

PIERO BOTTONI

Three houses on the Tyrrhenian Sea

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Abstract

Piero Bottoni is one of the major representatives of Italian rationalism and a leading figure in the critical revision of modernism. Between 1931 and 1945 he designs three 'villas' close to each other on the Tyrrhenian Sea: 'Villa Latina' (1930), 'Villa Ludolf' (1941) and 'Villa nella pineta' (1945). Focusing on a critical reading of these three projects, the paper would like to demonstrate the growing influence of the landscape and the regional characters in the maturation of the sensitivity and the thought of one of the most important architects of Italian modernism.

Keywords: Piero Bottoni, Modernism, Regionalism, Houses, Mediterranean Sea

Piero Bottoni graduated in architecture at the Milan Polytechnic in 1926, he participated in the First Italian Exhibition of Rational Architecture in 1928 with a series of watercolours entitled *Architectural Cromatismis* that brought the acclaim of Le Corbusier. Around the same time, he was one of the founders of the Italian Movement for Rational Architecture (MIAR) along with people like Adalberto Libera, Mario Ridolfi, Luigi Figini, Gino Pollini, Ignazio Gardella, Giuseppe Pagano and Giuseppe Terragni. From 1930, he was a member and delegate of the CIAM and throughout his career played -with great civil commitment- a leading role in the national panorama of Italian town planning and architecture.

Paolo Portoghesi, talking about Bottoni, recalls the pride with which he accepted the merit of being among the first to bring about and support rationalist intelligence in Italy (Portoghesi, 1998, p.336), while Carlo Olmo reminds us how Bottoni was a protagonist in the critical revision of modernism (Olmo, 2000, p.298). Being first among the promulgators and first among the critics of the modern movement at the same time are two seemingly irreconcilable roles that Piero Bottoni held thanks to his moral yet not dogmatic adherence to the principles introduced by modernism. In fact, from the beginning, his stance was always quite deaf 'to the cries of the strapaesan fanatics' and much more sensitive to a congenital 'Mediterraneanism, intended in the spirit, and not in

the forms or in the folklore' (Bottoni, 1933, p.84). These last words come from the *Programma di Architettura*, a sort of manifesto signed by Bottoni, Figini, Pollini, BBPR and others and published in the first issue of the magazine *Quadrante* of May 1933. The *Programma* well represents a stance of a generation of young Italian architects in which 'Mediterraneanism' is more a shared feeling, or ideological tension, instead of a common style or taste for specific architectural forms.¹

Reading in chronological order a group of 'houses by the sea'² designed by Piero Bottoni, it is possible to observe with more clarity than elsewhere a maturation in the sensibility and architectural thought of this passionate supporter of the dictates of new modernity (embraced above all with a revolutionary spirit towards 20th century academicism), towards a freer and more instinctive search to the satisfaction of the most ancient and natural needs of man ('I was one of the first defenders of the natural values of life' (Bottoni, 1973, p.350)). As early as 1932, Bottoni stated: 'Among the rational needs of the home, it is imperative not to forget the foremost important need of living: the need, that the poetry and sensitivity of the artist, as a man before technician, will have been felt and resolved' (Bottoni, 1932 a, p.147). Asking himself from the beginning about what architecture talks to the soul of man, 'to the soul of the non-theoretical man' (Bottoni, 1931, p.120), is what probably *planted* in Bottoni that *seed in fertile soil* that germinated healthily, strong over the years, chasing the warm rays of the sun more than the sterile coldness of neon lamps.

Perhaps we could already find this *seed* by digging under the large loggia open 'to the sea and to the mountain' of *Villa Latina*. This house, designed in Bonassola, overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea, was presented in 1930 for a national competition about the project of 'a modern villa for the family home' announced on the occasion of the 4th International Exhibition in Monza. Bottoni's project was the undisputed key player among the modernist trend proposals presented³ and contained in essence all the sensitivity and tension expressed in his best architectures of the following decades.

¹ For a broader discussion of this theme the reader should refer to *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean*, edited by Jean-Francois Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatino.

