

**DAAD Summer School**  
***“Dialogue on Cultural Heritage in Times of Crisis”***

**POMPEII IN MODERN ARCHITECTURE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

It is not easy to identify and define the role of Pompeii within the development of modern architecture. Many architects and designers have related in their works to the buried city: the overall picture is however difficult to outline and not homogeneous at all. Except for the historical-mimic architectural approach, already in vogue during the XIX century and partly still survived in the XX, the modern debate around the city of Pompeii was divided on two separate levels: the analysis of the urban plan on the one hand, and the study of the roman domestic architecture forms on the other. In the perspective of this century, the purpose of architects and designers was no longer as before the faithful reproduction of ancient models, but rather the study of these models into their constituent elements in order to propose solutions to the issues of modern urbanism and architecture.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

I was born in Como in 1991. I attended the degree course in Classics at the Università degli studi di Milano and obtained my bachelor's degree in 2013 with a thesis in roman archaeology entitled: «Wolfgang Helbig: archaeology in Rome in the late nineteenth century». After that I moved to the Università di Pisa and I attended there the degree course in Archaeology. I obtained my master's degree in 2016 with the thesis «The so called Pudicitiae: their formation, spread and reception in roman age». My fields of interest are history of classical studies, greek and roman history, greek and roman sculpture.

## INTRODUCTION

*«In tutti i rinnovamenti, che vogliono dire un nuovo vigoreggiare della ragione, v'è la possibilità d'istituire un rapporto con ottimi esempi antichi.»*

*«In every renovation, which means a new invigoration of intellect, there's the possibility of establishing a connection with good ancient examples.»*

Gio Ponti, «Concezione dell'edificio d'abitazione», 1932<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of those pages is to try to investigate the nature of those connection during the modern era. Is it possible to individuate in the modern experience of architecture particular influences relate to specific way of thinking at classical antiquity? Is it possible to assign to the city of Pompeii a special role in this dialog between ancient and modern?

To outline a complete and coherent picture of this development is not easy and maybe not possible at all. Obstacles to a proper comprehension of it are twofold:

On the one hand the contradictory nature of the city of Pompeii himself, capable of being simultaneously an extraordinary archaeological site and an abundant supply of urbanistic material for architects and designers. On the other hand it has to be acknowledged from the beginning that modern studies on this theme have never been developed in a linear way. Rather, from time to time different aspects have been chosen, different situations have been thought out, different perspectives have been underlined.

For these reasons, in order to avoid to draw up a rough catalogue, I had to make some choices. I decided to select a few guidelines that I consider the most meaningful for a general comprehension of the problem and then to outline a particular and specific case that seemed to me one of the most interesting in this context. For sure this is not nor intends to be a systematic approach to such a complex and variegated theme. It is, first of all, the approach of a non-specialist: I'm interested in Pompeii under an historical and archaeological point of view but I'm not an architect. This is also the reason why I decided to select some texts that could help and support my arguments. The study of modern approach to Antiquity is however not devoid of interest even for those who deal in ancient history. No vision of ancient world can claim to be neuter: everybody is somehow conditioned by the work of those who preceded us and by the vision of his time. This short text does not deal with a specialized and scientific historical approach to the city of Pompeii: I just intend to show some of the ways in which modern culture has been related to some vision of classical past in the particular field of architecture. If it could provide some interesting food for thought, it will be enough.

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<sup>1</sup> Ponti 1932, p. 187.

## 1

The interest of scholars, writers, artists, architects and designers in regards to Pompeii is not of course something that begins in the twentieth century.

Pompeii has been, starting from the end of the eighteenth and increasingly during the nineteenth century, one of the most popular Italian destinations of the so-called Grand Tour, the formative journey undertaken by the wealthy European youth through the countries of the old continent. Italy, with its art heritage cities and its Mediterranean landscapes, was of course one of the main travel destinations of this type of itinerary.

Intellectuals, scholars but also simple students and enthusiasts travelled there, moved not only by simple curiosity but often by interests of aesthetic, historical and in general cultural nature. Pompeii became gradually a must-see in this context. The direct contact with a somehow still alive ancient world that the traveller could feel here, impressed many of these personalities to the point that the buried city started little by little to impose its own aesthetic to the culture of that time.

This state of affairs culminated in the spread and development of an authentic Pompeian fashion, that gradually took hold all over Europe and USA during the XIX century. The progress of the archaeological investigations conducted in the Vesuvian area produced the rapid and steady increase of this trend that finally established itself with great success both in art as in architecture and design. It is sure that the impression that the ruins of Pompeii produced in the minds of those who witnessed their discovery was no doubt overwhelming.

Also thanks to the phenomenon of the Grand Tour the fame of these findings could spread very quickly and become almost a symbol of that era. One least visit could be, under some aspects, ascribed to this tradition, a visit that accomplished this first phase and started a new one:

the arrival in Pompeii in 1911 of Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris, later Le Corbusier, at the end of his famous *«Journey to the east»*<sup>2</sup>. After that travel, that had brought him through Europe and Asia, in Athens, Istanbul he finally arrived in Italy. For 5 days, between 8 and 13 October, the young architect visited Pompeii, its streets and its *domus*, made sketches and wrote notes.

The ideas of the young le Corbusier, later collected in his essay *«Vers une Architecture»*<sup>3</sup> were disruptive on many points of view and the considerations made by him on the occasion of his stay in Pompeii constitute only a very small part of them. However they somehow induced a change of perspective also in the approach of modern architects and designers towards Pompeian antiquity.

Before that moment many architects had already used the Pompeian models in order to design new buildings inspired by them: just to name a few of the most famous examples of that trend, think at the case of the *Pompejanum* in Aschaffenburg (1848) and of the prince Napoleon's *Maison Pompéienne* in Paris (1853). Until then however, mimic, historical and didactic interest had always predominate both in the minds of customers than in the architects': many of these buildings were in fact designed to be exact replicas of Pompeian structures, in many cases they were even thought to be the museums thanks to which it could be possible to come into direct contact with the roman antiquity.

The visit of Le Corbusier in 1911 and the arguments arising from it, managed to cause the transformation of this historical interest into a creative impulse.

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<sup>2</sup> Le Corbusier 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Le Corbusier 1923.

