture, various industrial products, and ship interiors.

OUT OF A PHILOSOPHY OF ARCHITECTURE

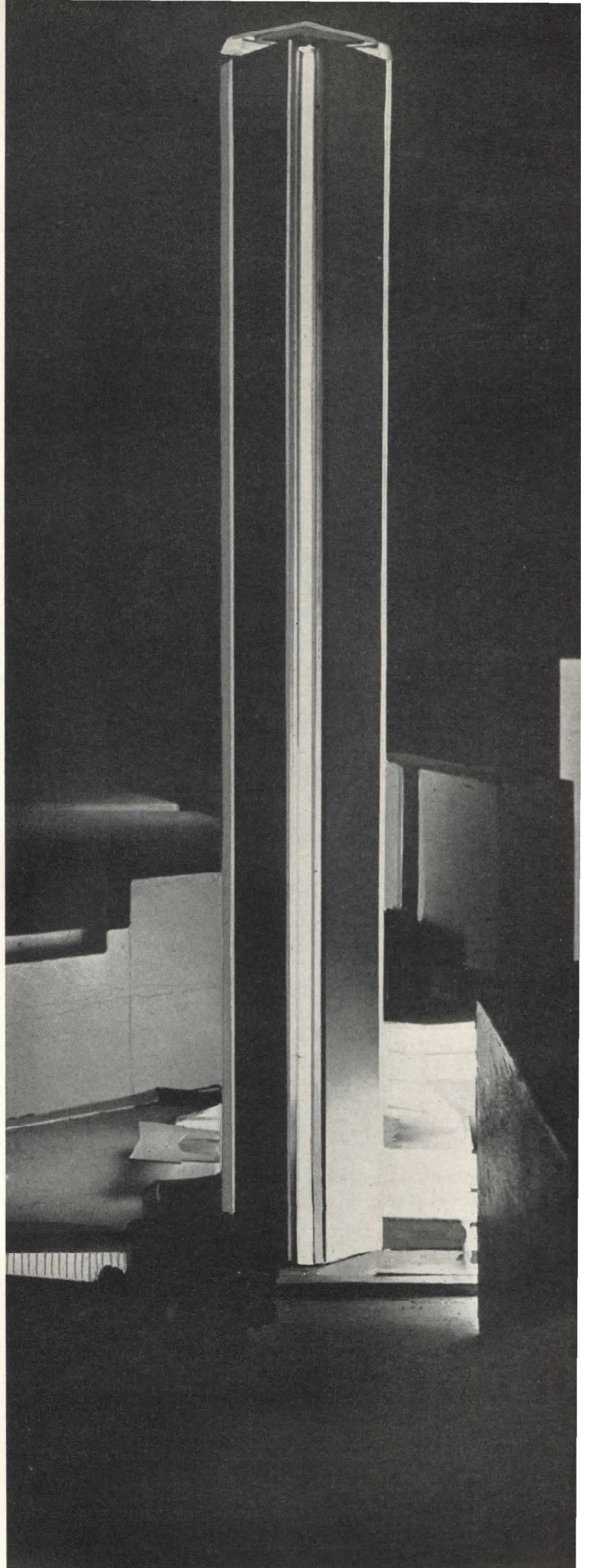
By GIO PONTI

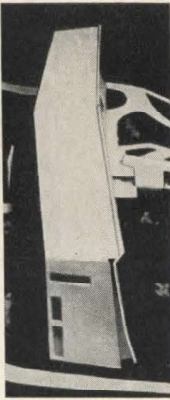
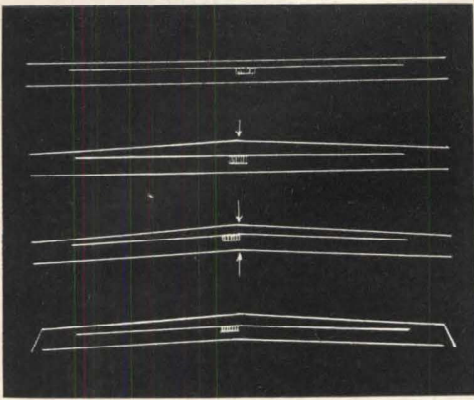
Translated by Dr. Nathan H. Shapira, Architect

IN ASKING ME to state my "philosophy of architecture," ARCHITECTURAL RECORD does me honor, for surely one's philosophy is more important than his works. For many reasons, actual works involve circumstances beyond our control, and the architect has at his disposal only limited powers with which to oppose them. It is difficult for the designer in practice not to betray his ideas, and in the final analysis it is the observer (you, the reader) who must judge how faithfully the reality follows the thought. To me this appears the only correct basis for judgment: that the work be judged only after the ideas generating it have been evaluated.

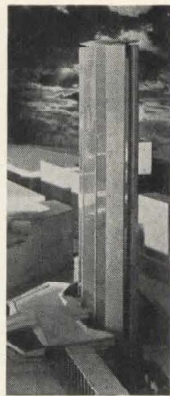
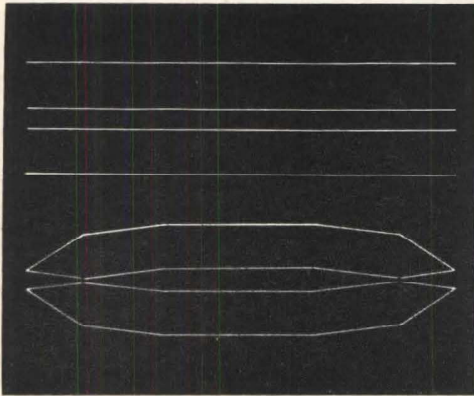
These thoughts are limited to an attempt to clarify the judgment of the "new architecture" by relating it to several unchanging ethical terms.

Obviously, a new architecture exists: new in terms of materials, structures and techniques which determine new spatial relationships; new in terms of new purposes, new requirements, new sizes, new customs, new functions, new relationships to environment, new conditions. But the new architecture also has a constant basis: *man*.

