

# Re-drawing of vanished space: Casa Giobbe della Bitta by Marcello Piacentini

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## Abstract

Does it still make sense today, over time dominated by the image and its power, to question the reasons and the potential of Architectural Drawing? Could we use, instead, this immaterial force that pervades our era against the *modus operandi* of the *tabula rasa* that affects the Modern Italian architectural heritage? An attempt to answer these questions could come from the study of a work no longer existing by Marcello Piacentini, Casa Giobbe della Bitta, of 1925. Starting from the critical re-drawing of the building, we want to attempt a decoding of the vanished architecture, analyzing its geometric shapes and matrices that generated it; digital 3D modeling, on the other hand, attempts to return in the form of an image the essence of space and its intrinsic value to which Italian culture has now definitively given up. While renouncing to provide judgments of a historical nature, both on the controversial character, and on the architecture investigated, we want to fill a small void in the study of architecture of the early 1900s, with the hope of favoring a greater awareness on our part in preserving and protecting the works of modern Italian.

*Keywords:* History, Twentieth century, Architectural drawing.

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In an era dominated by the indisputable power of the image<sup>1</sup> - meaning it as a simultaneous revelator of micro and macrocosms that make up a powerful metaphor of totality<sup>2</sup> - can it be legitimate (if not even necessary) to ask oneself about the role and potential of Drawing in architecture? To find an answer to this question an experiment could be developed that attempts to turn the iconic power of the image to favor architecture. Let's see how. There is no doubt that representing an architecture means making its absence obvious<sup>3</sup>, understood as something that has existed in the past and that today no longer exists<sup>4</sup>: this notation, containing in itself a certain amount of bitterness, reminds us of the unfortunate destiny of many modern buildings that in Italy and elsewhere face demolition, most of the time for unlikely reasons, instead of being preserved, protected and valued as testimonials cultural heritage of a recent past that will never return. Against this unspeakable *modus operandi* of the *tabula rasa*, the image and (perhaps even before) the architectural drawing could play a role of fundamental importance. As we said, the result of the

<sup>1</sup> Purini, F. 2003. "Un disegno plurale". In *Firenze Architettura. Il disegno come conoscenza dell'architettura*, year VII, no. 1 & 2. Firenze: Dipartimento di progettazione dell'architettura, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> Purini, F. 2000. *Comporre l'architettura*. Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza. P. 94.

<sup>4</sup> Purini, F. 2003. P. 58.

action of representing an object refers - without a doubt - to the object itself<sup>5</sup>: at the same time, however, it is itself an object that responds to its own code, has its own recognizability and belongs to its own reality<sup>6</sup>. The representation, therefore, involves in all respects a duplication of the architectural work in an autonomous work, a sort of specular text which in its virtual condition becomes a reflection of the real work<sup>7</sup>, of which, according to Franco Purini, constitutes a reliable abstraction that "establishes a superior place of meaning that preserves and nourishes the value of the building, placing itself as a *testimonial* act in which the reason for its existence is *consolidated* and *stabilized*"<sup>8</sup>. It is no coincidence that the attempt to try to put this into practice with this short paper is to testify to the reasons for a building that no longer exists, to understand its preciousness (although small in absolute terms but significant from other points of view), to which Italian architectural and artistic culture has definitively given up precisely with its demolition. In the 1920s, a well-known lawyer of the Roman bourgeoisie, a certain Enrico Giobbe della Bitta, decided to build a summer residence for himself and his family in the countryside outside Rome (Fig. 1); for the design of this house he commissioned the one who was probably the most popular architect at that time, not just the capital, but of the whole of Italy: Marcello Piacentini.

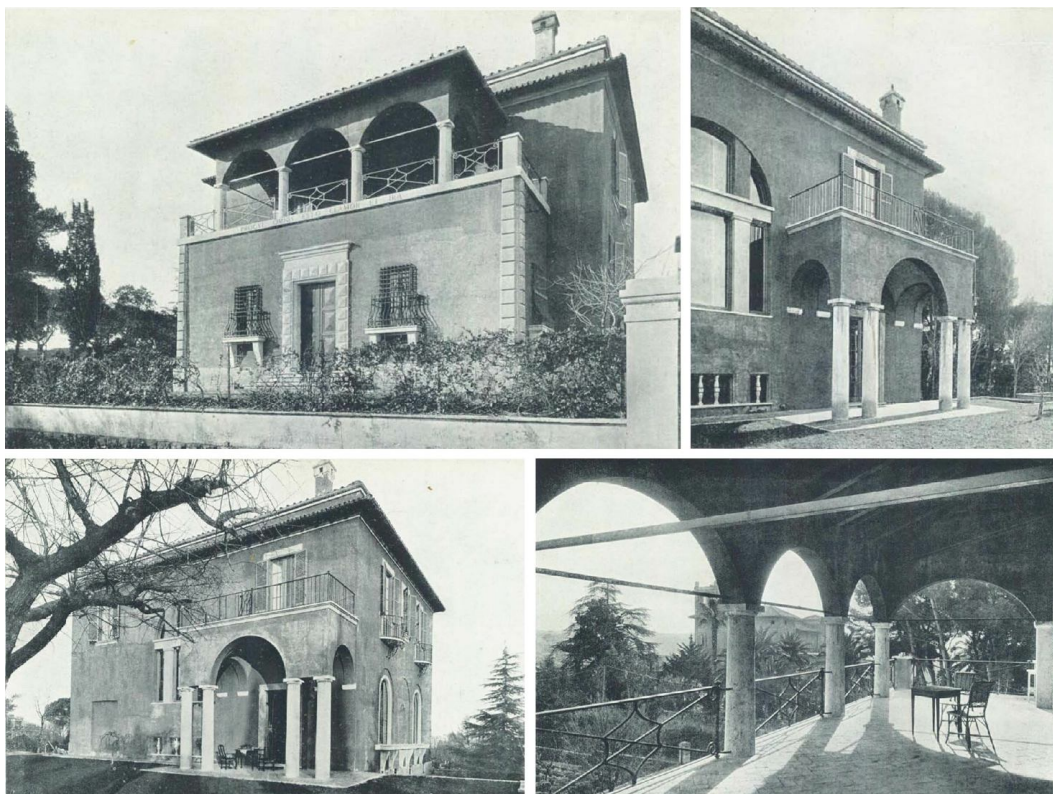


Fig. 1. Photos by Vasari of Casa Giobbe della Bitta (by Marcello Piacentini) taken from architectural magazine *Domus*, no. 2, year I, 1928, pp. 14-17.