² Reference is made to a group of works and projects for private clients, concentrated mainly on the coasts of the Tyrrhenian Sea and the island of Capri, between 1929 and 1969. Among them: *Studio di villa al mare* (1929), *Studio per un grande albergo al mare* (1929), *Villa Latina* (1930), *Casa al mare alla V Triennale di Milano* (1932), *Villa Ludolf* (1941), *Studio di palazzina con negozi* (1941), *Casa ideale su palafitte* (1943), *Casetta al mare Savini* (1944), *Villa nella pineta* (1945), *restauro della Grotta di Fra' Felice* (1958), *Casetta con piscina in via Tiberio* (1961), *Villa la Quercia* (1967)

³ It is interesting to note that important figures such as Franco Albini demonstrate in this competition to be still strongly linked to the 20th century neoclassicism.

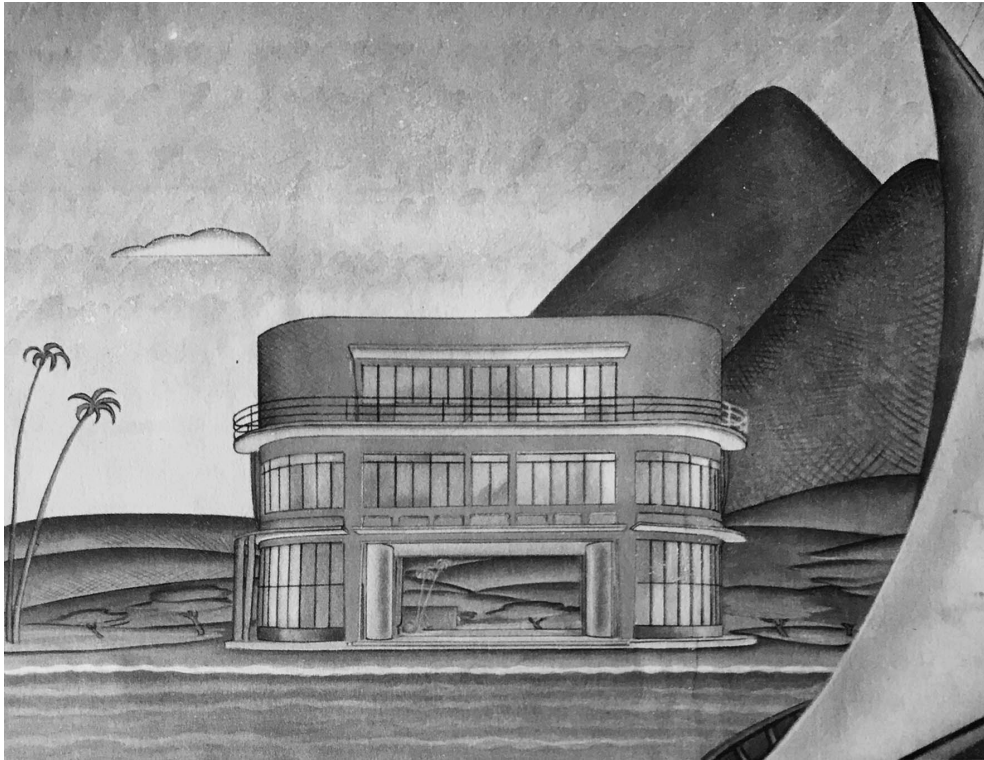


Figure 1. *Villa Latina*, Bonassola, Italy, 1930. (Archivio Piero Bottoni, Dastu, Politecnico di Milano)

This villa wants to reclaim, from the spirit of Latin constructions, the balance of the volumes, from the outdoor life customs of the Mediterranean peoples, the loggias, the atria and terraces, from the houses of the Tyrrhenian coast the colour, from the technical possibility that belongs only to today and its structure. It rises in a garden, on the edge of a pine forest by the sea. It does not block off the landscape but is crossed by it. (Bottoni, 1930, p. 33)

Bottoni's words are very clear and leave no room for false interpretations; his project for a 'modern villa' is intended to be deeply rooted in the tradition of that place, of that peninsula and of the entire Mediterranean basin. The technique is contemporary, modern⁴, but with this newness Bottoni tries to fish deep into the history of local buildings ('from the houses of the rivers running into the Tyrrhenian Sea'), Roman ones ('Latin construction') and all the more or less anonymous and spontaneous 'terraces' and 'loggias' that overlook each bank of the Mare Nostrum.