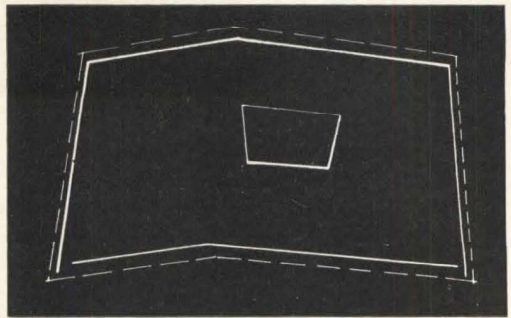




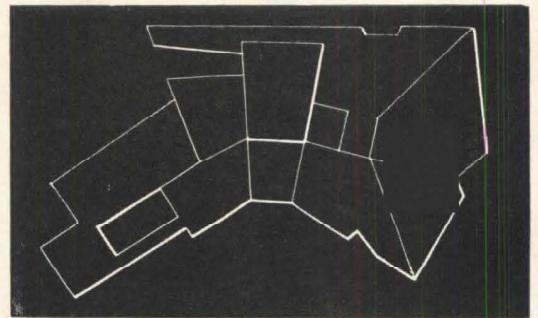
1. *Institute of Nuclear Physics, São Paulo*



2. *Pirelli Building, Milan*



3. *Villa Planchart, Caracas*



4. *Villa Arreaza, Caracas*

THE SEARCH FOR FORM

1 & 2, transition from a parallel pattern *ad infinitum* to a closed or definitive pattern; 4, progressing from two prevalent aspects (frontal and symmetrical) through spatial composition to a design with multiple aspects — greater complexity with continuous change in form. 5, A complete or closed form within a grouping of diverse elements with differing functions — hotel element at left, foundation proper at right. 3, The final realization of a complete “closed” form

PONTI (continued):

There is also a new man. There is always a new man, but there is always *man*. And there is a universal condition, nature, which is never new, but constant.

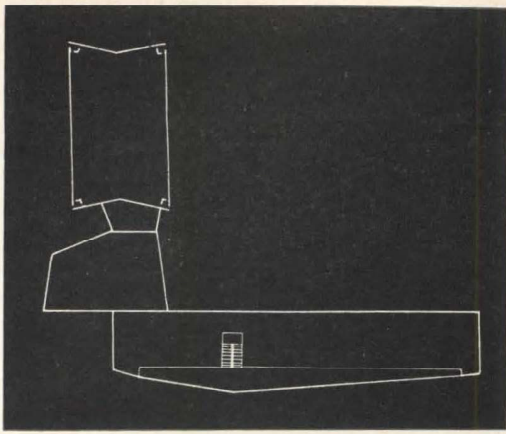
It is equally obvious that the “past” and its formal tradition are no longer useful conceptually in designing this new architecture. In the context of all these new things, there is a genuine gap between the architecture of the past and our architecture. But — and here is the core of the issue — when the new architecture must be judged as a reality and a work of art, then the term “new” no longer exists, for we must evaluate it within a framework of universal and unchanging terms.

There is, of course, a type of judgment — the “historical” — which is extremely interesting and which vastly enlarges the boundaries of architectural study. Such a judgment considers “architecture” as the totality of all built things; it makes use of all those aspects listed above, and it considers esthetic value as *one* of these. But can this be the judgment of an architect? Is it not rather the judgment of an historian who — correctly enough for the purposes of history — takes

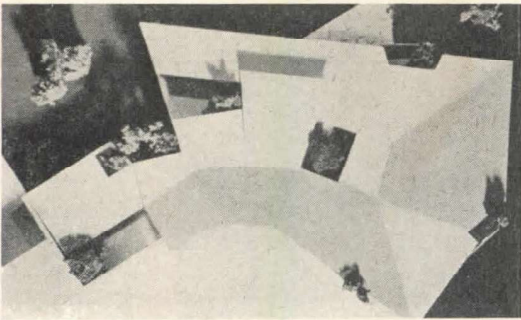
everything into consideration? The judgments of the working architect, who is active, and of the critic, his contemporary, are necessarily more restrictive. For the practicing architect and the critic, this historical enlargement of ideas and boundaries — which embraces and hence accepts everything on the same level — hardly clarifies the thinking that inspires art. Nor does it contribute — once these ideas have been defined — to the aim of clarifying and purifying the end product.

To relate the new architecture to *absolute* esthetic (i.e., ethical) values, and to consider this relationship *exclusively* in terms of architecture — or, to establish the condition of a work belonging to architecture, *which implicitly and necessarily gives us all the rest* — favorably limits one’s judgment. It excludes innumerable buildings old and beautiful, but it helps clarify evaluation.

In viewing architecture as “a work and creation of art” there is no past, because *in our culture everything is simultaneous*. There are no new ways of judgment; we must approach works of architecture on the level of

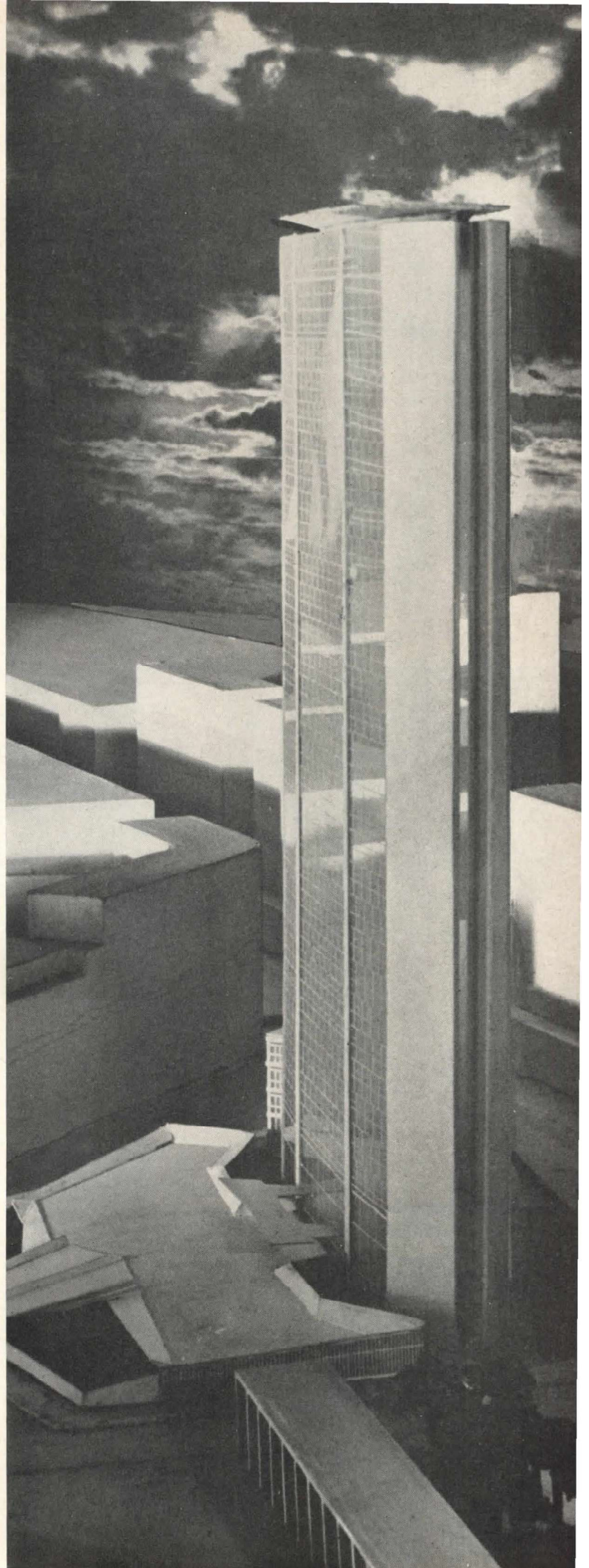


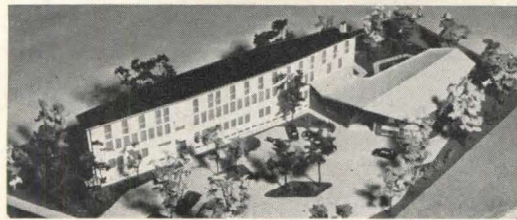
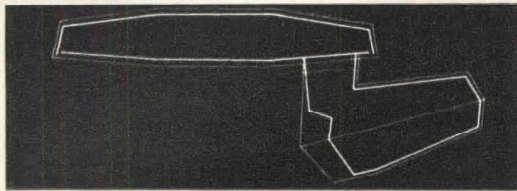
5. Garzanti Foundation, Forlì, Italy