«*A quoi servaient ces pièces? C'est en dehors de la question. Après vingt siècles, sans allusions historiques, vous sentez l'architecture*»

«*What was the function of these rooms? That is outside the question. After twenty centuries, without any historical reference, you are conscious of Architecture.*»

Le Corbusier, «*Vers une Architecture*», 1923<sup>4</sup>

The proposal of Le Corbusier was to remove every kind of historical superstructure and look at the architecture in his fundamental elements: «*without any historical reference*». According to this formulation, the fascination of ruins was no longer only a source of inspiration as it was in the romantic vision of the past. From this point of view ruin became a useful and meaningful medium to understand the deep and hidden structure of architecture. It is interesting to observe that suggestions of this type, in a sort of commingling of fascination and analytical approach, can be found in the notes, in the diaries and in the letters of other architects and designers not only of that times, as for example E.G. Asplund<sup>5</sup>, in Pompeii two years after Le Corbusier, but still a few decades later, as in the case of Louis Kahn<sup>6</sup>.

Of course it does not mean that Le Corbusier, at least at this stage, wanted to draw direct inspiration from the ancient roman models. Not even that the proposal of this new way of thinking caused the complete end of the mimic and historical architectural approach to the city of Pompeii that was maintained up to that moment by many designers: conversely it remained vital in north European and American architecture. However this change of perspective - remove every kind of historical, aesthetic but also ethical superstructure and look at architecture itself in his constituent elements: light and shade, walls and space - is in itself extremely interesting: there is no doubt that the figure and the thought of Le Corbusier represented a turning point also in the story of the relationship between ancient and modern architecture. He opened a way to a series of subsequent developments: a free and secular way of looking at things as they are.

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<sup>4</sup> Le Corbusier 1923, pag. 149.

<sup>5</sup> Asplund 2002, pag. 325.

<sup>6</sup> Scully 2003; Bonaiti 2006

## 2

Starting from these premises, the analysis of twentieth century's architects, designers and urbanists around Pompeii can be divided on two levels, the one included in the other.

First of all they have looked at the ancient city as urban centre, trying to individuate which were the rules that governed it. In this vision Pompeii was no more just one of the possible epiphany of antiquity: the buried city was seen as a source of inspiration more authentic and interesting than Rome itself. The aspect that most of all impressed these personalities was the regularity and orderliness of its plan. Le Corbusier himself expressed on that point:

*«Dans Rome-architecture, rien à faire, les murailles serraient trop, les maisons empilaient leurs étages sur dix hauteurs, vieux gratteciel. Le Forum être laid, un peu comme le bric-à-brac de la ville sainte de Delphes. Urbanisme grands tracés? Rien à faire. Il faut aller voir Pompéi qui est étonnant de rectitude.»*

*«Old Rome as regards architecture had nothing to show, the city walls were too crowded, the houses were piled up ten storeys high - the sky-scraper of the ancients. The Forum must have been ugly, a little like the bric-à-brac of the sacred city of Delphi. Town planning, a large lay-out! There was none of this. Pompeii must be seen, appealing in its rectangular plan.»*

Le Corbusier, «Vers une Architecture», 1923<sup>7</sup>

Of course these arguments were always made in comparison with modern cities, on the one hand in a perspective of study, on the other in order to find possible solution in the organisation of modern urban centres. The orthogonal order of the streets, of the *insulae*, of the entire plant of the city became in this perspective almost an ideal model in comparison with many modern urban areas:

*«Ever since I visited the ancient Italian town of Pompeii [...] I have found myself comparing the dead city [...] with the seemingly live cities we are living in in America. This comparison continues to haunt me. The landscape of Pompeii is not too different from that of many parts of California. [...] Yet this little provincial town produced such an orderly and coherent and aesthetically animated life that even in its ruined state it gives a less ruinous impression than the central areas of most American cities.»*

Lewis Mumford, 1962<sup>8</sup>

In this vision Pompeii has been seen as the archetype of the modular city: a rational urban structure composed by addition of residential *insulae*, built around the fixed-type of the courtyard house and distributed in straight paths. A structure built by addition of modules, rational in all respects.

The second and maybe more important aspect that has attracted the attention of modern urbanists and architects towards Pompeii, is the pivotal role of the roman *domus* in the context of such an ordered and regular urban structure.

Approaching from the point of view of the twentieth century architecture, the problem was no more, as was before, how to reproduce an ancient roman *domus*, but rather, whether and to what extension

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<sup>7</sup> Le Corbusier 1923, pp. 125-126.

<sup>8</sup> Mansfield 1990, pag. 20.

elements of roman houses and the way they interacted together in ancient examples, could provide solutions to the problems of modern architecture.

A development quite interesting in this respect, is the reflection, begun already in the last decades of the nineteenth century and then completed in the first decades of the twentieth century, carried on around the theme of the evolution of the housing structures typical of Mediterranean area and Italy between ancient and modern era. Pompeii in this context played a very special role.

The intuition of the existence of some form of continuity can be found already in a Goethe's page. During his *Italienische Reise* he had the opportunity to visit Naples and Pompeii. In the evening of the 11 March 1787, back from the buried city, he wrote:

*«Näher an der Stadt (Neaples) fielen mir die kleinen Häuser wieder auf, die als vollkommene Nachbildungen der pompejanischen dastehen. Wir erbaten uns die Erlaubnis, in eins hineinzutreten, und fanden es sehr reinlich eingerichtet. Nett geflochtene Rohrstühle, eine Kommode ganz vergoldet, mit bunten Blumen staffiert und lackiert, so daß nach so vielen Jahrhunderten, nach unzähligen Veränderungen diese Gegend ihren Bewohnern ähnliche Lebensart und Sitte, Neigungen und Liebhabereien einflößt.»*

*«As we approached Naples, the little houses struck me as being perfect copies of the houses in Pompeii. We asked permission to enter one and found it very clean and neatly furnished, nicely woven cane chairs and a chest which had been gilded all over and painted with brightly coloured flowers and then varnished. Despite the lapse of so many centuries and such countless changes, this region still imposes on its inhabitants the same habits, tastes, amusements and style of living.»*

Goethe, «Italienische Reise», 11. März 1787

The remark made by Goethe is not that different from the one made by a group of Italian architects, designers and intellectuals in the first half of the XX century: Gio Ponti, Tomaso Buzzi, Aldo Rossi, Ubaldo Castiglioni and others. They observed in the development of domestic architecture in Italy, some elements of continuity during the time, that they wanted to identify as markers of a particular and original way of conceive the domestic space.