<sup>5</sup> Purini, F. 2000. Pp. 94-95.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

Of course here it is not possible to make a biography, even a short one, of the character, for which we refer to another recent publication<sup>9</sup>, rather we want to hope for a reading of the works of the Roman architect free from ideological prejudices (without having to deny the stated proximity of the designer with the bloody and liberticidal fascist regime) that aims at an analysis of the actual value and quality that his architectures and city parts have expressed and still express today. It must be acknowledged, however, that - at least in recent years - timid signs of openness towards a reconsideration of the general work of Marcello Piacentini (not obviously leading to an enthusiastic revaluation of his realizations) recordable undoubtedly as a positive sign of enrichment and historiographical deepening.

The ostracism towards the character, started in 1945 for reasons that were completely understandable at that time, had perhaps its culmination in 1960, when an outspoken Bruno Zevi, shortly after Piacentini's death, while recognizing all his qualities typical of the architect<sup>10</sup> and extolling a fascinating, vigorous, enthusiastic personality, lovable as well as an extraordinary ability to work<sup>11</sup>, he called him dead in 1925<sup>12</sup>. The Italian dominus of architectural criticism, not surprisingly, sets precisely that year as a qualitative dividing line of his work, saving, in fact, all the previous production, of eclectic and secessionist flavor, and nullifying all that happened afterwards, from the recovery of the noble language of Roman architecture, simplified beyond measure and reduced to pure and bare volume, preserving the classical proportions, to the so-called "Stile Littorio"<sup>13</sup>, which will unequivocally characterize the new monumental faces of many Italian cities that Piacentini and his collaborators will have the burden and the privilege of designing<sup>14</sup>. And it is one of the last architectures of this first cycle<sup>15</sup> (destined to close inexorably after the rise to power of Benito Mussolini which took place three years earlier) that we want to talk about in this essay, a work designed and built in the three years between 1922 and 1925 and now disappeared following a deed of demolition<sup>16</sup>.

*Casa Giobbe della Bitta* is a compact architectural object from the stereometric point of view, built on a terrain with an irregular orography to the point of *strongly* influencing the project: the house, from the side of the main entrance (Fig. 3), as hoisted on a stone podium, which separates from the ground the solemn entrance opening, which in fact is preceded by a flight of steps; the ground floor takes place on a single level, but the opening on the back garden goes instead to place itself at the same level of the ground; a third service entrance on the west front is actually positioned well below the previous two, substantially coinciding with the height of the land.

<sup>9</sup> Nicoloso, P. 2018. *Marcello Piacentini. Architettura e potere: una biografia*. Udine: Gaspari Editore.

<sup>10</sup> Iori, T. 2017. *L'8 dicembre 1881 nasce a Roma Marcello Piacentini*. Retrieved October 3th, 2019 from: <https://www.raiplayradio.it/audio/2017/12/Marcello-Piacentini---Wikiradio-dell8122017-0be5d970-0416-4eb1-a580-b0af6d60ecea.html>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> Zevi, B. 1960. "Marcello Piacentini: morì nel 1925", in *L'Architettura. Cronache e storia*, no. 58, p. 220.

<sup>13</sup> A particularly effective definition of "Stile Littorio" is the one formulated by Ettore Sessa in his essay published by Flaccovio in 2014, entitled *La nuova immagine della città italiana nel ventennio fascista*, on page 5.

<sup>14</sup> In this regard we want to point out a monograph on the first organic urban project conducted by Piacentini (and certainly prodromal of the following ones) carried out for the city of Bergamo: Bianchi, A., Zigo, M. 2018. *Il centro piacentiniano di Bergamo. Dal rilievo urbano alla città contemporanea*. Sant'Arcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli Editore.

<sup>15</sup> The architect Arianna Sara De Rose places *Casa Giobbe della Bitta* among the last works of the "first cycle", in her monograph on Piacentini (De Rose, A.S. 1995. *Marcello Piacentini. Opere 1903-1926*. Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini Editore, p. 171).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

