

Postmediolanum 1981–1985. Architecture and Power of Milan in the pages of *Domus Moda*

Focusing on the relationship between the kinds of power¹ and the publishing industry, the essay proposes a reading of the image of the city of Milan in the early eighties seen through the contents of *Domus Moda*, an ensemble of special issues and columns of Domus magazine (fig. 1), where architecture and fashion are disciplines of design interpreted as powerful activators of urban discourses open to significant change.

For the purpose of the argumentation, a brief overview of the historical period with respect to the object of study is necessary. After the revolutions and the “strategies of tension”² of the 1970s, the 1980s saw the application of neo-liberal political and economic programs and the progressive normalization of the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. In Europe, the Schengen Agreements in 1985 allowed the free movement of peo-

1 Cf. Hillman 1995.

2 Strategy of tension is a political theory that generally indicates a very tormented historical period in the history of Italy, particularly in the 1970s, known as the leaden years and which, through a subversive plan, tended to destabilize or disrupt the pre-constituted balances.



Fig. 1 Domus No. 660 (1985).

3 In the mid-1970s Aldo Moro, president of the DC party (Democrazia Cristiana), and Enrico Berlinguer, secretary of the PCI party (Partito Comunista Italiano) pursued the path of the so-called “Compromesso storico”, a rapprochement between the two rival parties. The left wing of the DC supported the “Compromesso” whereas the right wing of the DC, represented by Giulio Andreotti, never endorsed it. The attempts of encounter between the DC and the PCI led the extreme left to boycott the PCI and led the militants of the terrorist group Brigate Rosse (Red Brigades) to kidnap and to kill Aldo Moro on the very day of the first debate on the vote of confidence for the fourth Andreotti government (16 March 1978). In February 1980, during the 14th convention, the DC considered Moro’s line to be finished.

4 Cf. Salvadori 2018: 433.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.: 440.

7 Foucault 1990: 33.

8 Cf. Vattimo 1983.

9 Calabrese 1987: VI.

10 Jencks 1987: 177.

11 Maddaluno 2015: 2. (October 28, 2020).

ple between the signatory countries, a prelude to the future Maastricht Treaty that will sanction the birth of the European Union in 1992. In a general climate of (apparent) relaxation, positive thinking and hedonistic worship promoted the pursuit of pleasure, individual happiness, and personal affirmation, fuelling in the society a (false?) optimism towards the present and the future. In Italy, after the epilogue of the Moro line³, Bettino Craxi’s position consolidated in the PSI (Partito Socialista Italiano) and in the non-communist left wing. Intellectuals such as Norberto Bobbio, Lucio Coletti, Giuliano Amato, Ernesto Galli della Loggia, Luciano Cafagna, Furio Diaz, and Giorgio Ruffolo advocated Craxi’s proposal of reorganization of the left wing on the side of the European social democracy⁴. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, reacting to the weakness of the institutions, Craxi strongly advanced the theme of the Great Reform “proposing to amend the Constitution, to make the work of the Parliament more effective and to adapt the administrative and public apparatus to the new needs of the society”⁵. Exalting Proudhon’s libertarian thinking, Craxi came to power in 1983.

In such a context “of subversive attacks, of manoeuvres planned by political forces in the same area of government against the institutions, of rampant corruption, both public and private”⁶, the 1980s can be called an unstable decade commonly associated with consumerism, narcissism, technology and entertainment, in which “power circulates, works in chains and is exercised through a networked organization”⁷. As it is inferred from David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity*, spatiotemporal compression, flexible accumulation, and mass consumption, as effects of the globalization of the Western economy and culture, produced an alteration of architecture urged on a postmodern expression. In 1980 the construction of the *Strada Novissima*, on occasion of the first Venice Architecture Biennale directed by Paolo Portoghesi, depicted the new façade-images of architecture that found their reasons in the affirmation of the postmodern condition of *koiné* of styles and languages systematized by Gianni Vattimo⁸. The twenty architects invited to build their own façade to be exhibited in the Arsenale wrote the visual manifesto of what Omar Calabrese would define in 1987 as the Neo-Baroque era, which consisted “in the search for forms and their valorisation, in which we witness the loss of wholeness, of globality, of orderly systematism in exchange for instability, polydimensionality, mutability”⁹.

