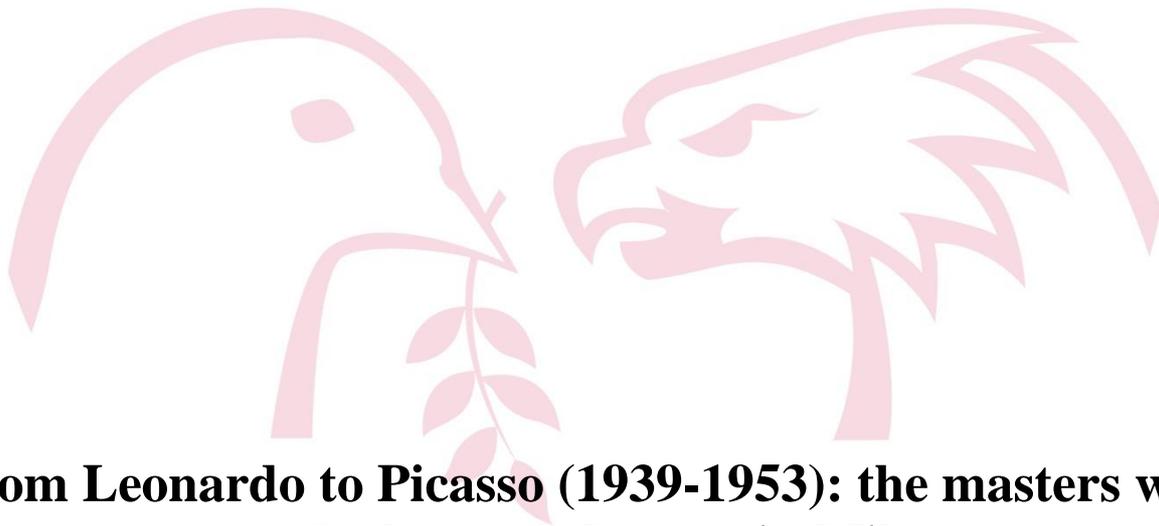


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From Leonardo to Picasso (1939-1953): the masters who marked war and peace in Milan

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to highlight the instrumental role of the arts – and especially the exhibition system – in relation with the Second World War period in Milan. Looking at the timeline of the Milanese exhibitions organised in that span of time, we can notice two main occurrences: the first one happened just before the war and the second a bunch of years after the conflict. More specifically, they are the Leonardo exhibition organised at Palazzo dell'Arte in 1939 and the solo show dedicated to Picasso arranged at Palazzo Reale in 1953.

In 1939 the conflict was not so far anymore and the international mood highly charged also due to the Italian subscription to the Pact of Steel; despite this, the fascist regime decided to organise a temporary exhibition dedicated to Leonardo, with the aim to strengthen the position of the party in power – actually the idea of Leonardo as the “greatest Italian genius of the Renaissance”[1] was clearly related to the identity of the regime.

On the other hand, after the Second World War, the public administration of the city was able to arrange a Picasso exhibition at Palazzo Reale and, during a moment of peace-building, the choice of the Spanish master was not accidental: on the contrary, his denunciation of the war (with *Guernica*), made the artist an ideal representative of the pacifism. Despite all the difficulties, the event was a success and, even nowadays, the picture of some women sitting in front of *Guernica* has become one of the most significant representation of the post-war history of Milan.

In the end, it is clear that art history, in these mentioned cases, was conceived as a tool for different – not to say opposite – cultural interventions, marking war and peace situations and tracing a political and diplomatic “manifesto” through a cultural lens.

1. Before

The idea of a temporary exhibition focused on Leonardo arose already in 1936, “obeying to the disposition the Duce gave to the Lombard cultural institutions on 31st October 1936-XV, saying to 'go towards the people, extensively and deeply'”[2]. The city of Milan, at that time, seemed the natural place to host the event, considering the historical phase of the master at the court of Ludovico il Moro and, more recently, the project for a Leonardo room that would have opened in 1938 inside the Ambrosiana Gallery. Not to mention that this hypothesis is also reconfirmed by a first, provisional program[3] written by Carlo Emilio Ferri and Giorgio Nicodemi, where we read that Mussolini, at that time, already gave his favourable opinion[4].