The issues around which they were discussing was: does an Italian-style house exist? Can we define his development and his evolution during history? Which are the elements that mark this supposed persistence? Finally, how can those elements be assembled today, in order to design a modern structure in which such an historical continuity is manifested?

Starting point of this reflection is the finding that architecture builds its development on the basis of models and languages already generated in the past. These models are developed in sequence and are united by a common inspiration, a fundamental idea that became guarantor of the unity of this evolution: in this case the ultimate foundation of this persistence was identified in a particular relationship between architecture of the interior and the exterior typical of the "Italian house". Gio Ponti, one of the inspirer of those ideas, wrote:

«Nella casa all'italiana non vi è grande distinzione di architettura tra esterno ed interno: da noi l'architettura di fuori penetra nell'interno»

«In the Italian-style house there is no great distinction between exterior and interior architecture: by us the exterior architecture penetrates into the interior»

G. Ponti, «La casa all'italiana», 1928<sup>9</sup><sup>10</sup>

According to these theories a red thread connected the entire history of Italian domestic and residential architectural culture: the systematic opening of the living spaces towards nature and the surrounding environment.

Pompeii, the roman villas and the roman *domus*, are seen in that vision, as the beginning of this development, the first evidence of the existence of an Italic style of life and living. A development that, through the medieval cloisters, the renaissance villas and the Palladian villas, would have led to modern times a profound continuity element.

The intent of those architects was not only speculative. They wanted to follow and continue this tradition and practically to renovate it in modern time. These ideas became in this way, prescriptive.

In their projects, in which «you could still feel miraculously alive the tradition of the ancient Roman house»<sup>11</sup>, the central element became, not by chance, the courtyard. This was considered as the last heir to the ancient peristyle. One of the most interesting projects is certainly the Gio Ponti's «villa alla pompeiana».

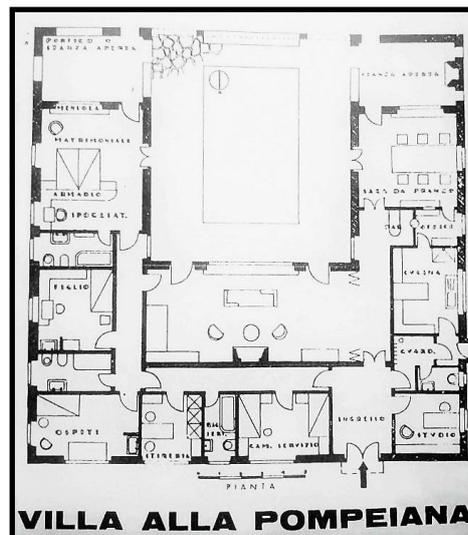


Figure 1 - G. Ponti, «una villa alla pompeiana», 1934

Everything in that house is subordinated to a courtyard open on one side, that was conceived to be the real and ideal centre of the villa. In the idea of the architect it could be paved in «a thousand pleasant and ingenious ways», with slabs with bricks or just a lawn. It could be adorned with a pond, a fountain, a statue and could be crowned with a porch. It could be painted too: even the choice of red colour to decorate the exterior surfaces of the house is not accidental, in a sort of overturned reference to the strict relation between interior and exterior decoration made in comparison to Pompeian houses.

<sup>9</sup> Ponti 1928, pag. 7.

<sup>10</sup> About that see Irace 1988.

<sup>11</sup> Buzzi 1928, pag. 20.

«a beautiful and cozy layout» writes the designer,

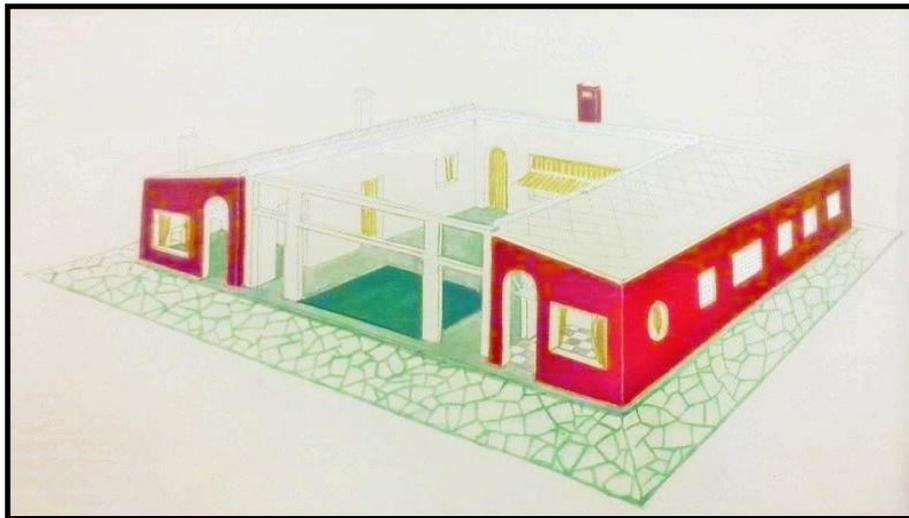


Figure 2 - G. Ponti, «una villa alla pompeiana», 1934

*«che deve tornare consueta e che gli italiani devono ancora amare»*

*«that has to return usual and that Italians have to love again».*

There is no doubt that these theories have enjoyed great popularity in those years also because they well suited to the nationalist propaganda of the fascist regime, from which the claim of Italian spirit and the direct link with ancient Rome was certainly well appreciated. Some of those insights, however, are anything but erroneous: they had fully grasped what was the basic inspiration of the living culture of the Roman villa, as yet we recognize. Simplifying, it is not wrong to say that the structure of the roman villa arises from the need to combine the existing hellenistic models on the one hand and the desire to open the house to the landscape on the other: the Mediterranean landscape and precisely the landscape of south Italy.

