

A Critical Reading of 20th Century Heritage

The Case of Palazzo del Lavoro, Turin

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Abstract

The architectural heritage of the 20th century reflects a transformative period in design and building techniques, as exemplified by structures like the Palazzo del Lavoro, which embody the transition between traditional methods and modernist experimentation. This paper aims to analyze the building in order to understand how its structural innovations, material choices, and formal composition interact with its urban context and reflect broader cultural and historical shifts. The study combines documentary research, morphological analysis, and urban contextual assessment to provide a critical reading of the building's architectural and structural features. The analysis highlights the Palazzo's innovative structural system, the integration of reinforced concrete with lightweight canopies, and its compositional strategies that balance functionality and aesthetics. Furthermore, the study addresses the building's current state as a fragile piece of heritage, facing challenges related to preservation and adaptive reuse. By examining its technical and cultural significance, this research demonstrates how the Palazzo del Lavoro stands as a testament to engineering and architectural innovation and also offers insights into the evolving identity of post-war Turin and the broader discourse on modern heritage.

Keywords

modern heritage, 20th-century architecture, Italian modernism, Pier Luigi Nervi

1 Introduction

The early 20th century marked a valuable moment in architectural history, characterized by significant historical events such as the Second Industrial Revolution, which transformed urbanization and altered social structures, generating a demand for innovative architectural solutions (Gómez Gutiérrez, 2020). The aftermath of the World Wars prompted a reevaluation of architectural practices, encouraging a departure from traditional aesthetics towards more functional and expressive forms (Frampton, 2007).

Culturally, the rise of modernism¹ embraced new materials and technologies, allowing architects to explore unimagined forms. This movement reflected a change on the artistic sensibility and addressed the needs of a rapidly evolving society. Urban contexts became sites of

experimentation, as cities expanded and diversified, leading architects to create buildings that were functional and resonant with the cultural zeitgeist². In this context, Italy sought to highlight its innovative capabilities through architecture, with the Palazzo del Lavoro, designed by Pier Luigi Nervi, serving as a clear example of modernist principles and an audacious approach to design.

The objective of this research is to explore how the Palazzo del Lavoro embodies the transition between post-war optimism and modernist experimentation, offering insights into the broader debate on the preservation and adaptive reuse of modern architectural heritage. This study frames the building as an architectural and structural object, while also interpreting it as a cultural artifact that reflects Italy's post-war aspirations. By examining its compositional features, materiality, and integration

¹ Artistic and literary movement that emerged approximately between the end of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century, characterized by aesthetic and formal innovation, as a reaction to traditional forms such as realism (Childs, 2000).

² "Spirit of the age" (Alvira, 1987). It refers to the intellectual and cultural climate of an era.

within Turin, the research highlights the ways in which negotiates the tension between functional demands and aesthetic expression. Furthermore, the analysis considers the challenges posed by its current condition, emphasizing the fragility of modernist structures and the complexities involved in their conservation and adaptive reuse; offering examples of buildings that had similar conditions. In doing so, this research aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of mid-20th-century architectural heritage. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of situating similar cases within ongoing discussions on preservation, and the evolving interpretation of modern architectural innovation.

2 Methodology

The study was conducted using a qualitative and descriptive methodology in an effort to determine the architectural, structural and cultural value of the Palazzo del Lavoro in its historical context. The research consisted of a combination of documentary analysis, visual interpretation, and contextual observation in order to build a complete picture of the building. Through different sources was gathered evidence related to the original design intentions, purposes of the building, construction methods, and subsequent alterations.

A morphological and compositional analysis was conducted to evaluate the formal and structural characteristics of the building with specific emphasis on the relationship between function, materiality, and aesthetics. A concurrent urban analysis provided a support to contextualize the evolution of the building in conjunction with the changing urban fabric of Turin in order to rate the interactions of the building with the surrounding areas.

Lastly, a critical reading³ synthesized the findings generating a reflection about modern heritage. This methodological framework allowed the study to work beyond a descriptive account and into critical understanding of the Palazzo del Lavoro as fragile evidence of 20th century architectural experimentations.

3 Palazzo del Lavoro, Turin

Built as a symbol of architectural prowess, the Palazzo del Lavoro was conceived for the 1961 World Expo (Fig. 1) in Turin to mark the Centenary of Italian Unification.