In other words, it seems that, since the beginning, the main purpose of the government was to deal with a cultural topic to gain a massive consensus: that is why the organisers decided to put together the “Leonardesca” (the nick name used for the “Leonardo exhibition”) with an exhibition dedicated to the Italian inventions[5], connecting the past Italian ingenuity to the current one and, at the same time, reinforcing a national(istic) tradition.

In such a delicate moment of the national history – the gradual affinity with the Nazi Germany, that will lead up to the Pact of Steel (22nd May 1939) cracked the diplomatic relation with the other States – the Fascist regime aimed to promote the economical and technical development of the nation passing through a name globally known and esteemed.

For example, the first list of the artworks requested for loan – attached to the proposal – demonstrates the intentions of the National Fascist Party (PNF) of having the most eminent paintings of the master, also maintaining diplomatic relations with the other States; it is not a case that Germany would have been the nation more involved in that process while, on the contrary, France never agreed upon the loan of the *Gioconda*[6]

Finally, conceiving the exhibition as an itinerary starting from the Palazzo dell'Arte and, then, scattering around the city, reveals the purpose to give the visitor the opportunity to better understand the work of Leonardo in Milan[7], connecting him to a city that, contextually, exhibits its historical, but also economical and productive values[8].

To get a better sense of the political exploitation used towards Leonardo, it is interesting to read an article where the curator Carlo Emilio Ferri considered the Italian master a magnificent personality of the past, but also an example of “our, Mussolinian and Fascist”[9] modernity and, again “not only a genius, but most of all a symbol”[10]. According to what Umberto Silva affirmed in a book written during the 70's with an evident antifascist component, the Fascist mythology recalled a glorious past not from a nostalgic point of view but as a positive comparison with the present, leading to something new[11], understandable from the masses.

The popular feature of the exhibition, similar to the one of the “Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista” (held in Rome between 1932 and 1934) is confirmed by the simple language used for the promotional material and further reiterated by the circulation of visual tools like celebratory stamps or illustrations published on the main newspapers[12] during all the long-lasting organisational process. In fact, due to technical and timing reasons the “Leonardesca” was firstly re-programmed for September-October 1938 and, finally, scheduled for the spring 1939, when Giuseppe Pagano fulfilled the position of architect supervisor, only five weeks before the opening[13].

We still don't know what exactly happened, but this role, initially attributed to the architect Gio Ponti (defined the “project creator”[14]), it was then vacancy almost until the end; so Pagano was probably called to give coherence to an itinerary otherwise sketchy because conceived according to heterogeneous tastes. The architects at work at Palazzo dell'Arte were actually representative of different generations and, most of all, supporting various ideas about how to design a displaying system for an exhibition; if some of them tried to create a series of “period rooms”, dominated by an “evocative articulation”[15], the others were able to express the *Zeitgeist*, anticipating a way of design typical of the postwar period. Pagano himself, for example, inside the “Anatomy Room”, used modern tools such as photographic reproductions and installations – like the glass-structure, in the centre of the room, put next to a small pink-painted tree. Finally, Pagano was able to contain the

traditionalist part of the exhibition, placing these rooms in correspondence to the 'minor' parts of the path, but he couldn't solve the problem, at least not completely[16].

That is why, maybe, the exhibition received several critics[17], mixed up with a general approval, as demonstrated by the great amount of the visitors: almost 400.000 between the 9th May and the 22nd October 1939.

In retrospect, the architect tried to justify the weaknesses of the exhibition, reading the event as a partial anticipation of the following political, historical and even social circumstances; according to him the “Leonardesca” showed the first symptoms of a more general exhaustion and “once again the arts told us, before and better of any other field, the matters secretly happened – or going to be – between the men. This time was the war: it exploded in the middle of Europe, not yet in Italy, before the Leonardesca could close”[18].

But this is not enough: the “Leonardo exhibition” was an extremely important didactic occasion more than a 'scientific project', where the artistic and historical languages went together with the political message. Far from a global event like the “Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista” under several aspects, the solo exhibition dedicated to Leonardo put in the background the explicit Fascist symbols, but gave the photography a significant role, trying to involve the visitors inside the rooms of Palazzo dell'Arte.