*«The clever orientation of porticos, dining rooms, and bedrooms to take advantages of particular vistas shows that Roman aristocrats and their architects consciously included nature and the landscape in their designs to enhance them and add a new dimension to the inhabitant's enjoyment»*

P. Zanker, «Pompeii, Public and Private Life» 1998<sup>12</sup>

It is clear that we cannot deal with those theories as we could do with scientific and historical researches. Most parts of these are founded on aesthetic intuition rather than on ascertainable elements. However the fundamental insight of that vision deserves to be preserved: like any other creative action, architecture is based on a model, an idea that turn itself in a concrete act, a project that outlines the shape of a building. But contrary to what happens for other arts, the adhesion of architecture to a place, its relation to the specific area, landscape, environment where it is based, is strong and indissoluble. It is so deep and meaningful that it is not possible to understand architecture itself without understanding the nature of this connection.

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<sup>12</sup> Zanker 1988, pp. 136-137.

## **Acknowledgment**

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# Pompeii in modern Architecture



Giovanni Colzani

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Hotel Napolit'Amo, Naples

«In tutti i rinnovamenti, che vogliono dire un nuovo vigoreggiare della ragione, v'è la possibilità d'istituire un rapporto con ottimi esempi antichi.»

«In every renovation, which means a new invigoration of intellect, there's the possibility of **establishing a connection with good ancient examples.**»

Gio Ponti, «*Concezione dell'edificio d'abitazione*», 1932



Via dell'abbondanza, in Cherubino Gambardella 2005

Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris, in Berritto 2011



*«Doveva accadere qualcosa di dirompente, [...] che tramutasse l'interesse storico in stimolo creativo. Nell'autunno del 1911 la visita di Le Corbusier trentenne a Pompei determinò questo cambiamento di rotta.»*

«It had to happen something disruptive, capable of transforming the historical interest into a creative impulse. **The visit of Le Corbusier in Pompeii in 1911** managed to cause this change.»

A.M. Berritto,  
*«Pompei 1911: Le Corbusier e l'origine della casa»*, 2011

«A quoi servaient ces pièces? C'est en dehors de la question. Après vingt siècles, sans allusions historiques, vous sentez l'architecture »

«What was the function of these rooms? That is outside the question. After twenty centuries, **without any historical reference**, you are conscious of Architecture.»

Le Corbusier, «Vers une Architecture», 1923



Le Corbusier, Casa di Sallustio, in Gresleri 2006

aerial view over ancient and new Pompei, in Berritto 2011



*«Dans Rome-architecture, rien à faire, les murailles serraient trop, les maisons empilaient leurs étages sur dix hauteurs, vieux gratteciel. Le Forum être laid, un peu comme le bric-à-brac de la ville sainte de Delphes. Urbanisme grands tracés? Rien à faire. Il faut aller voir Pompéi qui est émotionnant de rectitude.»*

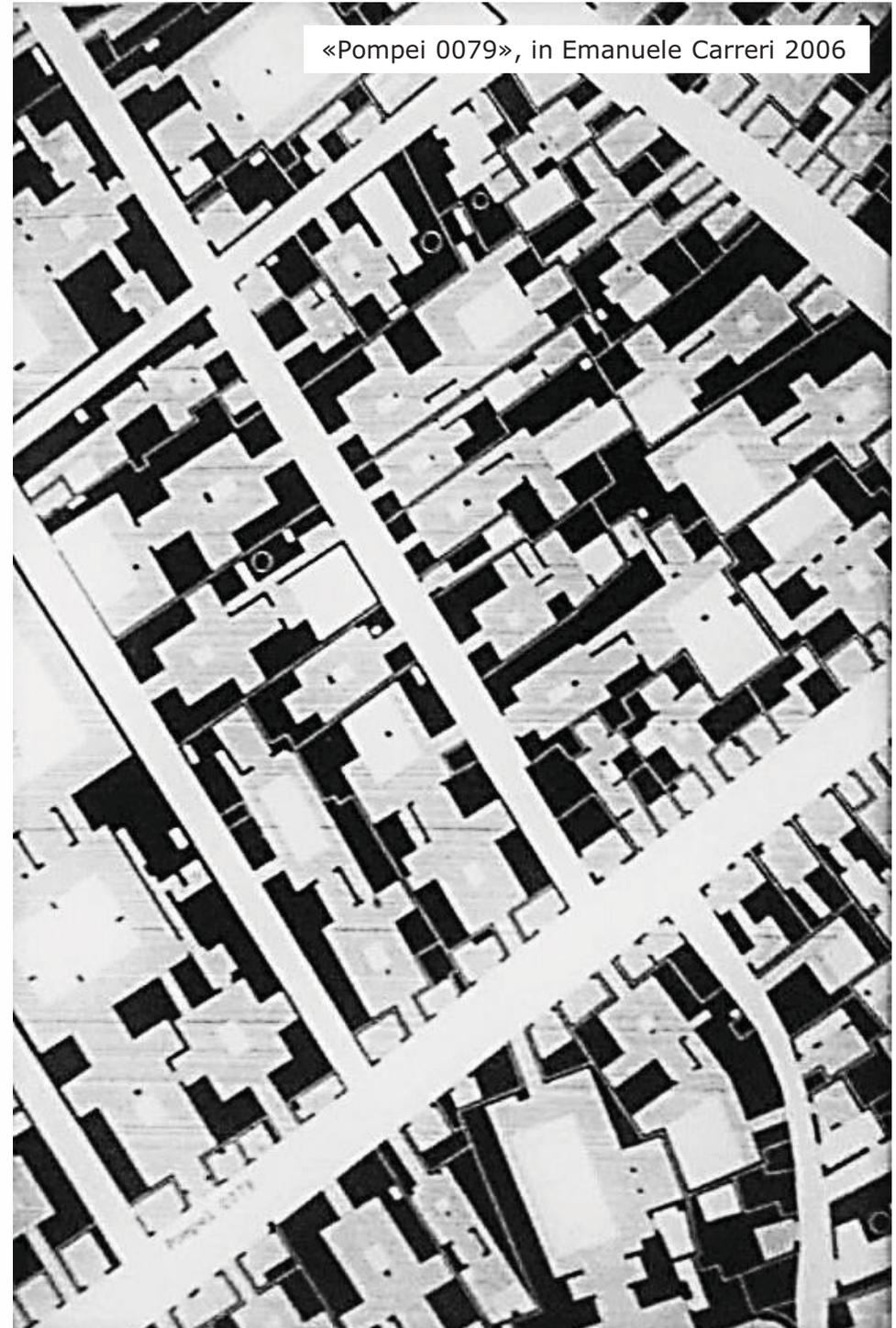
**«Old Rome as regards architecture had nothing to show**, the city walls were too crowded, the houses were piled up ten storeys high - the sky-scraper of the ancients. The Forum must have been ugly, a little like the bric-à-brac of the sacred city of Delphi. Town planning, a large lay-out! There was none of this. **Pompeii must be seen, appealing in its rectangular plan.»**