a pure and exclusive evaluation of art. Neither history nor new techniques, materials, structures, sizes nor new functions will alter the eternal and unique conditions of this judgment, because such conditions are moral. The pure judgment of art cannot alter these conditions; rather, it occurs after them. The architectural judgment of a work is unique and permanent, regardless of whether it is art, whether it is beautiful, or whether it delights us. And that judgment must be kept separate from everything else — use, purpose, material, technique, period, and so on. These latter considerations are implicit in the pure evaluation of any work, beautiful or ugly, but *they do not function on the level of art.*

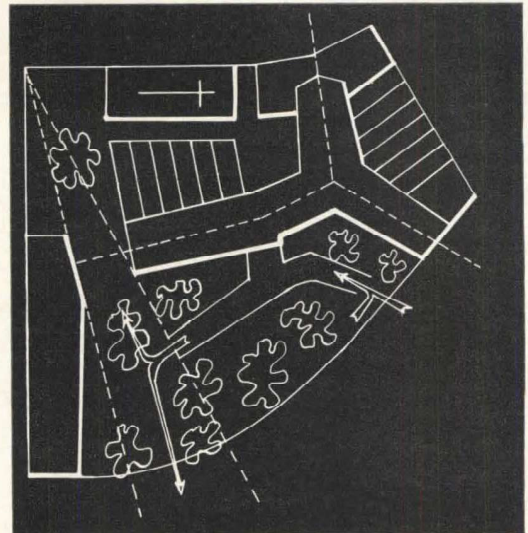
Thus, when I admire Philip Johnson's steel and glass pavilion by saying it is an example of Attic, you will understand that my judgment transcends the work itself in one exclusively spiritual answer in the permanent and unchanging terms of thought. Thus, my notion of *the Attic* symbolizes a supreme degree of purity rather than a place or a period. The conceptual framework I use in approaching architecture as a work of art may be



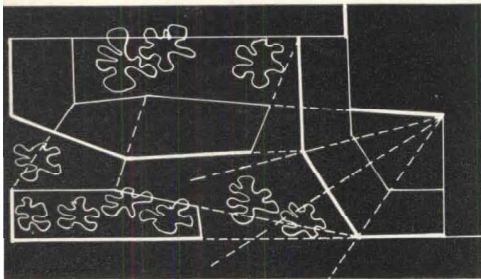


6. Institute for Italian-Swedish Culture, Stockholm

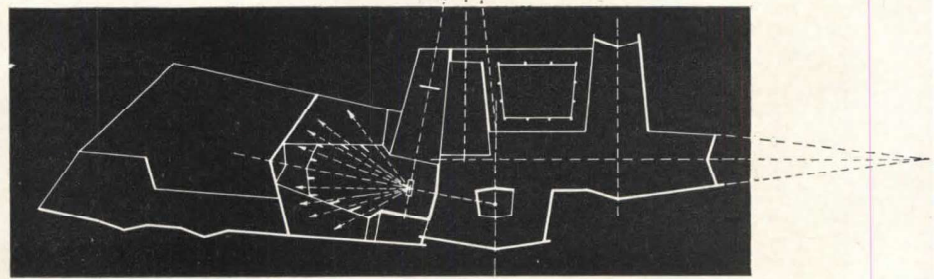
THE SEARCH FOR FORM



8. R. A. S. Building, Milan. Ponti, Ponti, Fornaroli, Rosselli & Portaluppi, Architects



7. Gallini Center, Voghera, Italy



9. Monastery & Church, San Remo, Italy

PONTI (continued):

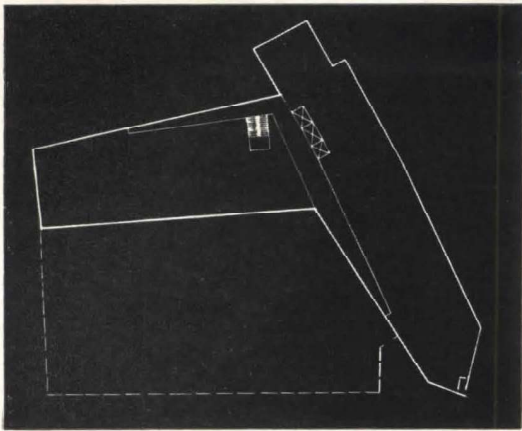
formulated in the following terms: (1) *Formal and Structural Inventiveness*, (2) *Essentiality*, (3) *Representativeness*, (4) *Expressiveness*, (5) *Illusiveness*, and (6) *Perpetuity*.

At the risk of repetition, let me say that I respect the historical judgment of an example of modern architecture as it relates to comparisons, documentations, and analogies; in relation to technology and its evolution; and in relation to changed social conditions or customs. Further, in terms of historical-critical evaluation, the search for similarities in the works of different creative minds will sometimes offer a superb testimony of culture. However, in the field of creation — in the field of architecture to be done — to evaluate architectural validity we must judge exclusively in universal and permanent terms. In such terms, the contingencies of periods and of places, of materials and of functions, count for nothing. One might even say that a work of art is entirely a matter of interior re-imagination, despite whatever similarities the thread of history might — by chance — show.

I do not underestimate the constructive values and the functional clarity of architectural drawings; all that is implicit in each sensible work of architecture. This was always so, especially in primitive works. But functionality is necessarily a constitutive term which has no importance in our judgment because we judge solely whether or not architecture is functioning on the level of a work of art. There are buildings that function admirably on the practical level, but which simply do not function on the artistic level.

There are so many examples of architecture that were brought into being for a specific purpose (a home, a palace, a church) which were preserved afterwards and remain valid for other functions because they are beautiful. They function now on the artistic level! Even ruins can function on this level when every other use has been lost; they speak forcibly to our minds in unchanging terms.