⁴ For the building's structure Bottoni chooses a reinforced-concrete frame system.

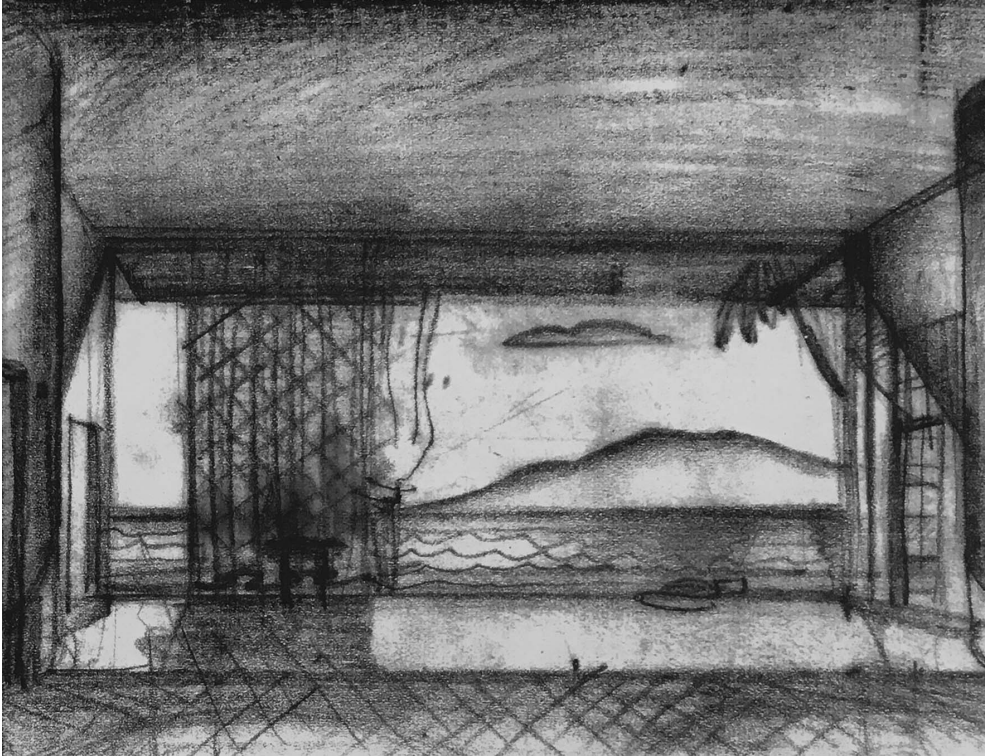


Figure 2. *Villa Latina*, Bonassola, Italy, 1930. (Archivio Piero Bottoni, Dastu, Politecnico di Milano)

This sea and this landscape are recognised as active, essential features of the scene, inhabitants that 'cross' architecture, longing for human companions. The contact with the landscape -even though quite generic- is very strong and Bottoni's painting of the Villa (Figure 1) is emblematic: the building proudly stands as a triumphal arch for a sail boat coming from the sea, as inhabited threshold between the Tyrrhenian and the Apuan Alps, static, there, painted with the same color of the many others solitary and stereometric houses of the North-Tyrrhenian rock coast.

Notwithstanding Bottoni does not want to make of all this a formal issue, but a matter of 'spirit', the facade's solution, the strongly geometric approach of the volume, as well as the rigidity of a still immature development of the plans, demonstrate how the project of *Villa Latina* (shaped on a series of sketches from 1929 made for other projects *by the sea*⁵) is still anchored to a bitter reception of the new European modernist influences. Nevertheless the words and drawings of the young architect strongly transcend the 'arid

⁵ Reference is made to *Studio di villa al mare* and *Studio per un grande albergo al mare*, both from 1929. The drawings of these two studios kept at the Piero Bottoni Archive in Milan illustrate the gestation of the *Villa Latina* project starting from the development of the large loggia on the ground floor, a true embryo of many of Bottoni's future projects.

and at the same time sad' (Bottoni, 1931, p.120) architecture of certain international exhibitions, aiming straight at what really seems to count: 'giving a moral ease to our life itself and a safe, lasting hospitality to our spirit and sensibilities, so that culture and experience have nobly enriched us', as Gio Ponti wrote in the introduction to the catalogue of the competition, which seems to have had on his deck the perspective view from the loggia of *Villa Latina* when he put the following words on paper: "the best of these projects are like real interpretations of the dwelling, of our life and, if we like, of our civilisation" (Ponti, 1930, introduction).