Le Corbusier, *«Vers une Architecture»*, 1923

«Ever since I visited the ancient Italian town of Pompeii [...] I have found myself **comparing the dead city [...] with the seemingly live cities** we are living in in America. This comparison continues to haunt me. The landscape of Pompeii is not too different from that of many parts of California. [...] Yet this little provincial town produced such an orderly and coherent and aesthetically animated life that **even in its ruined state it gives a less ruinous impression than the central areas of most American cities.**»

Lewis Mumford, 1962

«Pompei 0079», in Emanuele Carreri 2006



A. Libera 1950-54, «Unità di abitazione orizzontale, INA casa al Tuscolano», in Berritto 2011



«Un agglomerato urbano razionale composto per addizione di insulae residenziali, costruite intorno alla regola fissa del tipo a corte.»

«**A rational urban structure** composed by addition of residential insulae, built around the fixed-type of the **courtyard house**.»

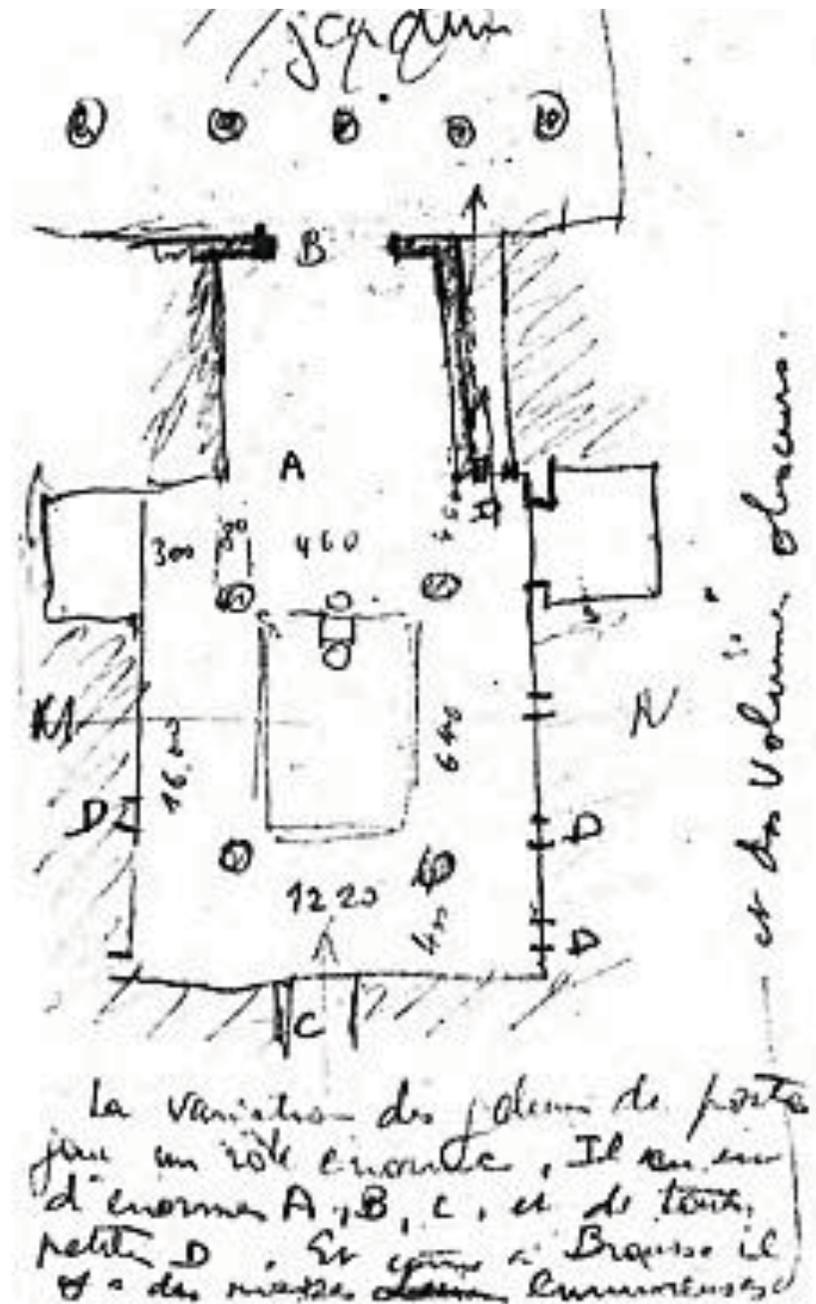
M. Agnoletto, «*Pompei e l'architettura contemporanea*», 2006

«Le plan procède du dedans au dehors; l'extérieur est le résultat d'un intérieur. Les éléments architecturaux sont la lumière et l'ombre, le mur et l'espace. [...] Vous êtes assujéti par un rythme sensoriel (la lumière et le volume)»

«The Plan proceeds from within to without; the exterior is the result of an interior. **The elements of architecture are light and shade, walls and space.** [...] You are enthralled by a **sensorial rhythm (light and volume).**»

Le Corbusier, «Vers une Architecture», 1923

Plan of the Casa delle nozze d'argento, Le Corbusier 1923



Casa delle nozze d'argento, Le Corbusier 1923



«*Quatre colonnes au milieu (quatre cylindres) élevant d'un jet vers l'ombre de la toiture, [...] mais au fond l'éclat du jardin vu à travers le péristyle, qui étale d'un geste large cette lumière faisant un grand espace. [...] On dispose de murs droits, d'un sol qui s'étend, de trous qui sont des passages d'homme ou de lumière, portes ou fenêtres.*»

«*Four columns in the middle (four cylinders) shoot up towards the shade of the roof; [...] but at the far end is the brilliance of the garden seen through the peristyle, which spreads out this light with a large gesture [...] making a great space. [...] **Our elements are vertical walls, the spread of the soil, holes to serve as passages for man or for light, doors or windows***»

