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di Roma e provincia**



# Press Kit

**24/05/2019**

Opening

**casa**baldi****

**Creative Centre Casalgrande Padana**



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## 01\_1

### Casa Baldi



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## The new Creative Centre in Rome

The Creative Centres are places where industry professionals can visit at will, a network dreamt up by Casalgrande Padana to take the traditional concept of a commercial showroom to the next level. Indeed, the Creative Centres are places where ceramics and design are celebrated, combining elements of display, communication, and technical information with a range of initiatives in architecture, design, and production.

The success of the formula is clear, given that the first Creative Centre, which was built just around the corner from the Casalgrande production facility to a design by Cerri Associati Engineering, was followed just a few years later by a second hub – Creative Centre Milano Foro Buonaparte. The Milan centre has already become a point of reference for the community of architects in the Lombard capital and beyond, and its jam-packed calendar of events and training sessions have attracted a range of big names in the international architecture and design panorama.

Given the growing demand for similar facilities up and down Italy, Casalgrande Padana has decided to launch another Creative Centre, this time in Rome. The location chosen is particularly significant and represents a golden opportunity to reopen an architectural gem to the design community: Casa Baldi, designed by Paolo Portoghesi and built between 1959 and 1961.

Sensitive to the importance of the building, Casalgrande Padana has entrusted Portoghesi himself with the restoration and redevelopment project. Portoghesi has come up with a series of solutions in keeping with the original work yet capable of adapting it – both architecturally and functionally – to suit its new purpose.



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## 01\_2

### Casa Baldi

#### Architecture in time

*An “intentionally ambiguous” building, in the words of the architect. An innovative design manifesto and an experimental pursuit of a new style, one rooted in places and history. A design that – many years down the line – once again raises the eternal question of what modernity really means in the world of architecture.*

Size doesn't make architecture great. Significance does. Designing on a smaller scale doesn't necessarily mean one has to condense a project, nor sacrifice or compromise on the content. And there are countless examples of this in the realms of architectural history. This is a vital foreword to any profile of Casa Baldi, the “small” residential building built on the edge of Rome's Via Flaminia in 1961, to a design by Paolo Portoghesi. The building went well beyond its original mandate, becoming a sort of innovative architectural manifesto for the early post-war period, one that sparked huge debate and even made a splash across the pond, appearing in the pages of the New York Times.

Much has been written about the appearance of Casa Baldi over the years. Portoghesi has been asked to discuss the various elements of the design project and explain the more puzzling decisions on a number of occasions. Indeed, the perception of this work of architecture has undergone constant changes over the years as a result of critical opinion.

One of the most memorable contributions to the debate around the building was supplied by an article in Edition 86 of the L'architettura cronache e storia [Architecture, news and history] magazine, which was run by Bruno Zevi. The article, which took the form of a back-and-forth with Portoghesi himself, declared Casa Baldi to be “a problematic building”, describing it as a small construction project that “sparked perplexity and resistance within Rome's architectural community, because while on the one hand it seems to be influenced by the most modern figurative themes (especially as regards the manipulation of the space), on the other it is packed with cultural memory, the presence of which seems misunderstood and almost reactionary”. Portoghesi penned a long, detailed reply in the same magazine, setting out his motivations and clarifications in a highly interesting article, beginning with a quite stunning introduction: “Casa Baldi is an ambiguous building, open to a plethora of interpretations. Given that this ambiguity is intentional and aims to invite the observer to decide on their own interpretation, engaging them in a narrative process that makes them a participant and even a co-author of the work, any analytical justification thereof can only be futile, contradictory even.” It's definitely an article to look up in the library if you'd like to know more about the subject, the influences, and the reactions associated with this complex design.

From our side, we'd like to point you in the direction of the interview that Portoghesi was kind enough to grant us. Published in this edition of the magazine, it sees the architect explain the origins, construction, and current state of Casa Baldi.



04\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



05\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



06\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



## 01\_3

### Casa Baldi

#### Back to the future

*We met up with the architect Paolo Portoghesi to hear about the history of this unique piece of architecture and discover the inspiration and guidelines at the centre of a redevelopment project that has seen him become the key protagonist once again, just shy of 60 years after his initial design.*

**Professor Portoghesi, could you explain how you came to be involved with the Casa Baldi project and how important it was for you to have carte blanche from a creative perspective?**

Gian Vittorio Baldi was a man of culture. He was quite an important director and had been behind a number of cinéma vérité experiments and produced Pasolini's early films. We met while making a documentary which he'd asked me to provide voiceover for. When the time came for him to have a house built in Rome, he wanted something different. He came to me and said: "Take complete freedom. I have only two requests: I don't want to spend much (no more than 10 million lire back then) and, as well as the standard facilities, it needs to have two bedrooms and a study."