In that occasion the government tried to promote an autarchic politics, taking the visitor by the hand and guiding him through the modern Italian geniality, originated during the Renaissance period; in other words it attempted to affirm its position even in a difficult moment like the one preceding the Second World War.

In the end, the duality expressed by this event – the didactic part from one side and the politics from the other – is well underlined by the final sentence of the catalogue introduction, where Leonardo is put side by side to the Duce: “[Leonardo] pioneer and symbol, mother Italy celebrates him; while the Fascism Duce, who armed the nation for war and for peace, guides it through all the prolific matters”[19].

2. And after the War

Then a few years later, after the World War II and during the reconstruction, Milan was at the centre of a huge process of cultural renaissance: many of the museums (i.e. Pinacoteca di Brera, Sforza Castle, Poldi Pezzoli Museum), hit by the bombings in 1943, were rebuilt by the municipality and the local Superintendence and, a little bit later, ready to reopen with their modern displaying systems. With the end of the conflict, in 1945, the perception of living in a new era comes with the idea of the museum as a place for a “potential rehabilitation” and the representation of a “recovered identity”[20].

In this scenario, Palazzo Reale, an ancient seat of government[21] situated in the heart of the city and newly recovered from the destruction, was reconverted in an exhibition centre, immediately able to catalyse the attention of a vast public. Just to mention a few examples, in 1951 the art historian Roberto Longhi curated the temporary exhibition dedicated to “Caravaggio e i caravaggeschi” and only the following year Lionello Venturi dealt with the solo show entitled to the master Vincent Van Gogh, remarkable most of all for its modern arrangement.

Already in April 1953, the Superintendent Fernanda Wittgens, who also played a significant role in protecting the national cultural heritage during the war, succeed in convincing Pablo Picasso himself to move to Milan the important exhibit held at Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome[22] (5th May – 30th June).

Since the 'Roman episode'[23], supervised by Eugenio Reale, a representative of the Italian Communist Party (P.C.I.) and committed to the already mentioned art historian Lionello Venturi, well-known for his antifascist ideas from the very beginning, it is quite clear that the event was conceived with an evident political component. Peculiarity that was even more reinforced by the subjects of some Picasso artworks, consequences of the most recent historical occurrences – the Spanish Civil War and the war in Korea – and by his subscription to the French Communist Party,

in 1944. On the other hand, this political mood was balanced by the moderate wing of the Italian government represented by Giulio Andreotti, who recommended to ban the painting *Massacre in Korea* (1951) from the exhibition, being a sensitive topic towards the Americans.

Getting to the point, if the Roman exhibition was an interesting occasion to partially know the modern production of the Spanish master (all the early artworks and some masterpieces, like *Guernica*, are missing), who furthermore never visited it, the following Milanese “Mostra di Picasso” was the first, most complete exhibit dedicated to the artist, also provided with a complex network of subtexts.

From the point of view of the organisation, the only connection between the two 'phases' was Eugenio Reale, who worked closely with the curator, Franco Russoli and with the Ente Manifestazioni Milanesi, while Lionello Venturi became a referee and a collaborator more than a proper promoter. Moreover, the painter Attilio Rossi[24], friend with Picasso, had a significant role too, pleading with him to loan *Guernica*, at the time temporarily entrusted to the Museum of Modern Art in New York[25].

The recent history of the location – chosen by Fernanda Wittgens because “an art exhibition in Milan interests classes and types that in Rome stay unresponsive”[26] – together with the possibility to display *Guernica* inside the Cariatidi Room, hit by the bombs and then reopened with the visible wounds of the war, definitively convinced him to provide the masterpiece, but also to extend the project, ordering up several artworks from other international museums[27], and to be directly involved with the arrangement of the show.

In this manner, the “Mostra di Picasso”, accessible to the public from the 23rd September to the 31st December 1953, became the first Picasso solo exhibition showing the whole production of the master – paintings, sculpture, installations... – since the beginning to the present and, contextually, acquired a more explicit relevance from the point of view of the political affairs.

