

## Case Report

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# EXHIBITING HETEROTOPIAS. THE ROLE OF PERIOD ROOM AND THE CASE OF CASA LANA BY ETTORE SOTTSASS AT TRIENNALE DI MILANO

*Exposición Heterotopías. El papel de la sala de época y el caso de Casa Lana de Ettore Sottsass en la Triennale di Milano*

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**ABSTRACT**

The paper investigates the exhibition practice of the period room through the case study of Ettore Sottsass's Casa Lana, recently reconstructed at the Triennale di Milano. The research adopts a documentary, curatorial and architectural analysis, combining historical sources, exhibition archives, and direct observation of the installation to clarify the spatial and narrative meanings of this reconstruction. The study aims to explore how contemporary museums reinterpret domestic interiors as immersive environments. The opportunity to physically experience a 'furnished environment' stimulates profound reflections on the construction of an interior space, from its composition to the definition of details, through material choices that contribute to recreating the atmosphere and quality of the space itself. By analyzing Casa Lana within the broader genealogy of exhibited interiors in Italy and abroad, the article identifies new curatorial strategies that connect material authenticity and visitor experience. The results highlight Casa Lana as a heterotopic device that merges preservation, narrative display, and architectural reflection, thus contributing to the current debate on the role of interior architecture within design museums.

**KEYWORDS**

Period room; Interior architecture; Exhibition design

**RESUMEN**

El artículo investiga la práctica expositiva de la sala de época a través del estudio de caso de la Casa Lana de Ettore Sottsass, recientemente reconstruida en la Triennale di Milano. La investigación adopta un análisis documental, curatorial y arquitectónico, combinando fuentes históricas, archivos expositivos y la observación directa de la instalación para aclarar los significados espaciales y narrativos de esta reconstrucción. El estudio tiene como objetivo explorar cómo los museos contemporáneos reinterpretan los interiores domésticos como entornos inmersivos. La oportunidad de experimentar físicamente un 'entorno amueblado' estimula profundas reflexiones sobre la construcción de un espacio interior, desde su composición hasta la definición de los detalles, a través de la elección de materiales que contribuyen a recrear la atmósfera y la calidad del propio espacio. Al analizar la Casa Lana dentro de la genealogía más amplia de los interiores expuestos en Italia y en el extranjero, el artículo identifica nuevas estrategias curatoriales que conectan la autenticidad material y la experiencia del visitante. Los resultados destacan Casa Lana como un dispositivo heterotópico que fusiona la conservación, la exposición narrativa y la reflexión arquitectónica, contribuyendo así al debate actual sobre el papel de la arquitectura interior en los museos de diseño.

**PALABRAS-CLAVE**

Sala de época; Arquitectura interior; Diseño de exposiciones

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The recent reconstruction of the original Casa Lana living room at Triennale di Milano – designed by Ettore Sottsass in the 1960s – prompts a range of etymological and interpretative reflections on the notion of the ‘period room’ and the significance this type of exhibit can hold in contemporary museums. To understand and frame the contemporary phenomenon of rebuilding furnished rooms in museum spaces [1], often with a temporary nature, it is necessary to make a premise on the origin and role of period rooms. The term refers, in fact, to the choice expressed by many curators of American museums of applied arts (Peck, 1996; Harris, 2007) [2] at the beginning of the 20th century to import rooms furnished in style, mainly from England and France but also from Germany, Italy and Spain. The intention was to carry a didactic and informative value that could support the works on display and make the decorative and spatial characteristics of European interiors understood by American citizens who did not have the opportunity to visit the places of origin of such architecture. The fitting of these rooms often resulted in substantial changes from the originals due to adaptation issues in the existing building (Costa et al., 2016). Sometimes, they were built without the original ceilings and only with three walls not to mention the problem of authenticity that affected the structural parts and furnishings that completed them. Casa Lana is one of the rare examples in Italy, and the only one in contemporary times, of an original interior set up in the space of a museum for public use. One of the main reasons for the lack of reconstruction of period rooms in Italian museums is the conspicuous presence of original material, which has led to a greater diffusion of house museums, i.e. places where spaces can be admired in their complexity and richness of decorative materials. The only previous Italian case of reconstruction of a furnished room is the Anticamera of Casa Zampini designed by the futurist Ivo Pannaggi in 1925 and acquired by the Municipality of Macerata in 1971 [3]. (Fig. 1)