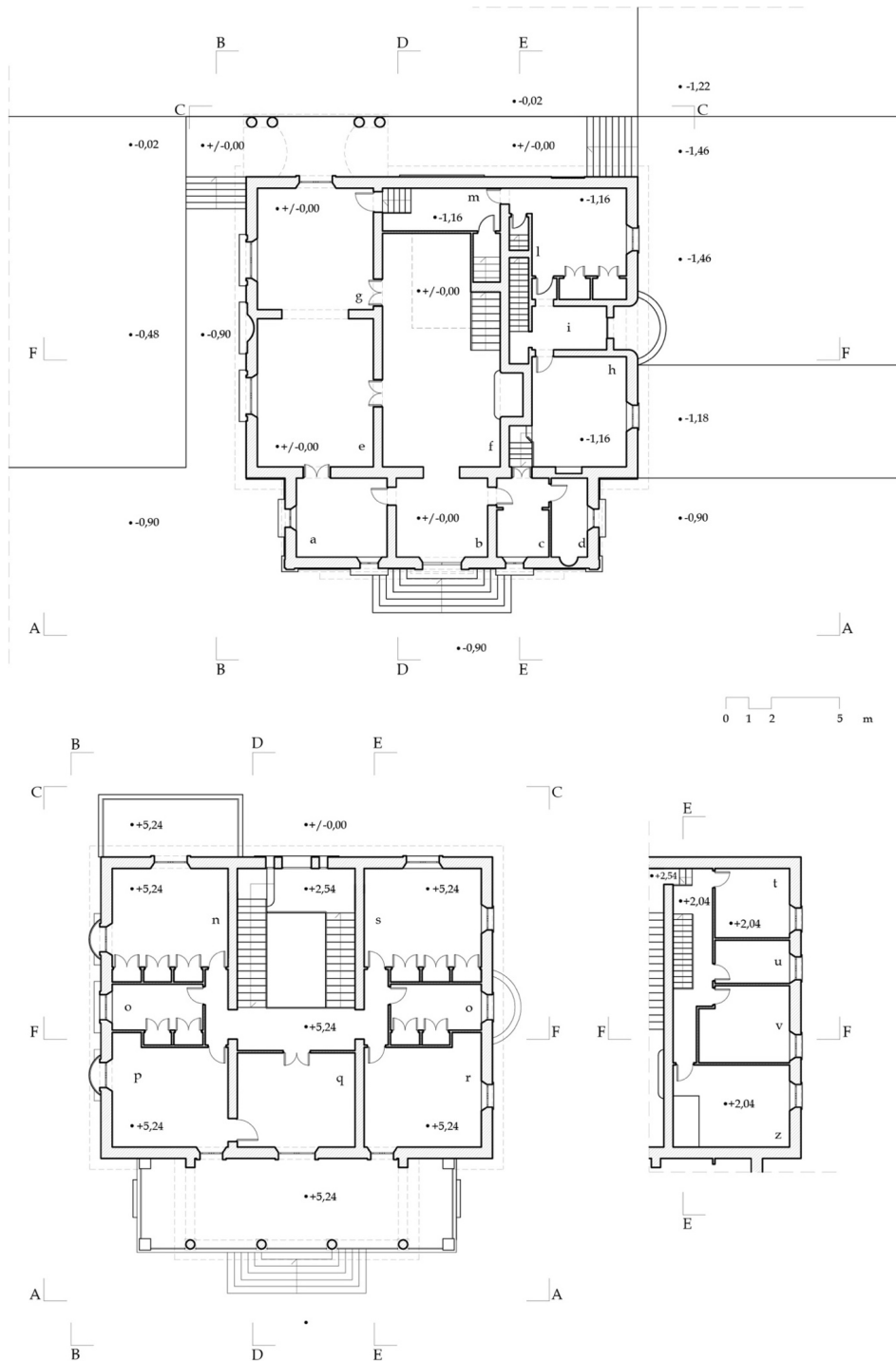


Fig. 2. Casa Giobbe della Bitta (by Marcello Piacentini). Top center: ground floor (section plan at +1,20 m); bottom left: first floor (section plan at +6,44 m); bottom right: middle floor, servant dwelling (section plan at +3,24 m); a) lawyer's office; b) entrance; c) cloakroom; d) bathroom; e) living room; f) hall; g) dining room; h) pantry room; i) secondary room; l) kitchen; m) office; n) master bedroom; o) bathroom; p) bedroom; q) private office; r) cloakroom; s) guest room; t, v, z) servant bedrooms; u) bathroom.

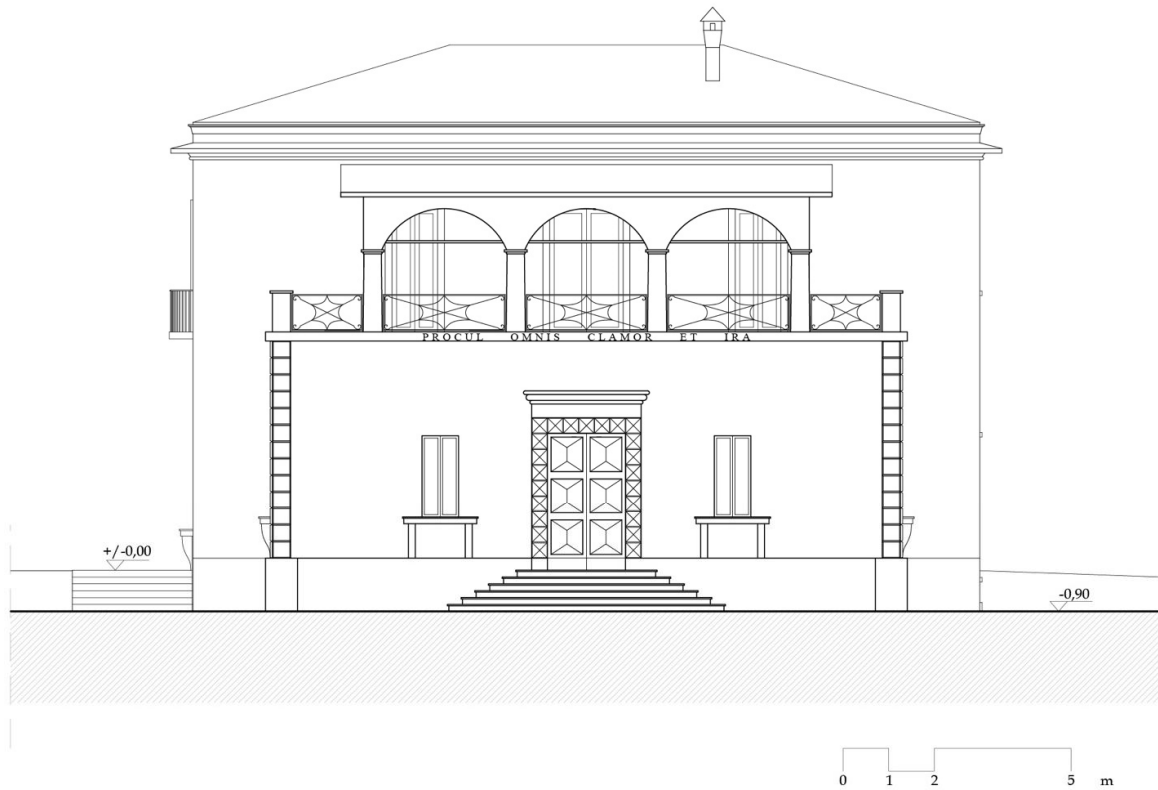


Fig. 3. Casa Giobbe della Bitta (by Marcello Piacentini), section "AA" and perspective section "AA" (below).



Fig. 4. Casa Giobbe della Bitta (by Marcello Piacentini), section "BB" and perspective section "BB" (below).

This brief description makes us understand how uneven it is, from an altimetric point of view, the lot on which the construction insisted. The house has a main front based on criteria of absolute symmetry (Fig. 3): a volume with a single elevation emerges from the large stereometry that encloses the living spaces, distinguished by the presence of many notable elements: the cantonal on the two edges, the entrance portal underlined by an exhibition made with ashlar pyramid in a vague Renaissance style, the “kneeling windows”<sup>17</sup> and the string course (even containing the Latin inscription *PROFUL OMNIS CLAMOR ET IRA*, that should mean "Far from all the clamor and anger... ") which coincides with the attic of the overlying view, all elements presumably in travertine, which generate (judging from the photos of the time, Fig. 1) an open contrast of matter and color with the plaster coating, dark, of the massive masonry wall.

