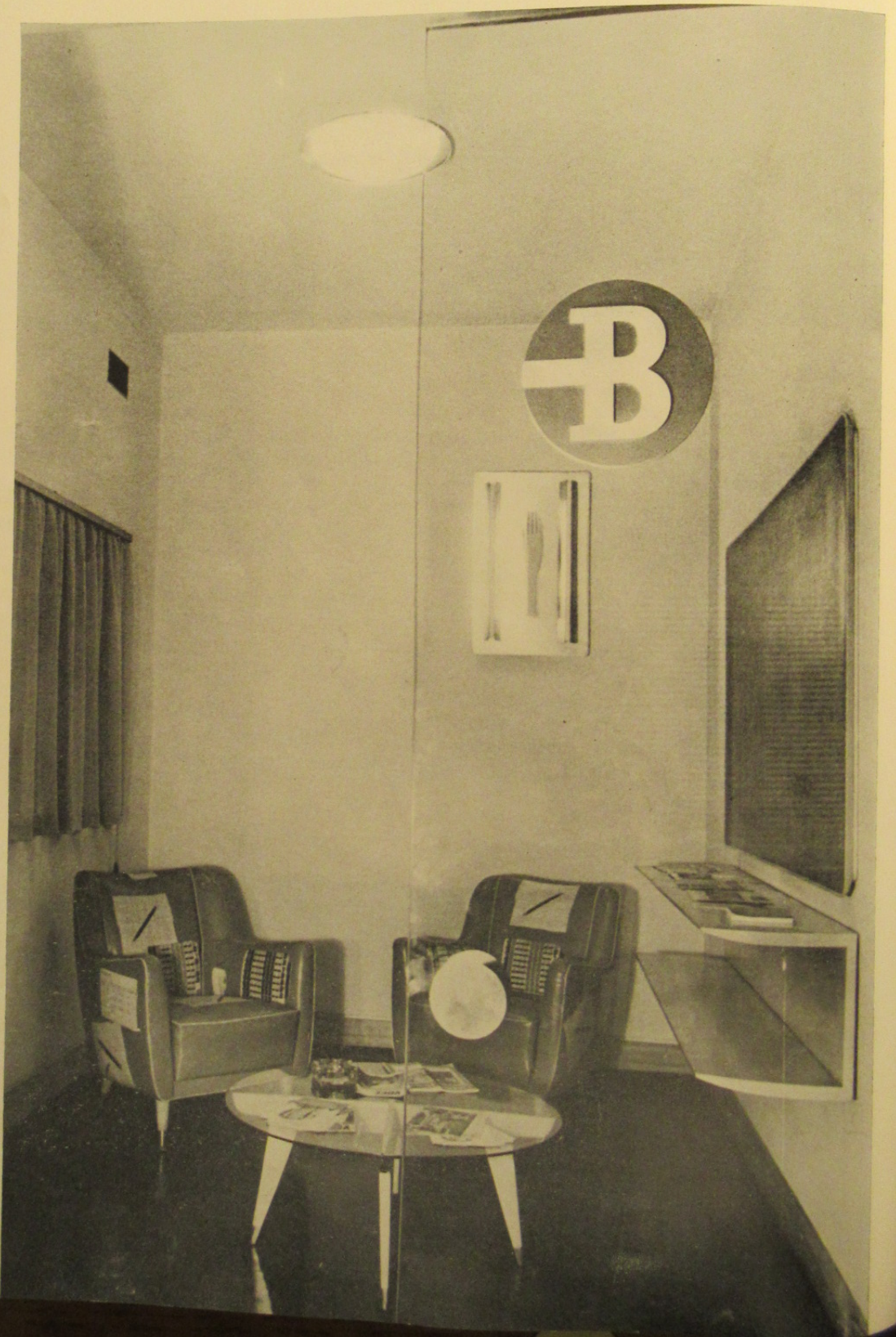


**classicism reconsidered:
the ponti style**



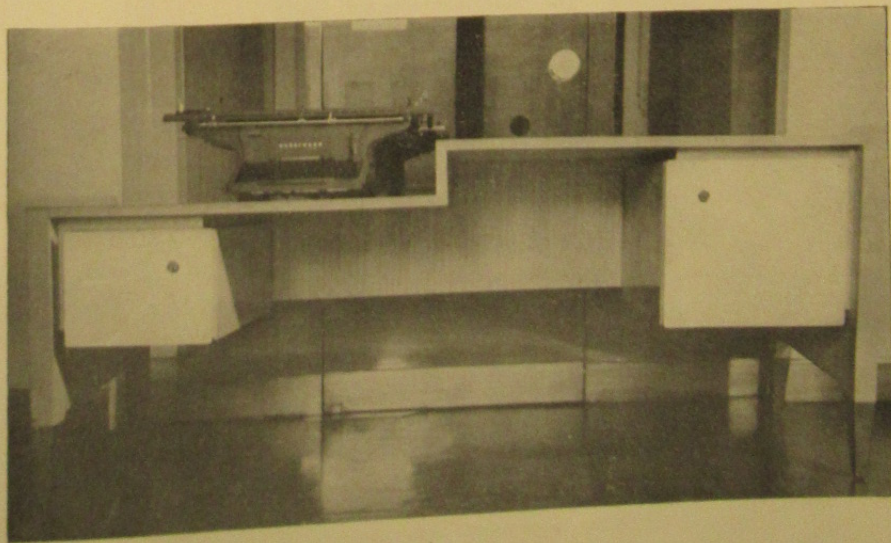
Gio Ponti, in the words of one American admirer who has seen him in action, is a Leonardo-come-lately. He sustains a busy architectural practice in Milan, is editor of *Domus*, professor at the University of Milan, and an industrial and furniture designer, without curtailing his career as a painter, art collector, active family man and *bon vivant*. Beside being quantitatively endowed with talent, energy and magnetism, he has been qualitatively influential in Italian design. Like an obelisk in a Roman piazza, Ponti stands firmly and visibly in the center of his professional arena, a towering point of reference even to those who prefer to operate outside his particular orbit.

In his furniture (which concerns us here) Ponti seems to regard the present extremes of Italian design—soft, convoluted shapes on one side, mechanical linearism on the other—as Scylla and Charybdis, and with seasoned skill he manages to hold the course between them. His furniture is not for mass production, in the Eames'-chair sense of the word, nor is it wholly a handcraft product; he dedicates his designs to craftsmanship at a sub-industrial level; that is, they are simple and direct enough to be reproduced within the speed limits of the workmen who make them. He loves to ply and mold wood, but the pronounced character of the forms he creates, in contrast to the organic romanticism of some of his colleagues, is a direct, man-made crispness. While still other designers are digging into industrial processes Ponti sticks to his method, in all probability, because he is less of an experimentalist than