**Fig. 1** - Reconstruction of Anticamera of Casa Zampini by Ivo Pannaggi (1925-1926), Macerata Musci, Palazzo Buonaccorsi. Source: © Macerata Musci

The rearrangement of this constructivist interior in the Civic Art Gallery involved the placement of the main furnishings: a mirror, a stained glass window, a coat rack, a chair and the door (not original). The surfaces of the room, such as the walls and ceiling, have retained distinctly different finishes. After attesting to the teaching value and decorative contextualisation of American period rooms (Ruggeri Tricoli, 2000) [4], the recent cases of reconstruction of original rooms, including the living room of Casa Lana, are part of a different phenomenon, whose objective is no longer merely educational but spatial. They are ‘demonstration rooms’ (De Ambrogi, 2012): interiors of a temporary or permanent nature that offer insights into the meaning of space and its

measurement: 'When what is exhibited with a temporary set-up is a room, usually a fragment of the architecture of the dwelling house, more or less practicable by the visitor's body but certainly not habitable, (...) the enactment of the message to be communicated is played out in a difficult balance between reality and simulation, because its aesthetic fruition, i.e. its perception and critical understanding by the visitors is immediate' (Ottolini, 2016, p. 38).

These spaces aim to offer insights into the meaning and measurement of space, blurring the lines between reality and simulation to provide an immediate aesthetic experience for visitors. Casa Lana, although it fits within Jeremy Aynsley's categorization of period rooms that bear historical witness and are displayed in museums, transcends this classification by focusing on spatial and experiential dimensions (Aynsley, 2006). The second group is that of rooms preserved in their place of origin, as is the case in museum houses, and finally the third group brings together rooms artificially reconstructed through different sources that define imaginative interiors. In the first situation, the processes of reconstruction and a changed relationship with the context, which possesses spatial characteristics and meaning completely different from the original place, necessarily overlap. This evolution highlights the growing importance of immersive and interactive elements in the presentation of historical interiors, enriching the visitor's understanding and engagement.

## 2. STATE OF THE ART

The setting up of furnished rooms (Ottolini, 2016) – with this term we refer to the creation of real spaces where the architectural characteristics of the container are as innovative as the content – is an exhibition strategy that has characterised the attitude of the Triennale di Milano since its origins in 1923, when it was still held in the park of the Villa Reale in Monza every two years under the name of International Exhibition of Decorative Arts. Ten years later in 1933, the event moved to Milan to Giovanni Muzio's Palazzo dell'Arte. This approach promotes living solutions by questioning the space and not only the object to be exposed. Among the most famous exhibits: the Living Room (*Sala di soggiorno*) by Mario Asnago and Claudio Vender presented at the 5th Milan Triennale (1933) (*Domus*, 1933), the Room for a man by Franco Albini (*Stanza per un uomo*), the Bedroom for young sporty married couples (*Camera da letto per giovani sposi sportivi*) by the BBPR-Banfi Belgiojoso Peressutti Rogers and Living Room and terrace by Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini presented at the 6th Triennale (1936) (Peirce, 1936; Ottolini, 2018).