I believe that both in judging and in creating architecture as art, each work must stand alone before



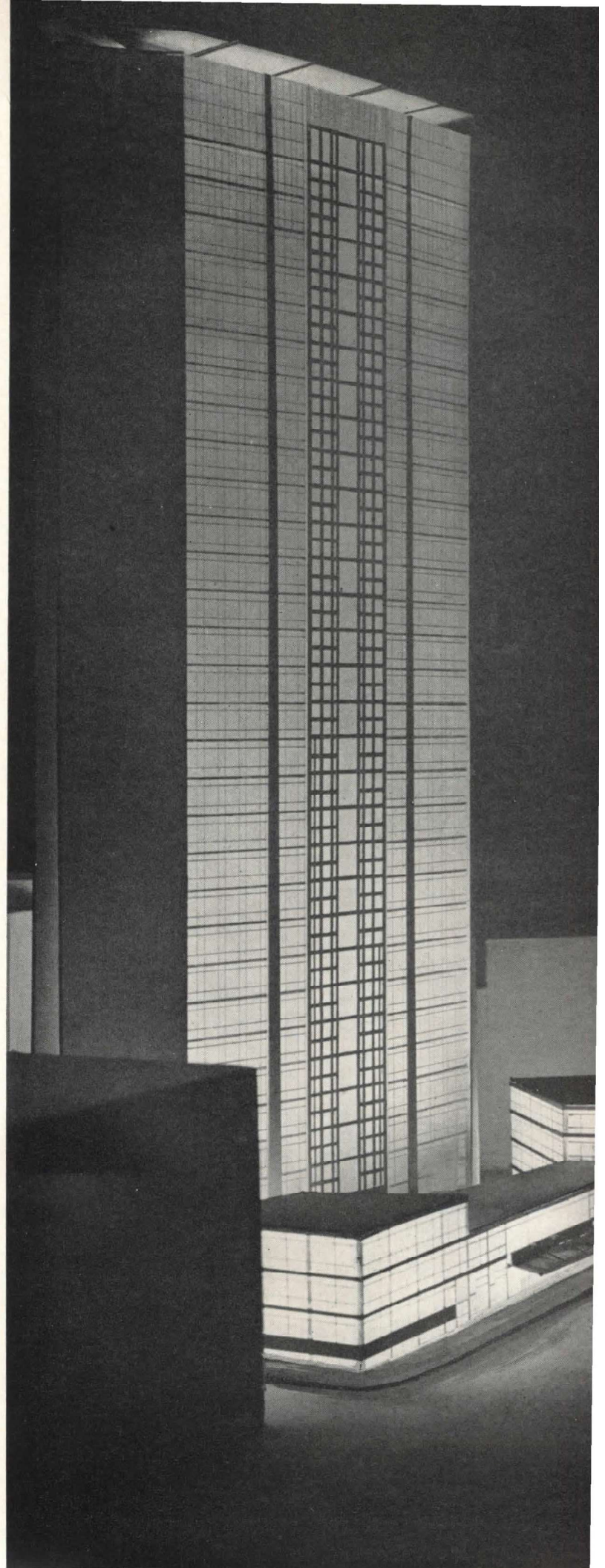
10. *Project for Italy House, Sao Paulo*

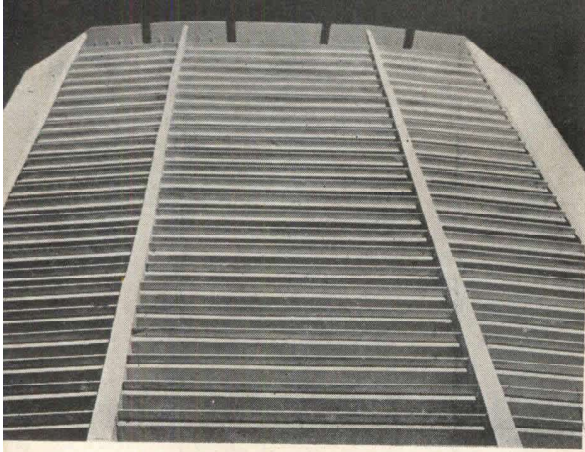
certain laws — universal and unchanging conditions. I have formulated these laws in my own way, and should like to explain how I justify them.

Formal and Structural Inventiveness

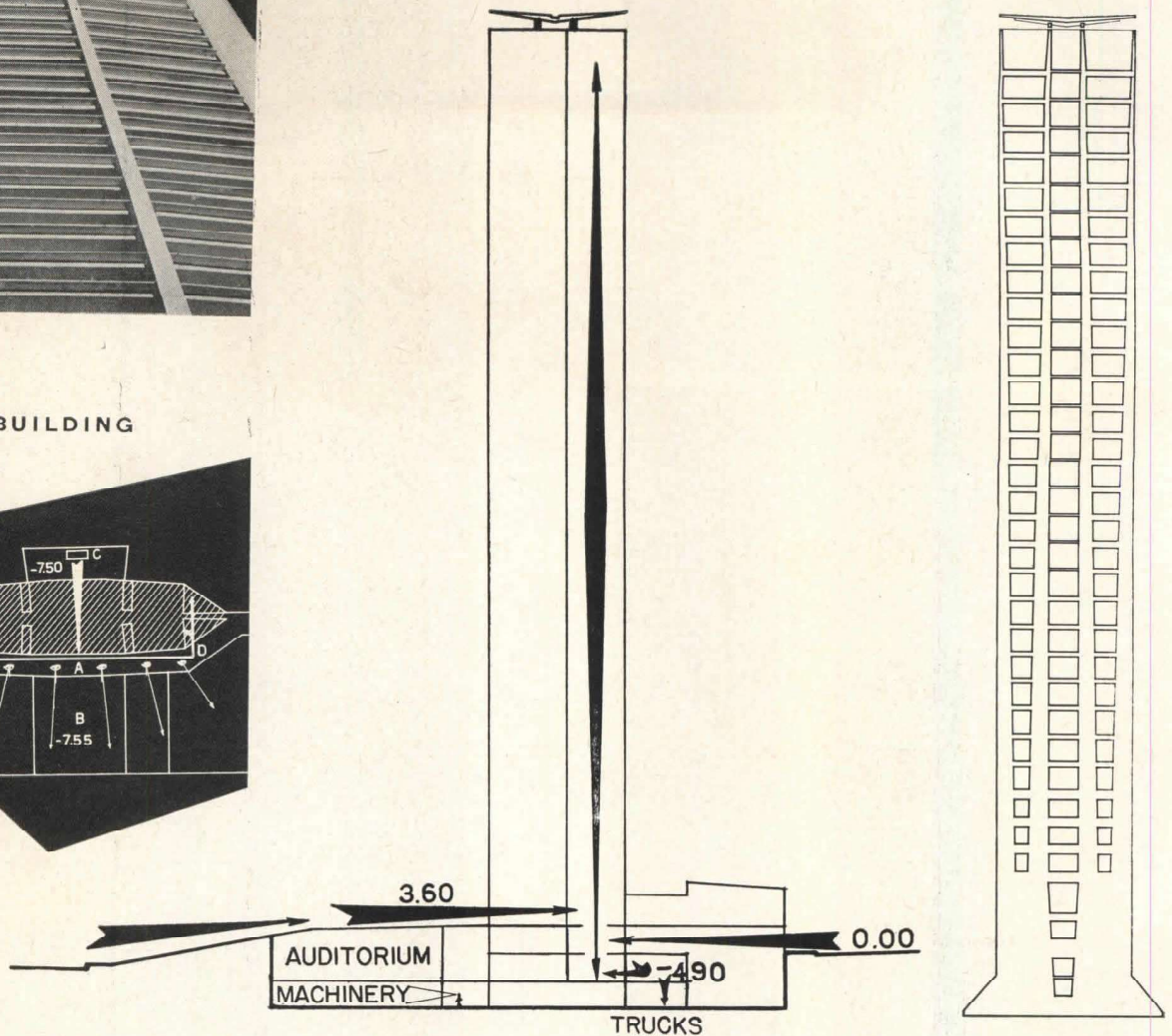
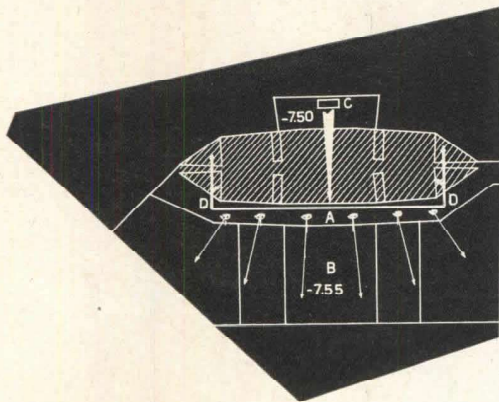
There is formal inventiveness, whether of unity or of composition, only if there is a form. When there is a form it can be only finite — i.e., closed — either materially or conceptually. A form is unchangeable, unrepeatable, unique, and coherent in each part. When there are forms whose structures are identified with architecture — this occurs markedly today and this is what I mean by structural invention — then there exists a *forma veritatis*, a truthful form, integrity of form. Formal and structural inventiveness is a term of judgment. It is judgment brought to bear on the facility of the architect's *imagination*. Even to make rational architecture we need architectural imagination.