The left wing, even if unable to join the majority – accorded to Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democracy) party – during the election of June 7th 1953, ended up being reinforced by the results and, in virtue of that, considered the only one capable of contrasting the D.C. The main consequence concerning the exhibit was its unequivocally strong, political character, concentrated most of all in the Cariatidi Room, where Picasso wanted to display a bunch of interesting artworks: *Guernica* (1937) voluntarily exiled in the U.S. since the Exposition Universelle held in Paris in 1937, was put in the middle of the room, pulled over the lateral wall and situated side by side with the more recent diptych representing *The War* and *The Peace* (1952), dedicated to the events happening in Korea.

As demonstrated by a picture taken by René Burri – then become an iconic symbol – framing four women sitting in front of the large canvas[28], *Guernica* was the real protagonist of the whole project due to its subject and to its deep significance. In the introduction of the catalogue addition, the curator gave an appropriate portrait of that connection, linking the artwork to the place and to the public: “In an ancient Palace of the old Europe, hurt by other bombings, nearby the Picasso paintings poetically proving the most recent sufferings of the humanity and their faith in the common good [...] 'Guernica' is the most significant proof of the deep honesty and truth of the realistic inspiration of Picasso and its pictorial genius”[29]. Representing the consequences of the war in a new manner, with a shocking language, this composition became a universal hymn against every conflict, “the flag against the fascism”[30], easily shareable by a nation that has just passed a period dominated by a totalitarian regime.

Paradoxically, the depiction of the sufferance is turned into a fight in the name of freedom, supported by the other paintings in the Cariatidi Room that, all together, retrace fifteen years of painful history, from the destruction of the Spanish village of Guernica, caused by the aerial attack of the Nazis sustaining the regime of Franco, to the Cold War. According to what Lucio Villari wrote, that was a period articulated by the dichotomy fascism-anti-fascism, a moment characterised by “the solemn antinomy between War and Peace”[31].

Undoubtedly, reading the articles issued on the Italian newspapers just after the opening of the exhibition, entitled like “The comments of the public visiting the Milanese exhibition of

Picasso”[32] or “Visit to the Lord of the monsters”[33], or admiring the ironic illustrations associated with them, we are well aware that the message was not entirely understood; although the success is confirmed by the durability of that symbol in the city of Milan and by the huge amount of the visitors, almost 200.000 in two months.

Moreover, despite the clearly marked[34] process of politicisation encountered by these paintings – and most of all by *Guernica* – in this specific occasion, the perception of the paintings by Picasso was able to modify itself throughout the years, staying anyway connected to the political field.

3. Other semantic slips in the aftermath

Both Leonardo from one side and Picasso (and most of all *Guernica*) from the other, having passed for Milan, left an important mark to the collective memory of the city, insomuch as remembering them means giving them a specific sense, different from time to time.

Although the memory of Leonardo shows a component which is more understandable and 'marketable' because his name is strictly connected to the idea of the artist as a universal genius, while the one related to Picasso keeps constantly alive the political consciousness of the public.

There was a time, during the 50's, when they were compared, being outstanding personalities of the past and of the present, but the entire speech served the purpose of the politics, launching Picasso as a regular Leonardo, “right in the head” as we read in the article[35].

It is no coincidence that, nowadays, the name of Leonardo is used as a sort of 'city branding' for Milan, especially in view of the next Expo 2015: besides the masterpieces that one can visit in the city – i.e. the Sala delle Asse inside the Sforza Castle and the painting entitled *Portrait of a Musician*, at the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana – and the institutions named after him, like the Science and Technology Museum or some public schools, there is a recent tradition got started in his name.

The first step is represented by the astonishment created by the latest restoration of *The Last Supper* (1977-1999), a mural artwork located inside the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie cloister, curated by the restorer Pinin Brambilla Barcilon with the supervision of the Superintendence[36]: after the long-lasting work, the restitution of the masterpiece to the city[37] gave the public a perfect occasion to rediscover the personality of Leonardo-painter – a myth further increased by the fiction novel *Da Vinci Code*, written by Dan Brown (printed in Italian in 2004).

Then, lately, at the end of May 2014, in Pio XI square was inaugurated a Leonardo tribute the Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana commissioned to the archistar Daniel Libeskind[38]. The monument, situated in front of the Ambrosiana and above the ancient Milan – more precisely, where the streets *cardo* and *decumano* meet and cross – is conceived as an homage to the master but, most of all, as a distinctive sign, marking the presence of the museum in the city. Moreover, the meaningful title chosen for this monument, *Leonardo Icon*, etymologically related to the visual field, clearly wants to underline the most impacting and 'superficial' component of the Master's production.