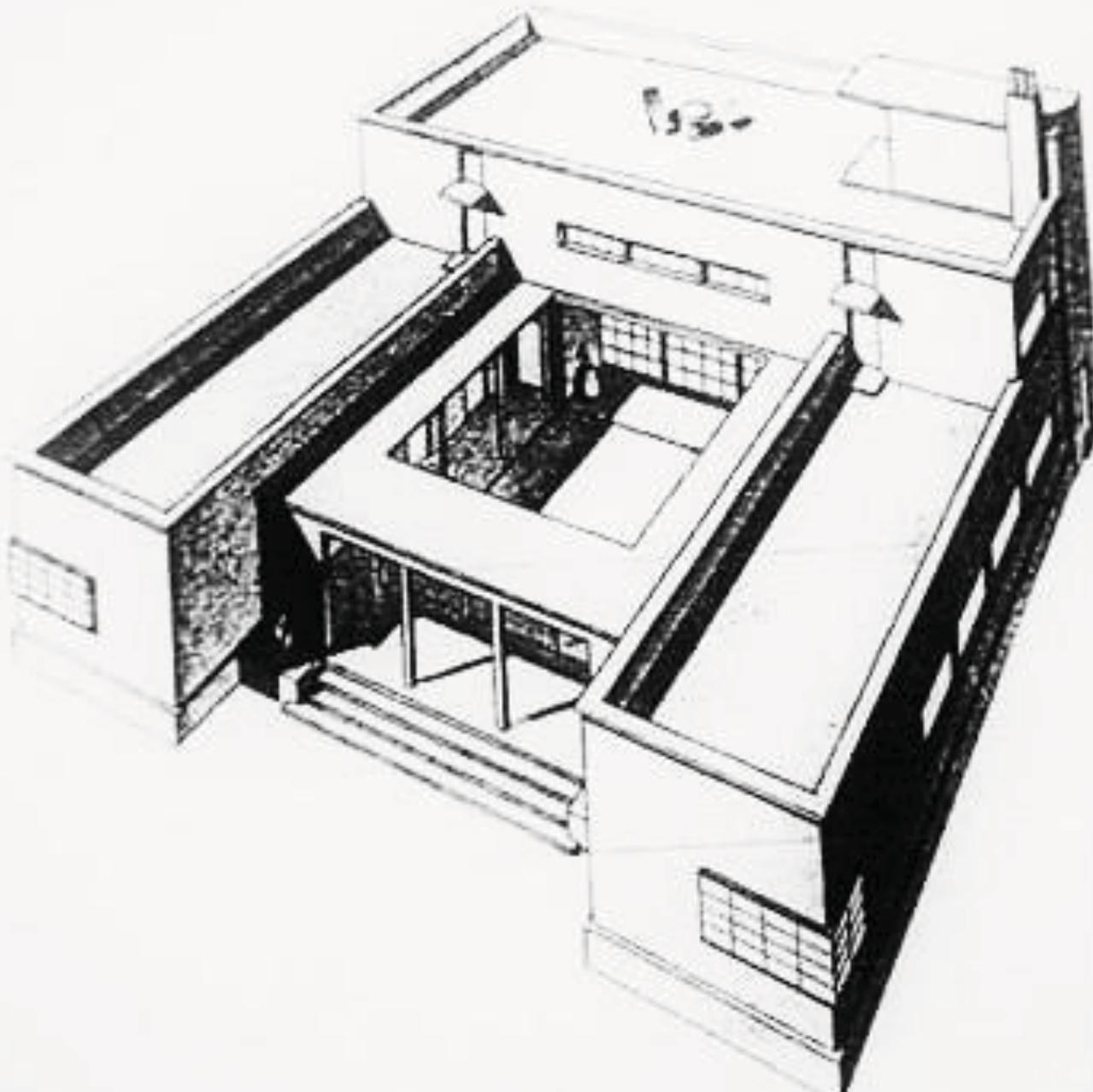


Cherubino Gambardella 2005

«Näher an der Stadt (Neaples) fielen mir die kleinen Häuser wieder auf, die als vollkommene Nachbildungen der pompejanischen dastehen. Wir erbaten uns die Erlaubnis, in eins hineinzutreten, und fanden es sehr reinlich eingerichtet. Nett geflochtene Rohrstühle, eine Kommode ganz vergoldet, mit bunten Blumen staffiert und lackiert, so daß nach so vielen Jahrhunderten, nach unzähligen Veränderungen diese Gegend ihren Bewohnern ähnliche Lebensart und Sitte, Neigungen und Liebhabereien einflößt.»

«**As we approached Naples, the little houses struck me as being perfect copies of the houses in Pompeii.** We asked permission to enter one and found it very clean and neatly furnished, nicely woven cane chairs and a chest which had been gilded all over and painted with brightly coloured flowers and then varnished. **Despite the lapse of so many centuries and such countless changes, this region still imposes on its inhabitants the same habits, tastes, amusements and style of living.**»

Goethe, «*Italienische Reise*», 11. März 1787



Ubaldo Castiglioni 1930, «progetto di villa al mare», in Agnoletto 2006

«Nella casa all'italiana non vi è grande distinzione di architettura tra esterno ed interno: da noi l'architettura di fuori penetra nell'interno»

«In the Italian-style house there is no great distinction between exterior and interior architecture: **by us the exterior architecture penetrates into the interior**»