Examples? In the Falling Water House and in the Ronchamp Chapel there is formal invention. In buildings where there is a simple repetition of elements there





THE PIRELLI BUILDING



PONTI (continued):

is no formal invention. Consequently such elements are a matter of technique and not of art.

Essentiality

A construction is truthful if it is brought to its very essence, in opposition to any esthetic dogma, academic notions (whether traditional or modern), or the insistence upon decoration. Care must be taken, however, that the plasticity of the architecture of the past is not confounded with the function such architecture served in celebrating some person or event. The work must arrive at the point where nothing can be added or taken away; it must arrive at unity, essentiality. Essentiality is the term of judgment that *measures* a work.

Representativeness

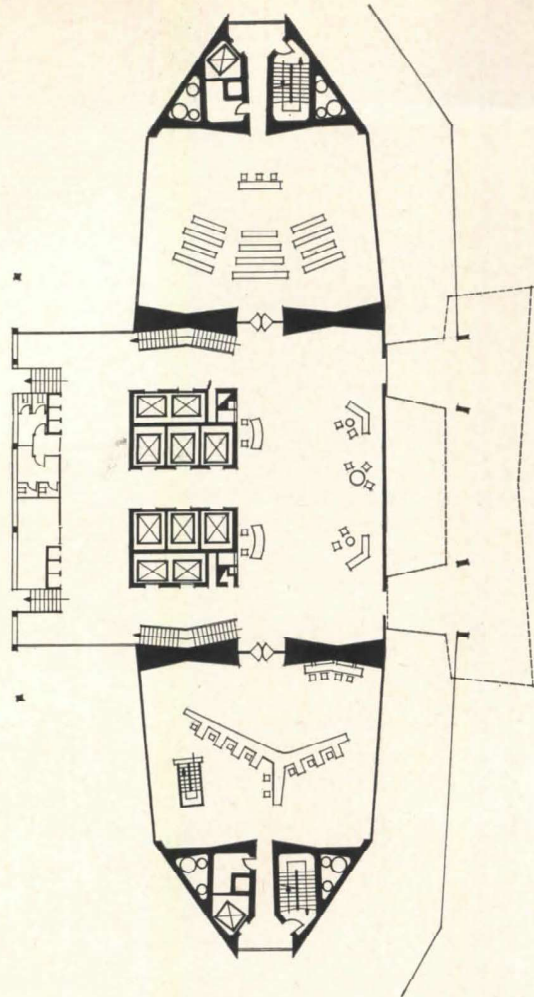
A building must visually represent to the mind that purpose for which it was or is dedicated. In the masterpiece there is no equivocation. A palace is a palace; a temple is a temple; a house is a house. The Falling Water House by Wright is exactly what it is; the Chapel

at Ronchamp by Le Corbusier is no more or less than *une chapelle*. It is only during periods of decadence in creativity — periods when the academic has dominated, or when history has turned back on itself — that architecture has created sham and confusion, and has abandoned clarity. Such work is “*architecture d’apres l’architecture*,” as Cocteau would say — to which I add, *et pas d’apres une creation*. It has created stock exchanges, railway terminals, parliaments, institutions, according to the design of Grecian temples. The representative aspect must be alive, rich in imagination, recognizable in the constitutive part of architecture.

The representative aspect characterizes the building and cannily brings it to popular understanding, to that *communication* which is one of the terms in the proof of the existence of art. This is the element of judgment brought to bear on the *character* of the building.

Expressiveness

This is that wisdom of an architect which knows how to make his building understood by the visual message of



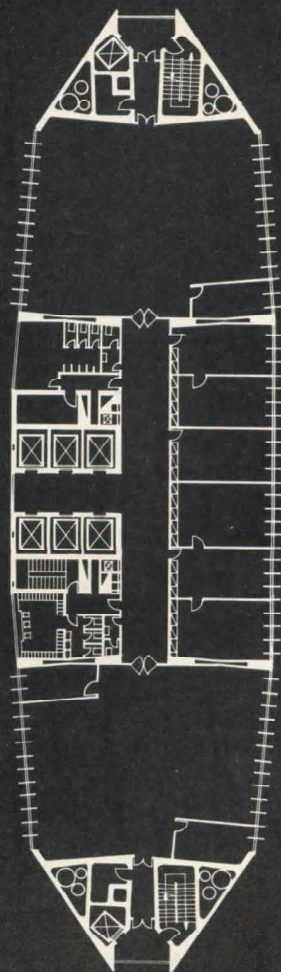
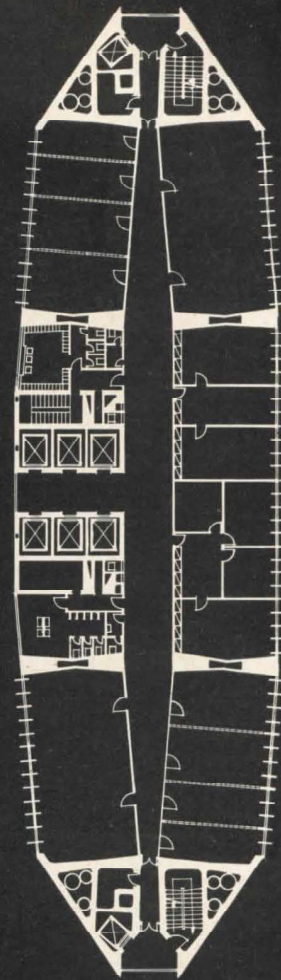
The plans make clear the manner in which the bifurcated columns diminish in area towards the building's summit. In the small plan, left page, C indicates the truck entrance and lift; D shows the glass-enclosed gallery where visitors may view mechanical and electrical equipment, located in the area noted as B