This exhibition strategy was to be reproposed in the United States, precisely on the basis of their interest in period interiors, when the first *Italy at Work* exhibition was inaugurated in 1950 at the Brooklyn Museum in New York [5] (Cordera & Faggella, 2023), where 'five special interiors', i.e. rooms furnished by Carlo Mollino, Gio Ponti, Fabrizio Clerici, Luigi Cosenza and Roberto Menghi (Ponti, 1950), were to be found alongside the presentation of individual objects. The presentation of interiors also continued in the 1951 with a hotel room by Gio Ponti (*Stanza d'albergo*) and in 1954 with Living room of the single-room house by Gio Ponti, Gianfranco Frattini, Alberto Rosselli, Antonio Fornaroli and Living-dining room for accommodation no. 2 in the Borsalino house by Ignazio Gardella (*Soggiorno dell'abitazione uniambientale, Soggiorno-pranzo per l'alloggio n. 2*). Triennale, gradually losing space in favour of other emerging themes that looked at the city, the environmental challenge and changes in the territory. The 1980s again dealt with housing and domestic themes first in the exhibition *Le case della Triennale* (Triennale Houses) (Raggi & Trabucco, 1983) and then in the XVII Triennale (1986) curated by Marco De Michelis, Monique Mosser and Georges Teyssot entitled *Progetto domestico. La casa dell'uomo: archetipi e prototipi* (Domestic project. Archetypes and prototypes). A section of the exhibition was dedicated to the design of rooms that are representative of some of the themes that touched on the future transformation of domestic space in those years.

After a long pause, the furnished rooms return in the project curated by Beppe Finessi,

*STANZE. Altre filosofie dell'abitare* (Rooms. Novel living concepts), presented on the occasion of the XXI Triennale di Milano (Finessi, 2016) where, once again, 11 rooms designed by as many architects build a sequence of spaces to cross, circumnavigate and in which to stay. If the design of interior spaces is a strategy that has accompanied the history of Triennale exhibitions since its origins, this same idea is also regaining the scene in recent years.

The reconstruction of furnished rooms or environments recreated temporarily or permanently in museum spaces is emerging strongly due to the powerful narrative value they convey. We recall the reconstruction of two environments by the Castiglioni brothers for the two temporary exhibitions, curated by Beppe Finessi, and entitled *The Domestic Dimension* (Fondazione Castiglioni, 2016 and 2017). The two environments show a conception of living based on an idea of maximum freedom of behavior and use. The first is the Living Room that Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni had presented at the exhibition *Colori e forme della casa d'oggi* (Colors and Forms of Today's Home) (Villa Olmo, 1957); and the second is the Environment furnished for lunch in the exhibition *La casa abitata* (The Inhabited House) (Palazzo Strozzi, 1965).

The English term for indicate this recent phenomenon in the field of art is 're-enactment' (Lütticken, 2005) precisely to emphasise not so much the desire to evoke the past but to encompass new points of view, different spatial dynamics and glimpses of the future. For the past few years, Triennale has also been proposing exhibitions that present the re-enactment of certain historical spaces such as the furniture designed by Carlo Mollino for the living room of Casa Albonico in Turin [6] and the acquisition of the living room of Casa Lana by Ettore Sottsass. They mark a different, inclusive, and total narrative experience that looks not only at the individual object, but at the interior environment in which it is placed.

### 3. METHODOLOGY. THE HETEROTOPIA OF CASA LANA

This research follows a qualitative and interpretative approach grounded in curatorial and documentary analysis. Primary and secondary sources include exhibition catalogues, archival documents from Triennale Milano, and critical essays on period rooms and exhibition design. The study combines historical reconstruction with a spatial analysis of the reinstalled Casa Lana, employing the theoretical framework of heterotopia (Foucault, 2006) to interpret the exhibition as a device of spatial narration. Casa Lana was commissioned in 1963 to Ettore Sottsass by his friend, the lithographer and printer Giovanni Lana in a pre-existing building in Milan. The solution designed for the living area is innovative for several reasons that also represent the value of its acquisition. Above all for the conveyance of a new idea of living that spans the Sixties and Seventies, when some exponents of Italian design sought to disrupt the functionalist twentieth-century division of home spaces in favour of an integration of different uses in the same environment through the design of living spaces, veritable devices that, depending on their configurations, create ever-changing domestic landscapes: 'it was necessary to put the Entrance, the Corridor, the Living Room, the Office, the Dining Room and also the Study in one single room (...) These places, in which the corresponding activities of life take place, have each been prepared in a special way: they have their own particular figure, but at the same time they are part of the same place, that is, of all those particular daytime activities; just as life in general is, or at least should be, the integration of all the various activities' (Sottsass, 1967, p. 29). The second is the introversion of an idea of urbanity expressed in the relationship between the 'piazza centrale' (central square), which is an intimate but at the same time convivial place, and the path around it (Boeri, 2022). The last lies in the integration of different skills, in particular between architecture and craftsmanship on which the Italian interior culture is based (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2 -** Casa Lana by Ettore Sottsass at Triennale di Milano  
Source: © Triennale Milano –  
images by Delfino Sisto Legnani  
e Alessandro Saletta-DSL Studio