In the beginning, I thought I was just going to oversee distribution. However, after visiting the site, I became fascinated by the whole situation and started trying to create a solution that fitted what was an extraordinary location: it was situated on a hill 50 metres above Via Flaminia, with a tuff rock in front of the patch of land where the battle between Constantine and Maxentius took place. Beside this are the ruins of a Roman tomb that have never been examined. It's fascinating: water erosion and the passing of time have erased its detail, transforming it into a kind of sculpture. In other words, the project was commissioned by a special client, with a very modest budget, in a stunning location. At the same time, we must not forget that this was a period in history in which architecture was gripped by a real crisis. Driven by Zevi, there had been the period of Organic Architecture in Italy, particularly in Rome, but this had produced rather disappointing results. Thus, for a young architect, it was time to open up to a world of new things. And my main focus was to create a "Roman building" – a building inextricably linked to the extraordinary place in which it would be located.

**You had already had the opportunity to express yourself as an architect by this point, but the wave of creative enthusiasm typical of younger generations shines through at Casa Baldi. Did it represent your design manifesto in a way?**

You could say that the building reflects everything I've ever tried to do in my life: to reclaim history and the forms inherent to it through architectural spaces, while at the same time applying a measure of modern sensitivity. The project intentionally drew inspiration from the De Stijl movement, especially Van Doesburg, Van Eesteren, and Rietveld, but it also bore the influence of the work of Borromini, who I had studied with particular attention. The building represents an attempt to forge a bond between two completely different phenomena that, in my eyes, had both called the very foundations of architecture into question. That's what the building wanted to be. A new concept of architecture linked to places and history, but at the same time a participant in the Modern architecture revolution.



07\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



08\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



09\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg





## 01\_3

### Casa Baldi

**Many years down the line, Casa Baldi still seems like a trailblazer – a much more convincing work than other examples from the so-called “post-modern” period. It doesn’t parody history, but aims to create something new. There’s something rather utopian about it.**

Well, my view of postmodernism is very biased. I’ve never accepted the idea of pastiches created by jumbling pieces of history together in a ridiculous, almost comedic mixture. That was without doubt the last of my intentions both back then and when I had my exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 1980 (La Strada Novissima, Ed.). For me, it was about looking to the past to learn how to build cities – a skill we have all but lost. Cities – particularly from a rationalist standpoint – are now simply invented with no regard for the history, customs, or needs of their inhabitants. In any case, modern architects have always preferred to live in the historic centres rather than in the houses they have built. They’ve been able to create unquestionable one-off masterpieces, but very rarely have they succeeded in building sections of city that can truly be lived in. It’s a problem we’re still dealing with now. Our suburbs are – largely – failed experiments.

**Going back to the scale of the building, Casa Baldi places great attention on construction elements, with some extremely unusual solutions. Take the hybridisation between the supporting walls and the brick vaults for example.**

The walls really do provide support, in the sense that the tuff that can be seen outside is the structure, not just a covering. As for the vaults, it’s important to consider that, at the time, highly skilled master craftspeople still worked on sites. The best vault-makers were capable of making structures that were lightweight yet formidably resistant, using bricks laid edge on. Pier Luigi Nervi (who mentored me) studied the science behind Roman vaults and came to the conclusion that the structure was held up thanks to the skill with which the backfill of the vault was made – the aggregates combined with lime and pozzolan to form a shelf. It meant that the vault worked statically like two shelves positioned close together.

Casa Baldi was a magnificent initiation experience into sites for me. My father was the one who built it, so I was able to keep an eye on the works as the days went by, helping to resolve the enormous difficulties involved in creating a building for a cost more suited to a suburban apartment. The result was this experiment, which sadly did not catch on because there was simply no taste for it.

A house like that could only be wanted by a director – by a rare beast in comparison with the wider Roman society of the time.

Despite the huge initial interest, which after a few months led to a photograph of the work being published in the New York Times, society was unable to grasp the meaning of the building.