Italian rationalists are much more concerned than some critics believe about preserving the spirit of tradition intact, a spirit that is becoming clearer and more assertive every day in its achievements. This spirit does not reside in the narrow superficial classicism, in the decorative detail, in the historicism, in the archaeological re-enactments, but in a superior classicism of the spirit. (Bottoni, 1933, p.84)

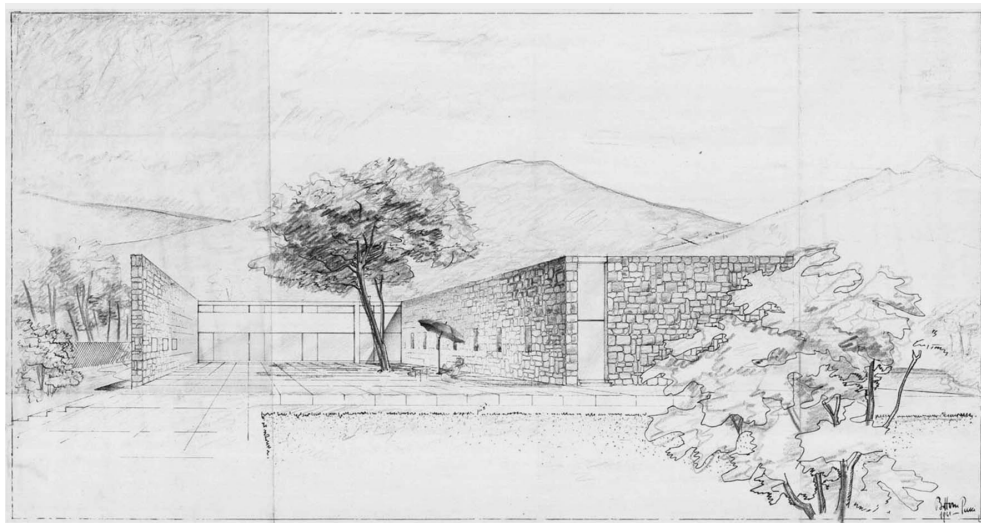


Figure 3. Villa Ludolf, Marina di Massa, Italy, 1941.
(Archivio Piero Bottoni, Dastu, Politecnico di Milano)

Overlooking the same Tyrrhenian Sea, a couple of miles south of *Villa Latina*, Piero Bottoni had the opportunity in 1941 to design another house, *Villa Ludolf*: a 'typical example of a Mediterranean villa' (Consonni, 1973, p.45). The client was the countess Marie Ludolf Fabbri, widowed at the time of Bottoni's project and already owner of an existing villa on the site. The drawings made for the Countess Ludolf, who probably

gave *carte blanche* to the architect, demonstrate the achievement of full control over the rationalist principles, skilfully shaped here to set a true, serene 'casa all'italiana'⁶. An evolution of Bottoni's language is beginning to be outlined and it will consist in a progressive departure from the vocabulary of the 'absolute rationalism' criticised since the 1930s. The suggestions of the myth of the machine and industry disappear, the volumetric purity of *Villa Latina's* perfect geometries gives way to a softer work on architectural type variations. In the plans, a sort of 'Latin' gene pool is still perceivable but now any monumentally is lost. In the facades, the flat colour of the plaster is replaced by the warmer texture of the stone masonry, as in many modest country buildings nearby.⁷