Aligning himself with this vision, Alessandro Mendini grounded his editorial project for *Domus* on the “different coloration”, the “new interest in the city as the basis for architecture”, the “commitment to anamnesis”, and the “ironic twists and disguised deflections, the typical displacement tactics of Post-Modernists” stated by Charles Jencks’ theory in *Post-Modernism*¹⁰.

After serving as editor in chief for *Casabella* and *Modo*, Mendini became director of *Domus* at the end of 1979, with the aim of unhinging the dogmas of Modernity and “assigning centrality to concepts such as change, body, decoration, style”¹¹. Validating the interpretation of “project” as an action of thought and discussion, each issue of *Domus*—whose graphic design was entrusted to

Ettore Sottsass—provided four to six contributions for the Architecture section, eight to ten contributions for the Furniture/Design section, and five to seven contributions for the Art section. The editorial approach was very different from that of 1970s *Casabella*, which was almost entirely dedicated to architectural and urban design. In the early 1980s *Domus* issues, the articles focused on famous designers' houses, bars, restaurants, clubs, sports fields, and banks, projects mainly presented in form of large-format photographs printed on white glossy paper. The magazine linked these architectural projects to a new urban reality, in which a new city bourgeoisie recognized the affirmation of its *status* in the representative power of architecture. In the 1980s the economic power of Italian design brands increased the volume of the magazines, especially *Domus*, where the number of pages of advertising was the same as the one of the articles. The thickening of the advertising space—an increase of 50% compared to the 1970s—is the confirmation of the economic power imposed by the manufacture and the consumption of industrial products in the mass culture. As Umberto Eco writes:

“... the product must like the customer, it must not cause him any problems, the customer must desire the product and must be induced to a progressive replacement of the product. The spread of mass culture remains in the hands of economic and political power groups that use the means themselves for persuasion and domination. All this is needed to show us that mass culture is an industrial fact and, as such, it suffers many of the typical conditioning of any industrial activity.”¹²

In 1987, the Italian furniture industry exported products worth more than 4,000 billion liras: 50% of "Made in Italy"-design was aimed at the creation of objects destined, for the cost, to an *élite* of buyers/clients who recognized their lifestyle among the pages of architecture and design magazines. Aware of this power of seduction, Mendini communicated through *Domus* an hedonistic image of interior architecture, forms of entertainment, and cult of objects. The magazine, however, aimed to recognize the businesses' *genius loci*, not only as a territorial peculiarity but also applied to the architecture and to the methods of products' manufacture. According to Wilfried Nippel's thought developed in his studies on Max Weber's urban philosophy¹³, it can be affirmed that Milan in the 1980s was a “city of producers”, a city that grew through the action of the industrial bourgeoisie. This, as Bonvesin de la Riva recounted, was historically demonstrated as early as the 13th century in *De magnibus urbis Mediolani*¹⁴; journalist Natalia Aspesi in an article published in *Ottogono* summarized with a historical note how the tradition for beauty, characteristic of the Milan-Brianza region, had allowed methodological continuity in the approach to the design project¹⁵. In what Umberto Eco defines as “the exchange between list and form”¹⁶, it is possible to redesign Milan and Brianza in the compilation of a list of business excellences fully operational in the mid-1980s. In the field of design: Artemide, Bernini, Boffi, Cappellini,

12 Eco 1964: 46.

13 Cf. Bruhns, Nippel 2000.

14 In 1288 Bonvesin de la Riva, *doctor gramaticae*, wrote *De magnibus urbis Mediolani*, a treaty in the form of a chronicle in which the author praises Milan, his hometown, showing it to the world as an urban model of efficiency, strength, and modernity. Through a quantitative list of precision, ranging from the geographical description of the site to the complete list of churches and bell towers, up to the number of notaries, consuls, doctors, merchants, bakers and soldiers within the perimeter of the walls, it is possible to reconstruct the image of the architecture and of the trades of those who belonged to the city and were defined by it. See Comoletti 1994.