This volume just described is surmounted by a tripartite portico with depressed arches, equipped with special metal systems to contain the thrust, which rise to real linguistic elements, like the stone columns supporting the arches themselves and the relative roof inclined. The side elevation (Fig. 4), in its composition, adopts likewise symmetry criteria: on the ground floor there are two openings with upper arched end, equipped, at the base, with shelves and relative brackets in travertine; between these two openings there is a niche of identical dimensions; on the upper floor, axially aligned with the lower openings, there are a central and two lateral openings equipped with a small balcony; in the skirting, there are two small windows for the ventilation of the basement rooms. The front on the back (Fig. 5) is characterized by the presence of a large arched tripartite hole in the center and a large terrace on the right supported by twin columns, which acts as a porch to protect the entrance to the ground house from the back garden.

The interiors of the building are the result of a complex union of two dwellings and ample service spaces located below the natural level of the land (Fig. 6, 7 and 8): As already specified, the main entrance to the house (higher than the 'tax of the land) occurs through a volume with a single elevation that rises to the role of a true vestibule, that is, an introductory space (probably of classic heritage) to the house (understood in the strict sense), which ensures the shelter of the visitor without that these come into the house, however, preserving the privacy of the owner; Piacentini designs the vestibule as a flow-organizing device (Fig. 2), not surprisingly, to the left of the entrance is the lawyer's office, frontally there is the gateway to the main house, while, on the right, in addition to a bathroom and to the cloakroom there is a staircase that leads to the servants' dwelling; the vestibule, therefore, in addition to configuring itself as a self-sufficient relational system (the lawyer's clients access the study and can use the bathroom, without having to enter the living space) acts as a covered terrace for the rooms on the upper floor facing the main front of the building (Fig. 2); the main house basically consists of two levels (Fig. 2), the ground floor (raised), occupies a part, although majority, of the total surface of the building's imprint and is characterized, once crossed the vestibule, by the presence of the large room at full height, the hall, which immediately reveals to the visitor the sequential essence of domestic spaces, starting, from the left, from the two apertures that lead to that area that today we would call “living”, or the living room and the dining room (among other things placed in direct and ample communication by a large wall passage with a rounded arch termination, which tends to generate a unique spatiality while maintaining the two areas of use distinct) to finish, frontally, with the vision of a backdrop composed of an imposing staircase, almost tending to monumentality, and of the large tripartite

<sup>17</sup> Lupano, M. 1991. *Marcello Piacentini*. Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, p. 52.

opening, which functions as a real optical device on the landscape of the Roman countryside; both elements described, designed to work synergistically, introduce a *fourth* dimension into the home of Giobbe della Bitta (distinct from the three that generate the space) that coincides with time, that is the possibility to follow it gradually<sup>18</sup>, to perceive it for views, for angles, for visuals composed of natural landscapes, in a nutshell, to live it; the upper floor of the main house (Fig. 2) is essentially occupied by the sleeping area, ie the bedrooms, to the west of the staircase, interspersed with a toilet, distribution scheme that is mirrored in the east, with the only exception that one of the two rooms becomes a cloakroom; in front of the staircase, instead, there is the lawyer's private office, through which it is possible to access the porticoed terrace (located above the vestibule) where, among other things, there is another bedroom and the cloakroom; the other part of the building volume is instead occupied by the house reserved for the servants (Fig. 2), equipped, in fact, with two separate entrances, one, by means of a staircase, from the vestibule described above, while the other, actually independent, centrally located in the eastern elevation; the share of this last access, considerably lower than that of the main entrance to the house, is located about 30 centimeters from the ground; on the ground floor of the servants' dwelling there are the pantry room (located to the left of the entrance space, which, as mentioned above, can also be accessed, with the help of a small staircase, from the vestibule) and the kitchen to service of both houses; two single-flight staircases, of identical dimensions, overlapping each other and positioned parallel to the main staircase respectively, allow the first to reach a basement space without ventilation, for the exclusive use of domestic staff (placed exactly under the floor of the ground floor), while the second one is the upper floor of the building, which in fact occupies an intermediate position between the ground floor and the first floor of the main building (Fig. 2), where the attendants' bedrooms are located; from the kitchen, by means of a space called *office*, it is possible to reach the living area, which is located at a higher altitude, easily overcome with steps; always from the office you can, through a flight of stairs, reach the basement spaces belonging to the main house.

Given the significant presence of underground and basement spaces, the laying of the foundations is differentiated (Fig. 8): the volume containing the servants' dwelling reaches a deeper level; the main house, given the presence of basement spaces, is located at an intermediate level; instead the vestibule, under which there are no cantine rooms, rests on a layer closer to the ground (Fig. 9g). Probably, however, such an excavation was not carried out only for functional reasons but it may have been necessary to reach more coherent layers of land: in addition to the fundamental motivations of a geological and geotechnical nature, actually, we could interpret the choice of Piacentini as an attempt to connect the building to the eternal energy of what we do not see and which appears to be immutable<sup>19</sup>, that is, that dark force that the earth and its entrails hold but that can bestow and from which the artifact draws the ability to lean and sustain itself<sup>20</sup>, or its sense of *being*<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> In a certain sense this concept could refer to the *promenade architectural* by Le Corbusier, whose works, including *Maison La Roche* in 1924, had already been published by Italian architecture magazines and were therefore known by Piacentini himself.

<sup>19</sup> Purini, F. 2000. P. 97.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.





Fig. 5. Casa Giobbe della Bitta (by Marcello Piacentini), section "CC" and perspective section "CC" (below).