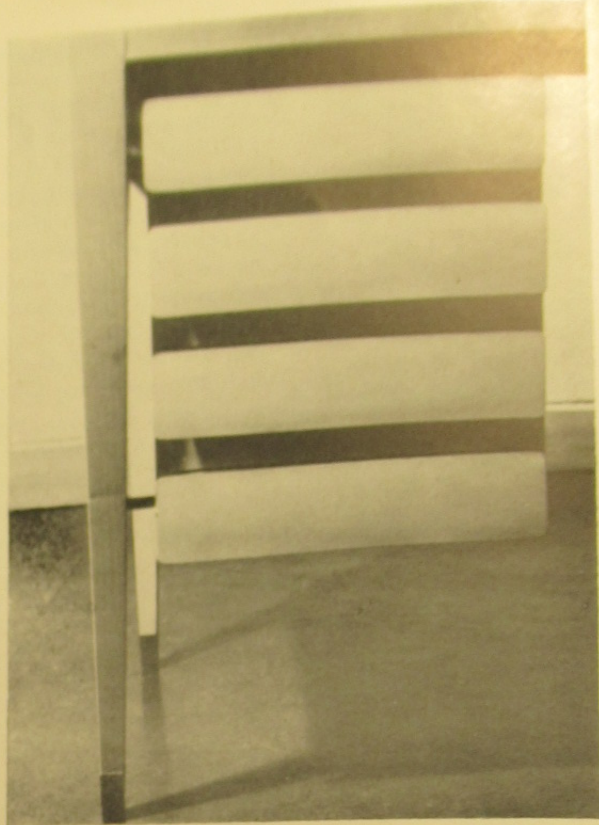


a perfectionist, more eager to refine ideas than search out new ones—which is what makes it possible to pinpoint his “style” at all.

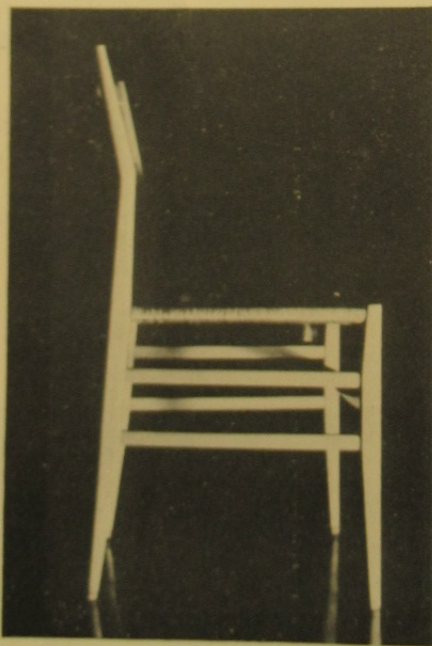
Though Ponti strikes a medium which may justly be called happy, he is not a muggump of stylistic compromise. He speaks of three deep convictions from which his style flowers—a belief in his classic training in elegant and slender forms, in creative fancy (“every piece must speak to the imagination of both designer and viewer”) and in the fact that essential modernity is more important than external modernity. This credo was fully visible in the dozen Ponti designs brought to the American Market last winter by M. Singer and Sons (*Interiors*, December, 1951); it is equally apparent in the interiors and furnishings shown here, designed for the Turin branch of the Burroughs Adding Machine Company (a regional office which includes a school where girls are trained to use the mysterious mechanical equip-



the ponti style



The famous Ponti chair, a theme with continuous variations, is used here in blond ash with a simple two-slat back and colorless cellophane seat.



Detail of a desk, above, illustrates both the taper and suspension in Ponti's design. Note that the complete rectangular unit as well as the individual drawers seem to hang independently, as if supported by air and shadows. When closed, the drawers (faced in yellow Formica) project about an inch from the unit, emphasizing their isolation and obviating the need for pull handles.

A small classroom desk is made more comfortable by a sympathetic but controlled curve. Note the expanse of venetian blinds stopping short of ceiling height on the facing page, a room divider used effectively throughout the offices.



ment.) There are logical similarities between the Singer and Burroughs designs; there are also differences, consistent with Ponti's kind of development. Built of blond ash and yellow Formica, this commercial group is sturdier, more direct in detail — proof that his style, for all its refinement, can have an economical expression.