15 “Queen Theodolinda of Bavaria had a love for beautiful objects, and when she married Agiulfo she came to rule over these lands eight centuries ago; and certainly loved beautiful objects those rich and aristocratic Milanese who, after 16th century, began to build there their beautiful villas famous in history for certain fabulous wedding parties, such as the one for the marriage of Ippolita Dugnani to Count Ottavio Giovinio in 1559, or for the holiday of kings, such as Ferdinand II of Naples, guest of the Brianza palace of the Gallarati Scotti family. The beauty and refinement of these lands also impressed Stendhal, who wrote an appendix in his *Voyage d'Italie, a Voyage dans la Brianza*, in which he praised its wonders. As far as the industrial product is concerned, Brianza has been very famous since 1500 for the art of the silk, that was safeguarded in the spinning mills owned by local monasteries or Milanese aristocrats.” See Aspesi 1969: 63.

16 Cf. Eco 2009.

17 Restany 1980: 2.

18 “*Domus Moda* was born in the moment of maximum international success of Italian fashion, which had also been widely legitimized from a cultural point of view. And it became the spokesman of an extraordinary season for the Lombard city. Those were the years in which Milan had become the fashion capital of Europe. It acts as a catalyst and activator of initiatives that focus on the phenomenon of serial design and industrial products. We feel the need to redesign the structure of the industrial system and look at the ‘possibilities’ of Italian design. In this framework, the fashion system begins to be understood as a space in which the collaboration between the creator and the rules of industrialization is carried out. We are witnessing the formation of the figure of the *stilista*, main character and host of Made in Italy.” See Maddaluno 2015: 6.

19 Mendini 1980: 2.

20 Cf. Masciarriello 2016.

21 “The fashion system has upset the ancient structures of patrician houses, which disdainful turn their backs on the street to open up less austere courtyards and shady inner gardens. The first floors have been ripped open and through the sumptuous windows the gaze penetrates the interiors that were secret until yesterday. [...] Via Spiga, Sant’Andrea, Pietro Verri, Santo Spirito, Gesù, Borgospesso constitute today a citadel of fashion that constantly expands.” Giacomoni cited in Masciarriello 2016: 243.

Cassina, De Padova, Fontana Arte, Flexform, Flos, Kartell, Molteni, Tecno, Zanotta; in the field of fashion: Armani, Etro, Ferrè, Fiorucci, Krizia, Missoni, Moschino, Nanni Strada, Prada, Trussardi, Versace; in the publishing field: Adelphi, Bompiani, Baldini & Castoldi, Feltrinelli, Garzanti, Hoepli, Longanesi, Mondadori, Mursia, Rizzoli, Sperling & Kupfer. The Milanese list is transformed into a neo-baroque architectural form: indentations and ledges, folds and swirls intertwine in the writing of a novel with a multifaceted and polymorphous plot. The abstract forms of this story have measures and real data. The presence of brand-companies on the territory involves the architecture of the city and the hinterland, which grows and develops through design actions desired and directed by the companies themselves. Once the success of “Made in Italy” design had been consolidated (*id est* “Made in Milan”) and exported all over the world, Mendini decided in 1981 to introduce fashion in the magazine. Defined by Pierre Restany in *Domus* no. 606 as “the ultimate, tangible, narcissistic expression of the collective unconscious of a community”¹⁷, fashion became a discipline of the project that in that precise moment was significantly acting on the city of Milan¹⁸. The choice of this widening of horizon is found in Mendini’s first editorial as director of *Domus* when he stated:

“I look at the definition of architecture, design and art in a very wide and ambiguous sense and I am emphatically more concerned with the relation between anthropology and these disciplines than in them as autonomous forms, objects and qualities. *Domus* will be eclectically sensitive to numerous design and para-design phenomena, great and small.”¹⁹