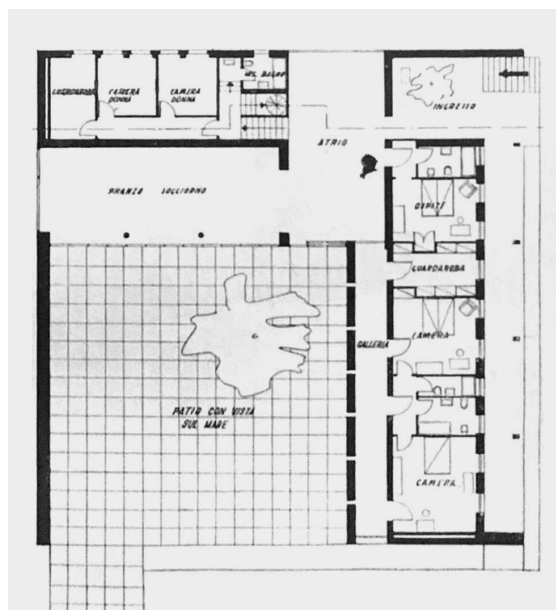


Figure 4. *Villa Ludolf*, Marina di Massa, Italy, 1941. (Archivio Piero Bottoni, Dastu, Politecnico di Milano)

What remains is the fixed idea of a building shaped on the dialogue with the landscape, with the Apuan Mountains and the Tyrrhenian Sea brought inside the Villa. Entering in the building from the east, in the large entrance hall there are in fact two large windows, one to the south and one to the north, and there -to welcome us- are the Tyrrhenian Sea to our left and the Apuan Mountains to our right. Bottoni deliberately raises the entire building on a base so it 'allows the sea view to be above the line of vehicle

⁶ Reference is made to the 'Italian house' described by Gio Ponti in the first issue of *Domus* in 1928.

⁷ In the 1930s these cost areas were almost undeveloped, behind a first line of summer villas and pinedwoods, and before a series of small towns at the foot of the Apuan Alps, there were only rural and little populated plains, few and small farmhouses built with local stones.

encumbrance along the coast' (Bottoni, 1943 b, p.395) and places a large courtyard with a panoramic viewpoint over the sea. On this terrace, he opens the large living room: a big *loggia* -or *exedra*- from which you can see south and west. In Villa Ludolf the contact with the landscape becomes a sort of very precise driving force, not more generic, but carefully pointed in multiple and selected directions. Bottoni tries to build a modern, functional villa working with local context, architectural tradition and landscape; his search for laying roots in the place is explicit: Villa Ludolf seems to be made almost exclusively of simple local stone walls, it could be almost a ruin, left there from times long gone by.

At Ronchi di Marina di Massa, a few hundred yards from the *Villa Ludolf* lot, in 1945 Bottoni built a house for himself. A few years earlier, in the document attached to Casabella 187, some words by Bottoni himself portrayed a condition of change in the values of a generation in the face of the drama of war and its consequent implications on architecture. The house was considered the founding theme from which to start:

We needed war, this tragedy that has become universal and raw today, which is gradually discovering and distinguishing the frills of conventions from truly human attitudes; eternal values from fictitious ones, to bring back to its proper value as an altar, a domestic altar, the house of man. [...] their function as a collection, a refuge, a meeting place for life counts, and they are remembered, thought out, longed for in the anguish of a trench or in the presence of the ruins of the city. (Bottoni, 1943 a, p.229)

After the war anyone with a modicum of civil conscience could not help but consider scandalous every selfishness and every exhibition of luxury. It was a time of self-criticism, introspection, 'humility (pride), high spirit' (Bottoni, 1943 a, p.229). It was on this *land* that Bottoni built his house by the sea, 'avoiding any abstraction [...] without yielding to the expressions of the false rural, but respecting the landscape, adapting it, as if the villa were born from the land on which it stands, part of the nature that surrounds it' (Bottoni, 1995, p.38). Almost as if they were part of a single body, two of the stone walls of *Villa Ludolf* stand here narrow among the pines of this small forest near the sea⁸, inside them, finally finds light the loggia that has been pursuing since the early studies of *Villa Latina*, a loggia that this time must be split into height to master the sea view. A room that looks out onto the sea, a minimal dwelling, well beyond a

⁸ Bottoni, in an article on the architectural magazine *Metron*, explains how the dimensions of this small retreat are influenced by the possibility to 'keep untouched the dense wood of holm oaks and pines' (Bottoni, 1948, p.32).

mature exercise of *existenzminimum*, the construction of this shelter means the sublimation of every abstract and theoretical premise of the modernism and constitutes the finding of a sentimental adherence with the body of the world.