Again, the next year Leonardo is going to be the main protagonist of a great exhibition hosted inside the Milanese Palazzo Reale, opened to the public (more or less) in parallel with the Universal Exposition. The temporary event, even if distantly related to the one organised in 1939 mostly because of its foreseeable, huge impact on Milan, is now free from any political involvement.

On the other hand, since the beginning the 'Milanese re-readings' associated to *Guernica* have been partially different; already in the 70's, when the Italian period of political turmoil was called “years of lead”, the masterpiece became a source of inspiration for the artist Enrico Baj, who was the author of the installation *The Funerals of the Anarchist Pinelli* (1972).

The historical circumstances (partially still unsolved) hidden behind this artwork are related to the Piazza Fontana Bombing, a terrorist attack happened in Milan during the December 1969, when 17 people died because of a bomb exploded at the headquarters of a bank in the centre of the city. After the slaughter, initially and unjustly ascribed to the anarchists, many arrests were made and a

few days later one of the suspects, the railwayman Giuseppe Pinelli, uncannily fell from the fourth floor window of the central police station and died.

This incident, immediately perceived as an injustice at the expense of the anarchist and left wing movements, highlighted the attempt – by the side of the State – to scapegoating innocent people, as demonstrated by the following investigations.

Enrico Baj, who at that time was going to rethink the artwork *The Funerals of the Anarchist Galli* by Carlo Carrà (1911), suddenly decided to change subject, passing from the art to the reality[39]. *The Funerals of the Anarchist Pinelli* was completed in 1972 as a huge composition (around 3 mt. high and 12 mt. long) which can be dismantled in minor panels, showing the victim at the centre of the scene, represented upside down, while is falling from on high and almost taken by eleven 'threatening hands'. He is depicted side by side with two groups of people: on the right the public officials, portrayed like atrocious monsters, and on the left a bunch of anarchist friends, definitely humanised. In the forefront, three female characters, one woman and two children, are the depiction of the most deep despair, embodying the daughters (left) and the wife (right) of Giuseppe Pinelli.

Overall the connections with *Guernica* by Picasso are evident: “it is not a case that Baj, just a few years before (1969), remade the masterpiece using different techniques and materials, with an ironic purpose, but also as an homage to the great Spanish artist. Both the artworks are born from the urgent need of showing to the future generation the emotion, the disdain, the sharing of the pain in front of unusually violent facts. Anyone who have lived in Milan during the days of the Piazza Fontana Bombing surely remember the dismay of the entire city”[40]. A city that, in the same 1972, was apparently ready to reveal the artwork to its citizens with an exhibition scheduled on the 17th May, but in the end never opened up due to “technical reasons”: that day Luigi Calabresi, the police commissioner in charge of the investigation about the 'Piazza Fontana Bombing' and considered responsible for the death of Pinelli, was murdered by a group adhering to the far-left movement Lotta Continua.

Probably considering the sensitivity of the subject, the municipality cancelled the entire project and the masterpiece was exhibited for the first time only in the 2000 – inside the Marconi Gallery[41] – and finally, in 2012, after fifty years of lapse of memory, it came back in the Cariatidi Room of the Palazzo Reale, just like *Guernica* did in the past and just before the temporary exhibition “Pablo Picasso. Capolavori dal Musée Picasso di Parigi” held between 2012 and 2013[42].

Again, the demonstration that *Guernica* is perceived as a symbol of peace and also as a politically active subject is reconfirmed by another Milanese episode happened more or less in the same period of the first just mentioned. The day when Picasso died (8th April 1973), leaving a massive emptiness in the cultural scene and in the prolific mood animating the universities during that decades – the occupations, the student movements... –, was perceived as an occasion to think about a permanent tribute entitled to the Spanish master.

Actually a bunch of students of the Brera Art Academy called by the Politecnico di Milano depicted *Homage to Picasso* – a mural copy of *Guernica* – on an empty wall of the university. “The painting, become the symbol of pacifism during the 50's, is chosen to the purpose of leaving a sign of civilization directly inside the faculty”[43]. And still today it is staring at us, inside the university Library, entrusting new generations of students with its multiform message.

