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Out of Ashes and Rubble: The Pirelli Tower

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At the end of World War II, the Italian economy was in ruins and more than 300,000 Italians were dead. Many in the country desired to “erase the compromises and errors of the period,” and turned to architectural projects to promote a sense of healing.¹

While the bombs of the allied forces had helped liberate Italy from Nazi occupation, the events of the war had also inflicted extensive damage on city centers, monuments, infrastructure, and major public buildings. But the destruction also left behind a series of urban voids by which Italy could re-create itself. It was out of such a condition that Milan offered the world the Pirelli Tower. Affectionately called the Pirellone, it would become an exemplar of the Italian response to disaster and a model for innovative Italian architecture.

Above: View of the Pirelli Tower from the Duomo. Photo by Nicholas Ng from Flickr.com.

Realization of the Tower

The success of the Pirelli Tower went against the grain in Italy, where postwar reconstruction was more often overwhelmed with symbolism, politics, and the long history of place.² Nowhere was this more evident than in Florence. On August 3, 1944, as the German army retreated, it blew up all the bridges across the Arno except the Ponte Vecchio, which Hitler loved.³ To prevent allied forces from using this historic structure, however, German forces dynamited more than one hundred adjacent medieval buildings.

After the war, Florentines wanted to rebuild without delay, and they formed a committee of historians, architects, and writers to offer advice. Some believed that all the damaged buildings should be rebuilt *dove erano, come erano*, “where they were, as they were”; others wanted to start over to create a living city instead of an illusion for tourists. Despite a competition held to consider a variety of ideas, no decisions were made. Consequently, the city



council approved “a series of small, rather bland proposals, parcel by parcel from 1948–1957, essentially rebuilding the city exactly as it was before the war.”⁴

Despite the outcome in Florence, Italian architects aspired to repair their cities in a manner that reflected the ideals of a new society, and in Milan, the outcome was different. During the fascist era, industrial companies like the rubber and tire manufacturer Pirelli had flourished there.⁵ However, a 1943 bombing campaign had destroyed the Pirelli factories and many others. Soon after the raids, a billboard advertising Pirelli’s ladies latex stockings appeared prominently on the site of the ruined factory, across from the main train station. But once the war had ended, Pirelli decided to move its manufacturing facilities to the northern La Bicocca area of the city. At the same time, the company decided to build a skyscraper on the former factory site, adjacent to the historical center and its Duomo.⁶

Much of the credit for the building goes to Alberto Pirelli, who guided his family’s company in the postwar

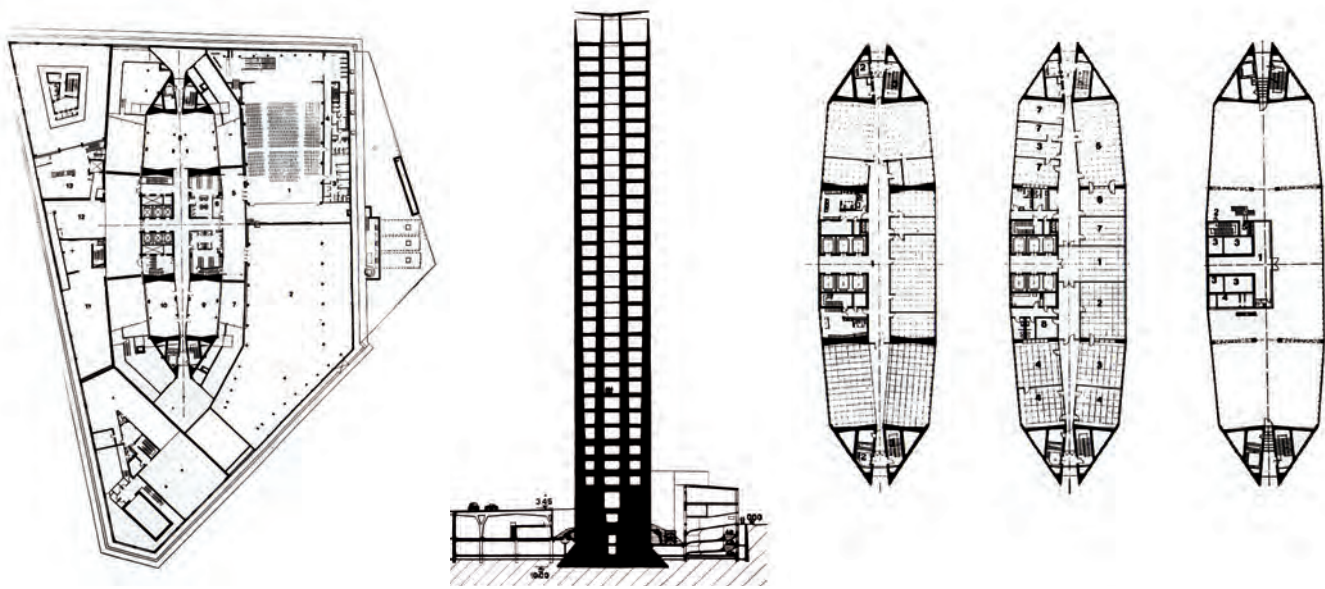
era, and who wanted an American-type skyscraper as a corporate symbol. The Milanese had also always dreamed of building tall buildings, and the city plan of 1953 designated the area near the train station for office buildings. When city authorities approved the Pirelli tower’s atypical height of 417 feet, they opened the door for the construction of Italy’s first skyscraper.⁷