In Milan fashion became an urban and anthropological fact at the beginning of the 1980s with the start of a process of redefinition of an entire district led by a group of young designers (Gianni Versace, Gianfranco Ferré, Giorgio Armani, Ottavio Missoni, Mariuccia Mandelli) who decided to set their headquarters in the streets of the historical centre around Via Monte Napoleone. This choice broke the introversion of the traditional Milanese *palazzo a corte*, opening windows toward the street front and revealing the gardens and inner courtyards previously inaccessible²⁰. The fashion spaces of Via della Spiga, Via Gesù, Via Santo Spirito, Via Sant’Andrea, Via Borgospesso—known as the Quadrilatero—*de facto* rediscovered architectural depth, meaning that “living the section” became characteristic of the contemporary city. The current situation confirms this spatial boundary which has acquired greater extension²¹ but without projection towards the “Duomo zone”, that remains excluded beyond the liquid barrier marked by Luigi Caccia Dominioni’s fountain in Piazza San Babila. From the Piazza onwards, the *prêt-à-porter* of the *boutiques* is replaced by the fast-fashion chains, and the *petit four* of the Café Cova are replaced by the fast-food burgers. The border is not only spatial but also temporal: luxury is slow, pop is instant.

Domus Moda initially appeared as a special volume to issues 617 and 621 (1981) and then became an internal column of the magazine until 1986

when it was removed by the new editor Mario Bellini. In the second issue, the article entitled “Milano Fashion Landscape” depicted a super-catwalk – of a clear radical *nostalgia*—on which bodies presented the looks of the 1981 fall/winter collections; the article “Fashion Spots” was a collage of Milanese places that included the Villagio dei Giornalisti, the garden of the Sormani Library, a Persian carpet store, and the interiors of a ceramic factory. The synergy between fashion and architecture triggered by Mendini and recounted through *Domus Moda* produced the representation of Milan as a “novel-city”, following Italo Calvino’s definition of the literary work of Honoré de Balzac, in which it is the city (1830s Paris in the case of the French novelist) that reveals itself to be the *fil rouge* of the plot:

“To make a city become a novel: to represent the neighbourhoods and streets as characters with personalities in opposition to the others; to evoke human figures and situations as a spontaneous vegetation that germinates from the pavement of these or those streets, or as elements of such dramatic contrast with them so as to cause chain cataclysms; to make the living city and its biological continuity be the real protagonist in every changeable moment.”²²

22 Calvino 1995: 157.

In these words of Calvino what emerges is the attention to the project of a “topographical-graphic poem” that interprets the city “as language, as ideology, as conditioning of every thought and word and gesture”²³; in *Domus Moda* it is therefore the postmodern drama-city that commands the action because the city itself is the genesis of the human episodes. The two special issues and columns constitute a kaleidoscope of events and places—not only Milanese, but also of other cosmopolitan fashion capitals such as Paris, London, New York, and of more exotic destinations such as India and Japan—

23 Ibid.: 159.



Fig. 2 Domus No. 659 (1985).

where the power of the architectural *mise-en-scène*, which is typical of the fashion show, is exercised. Léa-Catherine Szacka, in her critical study of the first Venice Architecture Biennale *The Presence of the Past*, speaks of a “post-modern understanding of ‘representation’”²⁴; the construction of the *Strada Novissima*, result of the rediscovery of the longitudinal section of the Corde-rie, expressed the urgency of repositioning at the center of the debate the political and social role of the street, an *en plein air* catwalk, an action carried out through the postmodern strategy of the display that dissolves the limit between real and ephemeral²⁵. Mendini therefore seems to invite the reader to the urban exploration, in search of the unusual and unexpected. Stendhal walked through Milan because of the design of the city itself that favours the *promenades philosophiques*: Stendhal’s walking, that of a bourgeois *flâneur*, is actually a design act very similar to enunciating or conversing. And again, Alberto Savinio in *Ascolto il tuo cuore città* describes Milan as a city “so exquisitely peripatetic and dialogic”²⁶.

