



When history is no match for shopping

Famed for its rooftop test track, a peerless, old building accommodates the future – as a mall

April 27, 2008

CHRISTOPHER HUME
URBAN AFFAIRS COLUMNIST

TURIN, ITALY—If it can be called architecture, it is only in the strictest sense of the word. A better way to think of it would be as pure structure.

This is Fiat's pharaonic factory in the Lingotto district, built between 1917 and 1923 on what was then the outskirts of Turin, in Italy's northern industrial heartland.

Designed by engineer Giacomo Mattè Trucco, the vast concrete complex captured the imagination of the generation that created Modernism, Futurism, Purism and all those other isms intended to remake the world in the spirit, if not the image, of an assembly line.

It's not hard to understand why the Lingotto building had such a powerful impact: There's something deeply impressive and genuinely moving about the factory. Stripped of all architectural pretense, it has a structural honesty and integrity that form the basis of an aesthetic that, no matter how unintended, leaves us overwhelmed.

Mattè Trucco's instructions from Fiat founder Giovanni Agnelli were short and to the point: "You must have no aesthetic concerns," he warned. "That's how you must work for industry."

Nevertheless, it achieved a beauty all its own, one that, however unexpected, survives today.

Le Corbusier, who first visited in 1925, went into raptures. "Certainly one of the most impressive spectacles of industry," he pronounced, "a Florentine work, punctual, limpid, clear." He included no fewer than three photographs of the Lingotto building in the second edition of *Vers une architecture*, enough to make it famous in certain circles.

Above all, what impressed Le Corbusier – and impresses everyone who

visits even now – was the rooftop test track. With its long straightaways and steeply banked turns (one at either end of the oval), it was the very image of modernity. Where else could one see cars hurtling round a track five storeys in the air?

Photographs taken in the early years show leather-helmeted drivers putting cigar-shaped racing cars through their paces. At first, these images seem quaint; on second glance, we realize they form a record of a future that was.

Now, of course, we are becoming aware that roofs can be used for more than mechanical equipment. Green roofs may have grown hugely in popularity, but Mattè Trucco was pioneering in his understanding of the roof's potential.

The fact that the factory was a place where cars were manufactured also warmed the cockles of Corbusier's Swiss watchmaker's heart. "Cars, cars!" he wrote. "Speed, speed! One is carried away, seized by enthusiasm, by joy... "

One can only wonder whether Corbusier seemed as bizarre in his time as he does in ours. His obvious horror of intimacy, and his desperate need to turn cities and buildings into machines, strikes the postmodern observer as deeply neurotic. Regardless, he remains the most influential figure in architecture, which may explain why much contemporary planning and design falls so short of the mark.

These days, the track at Lingotto is closed to vehicles. Cars can, however, still drive up to the roof on one of the Piranesian spiral driveways that reach the full height of the building. Originally, vehicle assembly began on the ground floor, with the heaviest parts, and moved upwards until it was complete on the top floor. The finished cars were then driven around the rooftop track, down the ramps, and away.

Eighty years later, the car has lost none of its popularity but much of its appeal. The difference, of course, is that now it only *represents* mobility. Those who want to travel efficiently take transit.

As for the factory itself, it has been integrated into the life of Turin in a way not possible when it was up and running. It closed in 1982 and since has suffered a mixed fate. Though it's still standing, the Lingotto building has endured the ultimate indignity: gentrification. Some sections have been transformed elegantly by architect Renzo Piano into an art gallery, hotel and meeting place, but the bulk of this monumental heap is now a mall, and a particularly banal mall at that.

Yet even such ignominy cannot diminish the thrill one feels on first glance. It's the size that initially strikes most visitors, the sheer, ocean-liner enormity of the place. It's almost geological in its scope.

The structure itself is made of beige concrete, but the bulk of the facades consists of windows. This brings a surprising lightness to the building, which, given its heft, seems all the more remarkable.

Like so many cities, Turin has had to reinvent itself. As recently as 1961, Fiat employed 125,000 people. That's down to fewer than 20,000. In its own way, the Lingotto building serves as a symbol of the new city, for better and worse. The Piano additions, especially the hotel, ingeniously bring new life to the place. The spherical meeting room that sits atop the factory like some miniature Saturn piles one landmark atop another.

But the mall, with its cheap gelaterias, clothing stores and cinemas, illustrates the homogeneity also known as globalization. What can be said about a scheme that turns a uniquely historic factory into a shopping centre that could be anywhere in the world?

By contrast, an 19th-century vermouth distillery across the road has become a wildly successful slow-food supermarket and restaurant complex.

To its credit, Turin wouldn't allow either building to be demolished. You can bet that in Toronto, such a fate would have been more than likely. As a result, Turin is a city in which the past is still alive. It is not simply a city where people live, but one they inhabit.

In the inner core, for example, there are 13 kilometres of continuous arcade. They date back three centuries, when the rulers, the kings of Savoy, dictated that all building in the city should have arcades. It was an idea that made sense then and now.

As for Lingotto, its evolution continues. Don't be surprised if the mall, like the assembly lines before it, eventually makes way for something new.

Yet as new as new may be, in Turin it will have to accommodate the old. Therein lies the way of sanity, urban or otherwise.

Christopher Hume writes about urban affairs for the Star. He can be reached at: chume@thestar.ca.