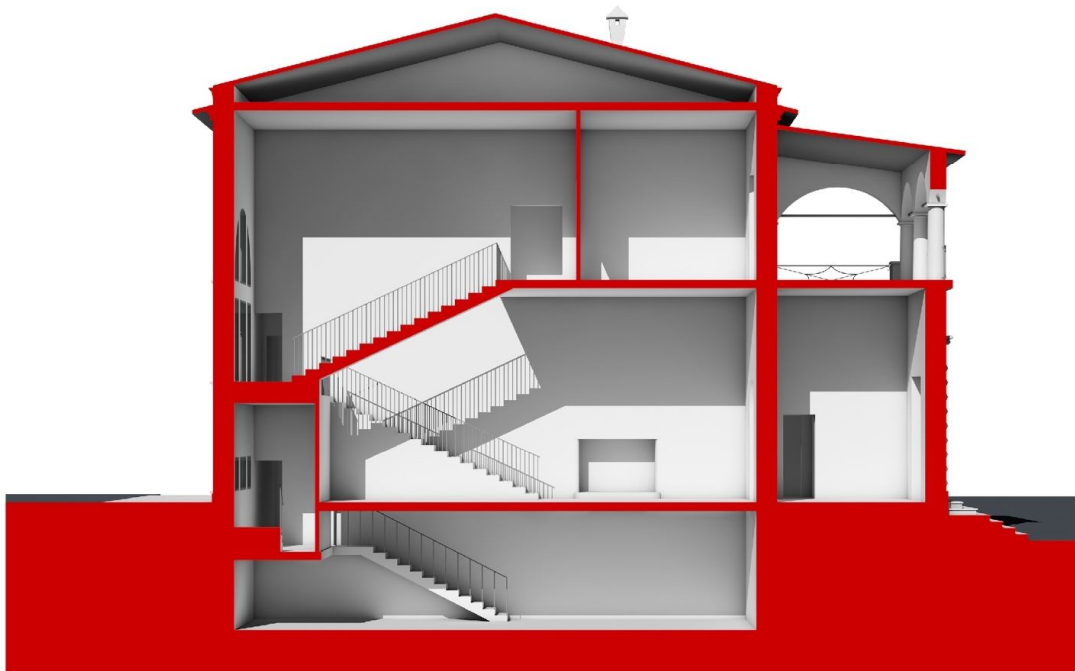
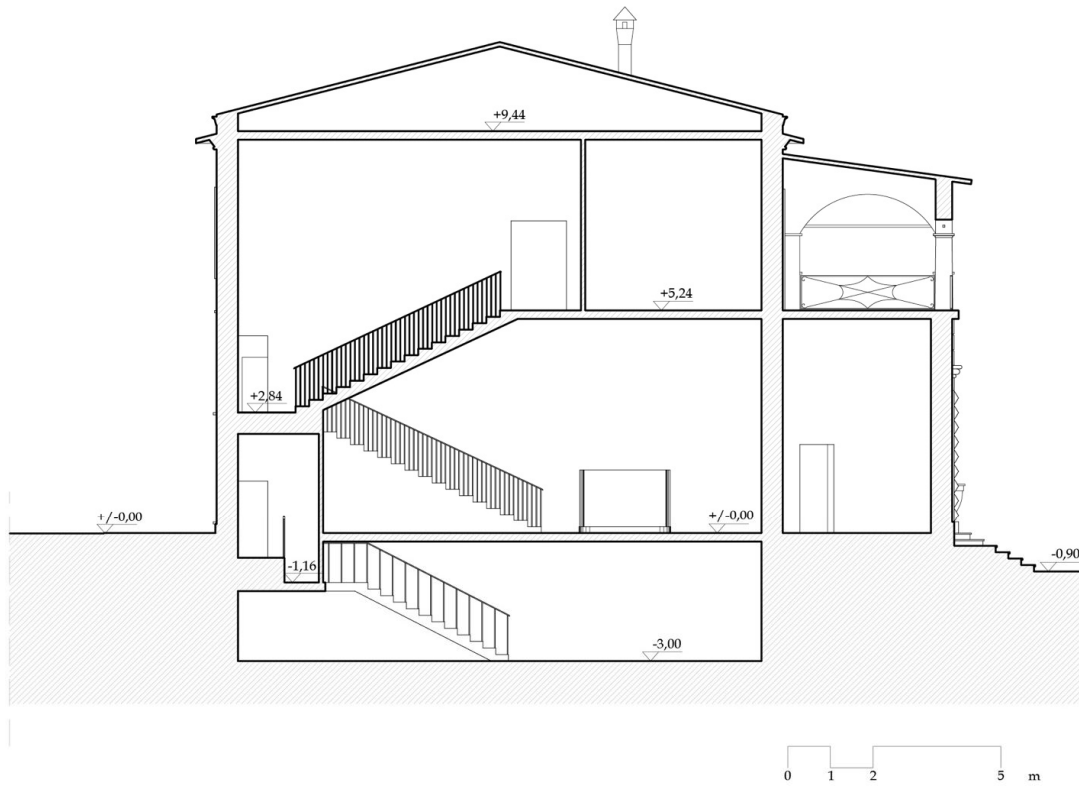


Fig. 6. Casa Giobbe della Bitta (by Marcello Piacentini), section "DD" and perspective section "DD" (below).