The living area of Casa Lana, as well as the bedrooms, is the result of the collaboration between Ettore Sottsass, collaborator Bruno Scagliola and carpenter Renzo Brugola. Giovanni Lana kept the flat until his death with the utmost respect and attention to the architect's original design. Aware of its importance in the history of Italian design, Triennale took on the task of preserving a part of the flat in its original state, namely the living room [7]. The refurbishment project provides an opportunity to construct a broader reflection around the theme of the 'furnished rooms' as an exhibition strategy capable of responding to the contemporary needs of applied arts or design museums that identify narrative value as a founding feature: 'The museum is increasingly becoming a place in which to live, to participate in a story through multiple stimuli, in which to experience, not only perceptually but also physically, its content and in which to share one's emotions with others' (Studio Azzurro, 2011, p.13).

The new set-up accommodates different values: the experiential one arising from being dropped into another space, a heterotopic place that unites past present and future, 'heterochrony', the historical-knowledgeable one of the artefact and its objects and equipment, and the relational one that allows links to be made with similar themes, projects and experiences. Borrowing Michel Foucault's definition of heterotopia, it can be said that Casa Lana as well as other reconstructed environments are real "counter-spaces" within the museum: 'heterotopia has the rule of juxtaposing in a real place several spaces that would normally be, should be, incompatible' (Foucault, 2006, p.18).

The layout creates 'a room within a room' (Sottsass, 1967) where, once immersed, one loses the temporal and spatial coordinates of everything outside: 'heterotopias always have a system of opening and closing that isolates them from the surrounding space' Foucault, 2006, p.23). The first design issue concerned the choice of where to locate the original living room in the Triennale's existing spaces. Among the possibilities explored, the central room on the first floor was chosen for reasons of accessibility, usability and autonomy of paths. The passage through the bridge designed by Michele De Lucchi marks a further detachment from the other rooms and invites us into an environment governed by different exhibition laws. The dialogue with the pre-existing hall is established in dimensional terms: the size of the new box fits into the existing one, recalling its proportions in elevation and width (the ceiling of the existing room is 6 metres high, the new box is 3 metres high and aligns perfectly with Michele De Lucchi's architrave).

The layout created by architect Luca Cipelletti deliberately amplifies the theme of the 'box in the box' by placing the new storage unit, also housing the core of Casa Lana, in the central part of the room. This defines a circular environment that becomes an integral part of the exhibition itself. In this way the spatial model of the living room designed by Sottsass were duplicated on the outside: the walls of the new box become set-up systems together with the circular space that becomes a place to walk through and pass through. If the refurbishment is permanent, everything around it changes with six-monthly temporary exhibitions that deal with themes related

to the figure of the architect and relate to those promoted in the other spaces of the museum. This interstitial surface also overcomes a possible problem of reduced visitation of Casa Lana over time. The outer walls of the box come alive and place the project in an extended exhibition context where the core becomes a space harbored by new links and installations.

