In 1984, Gino Valle visited the University of Applied Arts in Vienna and gave a talk. He showed several of his prestigious, pragmatic buildings, as well as a much smaller project, the Casa Rossa in Udine [1]. Something about this house struck a chord with us. It exemplified what Robert Venturi was referring to in Complexity and Contradiction, perhaps even more so than the iconic house he designed for his mother. Valle's design might also be considered a variation on the theme of the ordinary house. Shortly thereafter, we came upon a building at the other end of the spectrum, one that looks like a gigantic typewriter. It was La Serra in Ivrea [2], a training center for Olivetti by Iginio Cappai and Pietro Mainardis. These two poles made us start to think about the diversity of Italy's postwar architecture. How had the buildings of this era stood the test of time? What signs of appropriation could be identified? Did the concepts have an influence on the surroundings? Were the buildings still used as originally planned?

[1] Gino Valle,
Casa Rossa, Udine, 1965–66

Twenty years later, we began to systematically document buildings throughout northern Italy. When the opportunity to exhibit our photos at AUT, Innsbruck's architecture gallery, arose, our work intensified. At this point we had to find a title for our series of DETOURS on roundabout paths off the beaten track of modernism. Disregarding fiercely contested demarcation lines, we simply called it ITALOMODERN. The first phase, which culminated in the exhibition in Innsbruck in 2011, documented 84 projects. A second exhibition there, with 132 additional works, followed four years later. In each case a catalogue was produced.

A variety of journals, monographs, and surveys served as the basis for the research. For instance, in Domus 801 (1998) we first encountered Giuseppe Pizzigoni's work, an oeuvre with many shifts – moving from neo-classicism to rationalist architecture, then on to studies in geometry and experimentation with thin concrete shells. In 1960, he employed his novel technique for both a church [3] and a pigsty [4].

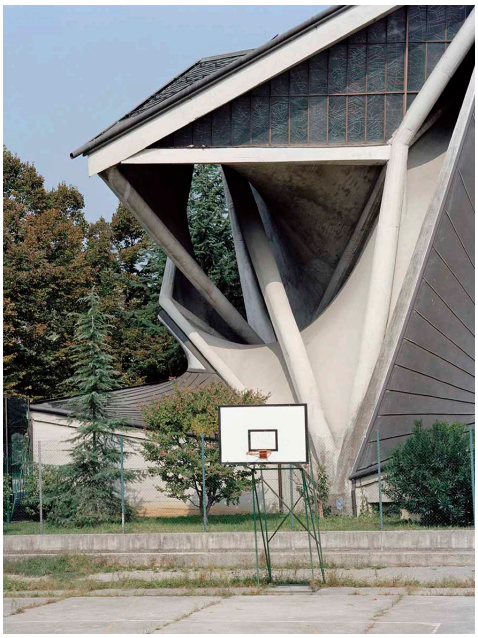
[2] Iginio Cappai, Pietro Mainardis,
La Serra, Ivrea, 1967–75

Our documentation is structured chronologically. Italomodern begins in 1946 with Pizzigoni's casa minima in Bergamo [5], a row-house prototype, and culminates thirty years later in Giuseppe Gambirasio and Giorgio Zenoni's elevated courtyard houses in Spotorno [6].
This time span encompasses a remarkable range of groupings and stances: Tendenza organica, Neorealismo, Neoliberty, brutalism, various neorationalist positions, as well as technological stances, daring structures, and extravagant spatial conceptions. We included some masterpieces by celebrated architects – for instance, the Via Quadronno apartment building in Milan by Angelo Mangiarotti and Bruno Morassutti [7] – but our attention was more often directed to minor works by acclaimed architects and, most often of all, to works by lesser-known architects which, upon completion, received only limited or regional exposure.