By contrast, I often think about the good fortune that Frank Lloyd Wright enjoyed in Chicago, when he was able to build around 40 houses, each of which let him make tweaks and corrections to the initial design used for the first ones. I didn’t have that opportunity. I was able to build two more homes which were kind of linked to this one, but no more than that. Naturally, given the difficulty involved and the fact that they were designed years after each other, I was unable to develop the spaces in different ways. Everything remained locked inside this small building, which perhaps did not wholly match up to the expectations of the time.



10\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



11\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



12\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



## 01\_3

### Casa Baldi

**But Wright had the support of a part of the new social class that – as it became more established – wanted liberation from certain past values. It was searching for a new image, one that defined it...**

Wright had a genius that I certainly don't presume to possess, but you're right. The middle class wanted to liberate itself from certain dogmas, live life in a different way, and celebrate their way of living. Unfortunately, as I've said, Roman society was not open to any kind of adventures in terms of its way of life back then.

#### **How does it feel to be working on the building again after so many years?**

The risk for a building of this kind is that it is rendered unrecognisable by the changes it undergoes, or is even destroyed. In the 1970s and '80s, for example, the second owner did some work in the basement that I didn't agree with. Yet the idea of transforming the place fascinates me. If a building cannot continue to maintain its function, the idea of changing its purpose is an interesting one. I would say that this is one of the greatest successes of the post-modern movement. Through the reuse of pre-existing structures, we understood that buildings are not linked to their origins in as direct a way as we thought, or rather as the functionalists thought. In reality, these works of architecture still function very well even after their purpose has been radically changed.

**It's quite something to look at the original photos, with the building surrounded by fields, when the area is now completely urbanised. In Zevi's "L'architettura" in 1962 you speak of the pursuit of a "special relationship with the spectacle of nature". What is the current condition of the building? What has been preserved and what has been lost?**

The outskirts of Rome are a classic example of architectural heterogeneity, which is why the building was devised to be a yell rather than a whisper. Even though it was surrounded by nature, it was a rejection of a city growing in such an absurd way, tearing up its contract with the natural world. The house was about ambivalence. On the one hand, there was dialogue with the natural landscape, particularly inside the house. On the other hand, there was a strong contrast with the other buildings, something that can be seen from the street. That was the source of the majority of the compositional problems, which we solved by meticulously applying the teachings of the De Stijl movement. In my eyes, although the house has had it rather rough, it has suffered mainly in terms of the experience when looking out from indoors, because the landscape it once had has gone. As for the perception you get when looking at it from outside, I would say that the protest cry of diversity remains. In a sense, the fact that it is now surrounded by more or less contemporary buildings with no architectural value whatsoever serves to emphasise the base concept.



13\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



14\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



15\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



## 01\_3

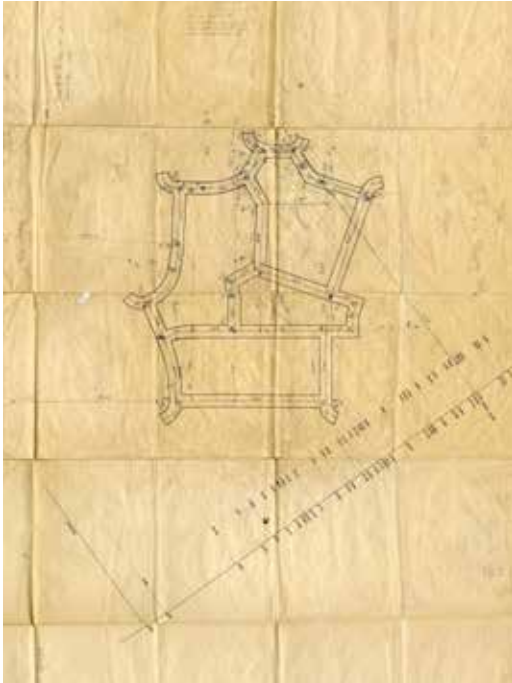
### Casa Baldi

**There has been much talk of safeguarding and regenerating “modern” buildings for a while now. Given its importance, is Casa Baldi protected at all or is it completely free from any constraints?**

I sought recognition for its artistic value, but nothing came of it. Casa Baldi isn't protected in any way, but thankfully it was bought by people who see it for what it is: a building with historic value that deserves attention. They began to restore it in a very well-planned, precise way. I was really pleased to hear that they were letting their respect for the building guide the project. It's definitely not easy to transform a house into a showroom, though I do think that this is definitely one of the most interesting and positive choices available. Generally speaking, it is important that some of the main characteristics of the building are protected as much as possible, such as its spatiality. Aside from that, it is fine to take a freer approach, perhaps re-invoking some of the styles and methods used during the original planning phase. That's the system I went with. Naturally, there's always an element of risk, but I've always loved risk. This house is a classic example of risk.