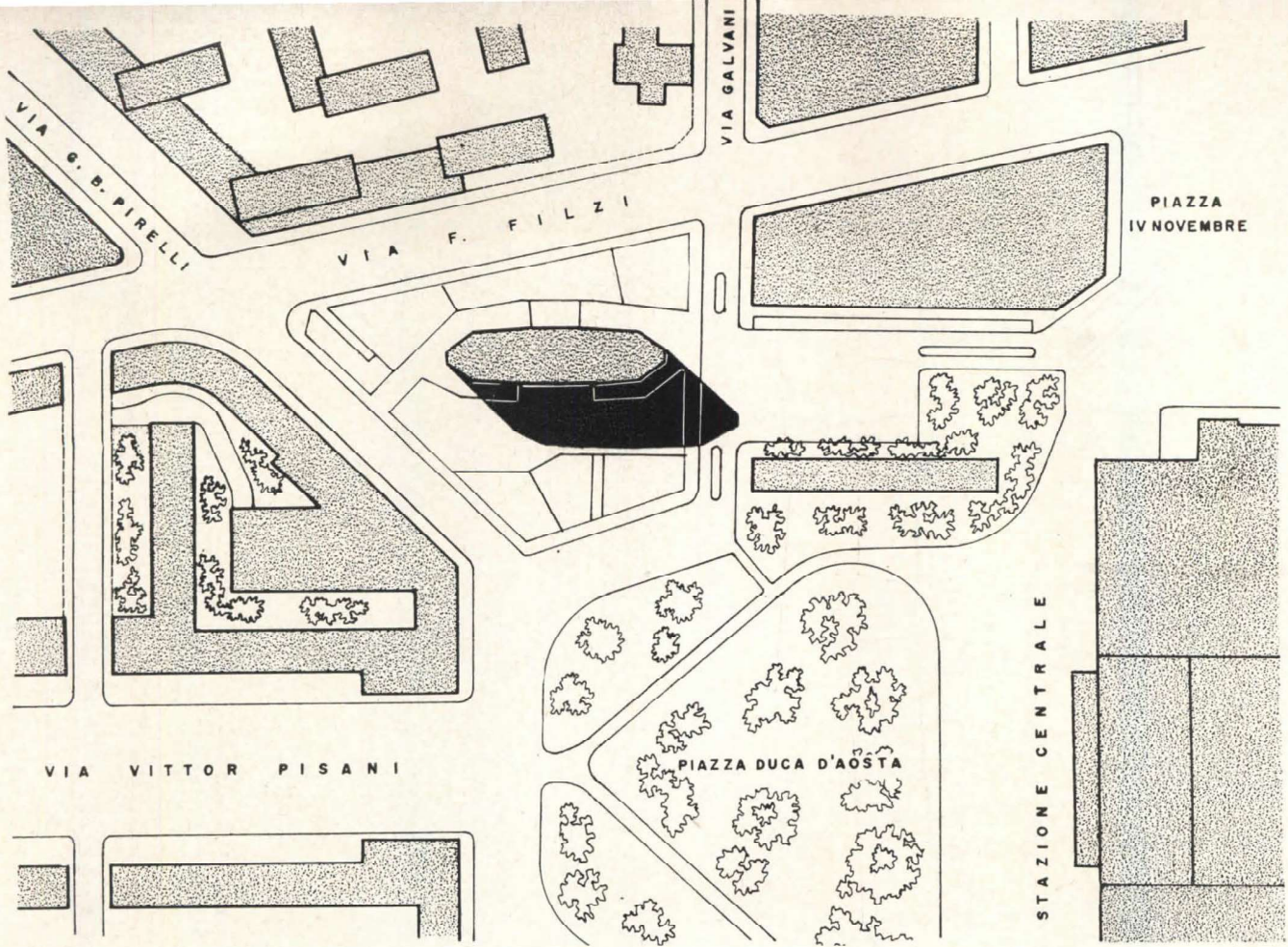
its elements. It is an interpretation of those elements in a way that makes them clear in the language of architecture and hence clear in the mind of the observer. It is the judgment of the architect's *acuteness*, of the manner in which his imagination *speaks*.

Illusiveness

This characteristic is one which transposes the building to a higher level — sheerly poetic and unreal — where a volume, a dimension, a weight, or a manner becomes meaningful. Without this quality of poetry, of unreality, the building is not a work of art; it remains in essence technique and engineering, not architecture.

According to Le Corbusier, a building "*doit chanter*." This song (*canto silenzioso*, if I may call it that) is the song of architecture, which abides in illusiveness. An example: the Ca d'Oro in Venice has weight, as do all other palaces, but how light it is! Remember that architecture is not only static but also ecstatic; its poetic unreality is its only true reality. This is to say that illusiveness is another term of judgment.





THE PIRELLI BUILDING AND THE CITY

Development in height is justified in a city when the ground area occupied by the building proper is small, so that the surrounding areas are freed for the movement of traffic and for parking. Based on a 20 minute time limit, the plaza between the bounding streets provides parking for over 2,000 cars during the working day. Inner truck road (dash line at right) descends 5 meters below street level

PONTI (continued):

Perpetuity

This derives from all of the foregoing terms because they are ideal terms, universal terms, and hence unbounded by any of the contingencies of time.