To design the tower, Pirelli hired the architect Gio Ponti, who assembled a team that included the renowned engineer Pier Luigi Nervi. Their collaboration resulted in a 33-story structure, with parking for 800 cars, built of prestressed, reinforced concrete. Its facade was clad with thermopane windows, held in place by anodized aluminum mullions and positioned outside the floor slabs to achieve

Above left: Street-level view of the Pirelli Tower.

Above right (top and bottom): Interior views of the Pirelli Tower.

Photos by Epzibah from Flickr.com.



the effect of an unbroken curtain wall. The roof, supported by a separate structure, seemed to float over the building.

Efficiency was central to the design. For example, the building's columns became thinner as they rose. Efficiency also affected planning for interior circulation: since the office workers needed open, flexible spaces serviced by centrally located elevators and corridors, Ponti decided the width of the building should diminish toward its edges, resulting in a tapered, lens-shaped plan. Moveable partitions also allowed flexibility in the use of each floor—except for below grade where the building included a 600-seat auditorium, a staff cafeteria, conference areas, and parking.⁸

This synthesis of form and structure was a welcome departure from the single-block or tiered skyscrapers that filled Manhattan's grid at the time, and Ponti and Nervi's ideas influenced such later American skyscrapers as the 1958 Pan Am tower.⁹ However, the architecture critic Reyner Banham wrote that the design "was not a style-oriented formalism, despite the elegance of his solution, but one that centered around essential functional planning which was typical of the modern movement."¹⁰

As Italy's tallest building for many years, the Pirellone became a symbol of the country's economic growth and

an expression of its industrial power. Banham also noted, however, that "Ponti had managed to make his architecture more effective in corporate image making than any advertising agency's work." The stylized lens-shaped plan became *uno slogan grafico*, which he placed on all of his own printed materials. "[The] clear architectural image promoted the company, and the company's publicity promoted the architect."¹¹ The tower thus evolved symbolically from being an icon of national recovery to being an advertisement for Pirelli products, the architect, and contemporary Milan.

Icon for Postwar Milan

The tower was particularly important as a crystallization of Milan's new image as a space for modernity, speed, and chance. One reason was its proximity to the historic center, which allowed it to seem both geographically distant and central to the life of the city.

This altered image of Milan is evident in the urban elements that are included or edited out of films from the early 1930s through the 1960s. Until the 1950s the city's expansive northern areas were almost completely absent from films, most likely because this landscape was filled with factories and housing for workers. But in the 1960s, films like Antonioni's *La Notte* began to present Milan no longer just as its Duomo, but also as its train station, the Valesca tower, the Pirellone, its industries, and its anonymous suburbs.

Above: Plans and section of Pirelli Tower. From R. Aloï, *Nuove Architetture a Milano* (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1959).

Opposite: Map of Central Milan. Drawing by author.