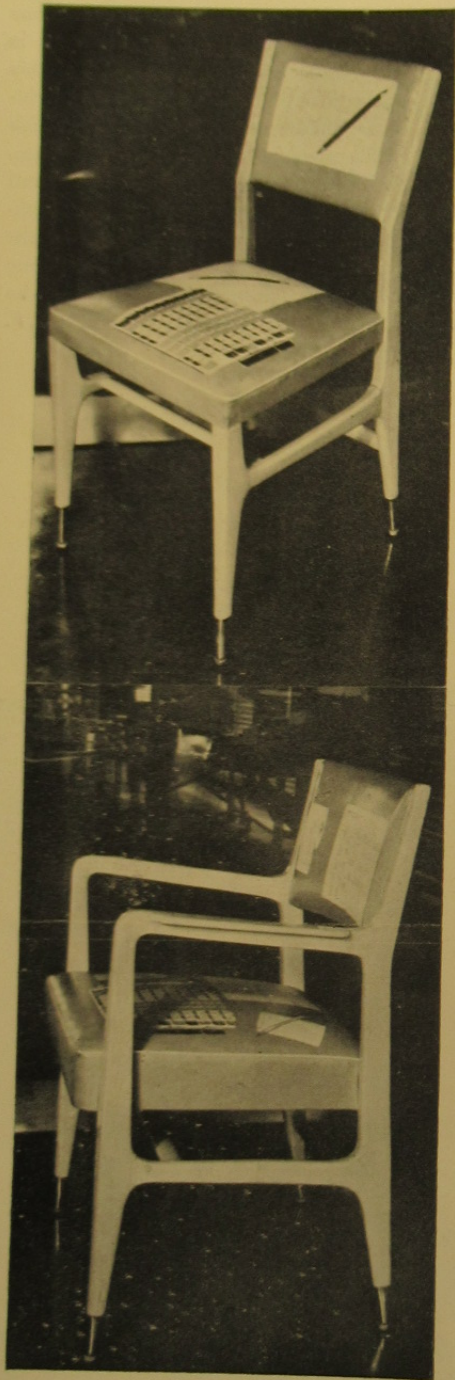
The Ponti signature here, as always, is the taper — the pointed leg, the knife-edged shelf or table top — which gives slenderness without sacrificing stability. The leg is firm where structure calls for it, at the joint, and graceful at floor level, where the eye sees it in a cluster (but never clutter) of other legs. The leg's heavier propor-

tion, played against a thin top slab in the desk at the left, adds tension and movement to the design. Ponti frequently punctuates the taper with a brass kick-plate, like a bracelet worn to flatter a trim ankle. Often, too, he angles the back legs (see chair, left) to boost the illusion of tentative, quivering repose.

As often as Ponti tapers, he suspends. The drawers of his desks and consoles are so invisibly hung that the tops seem to hover above them by accidental proximity more than by any preconceived structural relationship. Shadows, thrown by projections and subtle surface changes, isolate not only the drawer units but each individual drawer. The suspended look turns

up, too, in a chair (next page) whose seat, rather than leaning listlessly on a crosspiece, strides like a suspension bridge between the front and back legs. The independence of the seat slab is pointed up by the light wood frame, a continuous modeled form enveloping the seat in sculpturally hollowed spaces. All of this works toward a point: the apparent lightness, slenderness and poised frailty which is the core of Ponti's modern classicism. To dramatize these light forms, Ponti selected a darker monochromatic background in the Burroughs office. In the best Ponti style he explains, "Everything is blue and yellow, except the girls — who are vividly and splendidly colored."—J. F.