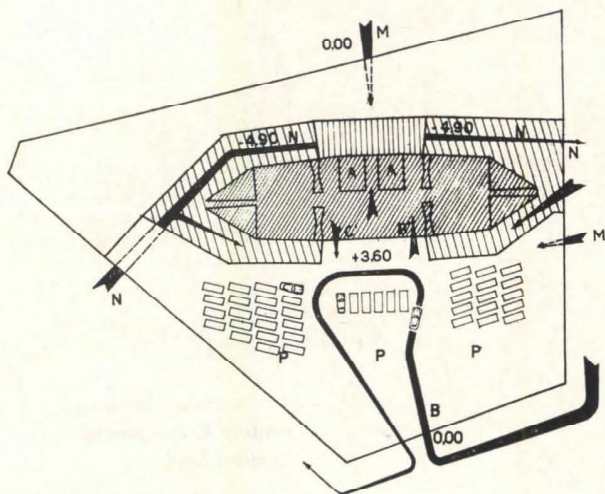
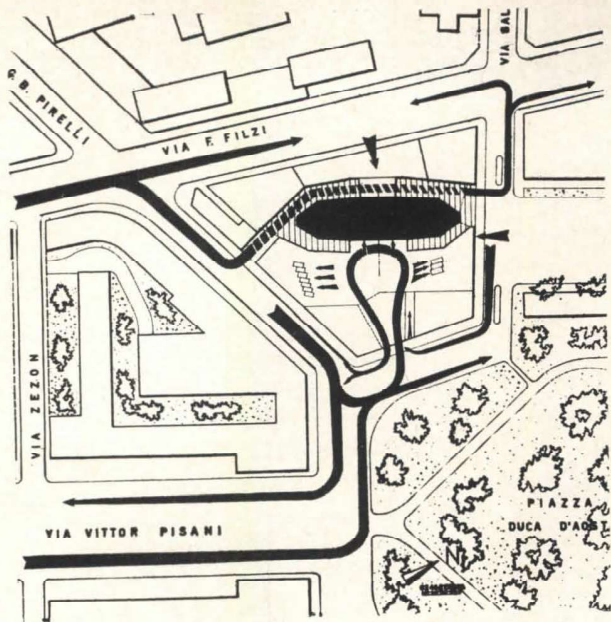
Can you conceive of architecture as a work of art when it does not contain formal and structural inventiveness, or when it does not possess its own finite, unchangeable and unrepeatable form? Its unchangeability lies in the perpetuity of its form. Buildings constructed with equal elements repeated vertically and horizontally, with parallelisms, and with no limitations which derive from a composition (form is composition) are admirably congenial, if you will, but they belong to technique — which functions on the level of pure utility — and to engineering — a wonderful discipline, but one which has nothing to do with architecture as art.

It is advantageous to distinguish clearly between technique and art; between engineering (even in cases where it is splendid) and architecture (even if it is simple); between that which grows and advances (as

engineering does) and that which possesses perpetuity (as Palladio says). If there is an architecture that interprets the social progress of civilization and which takes advantage of technological progress then, for me, such a progressive architecture cannot exist as a work of art.

Technology is progressive; art (and thus architecture as art) is not progressive, it is perpetual. Technical work is repeatable for it is a prototype and repetition does not falsify it. Each repetition of technology is authentic; each Cadillac is a Cadillac, each factory type bears repeating, as does a bridge. Each example of architecture — the work of art — is a monotype; it cannot be repeated; it is absurd to repeat it; the repetition would be a fraud. Would you duplicate the Falling Water House? The Chapel at Ronchamp? Would you make a row of Falling Water Houses, each repeating the other? The work of art is permanent — “perpetual” as Palladio says. Let us preserve it! It is always alive, even in ruins.