Among the kinds of power identified by James Hillman²⁷, the 1980s seem to have identified “representation” as the most influential one. Louis Marin, starting from the visual analysis of Charles Le Brun’s 17th century tapestry *Entrevue de Louis XIV, Roi de France et de Navarre, et Philippe IV, Roi d’Espagne*, wrote that representation aims essentially at producing a narrative, “representation enhances, legitimizes the signs of force, is valid in place of force because it is the system of its signs”²⁸. Among the 1980s Milanese “signs” of fashion we can include the stores that, as previously stated, occupied strategic positions, and constituted a compact urban system. In 1985 a series of reports entitled “Fashion Stores” was published in *Domus Moda* columns (fig. 2). The first report opened with photographs of the Milanese boutiques of Bruno Magli, Comme des Garçons (fig. 3), Jean-Paul Gautier and Thierry Mugler (fig. 4). In the article, it is specified how

24 Szacka 2016: 136.

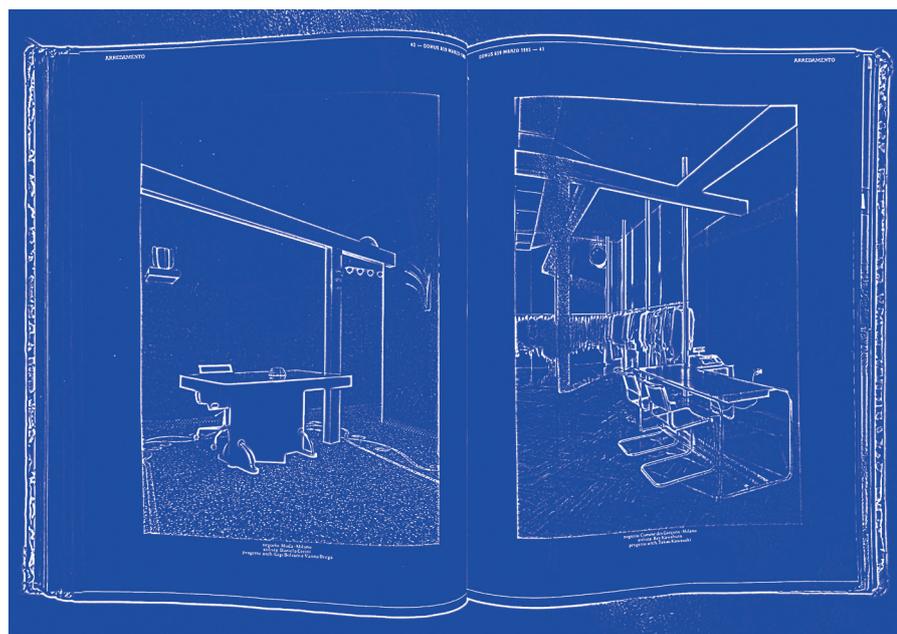
25 Cf. Vattimo 1997.

26 Savinio 1984: 185.

27 The kinds of power analyzed by James Hillman in *Kinds of Power: A Guide to Its Intelligent Uses* are control, prestige, ostentation, ambition, resistance, persuasion, representation, authority, enthusiasm, tyranny.

28 Cf. Marin 1994.

Fig. 3 Domus No. 659 (1985).



“... fashion stores are phenomena linked with the design and costumes field. In this sphere, the stores become real places subject to the *tourbillon* of fashion; habitués, not necessarily buyers, salesmen and saleswomen dressed with the clothes on sale, but foreigners attracted by the good “exchange rate”, *mannequins* which draw attention, closed circuit videos which give up-to-date information on the latest fashion shows, hit tunes and nostalgic music in the background are the ingredients of these stores, where buying and selling seem a marginal fact compared to the complexity of the image. The shop image comprises persons, furnishings, space and clothes.”²⁹