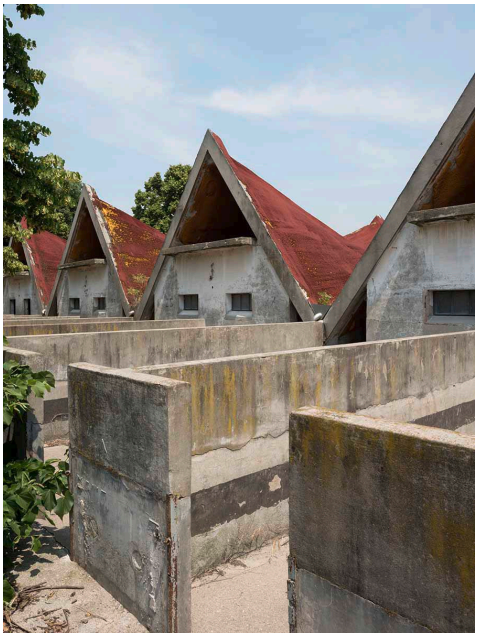
Throughout the course of this project, the notion of duality propelled our search and enhanced our understanding of the era's multifaceted architecture scene. In the case of Milan-based Luigi Caccia Dominioni [8/9/10], choosing among his hundreds of completed buildings was a nearly impossible task. Caccia Dominioni once proclaimed that he felt more at home visiting a building site than participating in academic discourse. Yet with his refined designs of ceramic facades, he established a school of his own. In contrast, Vittorio Giorgini's work consists of just a few buildings, two of which are located right next to each other in Baratti: his own wooden, tree-house-like hexagonal cabin [11] faces his most extreme project, a zoomorphic concrete-shell structure [12]. In 1969, Giorgini moved to New York, where he began a career in academia.

Another pairing of extremes has to do with magnitudes of scale. Luigi Carlo Daneri's gigantic Forte Quezzi housing complex [13] high above Genoa – dubbed il Biscione – consists of five serpentine apartment buildings which follow the contours of the hillside. At the other end of the spectrum is a bivouac perched atop the Grignetta [14] designed by Mario Cereghini. His career had two overlapping phases: on Lake Como he was committed to rationalism, while in the mountains he was a contextualist who took cues from local building traditions. For his project on the peak of the Grignetta, however, Cereghini metamorphosed into an engineer. His design of the space-capsule-like bivouac employed prefabricated aluminum panels light enough to be carried to the summit by hikers.

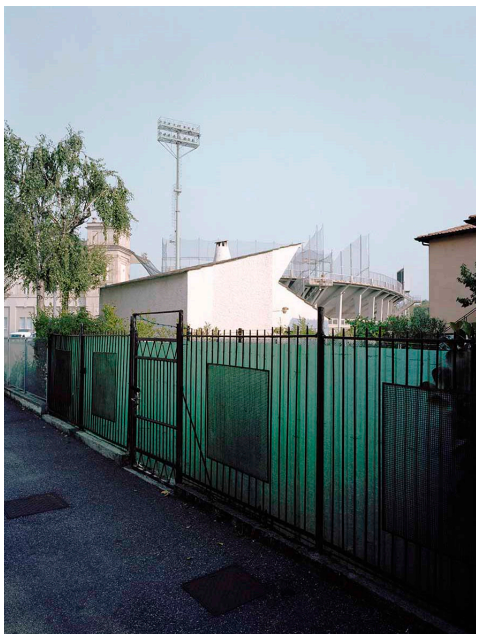
These examples provide a small glimpse of this prolific period – a period characterized above all by playful experimentation, vitality, and passion. Perhaps these many detours, taken over the course of a dozen years, amount to a grand tour after all.



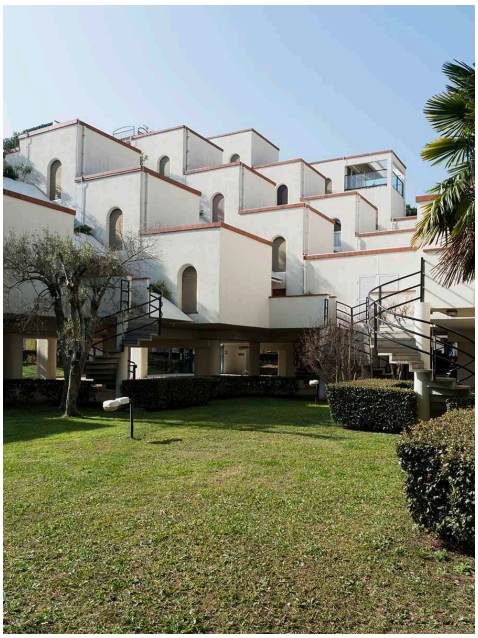
[3] Giuseppe Pizzigoni,
Church, Bergamo, 1960–63