Endnotes

- [1] *Mostra di Leonardo da Vinci* 1939.
- [2] Nicodemi 1939.
- [3] *Proposta di una mostra di Leonardo da Vinci a Milano* [1936].
- [4] *Ibidem*.
- [5] Castaldi 1939.
- [6] For this specific aspect see: Cara 2008-2009.
- [7] The itinerary intended to include different places, where Leonardo work or collaborated with; for example the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie, with *The Last Supper*, the Ambrosiana, the Sforza Castle, the Naviglio and the cathedral.
- [8] The propaganda was also interested in promoting an economic autarchy, potentially able to make Italy totally independent from the economic point of view.
- [9] Ferri 1938.
- [10] *Ibidem*.
- [11] Silva 1973, 64.
- [12] *Guerin Meschino* 1938.
- [13] Pagano 1939.
- [14] See the illustrations on the already mentioned: *Guerin Meschino* 1938.
- [15] Pagano 1939, 6.
- [16] See: Cara 2008-2009:62.
- [17] Gadda 1939 and Rovella 1939.
- [18] Pagano 1941: 78.
- [19] *Nota dell'editore*, in Leonardo da Vinci 1939.
- [20] Mazzi 2009:26.
- [21] It was a Medieval seat of government, then, during the centuries, renamed Ducal and Royal Palace, National Palace – under Napoleon – and Royal again, until the 20s of the 20th century, when the Royal family gave it to the city.
- [22] For further information see: Mattiolo 1998.
- [23] The organization started only two months and two days before the opening.
- [24] Attilio Rossi was also responsible for the design of the posters.
- [25] At the time also the Superintendent Fernanda Wittgens wrote to the director of the MoMA, Alfred H. Barr, trying to convince him lending *Guernica*, but he answered that to finalise the loan it occurred the previous agreement of Picasso. For further information see: Mantura 1998.
- [26] In Italian: “una mostra d'arte a Milano interessa ceti e categorie che a Roma restano indifferenti”, from *Picasso a Milano senza sottintesi*, in “L'Europeo”, 9 agosto 1953; mentioned in Mattiolo 1998.
- [27] *Picasso. Opere dei Musei di Mosca – New York – Barcellona e di altre collezioni alla Mostra di Palazzo Reale a Milano* 1953.
- [28] René Burri, ITALY. Milan. Palazzo Reale. 1953. PICASSO exhibition – © René Burri/Magnum Photos. See: <https://www.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&STID=2S5RYDW3UG86>.
- [29] Franco Russoli, from *Picasso. Opere dei Musei di Mosca – New York...* 1953.
- [30] Mantura 1998:16.
- [31] Villari 1998: 33.
- [32] Todisco 1953.
- [33] This specific title is a wordplay between the word “mostra” (exhibition) and “mostro” (monster): R.P. 1953.
- [34] On *L'Italia del lunedì* (see: R.P. 1953), a caricature of a Picasso portrait is associated with the title “[Picasso] is appreciated by the P.C.I. [Italian Communist Party]”.
- Again, see: “Quel Pablo” dissero le signore “ci farà diventare di sinistra” 1953.
- [35] Picasso è un Leonardo con le valvole in testa (1952). The author of the article literally wrote “Picasso is a Leonardo with Over Head Valves” – it is an Italian wordplay meaning “having all in the right place, right in the head”.
- [36] See: Artioli (ed.) 2002.
- [37] Marani 2001.
- [38] See: Libeskind 2012.
- [39] He said “the reality and the life and death of Pino in my head replaced the memories linked to the books I've already read, to the heroes of the past, to the Futurism, Dadaism – that I love – demanding, instead of an amused and ironic-literary remake, the celebration of a familiar and political tragedy that had to be represented”, from: Baj 2012:45.
- [40] Cerini Baj 2012:25.
- [41] Giorgio Marconi is the current owner of the artwork.
- [42] Baldessari (ed.) 2012.
- [43] Franco Origoni, 8 Aprile 1973. *Omaggio a Picasso*, in *La rivoluzione culturale. La facoltà di Architettura del Politecnico di Milano 1963-1974*. For further information see: <http://www.gizmoweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/la-rivoluzione-culturale-catalogo-bassa-protetto.pdf>.

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