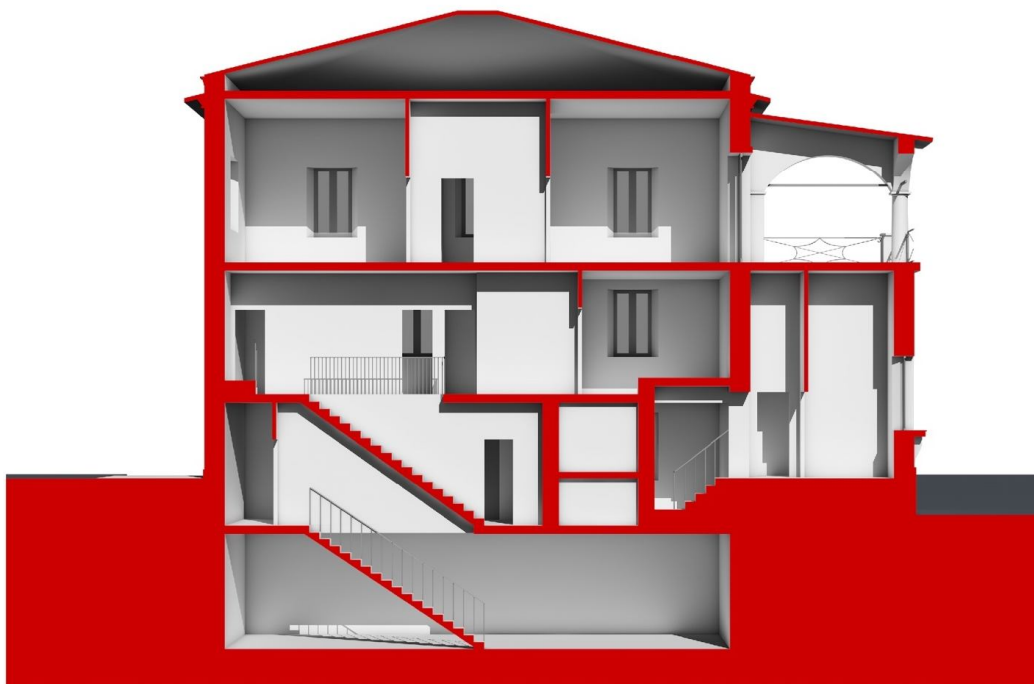


Fig. 7. Casa Giobbe della Bitta (by Marcello Piacentini), section "EE" and perspective section "EE" (below).

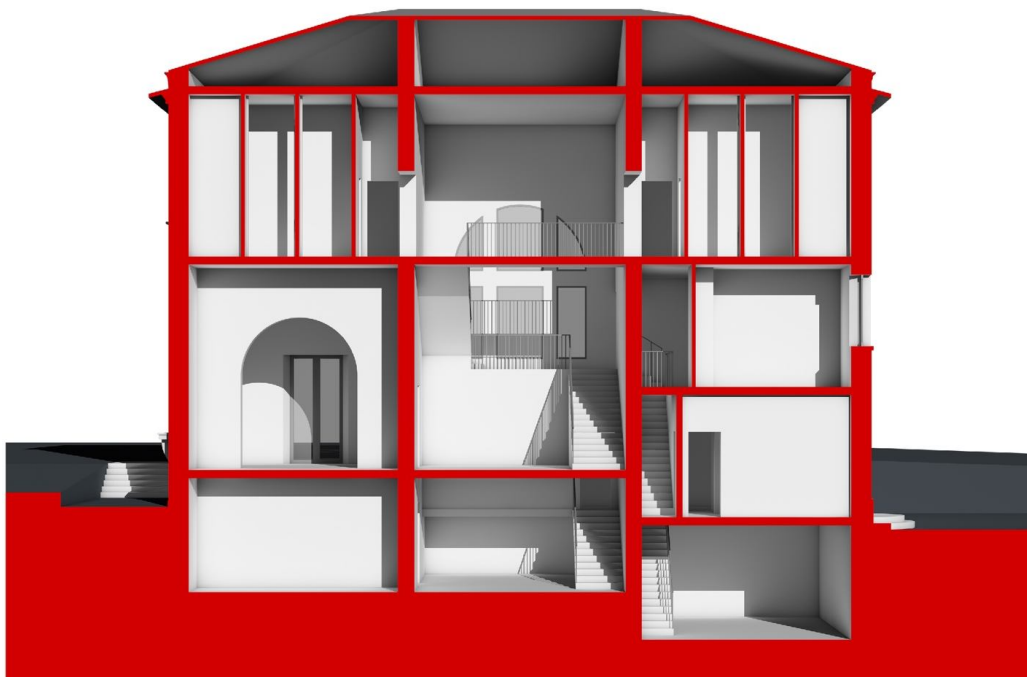
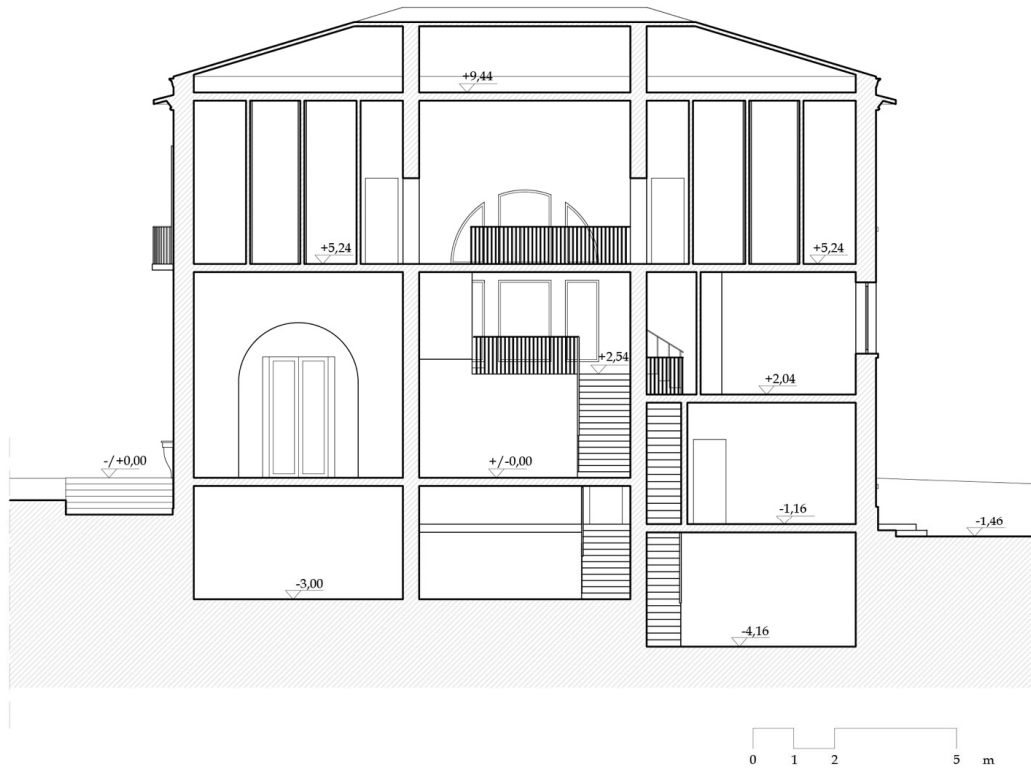


Fig. 8. Casa Giobbe della Bitta (by Marcello Piacentini), section "FF" and perspective section "FF" (below).