**What have the biggest decisions been within the redevelopment project?**

I worked on the basis of two hypotheses. One was that the lounge, which is the most interesting part of the home from a space perspective, should be kept the way it was. The other was to cover the walls with the company's ceramic tiles, in order to meet the client's request to have as much display surface as possible. Everything had to celebrate the space itself while at the same time assimilating compositional elements that weren't there before, such as the colour and shiny surface of ceramics, which are very different to plaster. Having said that, we're talking about a showroom – so it's about displaying objects. Had we just placed these objects in the middle of the rooms, it would have broken up the fluidity of the space, which is the key quality of the house. Therefore, while objects can be displayed freely in the smaller rooms, in the main spaces – especially those on the first floor – the aim is to keep the layout the same in order to preserve the sense of fluidity. Having said that, the plan for the ground floor is slightly different. The idea is to lay out the ceramic tiles on display in such a way that they are bathed in natural light. This is the same logic I used to position the various exterior walls of the house back in the day – the way they were separate from one another created gaps for windows. Indeed, the windows of Casa Baldi are not just “holes in the wall”, but the result of a process of convergence that avoids all contact and confusion at the same time. The closeness is meant to signify desire. I tried to reproduce all that on the ground floor, where I'm considering positioning the large ceramic tiles in the shape of a curve, with interruptions to allow radiant light to shine through the windows. It's a very Baroque technique.



16\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



17\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



18\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg





## 01\_3

### Casa Baldi

**It sounds as if visitors would be really engaged with the space.**

It's a solution that might generate very interesting results. People will be able to choose a material on account of its texture, colour, and the patterning on the surface, but at the same time they'll be able to see how it interacts with the wider space. It's a bold choice but if, as I hope, we are able to maintain control over how the materials are combined, I think it could be interesting.

Of course, the house doesn't die at that point. It might take on a different purpose in the future. That's why it's important that we preserve its fundamental value: the element of protest against the architecture of indifference, the architecture of quantity, or even just the architecture of calculus. I think the showroom can also be a way to preserve this element, as it will offer a great many architects, who have only ever heard the name of Casa Baldi, the possibility to visit and get to know it first-hand.



19\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



20\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



## 01\_4

### Casa Baldi

#### Paolo Portoghesi

One of the main protagonists of the architectural debate that ensued following the Second World War, Paolo Portoghesi is an architect, professor, architectural theorist and historian, and academic at the Accademia dei Lincei, the former president of the Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, and a professor emeritus at the University of La Sapienza. Portoghesi was born in Rome on 2 November 1931, earning his degree in the city in 1957.

Throughout his career, he has always combined his professional activity with a focus on the big issues in the discipline.

His professional and academic work has always focused on discovering a continuity that could compare knowledge, memory, and the values of historical traditions with our contemporary reality, transcending the common definition of “modernity”.

Portoghesi taught History of Art Criticism at the University of La Sapienza in Rome between 1962 and 1966, becoming a professor of History of Architecture at the Polytechnic University of Milan in 1967, and serving as head of the Faculty of Architecture between 1968 and 1976. Between 1995 and 2007, he was a professor of Design in the Valle Giulia Faculty of Architecture at La Sapienza, where he is now a professor emeritus and the head of the Geoarchitecture course. Portoghesi ran the Architecture section of the Venice Biennale between 1979 and 1982, becoming president in 1983, a position he held until 1993. La Strada Novissima, the project he devised at the Venetian Arsenal for the 1980 Biennale, was widely celebrated: it saw participation from 19 international architects and sparked a debate around the Post-modern movement. He has published a large number of essays and volumes on Renaissance, Baroque, and Art Nouveau architecture as well as contemporary issues. He founded and ran the magazines Controspazio, Eupalino, and Abitare la Terra.