The Stazione Centrale and the Pirelli tower become particularly recurrent geographic indicators: the station as the gateway to the city, the Pirellone as a symbol of the economic boom in the new Milan. According to a publication by the University of Milano-Bicocca, “Perhaps it is no coincidence that the imposing, slightly oppressive monumentality of the station stands just a few dozen meters from the modern, linear form of the skyscraper, as though in an inevitable clash between the old and new.”¹²

Without the 1943 bombing, it would be hard to imagine how the factories near the train station would have been relocated so swiftly to the northern periphery, allowing contemporary architecture to appear in their place. The tragedy of wartime destruction is no guarantee of later architectural innovation; but in this case it led to a progressive architectural symbol as a part of postwar reconstruction.

The tower resulted, in other words, from a historic opportunity. The ambitious visions of Pirelli, Ponti, and Nervi, the Pirelli company’s financial resources, popular rejection of the stifling cultural impact of fascism, and Milan’s open-mindedness regarding postwar building codes and regulations paved the way for never-before-seen, experimental architecture.¹³ The Pirellone brought the city into the twentieth century and illustrated how accommodation to new ideas, especially in postdisaster conditions, can produce architecture that resonates for decades.

Notes

1. Manfredo Tafuri, “The Years of Reconstruction,” *History of Italian Architecture, 1944–1985* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), p. 11. Tafuri points out that the alteration of buildings associated with the war was seen as a way to correct the errors of the past. For example, the redesign of the Stazione Termini in Rome was intended to erase the embedded symbolism of fascism. The new Montuori-Vitelozzi station was “universally recognized as a reflection of all the positive elements of the new democratic society, in its flowing functional plan, its lightness and transparency, [and] its lack of any stylistic references.”

2. Construction in Italy is rarely a matter of a prescribed procedure. It seems almost anybody can have input, the government is extensively involved, and the image of the city must be considered. See Tobias Jones, *The Dark Heart of Italy* (New York: North Point Press, 2005); and Claudia Ziegler, *A Waste Water Treatment Plant as a Contemporary Public Space in Florence, Italy* (Houston: Rice University, 2007).

3. Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, *Italian Days* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), p. 128.

4. This book is one of the few comprehensive resources for the history of twentieth-century architecture in Italy. It was a strong reference for material in this article on both the Pirelli tower and postwar reconstruction in Florence.

6. Elena dell’Agnese, *La Bicocca e Il Suo Territorio* (Milano: Università Milano-Bicocca, 2005). This text was produced by the University of Milano-Bicocca to help students and faculty understand its urban context and history. It is an excellent source of information regarding the Pirelli Tower because of the company’s decision to relocate its manufacturing facilities to La Bicocca after the war. Also see R. Aloï, *Nuove Architetture a Milano* (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1959), p.

2. However, these sources do not explain how Pirelli was organized during the war, how its organization changed afterwards, or why the offices were separated from the manufacturing facility. The crisis within the company was severe: in addition to the destruction of its original factory, many employees were deported to work camps.

7. Kirk, *The Architecture of Modern Italy, Volume II*, p. 167.

8. Aloï, *Nuove Architetture a Milano*, pp. 2–5; Kirk, *The Architecture of Modern Italy, Volume II*, pp. 168–69; and Francesco Dal Co, Sergio Polano, and Antonio Martinelli, “Grattacielo Pirelli,” *20th Century Architecture and Urbanism: Milano* (Tokyo: Extra Edition, 1991), p. 186.

9. <http://www.aviewoncities.com/nyc/panam.htm> (accessed Nov. 11, 2008).

10. Kirk, *The Architecture of Modern Italy, Volume II*, p. 168.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 166, 170.

12. Dell’Agnese, *La Bicocca e Il Suo Territorio*, p. 14. The above paragraphs contain a summary of ideas located in several areas of dell’Agnese’s text.

13. The Pirelli tower was novel, experimental architecture because it was the first skyscraper to be built in Italy; it was an extremely tall building realized next to Milan’s *centro storico*; it had image-making capacity; and it was able to function as an advertisement. It is not being argued that there was a discontinuity in architecture between the interwar and postwar periods, or that the tower was a departure from the style or materiality of Ponti or Nervi’s earlier work.