#### 4. EXHIBITION MACHINES: DISMANTLING, CATALOGUING AND EXPOSING

The disassembly and reconstruction of Casa Lana's core addressed classic challenges of 'period room' preservation – such as structural integrity, cleaning, and display approach – but ultimately diverged from traditional methods. Rather than replicating a historical environment, Casa Lana is presented as a self-contained and autonomous space, intentionally framed as a complete and concluded object. The project was coordinated by Studio Cipelletti, working in constant dialogue with the restoration, archive, technical, and production departments of Triennale di Milano. Owing to the careful conservation carried out by Giovanni Lana and the availability of reliable archival documentation, only limited interpretative choices were required. The principal issues concerned the method for dismantling the ash-wood interior in its entirety and the strategy for its display, whether to reconstruct it as an inhabited domestic setting populated with personal belongings or to emphasize it as an abstract environment.

The new installation was undertaken following the creation of a plasterboard enclosure inside the museum, designed to replicate the original ceiling and wall configuration and to reproduce the two historic light sources. Various components were reinstated: the entrance furnishing, not originally designed by Sottsass, was reconstructed; the glass-block elements were substituted with plexiglass; one sofa was remade using surviving Poltronova fabric samples from the 1960s; and several lacquered panels, previously damaged by excessive heat from lighting fixtures, underwent conservation treatment.

A 'philo-archaeological' approach guided the reconstruction, aiming to recover the social atmosphere of the original 1967 living room. Carefully selected books, records, and everyday objects recreated the domestic spirit of the time [8]. Light filtered through recreated window elements and Japanese curtains recreated the sense of Milanese smog and interiority, avoiding literal imitation. The original function of the space as a rotating exhibition gallery was also preserved. Today, like in the past, artworks continue to change in dialogue with external exhibitions and events, reflecting Sottsass's original vision for a dynamic, lived space.

#### 5. RESULTS

The example of Casa Lana shows some concrete aspects that clearly fit into the increasingly immersive contemporary exhibition language that identifies visitor involvement and participation as some of its central aspects. The Casa Lana device presents itself as an action of displacement within the museum, not only because it is one of the few cases of permanent refurbishment of an original interior in Italy, but also because it moves with different objectives with respect to the phenomenon that most resembles it but from which it differs: that of period rooms. The book edited by Penny Sparke, Brenda Martin and Trevor Keeble identifies the 'modern period room' in the chronological period from 1870 to 1950 (Sparke et al., 2006). If on the one hand this object amplifies the value and importance of reconstruction as a testimony of the material culture of a given historical and cultural period, through the declaration of construction techniques, materials, colours and furnishings, on the other hand it opens a glimpse into the future by showing different exhibition objectives. At the heart of the installation lies a multifunctional area conceived to host diverse activities without relying on rigid, single-purpose enclosures. Rather than imposing predetermined uses, the layout allows visitors to decide how to inhabit the space: pausing within the small square, assembling in the circular zone, looking into the interior, or interacting with the sur-

rounding display elements. The design of the exhibition space surrounding the installation is intentionally dynamic, generating constant cross-references and insights. Through this network of references, the space operates less as a static museum artifact and more as an active communicative system. Beyond its exhibition function, the installation also exemplifies fundamental strategies in the construction of interior environments. Its overall configuration, the carefully considered placement within the gallery, the precision of its detailing, and the deliberate material choices all collaborate to produce a distinctive spatial atmosphere. By examining the construction process of this 'interior-cabin,' one can gain a deeper understanding of its spatial dynamics. This analysis allows designers to re-appropriate and integrate these methods into their design repertoire, enriching their approach to creating interior spaces (Ambrosino, 2023). In essence, this installation serves as both an exhibit and an educational tool, offering insights into the complex process of spatial design. It highlights the importance of flexibility, interaction, and materiality in creating spaces that are not only functional but also engaging and thought-provoking. By fostering an environment where experiences and relationships are continuously formed and reformed, it aligns with a contemporary vision of museums as dynamic and participatory spaces.