29 Rinaldi, Scarzella 1985: 38.

From these words it is evident that the fashion store is conceived as an “architecture of representation”. It recalls Umberto Eco’s phenomenological considerations of the architectural object, according to which architecture is a “fact of communication” that generates an “iconic code”³⁰. The rigorous organization of the furnishing components seems to correspond to an interpretation of the interiors as a container of interchangeable typologies, where the postmodern *mixité* imposes a battle between the present and the past (fig. 5): steel against marble, concrete against stucco, beams against capitals, neon lights against mosaics, fluorescent colours against opacity, and eventually the sculptural design of the clothes against the mineral and monumental matter of architecture. As Restany reported:

30 Cf. Eco 1968, ch. “Architettura e comunicazione”.

“Postmodern space lends itself to the general flexibility of all stage productions. The time has come when the creative dreams of the artist and the fashion designer will be dreamed on the same wavelength. Portoghesi will be inspired by the graphic motifs of Keith Haring or Yves Saint-Laurent will pick up Schnabel’s broken pots to make a must de Cartier, and David Salle will design Krizia’s draw-curtains.”³¹

31 Restany 1985: 32.

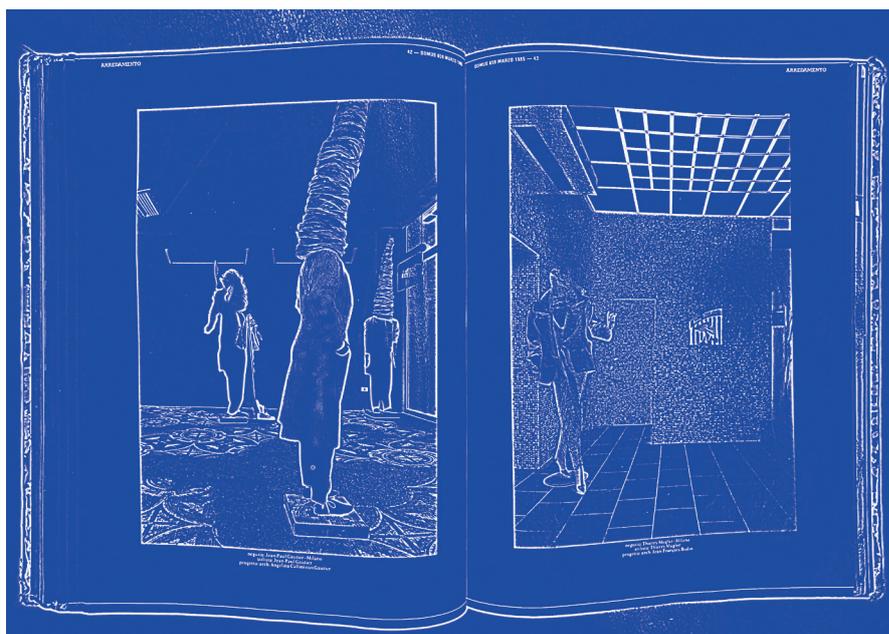
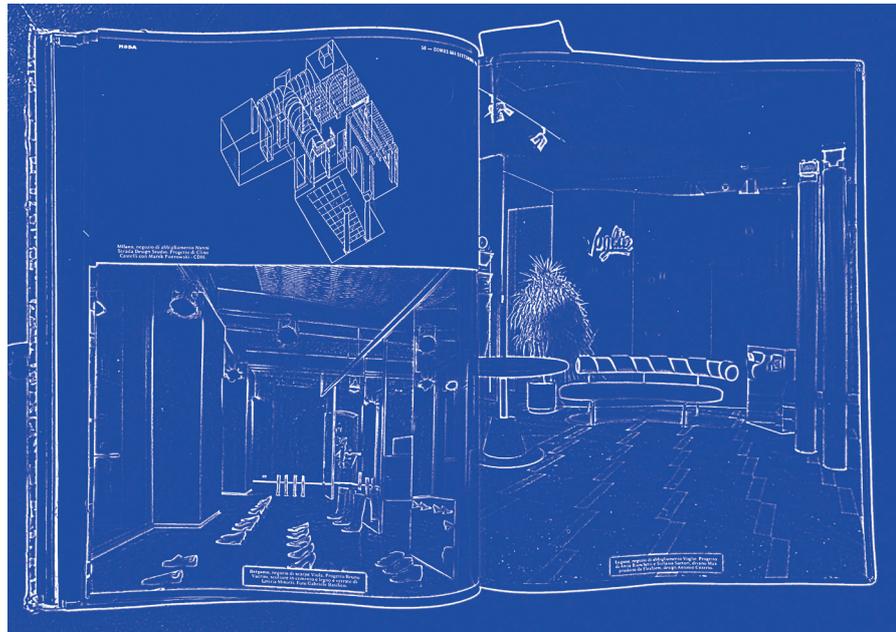