Portoghesi has been behind an array of architectural works in Italy and abroad for residential buildings, tertiary-sector buildings, religious buildings, projects in the educational sector, cultural buildings, and urban redevelopment projects. His best-known works include Casa Baldi in Rome, the Chiesa della Sacra Famiglia in Salerno, the Mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre in Rome, the Accademia di Belle Arti of L'Aquila, the Enel residential complex in Tarquinia, the new pavilion of the Terme Tettuccio in Montecatini, the Teatro Politeama in Catanzaro and the redevelopment of Piazza San Silvestro in Rome.



21\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



22\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



23\_Casa\_Baldi.jpg



## 01\_5

### Casa Baldi

#### Paolo Portoghesi's Casa Baldi on the Via Flaminia. Casalgrande Padana's new Creative Centre.

by Matteo Vercelloni



01\_Casa\_Baldi\_today.jpg



02\_Casa\_Baldi\_today.jpg

Casa Baldi was built in Rome between 1959 and 1961 for film director Gian Vittorio Baldi. It was Paolo Portoghesi's third built architecture project, but this time he was totally free to experiment with a language that reflected the history and various seasons of architectural avant-gardes. Visiting and observing Casa Baldi today means reflecting on the possible lessons to learn from this type of architecture and the relationship between its message and contemporary architecture. Reflecting on Casa Baldi means assuming that history is always contemporary in its effort to identify the messages that have become constants in the various approaches to a new architectural project.

An aspect of Casa Baldi, which may be a given today but was undoubtedly experimental at the time, is the relationship between architecture and nature that translates, from a formal, compositional, and material point of view (the use of tufa is a clear demonstration) into the built project. This concept has become the basis for any building. Today's architecture – whether in urban or non-urban settings – must take the landscape and the environment into account. We met up with Paolo Portoghesi in his home in Calcata, between Rome and Viterbo, to talk about Casa Baldi and its stunning modernity 57 years later, also thanks to its conversion into a Casalgrande Padana Creative Centre.

Paolo Portoghesi told us that “every generation carries a new message” and the generation he belonged to – with Aldo Rossi, Guido Canella, Gianfranco Caniggia, and Paolo Marconi – was “wary of the stories of modern architecture and everything that had happened in the years of the post-war reconstruction.

We were well-aware of the revolution of rationalism and the avant-garde; however, it was no longer about the enthusiasm of being part of these movements, but rather to examine them as historical facts together with the other modern research strands. We realised that rationalism reflected only part of the great expectations that came with modernity. That's why we all started to read the journals of the first half of the century to verify the simplifications created by historians. More importantly, we didn't agree with the damnatio memoriae imposed by the avant-garde towards revolutionary Classicism, Art Nouveau, and Expressionism. We blamed modernism for disregarding history, nature, the environment, and the landscape and not managing to build a city that met the needs and desires of any common mortal.”





## 01\_5

### Casa Baldi



03\_Casa\_Baldi\_today.jpg



04\_Casa\_Baldi\_today.jpg



05\_Casa\_Baldi\_today.jpg

Free from constraints, with Casa Baldi a thirty-year-old Paolo Portoghesi translated these thoughts into a building, letting the setting inspire him. “From the tufa hill, where the house was located, you could see the ground of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge between the Roman Emperors Constantine I and Maxentius. A place full of history.” Casa Baldi was kind of born out of that place and aimed at expressing it. That’s why the Borromini-style curves and the overhangs of the flat roof follow those of the river Tiber below. “Wright’s architectural style and his attention to the landscape and surrounding nature had a strong influence in all this.” In addition to attention to the landscape, its figures, materials, and colours, there’s another aspect of Casa Baldi that we still find in contemporary international architecture, i.e. the approach to history, which is not the anachronistic use of styles and figures of the past or an attempt to revive them.

To this regard, Portoghesi stressed that “a generation stands out for the future it fights for. When I was designing Casa Baldi, I was applying an approach to research, which I later discovered was the same as Bob Venturi’s, i.e. learning from history and trying to express oneself with a simple language, in which the collective memory is the main means of communication. When I answered to Bruno Zevi in issue no. 86 of *Architettura Cronache e Storia* of 1962, which featured Casa Baldi, I was talking about positive aspects of complexity and contradiction, the two words that form the title of Venturi’s best-known book – *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* – published four years later, in 1966.”