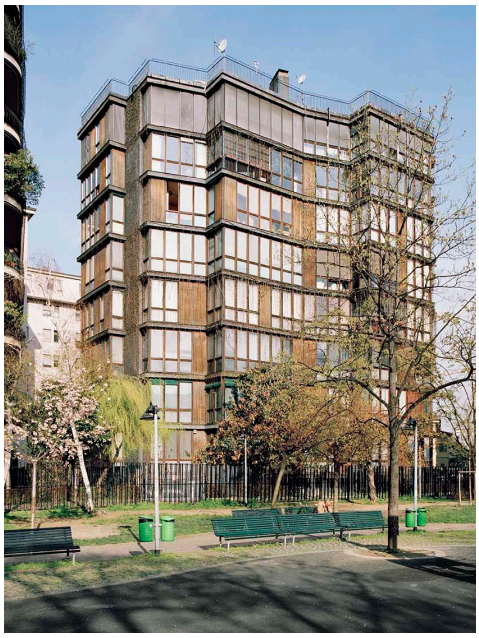
[4] Giuseppe Pizzigoni,
Pigsty, Torre Pallavicina, 1960–64



[5] Giuseppe Pizzigoni, Casa Minima, Bergamo, 1946



[6] Giuseppe Gambirasio, Giorgio Zenoni, Residential Complex, Spotorno, 1976–83



[7] Angelo Mangiarotti, Bruno Morassutti, Apartment Building, Milan, 1960–62

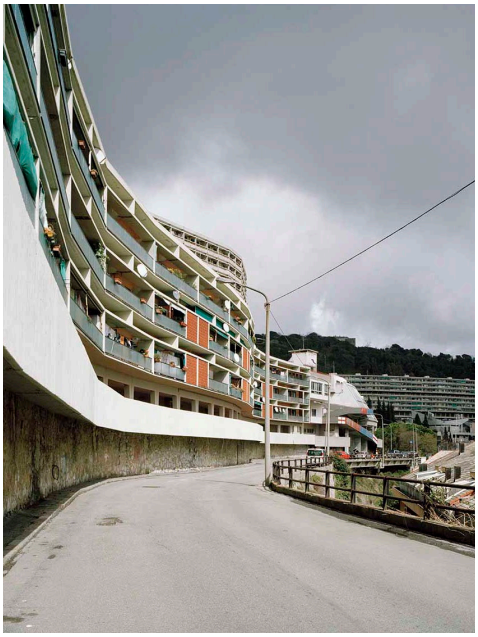
[8] Luigi Caccia Dominioni, Apartment Building, Milan, 1955–57

[9] Luigi Caccia Dominioni, Convent, Milan, 1960–63

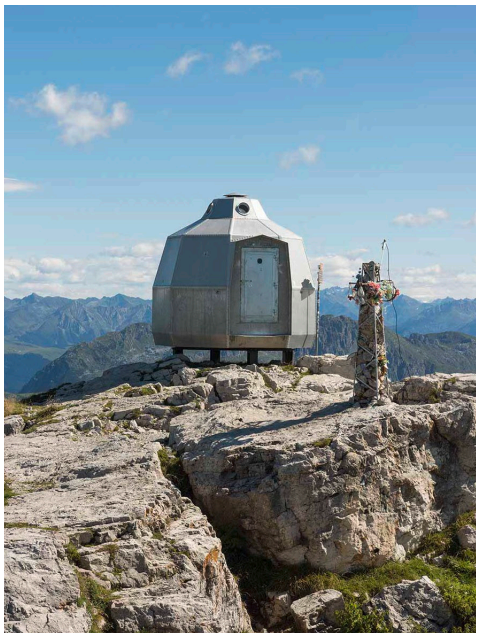
[10] Luigi Caccia Dominioni,
Apartment Building, Milan,
1960–61

[11] Vittorio Giorgini,
Hexagon, Baratti, 1957

[12] Vittorio Giorgini,
Holiday Home, Baratti, 1961–62



[13] Luigi Carlo Daneri,
Forte Quezzi Housing Complex,
Genoa, 1956–68



[14] Mario Cereghini,
Bivouac, Grignetta, 1966–67