A work of technology dies by self-transformation be-

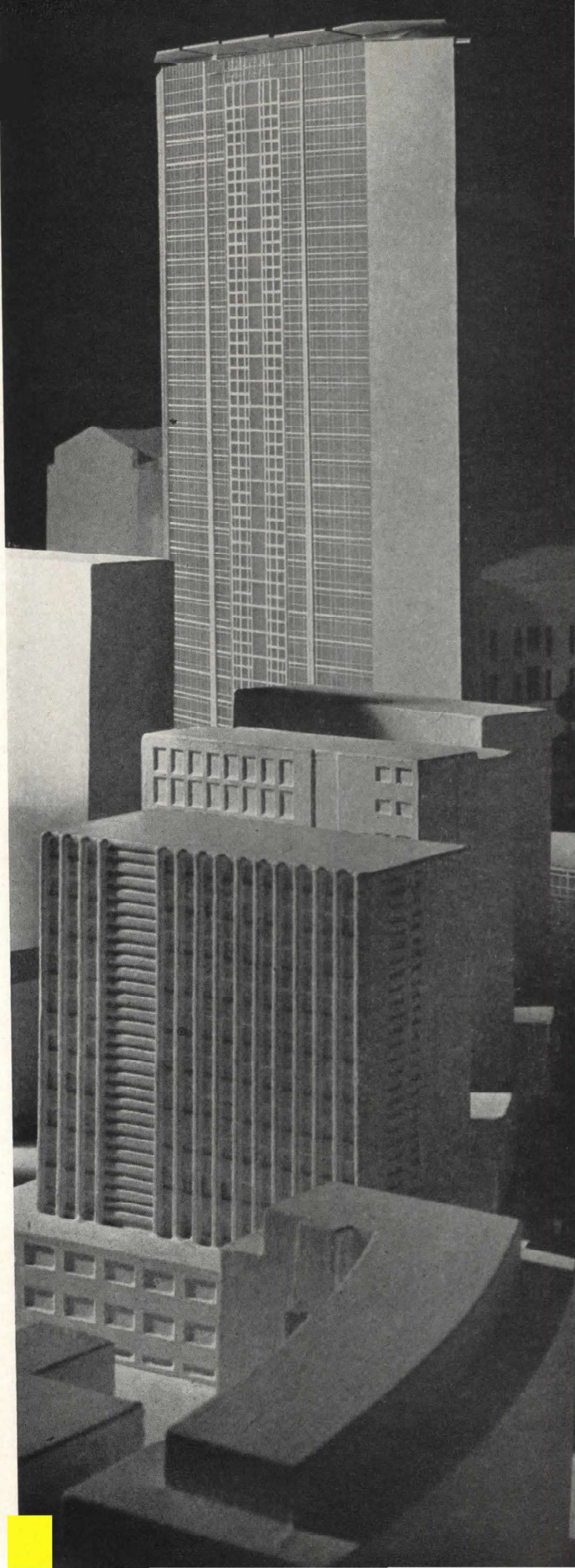


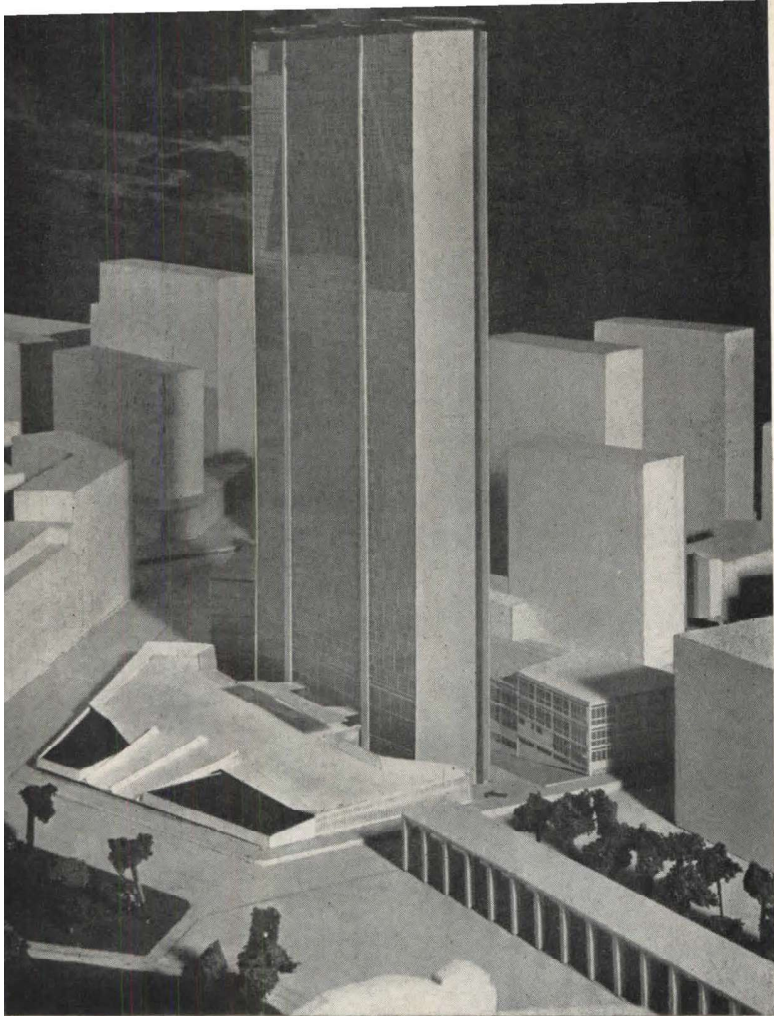
cause technology supersedes itself, is progressive. We do not preserve a worn out product of technology; its ruins are bits and pieces. An old car is grotesque, and so is an out-dated factory building. We can think in terms of permanent value and of full poetic and spiritual efficacy when we speak of any work of art, yet how can one conceive of the permanence of a car, a locomotive, or an airplane — even if they are beautiful?

So, for me, prefabrication and social architecture are works and technical services; works and social services. They are *historical architecture*. That is only by chance a work of art which, by its creation, generates models according to which things are prefabricated, for such is purely an historical and academic fact, not an artistic one; it is a transitory fact, not a perpetual one.

Conclusion

My understanding of these terms for judging and designing matured slowly, and any merit they may have is due others. To understand them is to feel their shock, even by contrast. I passed from buildings having





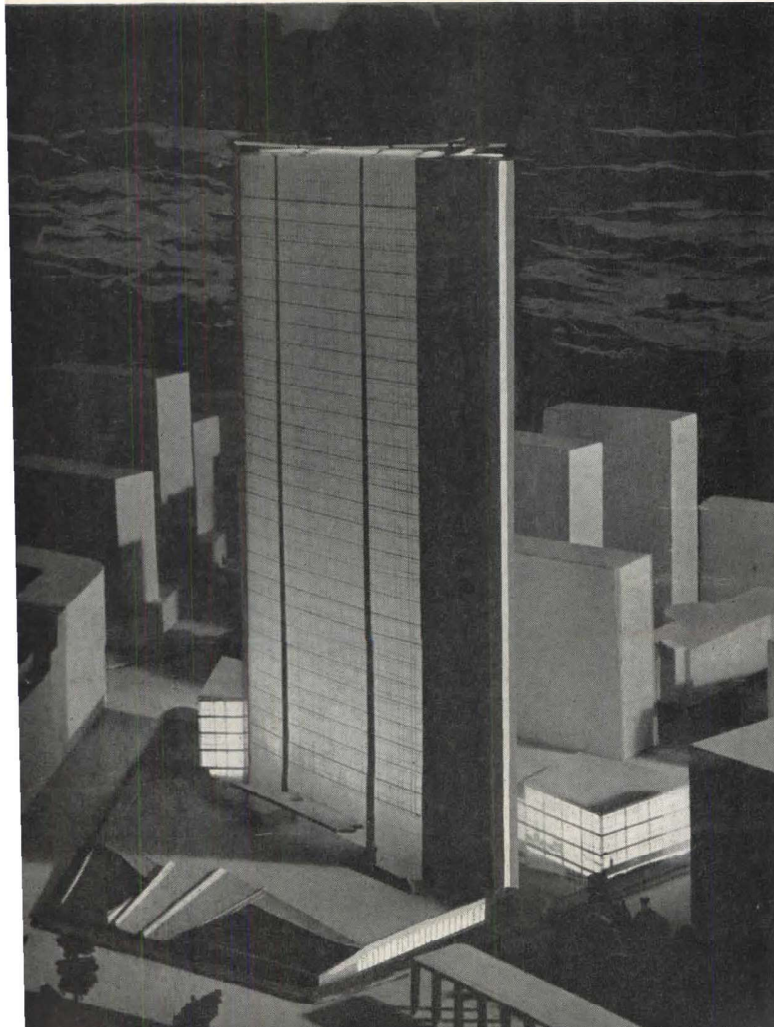
THE PIRELLI BUILDING DAY AND NIGHT

I should like to mention — as brief observations — some recent developments in modern architecture. These do, however, always enter into esthetic judgment in the terms I have mentioned.

First, it appears that our architecture is divorcing itself from the use of materials upon which time can act competitively. We are coming to use incorruptible materials; non-oxidizing metals, glass, ceramics, plastics — materials born of technology and not of nature; materials which do not become old. But when architecture does indeed become old, can we then say that its materials too have become old? That which has everlasting value can hardly be old.

Next, in addition to designing for daytime we must consider the night. Why not develop the possibilities illumination offers for obtaining a different optical effect that changes forms, distances, sizes, volumes, silhouettes, weights, and creates (or annihilates) spaces and spatial relationships? This can be a brand new dream for architecture. American architects: take this idea and let it revolutionize the aspect of your cities at night! Or, let me collaborate with you to create a building, even a small one, of two architectures — for the day and for the night!

— Gio Ponti



PONTI (continued):

parallelisms without finite form, or having only perspective variations — to the search for closed forms and for visual variations as one moves about them. I passed from closed buildings (volumes) to buildings penetrable visually (spaciousness). I passed from inexpressive to expressive buildings. And I will, if God permits, include light in architecture for the night.

In permanent terms, the result enters into the spirit of “classic without classicism” — i.e., becomes classic without classical elements. Paraphrasing the title Edgar Kaufman gave his article in *Art News* on the Pirelli building, “a new look in the old American art of the skyscraper . . .” I might say instead, “an old look in new American . . .” Why? Because, in effect, what we sought was an order for all time, not a new order. And because, in effect, the American art of the skyscraper is new; did not exist before historically modern times. This does not diminish the fact that the Pirelli building has a new look, despite its “obedient order.” The novelty is that the new construction is reformulated in accordance with perpetual spiritual laws.