However, it is certain that these rooms obtained below the natural altitude of the land, certainly contribute - and in full - to compose the set of architectural spaces in sequence that define, in fact, the architecture of this Italian house of the 20s: Piacentini, in order to create two dwellings not denounced as such outside, takes advantage of the big height of the ground floor of the main house, combined with its height from the ground, to create an apartment for servants on two levels with dignity as a real home, equipped with all the comforts that the standards of that time envisaged and in which the distance between ceiling and floor is a good 3 meters, avoiding that typical tradition, a legacy of previous centuries, which he saw reserved for his own attendants, inside the noble and bourgeois buildings, of narrow spaces at the limit of human liveability; all this determines a system of broken floors, placed at different heights, adequately connected to each other by stairs (Fig. 9b and 9d), which define real paths<sup>22</sup>; not by chance the two lodgings cannot be defined "separated" but perhaps, more properly, "distinct"; from a functional point of view, in fact, the movement flows of the two houses never intersect, but it is possible to go easily, through multiple paths, from one to the other and vice versa; the varied height of the floors has a further induced effect, obviously determined by the designer, consisting in the direct proportionality between the intended use, areas and heights of the rooms<sup>23</sup>, that is, the larger the rooms (for example representative spaces) the higher the ceiling, otherwise, in the servants' apartment or in the basement, a lower floor area corresponds to a more contained free height, without this in any way prejudicing the maintenance of a good level of habitability. A *complex* space project, which results in a tectonics of the volumes generated in turn by flat geometric matrices, with an unmistakable character: for example, the ground floor plan is supported by a grid of modules (9 in all) of 5, 60 to 5.60 m (Fig. 9a), which generate a large square, the same that governs the house in elevation (Fig. 9e), A fact that could suggest that the building is the stereometric result of a modular deconstruction of a hypothetical cube; a further refinement is present in the main front, which responds to a golden rectangle having the height of the perimeter wall as its smaller side (Fig. 9c).

Marcello Piacentini, with this country house, completes a research begun several years before, which had a moment of maturation in 1922 on the occasion of the project for the *Casale del Conte Pietro Fogaccia*, in which he devised a language, certainly of classical derivation, also containing numerous quotations of the typical elements of villas and country houses and more generally of rustic buildings<sup>24</sup>, the latter theme, which the Piacentini scholar has been dealing with since the early 1920s<sup>25</sup>, first when he tries to founding, unsuccessfully, a magazine with an eloquent name, *Arte rustica italiana*, and subsequently organizing an exhibition entitled "Architettura rustica", which instead met with good success during the Roman Biennale in March 1921<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> Although there is no proven evidence in this sense, this type of spatial articulation refers, in some ways, to the concept of *Raumplan*, the result of the design research of one of the absolute masters of the European architecture of the '900: Adolf Loos. Moreover, in 1925 the works of Loos were already known in Italy, so it is assumed that the same Piacentini could not know them. To learn more about the *Raumplan*, see: Trevisiol, R. 2007. *Adolf Loos*. Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza. Pp. 65-111.

<sup>23</sup> Piccinato, L. 1928. "Una casa di campagna disegnata da Marcello Piacentini" in *Domus*, no. 2, year I, Milano: Editoriale Domus.

<sup>24</sup> De Rose, A.S. 1995. P. 162.

<sup>25</sup> Lupano, M. 1991. P. 183.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