G. Ponti, «La casa all'italiana», 1928



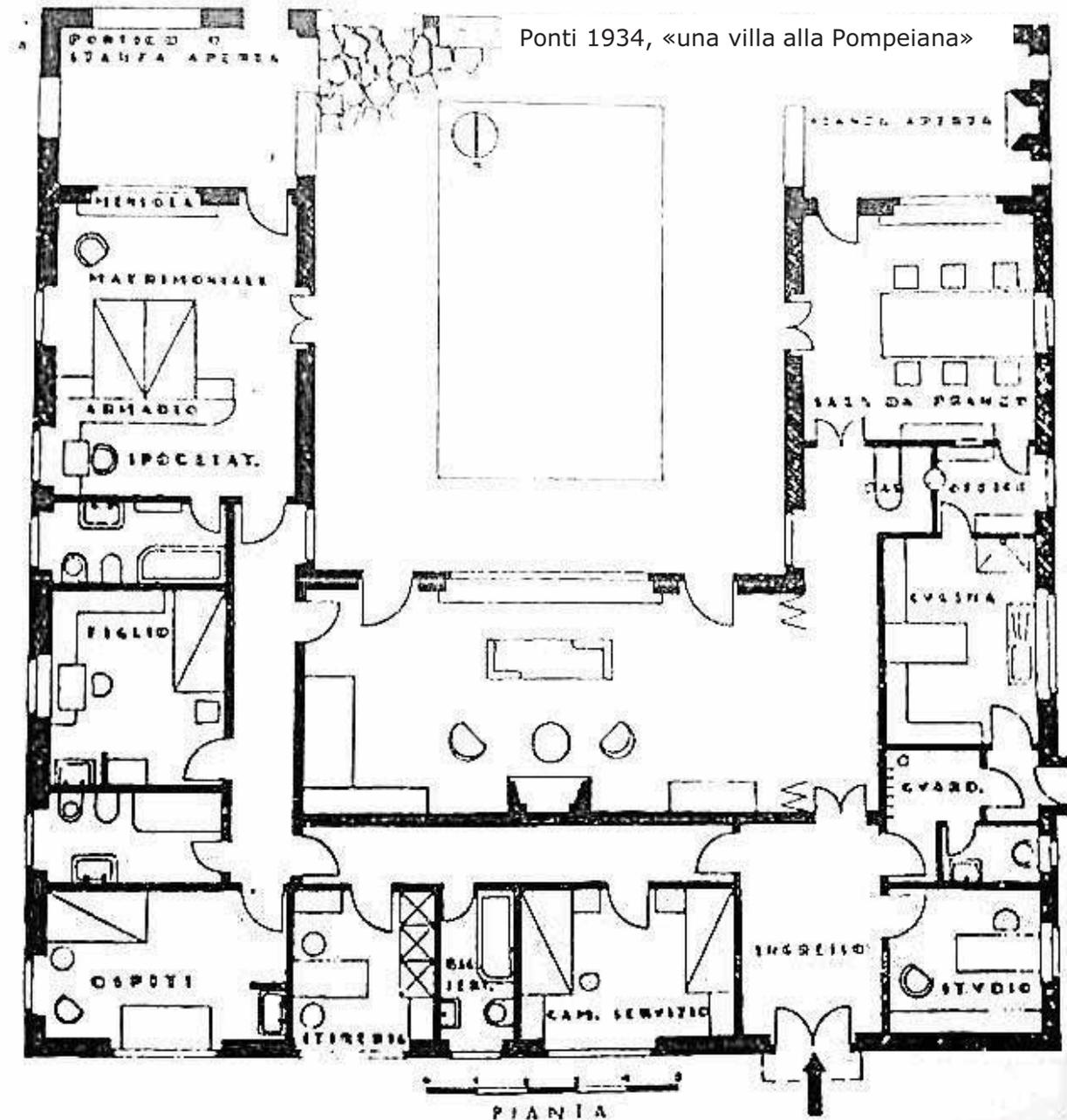
*«The clever orientation of porticos, dining rooms, and bedrooms to take advantages of particular vistas shows that Roman aristocrats and their architects consciously included nature and the landscape in their designs to enhance them and add a new dimension to the inhabitant's enjoyment»*

P. Zanker, «Pompeii, Public and Private Life», 1988

«"alla pompeiana", intorno ad un cortile aperto su un lato, disposizione oltremodo bella e intima che deve tornare consueta e che gli italiani devono ancora amare»

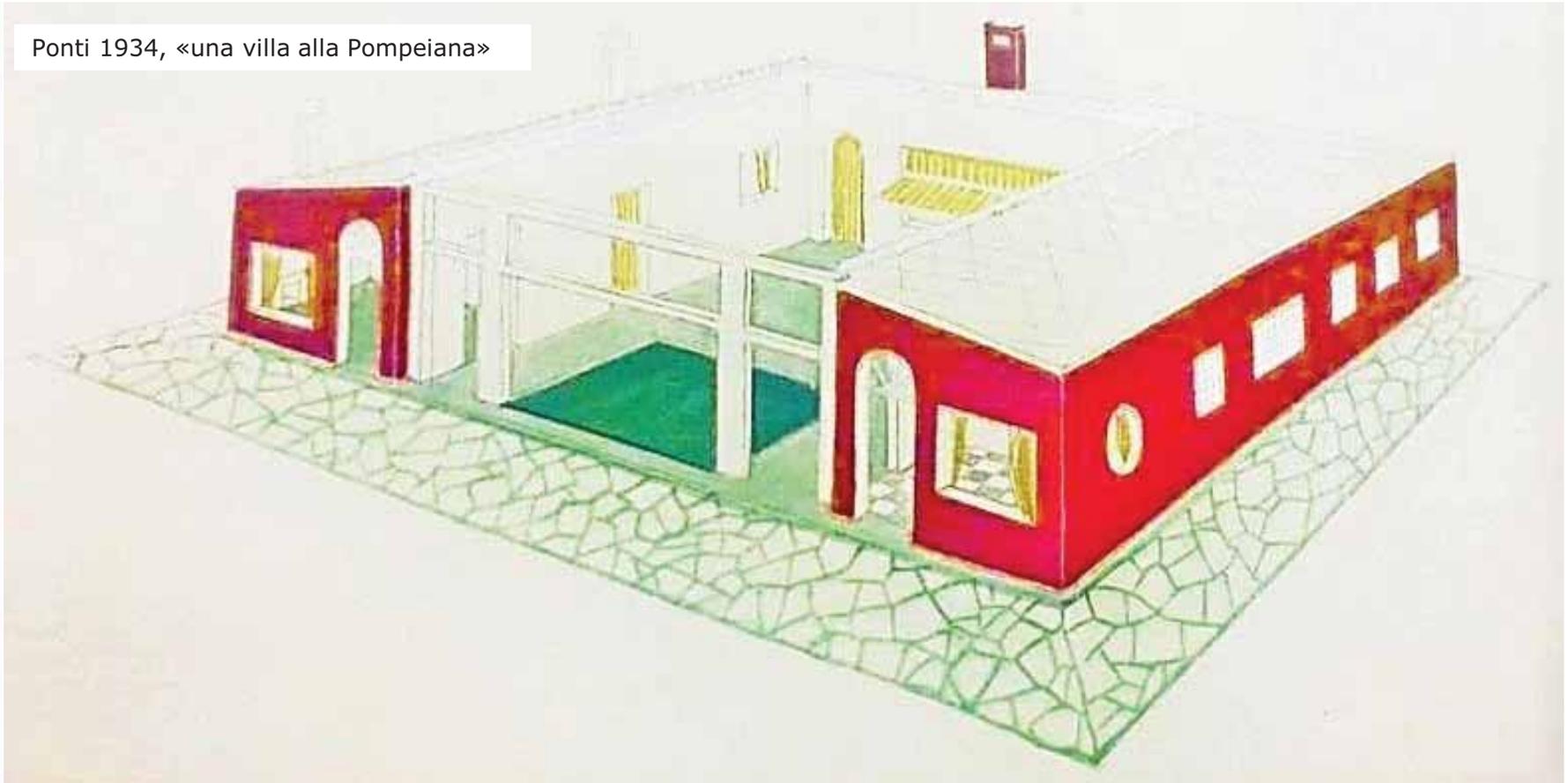
«"alla pompeiana", around courtyard open on one side: a beautiful and cozy layout that has to return usual and that Italians have to love again.»