This way, Casa Baldi moves away from the “stubborn inhibition towards anything that can refer directly to the forms of tradition.” What in that article was clearly indicated as a “senile idiosyncrasy that cannot be justified by resorting to the spirit of the veterans.” This is another topic that today’s international architecture has developed in various ways, turning Casa Baldi into some sort of ‘permanent manifesto’.

Portoghesi considers himself a student of Borromini since he was born in the shadow of Sant’Ivo’s dome. “It seemed legitimate to use my experience as a historian, just as many architects of the past – Brunelleschi, Palladio, Semper – had done because history saves us from the tabula rasa preached by the avant-garde and provides us with the richness of collective memory and the symbolic value of shapes to communicate. We were lucky enough to look at the architecture of the past through the eyes of great masters, such as Le Corbusier, Wright, and Aalto, who used memory despite the prohibition. In Casa Baldi [where Baroque axiality is broken down], I tried to associate the conquests of the past and those of modernity, mixing – not without bravado – Gerrit Rietveld, Mies van der Rohe, and Borromini.





## 01\_5

### Casa Baldi

Christian Norberg Schulz, who was a dear friend of mine and had studied with Mies, told me that when he asked the master why he didn't continue to use the curves he had experimented with when designing a house in 1934, Mies replied that he simply didn't feel fit for the job. He would have preferred to study Bavarian Baroque first."

Stepping inside Casa Baldi and describing its spaces in response to Zevi, Paolo Portoghesi talked about "chords", giving a musical twist to this type of architecture, characterised by "chords" and "counterpoints", in a sequence that in the end produces perfect harmony. For Portoghesi, the musical structures and the development of the composition in three or four movements "help us see architecture as dynamic, something that develops over time. And this is the great affinity between music and architecture. The art of creating spaces intertwines with the art of creating movements. Architecture can be fully understood only by moving.

Casa Baldi was designed for the various moments in everyday life in a sequence that attempts to follow the movements of the user throughout the day and in the relationship with the exteriors while trying to frame the landscape in the most significant points." Aldo Rossi – Portoghesi's companion in many wars of ideas – once said that "when architecture is 'healthy', it can have any function". Casa Baldi seems to reflect this statement in its conversion into a Casalgrande Padana exhibition space.

For Paolo Portoghesi, who oversaw Casa Baldi's restoration and conversion, "an architectural space's independence from function is a postmodernist conquest (as a liberation from the inhibitions of the modernist movement). In his famous book, *Form Follows Fiasco* (1974), Peter Blake stated that not only changes in function do no damage to architecture, but they even activate a virtuous reinterpretation of space, This way, buildings can become perfect for housing certain activities, even if they weren't designed for that purpose. In the same way, I loved the idea of using Casa Baldi to showcase Casalgrande Padana's materials, which are much more appealing and resistant than natural stone but maintain the fluidity of the original spaces, so that visitors can see the original building, which was created as a home. I tried to put together the exhibition aspect required by Casalgrande Padana's Creative Centres with the domestic nature of the original space."



06\_Casa\_Baldi\_today.jpg



07\_Casa\_Baldi\_today.jpg



## 01\_5

### Casa Baldi

The walls on the ground floor are covered with tiles of different colours and materials, creating the effect of curtains with the “charm of variety embodied in the building’s structure” and forming an exhibition space with a theatrical flavour. The theatrical flavour of the ground floor results from diversity, the “mermaid of the world”, as Portoghesi says citing Gabriele D’Annunzio.

And the full-height curtains conceal grazing lights with a Baroque taste, emphasising the overall setting created by a balanced sequence of repetition and variety. If the ground floor and garden are dedicated to showcasing Casalgrande Padana’s materials, which were also used to restore all the bathrooms and the flooring of the house, the first floor has maintained its original materials and appearance. Here, the large Casalgrande Padana tiles become panels arranged on the walls like paintings.

Casa Baldi’s transformation seems to reflect what Portoghesi clearly stated in 1962 when he said that “Casa Baldi is an ambiguous building that can be interpreted in many ways and aims at involving observers in its interpretation, almost turning them into co-authors. And since this ambiguity is intentional, in addition to being useless, an analytical justification would be contradictory.”



08\_Casa\_Baldi\_today.jpg



09\_Casa\_Baldi\_today.jpg



# **casa****baldi**

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