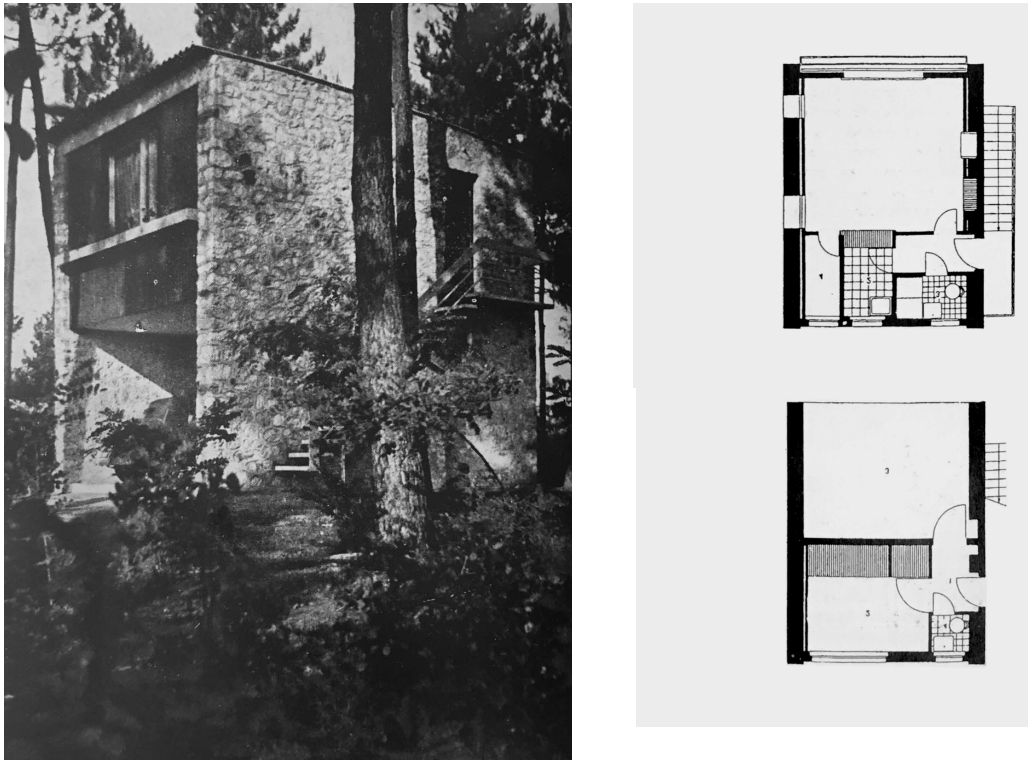


Figure 5. *Villa nella Pineta*, Marina di Massa, Italy, 1945.
(Archivio Piero Bottoni, Dastu, Politecnico di Milano)

The materials, solutions and dimensions of the project reduce almost at zero the distances between man and the surroundings, here the contact with the landscape becomes *skin to skin* and it is perceivable the intent of the architect to live not only close, but really inside the nature. A *cabanon*, a pulsing 'House like me' for which Malaparte himself could provide valid words about his famous villa on the Island of Capri: 'secret form of my spirit, hard, severe [...] secret image of my prison [...] of my nostalgia' (Martellini, 1991). Bottoni seems to build his little house looking at many of the rural buildings in this coastal area, with one or two storeys yet often consisting of a single room protected by stone walls; he builds his modern lodge using almost only local tradition, moving away from even the most dignified references to a certain 'Latin' architecture still present in the projects of *Villa Latina* and *Villa Ludolf*. Bottoni realised that the 'intimacy, serenity and welcome' of a shelter (Bottoni, 1949, p.34) flourish

maybe more easily in modest and anonymous buildings, as long as attention is paid to establishing a respectful dialogue with the natural landscape and with the built landscape, and as long as that architecture had 'at least the merit of wanting to look like what it is... and nothing more'. (Bottoni, 1932 b, p.149). With *Villa nella pineta*, Bottoni's rational architecture finds a full correspondence with the imperishable needs of man, through the lesson of tradition, and "the poetry and sensitivity of the artist" it really satisfies 'the foremost and most important' need to live (Bottoni, 1932 a, p.147) demonstrating how can no exist real architecture that is not an ethical reflection of the human soul or that prescind from the creation of a sincere physical and emotional relationship between space, body of man and body of the place.

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