G. Ponti, «una villa alla pompeiana», 1934



# VILLA ALLA POMPEIANA

Ponti 1934, «una villa alla Pompeiana»



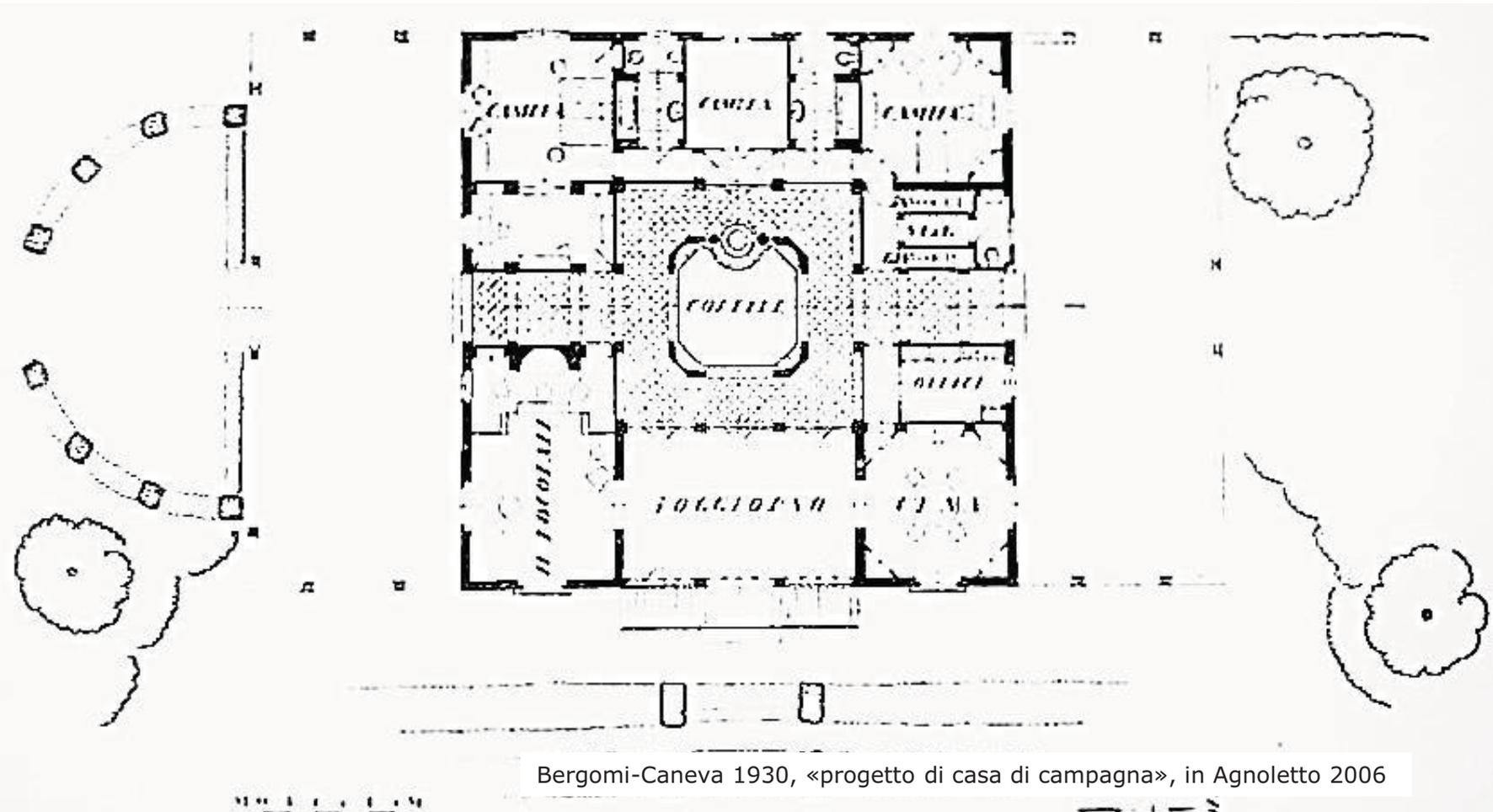
*«Il cortile si può pavimentare in mille modi piacevoli e ingegnosi, a lastre, a prato, a mattoni. Lo si può ornare con uno specchio d'acqua, una fontana, una statua; Può essere coronato da portico; può essere affrescato.»*

«The courtyard can be paved in a thousand pleasant and ingenious ways, with slabs, lawn, brick. You can adorn it with a pond, a fountain, a statue; It can be crowned with a porch; It can be painted.»

«Son ville in cui senti ancor miracolosamente viva la tradizione dell'antica casa romana, e la leggi dall'ordinata disposizione della pianta, in cui tutto è subordinato ad un cortile»

«They are villas where **you still feel** miraculously **alive the tradition of the ancient Roman house**: you can see that in the ordinate arrangement of the plant, in which everything is subordinated to a courtyard.»

Buzzi, «Trascrizione moderna di un antico disegno», 1929



Bergomi-Caneva 1930, «progetto di casa di campagna», in Agnoletto 2006

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