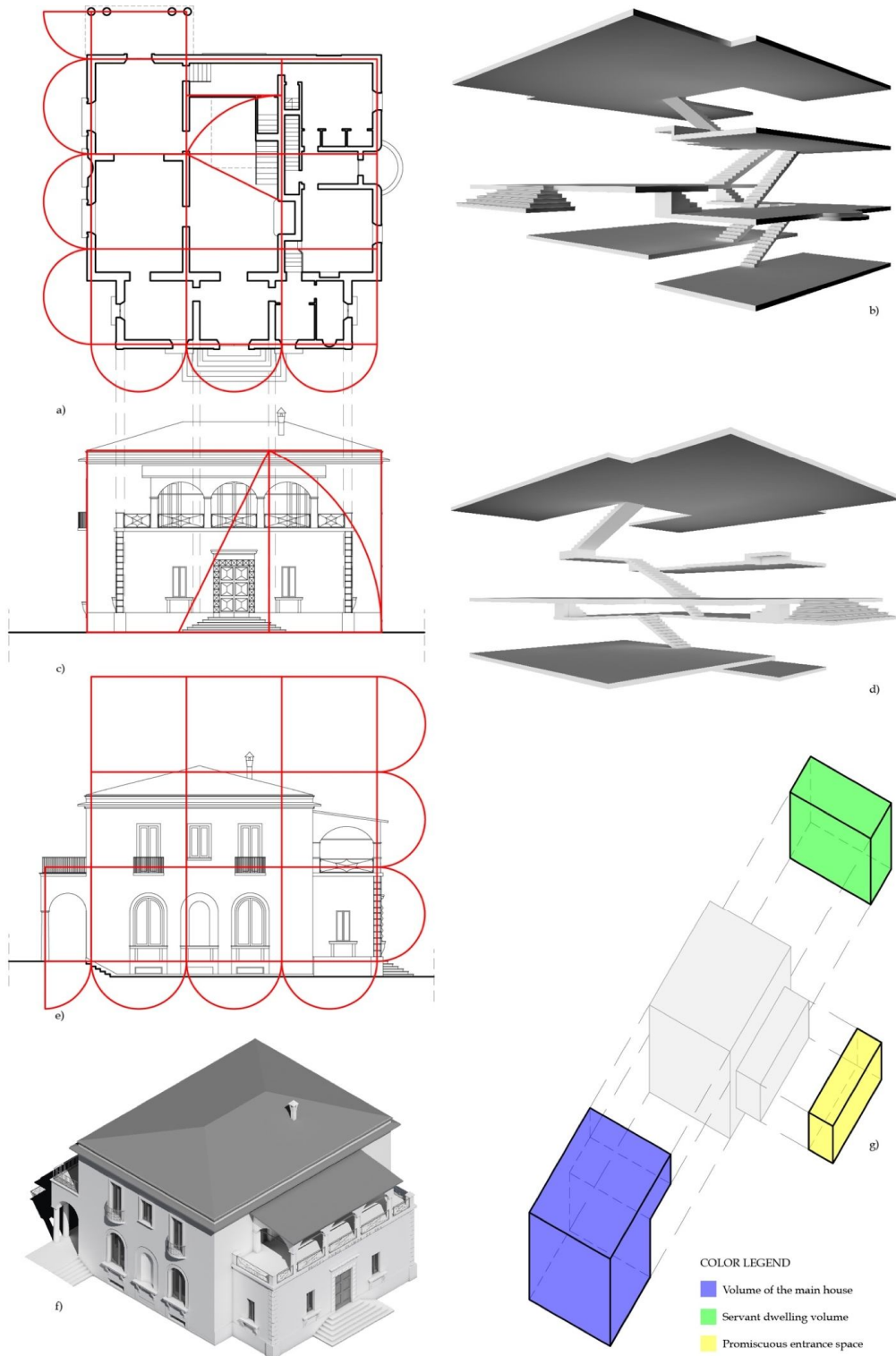


Fig. 9. Casa Giobbe della Bitta (by Marcello Piacentini): a, c, e) graphic analysis of plan and elevations; b, d) walking surfaces and vertical connection elements (perspectives); f) axonometry; g) volumetric scheme of the building.

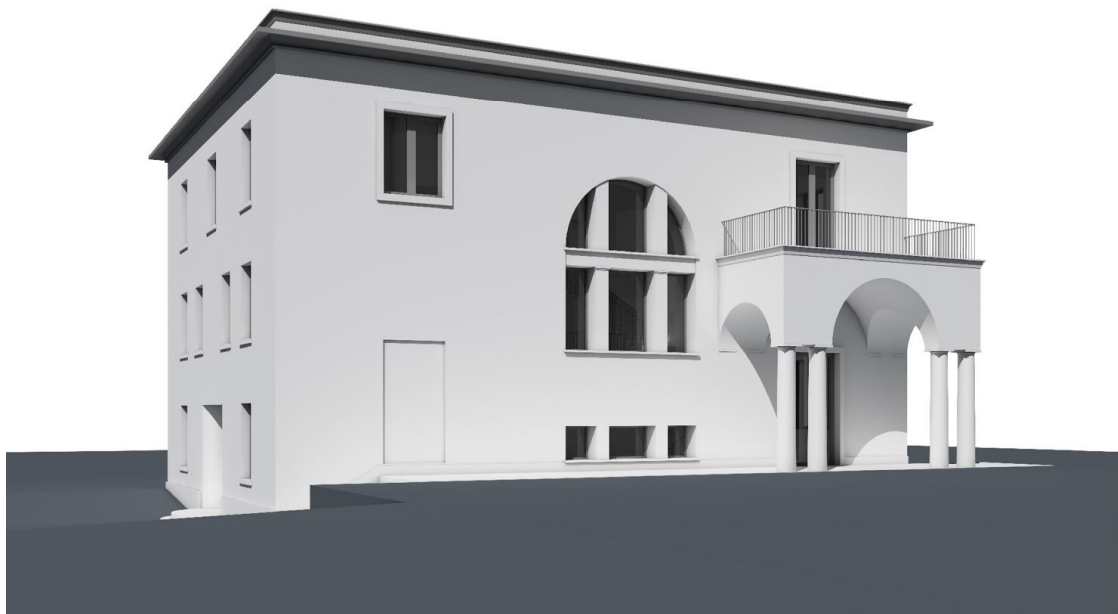


Fig. 10. Casa Giobbe della Bitta (by Marcello Piacentini), accidental perspectives.

An evolutionary trajectory that sees the volumetric and spatial articulation denounced also in the exteriors of Casale Fogaccia, three years later, sees a compact stereometry concealed in Casa Giobbe della Bitta that hides a sophisticated interior tectonics, although both buildings bring that aspect into dowry exterior that refers to the icon of the fortress<sup>27</sup> (Fig. 9f and 10), a trait unequivocally traceable even in another famous Roman work, albeit later, by Piacentini: the *Casa Madre dei Mutilati e degli Invalidi di Guerra*. It is therefore undeniable that in those years the Roman architect and professor, being well aware of what the newborn Modern Movement expressed outside of Italy, was convinced that Italian architecture should likewise renew itself<sup>28</sup>: but not understanding the fundamentals of rationalism, he maintained that this should happen "in our own way"<sup>29</sup>, outlining, in fact, an Italian way to modernity.

Not surprisingly, Luigi Piccinato, in his article on Casa Giobbe della Bitta published in the second issue of *Domus*, in February 1928, enhances its decorative parsimony in favor of a frank use of pure construction elements and of the bare materials that compose them, which they thus rise to a real language, in coherence with the Piacentini design attitude consisting in the progressive stripping of that eclectic classicism, an action aimed at achieving a pure, objective style, almost a *non-style*, or, as Mario Lupano defines it, one impersonal style<sup>30</sup>.

The attitude of reduction to the essence - carrying out the due and appropriate proportions and transpositions - presents obvious similarities with the sentiment that animated the critical redesign of the work here: a virtual reconstruction, made slowly and thoughtfully starting from the drawings and the vintage photo, of the architectural space of Casa Giobbe della Bitta in its purest meaning, with the aim of exploiting, as we said at the beginning, all the icastic force of the image, using, however, colors and textures the most possible neutral, distant, indeed, very far away (paraphrasing the Latin inscription that stood out on the main front of the house) from the clamor and anger aroused by the hyper-realism that pervades today's representation in architecture. A rereading that also wants to be - but perhaps mostly - a warning (pure also that, so that it can be more easily understood) so that works like this are no longer demolished.

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<sup>27</sup> De Rose, A.S. 1995. P. 162; Piccinato, L. 1928.

<sup>28</sup> Purini, F. 2014. *Roma. La storia dell'arte. Un duello: Armando Brasini e Marcello Piacentini*, broadcast on channel 23 of Italian terrestrial digital (Rai 5) on 5 October 2014 at 8.40pm. Today it is visible at the link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2\\_q3Ln0dAIY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_q3Ln0dAIY) (Retrieved October 15th, 2019).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> Lupano, M. 2012. "Stile impersonale" in Ciucci, G., Lux, S., Purini, F. (a cura di) *Marcello Piacentini architetto 1881-1960*. Roma: Gangemi Editore. P. 27.



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