## 6. CONCLUSION: EXHIBITING HETEROTOPIAS

The study demonstrates that Casa Lana's reconstruction transcends the didactic purpose of traditional period rooms by offering an immersive and interpretative experience of the domestic interior. The project exemplifies how contemporary museums can merge spatial authenticity with narrative experimentation, transforming exhibited interiors into heterotopic environments that challenge linear historical display. Methodologically, this work contributes to the field by integrating curatorial studies with spatial theory, providing a model for future research on the exhibition of interiors as cultural and architectural artefacts. Further developments could expand the comparative analysis to other European contexts, clarifying how immersive environments reshape the visitor's role and perception within museum narratives. More and more often we speak of performative exhibitions that aim to offer not only the staging of content but also forms of experiential involvement. They are "narrative habitats" that welcome a story to be read and experienced, where the person has an active role within a system that amplifies and exploits his or her cognitive and sensorial potential: space, object and visitor are part of a single performance (Casey, 2005).

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## NOTES

[1] In this context, mention should be made of some exhibitions in Italy and Europe in recent years: the reconstruction of the Cabanon (exhibition *Le Corbusier. The interior of the Cabanon*, Milan Triennale, 2006); the reconstruction of the model flat of the Cité radieuse in Marseille (permanent collection, Cité de l'Architecture, Paris); the reconstruction of Verner Panton's Fantasy Landscape (exhibition *Home Stories: 100 Years, 20 Visionary Interiors*, Vitra Museum, 2020).

[2] See in particular the role of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art<sup>7</sup>.

[3] Ivo Pannaggi (1901-1981) designed several rooms for the home of Mr and Mrs Erso and Kenia Zampini in Esanatoglia (Macerata): the Anticamera, the Dining Room, the Salottino per Radioaudizioni (no longer present) and the Bedroom.

[4] The phenomenon affecting France, Great Britain and the Netherlands is still different from the American one because it fits within the spirit of nationalist construction of these states.

[5] The exhibition is part of the MUSA (United States of America Exhibitions) project, which will travel to twelve museum venues between 1950 and 1953 with the aim of spreading the taste and style of Italian design culture.

[6] The temporary exhibition Carlo Mollino. Hyperreal Illusions (4 September – 7 November 2021), curated by Marco Sammiceli, is the result of a collaboration between Triennale Milano and the Ministry of Culture. The installation was designed by the Bunker-arc studio.

[7] The project was born thanks to the collaboration of several people: Stefano Boeri, President of Triennale Milano, and Joseph Grima who was then Director of the Museum of Italian Design and who first perceived its importance. The installation is the result of a collective work made up of different skills and supported by Barbara Radice, which saw the participation of many actors, including Marco Sammiceli Director of the Museum of Italian Design, Chrispoh Radl who oversaw the art direction of the project, Luca Cipelletti who oversaw the installation, Giorgio Galleani, head of the Permanent Collection and Archives of the Triennale, and the restorers Alessandra Vannini and Rafacla Trevisan.

[8] Part of the objects came from Mr and Mrs Lana's collection, part from Triennale's internal collection, and the additions were discussed with Barbara Radice and the Triennale curatorial team.

## NOTES ABOUT AUTHOR

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Michela Bassanelli – Architect and PhD, she is Assistant Professor in Interior Architecture and Exhibition Design at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano. Her research interests focus on domestic interiors, with particular attention to their historical evolution and the phenomenology of contemporary processes, approached through an interdisciplinary theoretical framework. A member of the editorial boards of the journals «ARK», «PAD. Pages on Arts&Design» and «Territorio», in recent years she has been studying the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on transformations of domestic space and workplaces. Among her most recent publications are: *Dispositivi e architettura. Lo spazio dinamico dell'abitare* (2024); (co-edited with I. Forino) *Gli spazi delle donne. Casa, lavoro e società* (2024); (with E. Scaramellini) *In-Between Rooms. Dispositivi architettonici nel contesto naturale* (2024).

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