³ Critical reading is an act of research that must follow the same standards of being systematic, rigorous, and objective (Gile, 2001).



Fig. 1 Interior of the Palazzo del Lavoro during 1961 World Expo, Turin, Italy (Monti, 1961a, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The design is the result of an architectural competition held in 1959, won by Nervi & Bartoli S.p.A. Located in Turin's southern industrial hub near to Lingotto⁴, the pavilion strategically interacts with changing urban conditions that grew more city-like in nature throughout its transient lifespan. The transformation of this site into a major multi-use facility provides angular insights into urban development that the post-war industrialization journey has followed.

The Palazzo del Lavoro represents a significant architectural achievement during a time when Italy was recovering from the devastation of World War II. This period had a sociopolitical environment that aimed to demonstrate innovative capabilities through architecture, reflecting a desire for progress and stability. The building incorporates bold use of reinforced concrete, aligning with modernist principles by achieving structural integrity and a unique aesthetic expression.

Following its initial role in 1961 as a space for exhibition, the Palazzo continued to serve as a symbol of Italy's architectural innovation related to post-war optimism, embodying a vision of modernity and progress through its innovative use of materials, structural experimentation, and integration of artistic elements. Initially it was intended as a temporary exhibition space, but then the

⁴ The Lingotto in Turin (Torino) was the historic Fiat automobile factory, opened in 1923. It was notable for its innovative rooftop test track, where newly manufactured cars could be driven directly (Arduini, n.d.). During that period, Lingotto was Fiat's largest factory. Today, the building has been transformed into a shopping, cultural, and exhibition center, preserving its industrial structure.

building was repurposed several times over the years⁵, reflecting Turin's evolving urban landscape. However, despite its emblematic design, maintenance challenges arose due to the aging of reinforced concrete and extensive roofing systems. Also, during 2015 there was a major fire on the second floor of the Palazzo, likely caused by piles of wood stacked for renovation work and the investigations found three points of origin, suggesting the fire was intentionally set (Laterza, 2018). This event will complicate the conservation process of the building.

By the early 21st century, the structure faced deterioration and periods of abandonment, with debates emerging around its conservation status. Nowadays, the building's restoration or adaptation is still a matter of discussion, understanding the challenges of preserving modernist heritage but also recognizing its historical and architectural significance⁶.

The design combined a hybrid structural approach using reinforced concrete columns in conjunction with light weight metal canopies. The design is reminiscent in form to his philosophy that architecture should integrate with its surroundings as the curved green roof mimics Italy's diverse physical topographies, but also functions practically for light and sound conditions during events. The incorporation of these components highlights a key principle to modernist architecture: the desire for necessary ornamentation as opposed to decorative ornamentation. One of the building's most distinctive features is its radial structural columns, which support the expansive cantilevered roofs and reflect Nervi's skill in blending functionality with innovative design. These columns not only fulfill a support function but, through their branched structure at the top, efficiently distribute loads toward the ground, creating expansive open interior spaces. This structural system leverages the malleability and strength of reinforced concrete, creating a robust yet elegant aesthetic.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the final result of the building was not solely shaped by Nervi's approach.

⁵ It was the headquarters of the Bureau International du Travail BIT from 1963 until the early 1980s. Later, it housed the Giorgio Quazza Institute of Computer Science and Electronics, but was abandoned shortly after. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the building was partially used by the Faculty of Economics and Commerce at the University of Turin. In 2020, Cassa Depositi e Prestiti acquired it (Palumbo, 2023).

⁶ In 2023, Cassa Depositi e Prestiti began renovations to establish commercial spaces, offices, and exhibition areas in the Palazzo del Lavoro (TorinoToday, 2023).

There was another factor that led to rethinking the design: the demands of the construction timeline⁷. As a result, instead of creating a unified roof, they decided to build 16 large independent structures (Fig. 2), each 40 meters long. This led to a mixed structure, with concrete columns and metal structures in the fungiform elements, allowing the concrete to cure at its proper rate while the capitals were concurrently constructed. The time factor influenced the prominence of the structure, making it a distinctive feature that met aesthetic expectations.