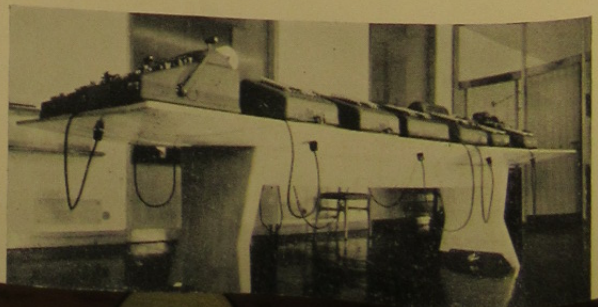




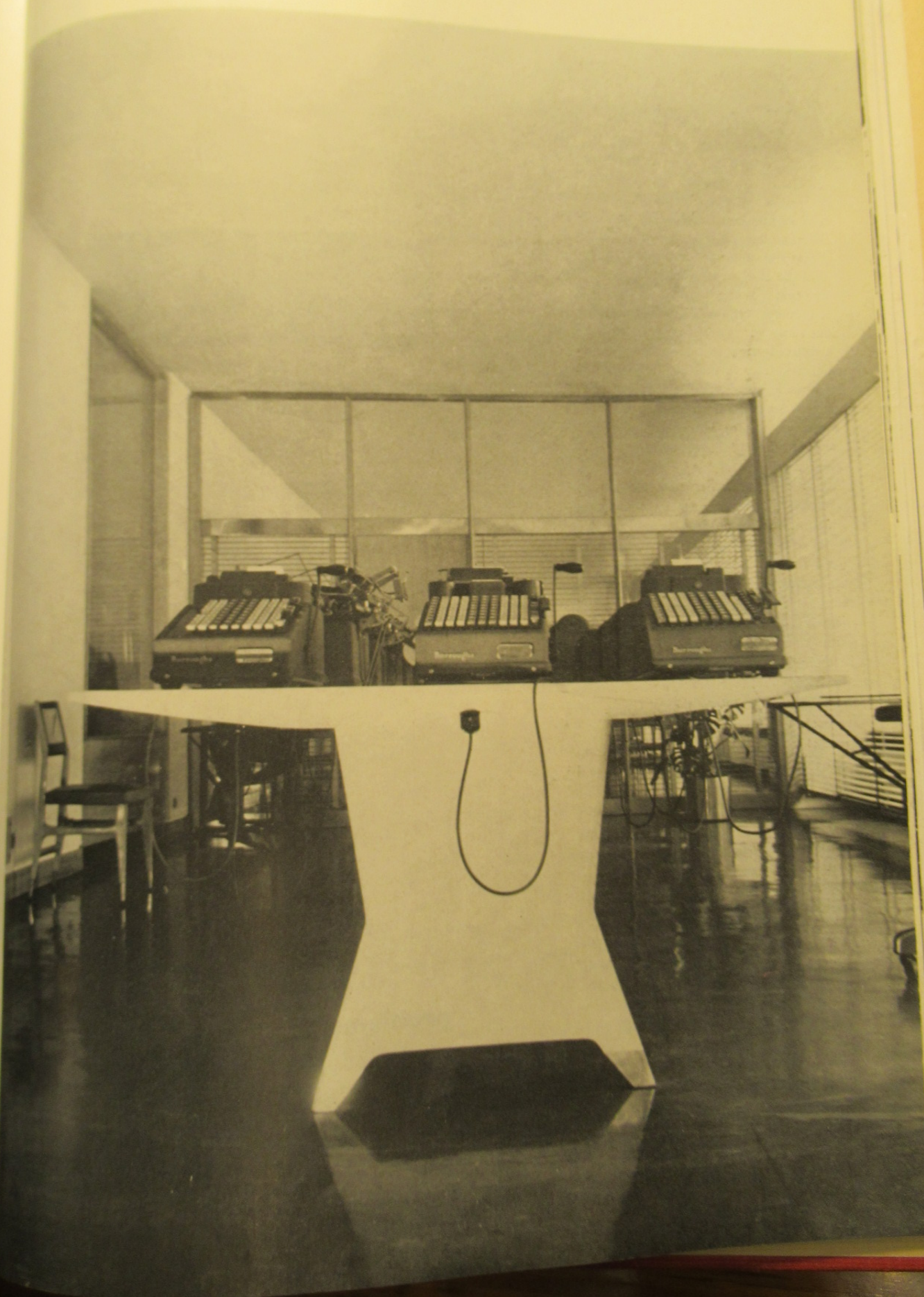
Large demonstration table (right) gains deceptive lightness from diminishing lines. By tapering the underside of the top to a knife edge on the sides and ends, Ponti gives it an upward impetus. The trunk also appears delicate because of its pinched waistline.

Right: In the sales area, as throughout the offices, blue rubber tile floors, steel-trimmed glass and venetian blinds as interior partitions which give a sense of openness between rooms. The space is pleasantly clean, the furniture light and comfortable, illumination aided by blue, yellow and white color scheme.

Plastic-upholstered chairs, left, and arm chairs in the reception room (page 74) were decorated by the artist Fornasetti in mathematical motifs appropriate to Burroughs' purpose and products. Ponti, who believes that the integration of design and decoration is an important and natural function of architecture, has previously collaborated with Fornasetti on similar decorative schemes.



the ponti style



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