Fig. 4 Domus No. 659 (1985).

Fig. 5 Domus No. 664 (1985).



In conclusion, the role of *Domus Moda* is part of the game of smoke and mirrors that marks the dynamics of the 1980s. *Domus Moda* became one of the vehicles of postmodern knowledge that, as Lyotard pointed out, is articulated in “different linguistic games that constitute the heterogeneity of the elements, and the games can generate institutions only through a grid of plates”.³² From the pages of the magazine it emerges how Mendini structured such a grid by grafting it onto three neo-bourgeois architectural principles: *urbanitas*, *spectaculum* and *voluptas*. *Urbanitas* identifies being “civilized and courteous”³³, which translates into the search for cultural contaminations, expressions of a cosmopolitan society that recognizes itself as inhabitants of the world’s stage; *spectaculum* is identifiable in the experience of entertainment, in those episodes in which the city becomes the inhabited scene; *voluptas* defines the places of satisfaction, of the conquest of a status that is self-determined through the language of architecture, design and fashion. Thus, *Domus Moda* portrayed the sense of belonging to a Milanese *civitas* where the postmodern *homo oeconomicus* moves, a polyglot *flâneur* who lives the architectural experience *ad libitum*, lives the novel-city of Honoré de Balzac, plunges into the pleasures of the ephemeral, falls in Freudian hysteria, gets up again: in this ephemerality the *homo oeconomicus* endures.

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32 Lyotard 1979: 6.

33 *Urbanitas* as elegance contains the etymology of *urbis*, city. As the Encyclopedia Treccani reports, the concept of *urbanitas*, the linguistic purity of the cultured Latin of the city, is already contrasted in Cicero with *rusticitas*, peculiarity of rustic Latin, on the one hand, and *peregrinitas*, peculiarity of the Latin of peregrines, on the other (cf. Brut. XLVI 171 Orat. XXIV 81 De Orat. III XLII and XLIV); this is how later Quintilianus defined *urbanitas* (Inst. orat. VI III 17): “urbanitas... qua quidem significari video sermonem praeferentem in verbis et sono et usu proprium quendam gustum urbis et sumptam ex conversatione doctorum tacitam eruditionem, denique cui contraria sit rusticitas.” See https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/urbanus_%28Enciclopedia-Dantesca%29/ (November 19, 2020).

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Figure List

- Fig. 1:* *Domus* No. 660 (1985), *Domus Moda* column, pp. 32–33. Courtesy Archivio Domus. Graphic processing Giovanni Carli.
- Fig. 2:* *Domus* No. 659 (1985), *Domus Moda* column, pp. 38–39. Courtesy Archivio Domus. Graphic processing Giovanni Carli.
- Fig. 3:* *Domus* No. 659 (1985), *Domus Moda* column, pp. 40–41. Courtesy Archivio Domus. Graphic processing Giovanni Carli.
- Fig. 4:* *Domus* No. 659 (1985), *Domus Moda* column, pp. 42–43. Courtesy Archivio Domus. Graphic processing Giovanni Carli.
- Fig. 5:* *Domus* No. 664 (1985), *Domus Moda* column, pp. 50–51. Courtesy Archivio Domus. Graphic processing Giovanni Carli.

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