The configuration explores the balance between practicality and ornamentation. The cantilevered roofs shield the building's interior from environmental elements and visually extend the space. This balance of structure and aesthetics exemplifies Nervi's holistic approach to architecture, where each element serves as an opportunity for material and design innovation. The legacy of the Palazzo goes beyond just its architectural importance, acting as a time capsule of an era in Italy still searching for their post-war identity.

4 Critical reading

Understanding the Palazzo del Lavoro from a holistic point of view, it is necessary to analyze not only its volumetry and composition, but also to know the aspects related to urban context⁸. The original urban context of the building dates back to the 1960s when it was built as part of the city's urban modernization efforts, and was strategically built in the southern area of Turin, which was undergoing significant transformation at the time. The surrounding urban environment featured wide avenues and open spaces⁹, reflecting the modern urban planning approach of the era that emphasized accessibility and public interaction. Therefore, with this location the Palazzo contributed to reimagine Italy's urban future, since it stood as a representative example of modern architecture.

Currently, the Palazzo is surrounded by urban areas (Fig. 3), including commercial spaces, offices, residential areas, and public spaces such as large gardens, reflecting the evolution of the area since its construction. This combination

⁷ The Project timeline was 1959-1961 (Architectuul, 2013).

⁸ It refers to the characteristics and variables that influence the organization and functioning of an urban area, such as density, spatial organization, and the relationships between different subspaces (García et al., 2014).

⁹ For example, Via Italia and Parco Italia 61.

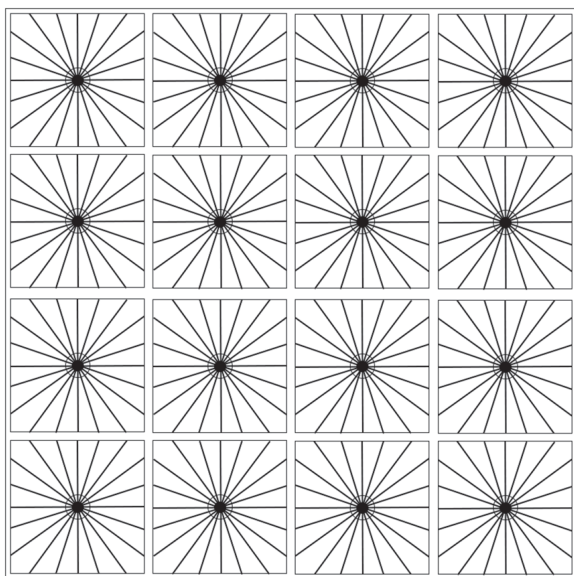


Fig. 2 Roof structure of the Palazzo del Lavoro (Created by the author based on Urbipedia (2015))

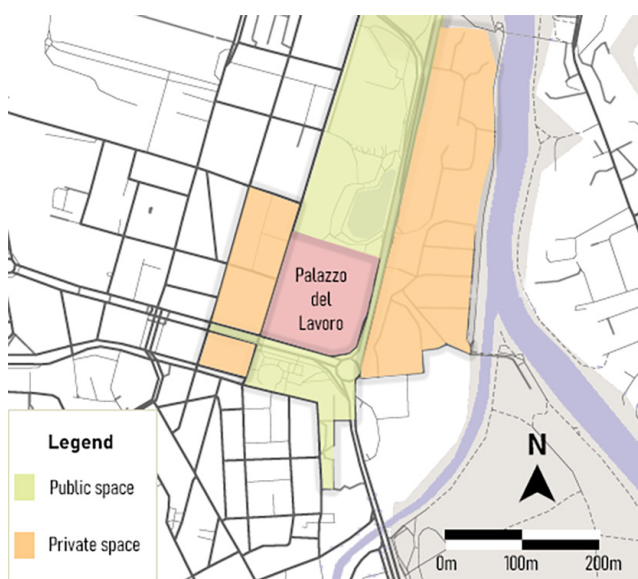


Fig. 3 Urban area of the Palazzo del Lavoro, public and private spaces (Created by the author)

suggests that the Palazzo may need to be envisioned as a connector between the private and public spheres, as the failed attempts of rehabilitation share the common feature of being uses oriented toward the private sphere, isolating the architectural object from its surrounding environment and limiting its potential to revitalize the area.

In other matters, the distribution of competitive features in the Palazzo del Lavoro is characterized by the integration of modernist architecture, use of materials, and functional design. The Palazzo's design incorporated

advanced engineering techniques, allowing an efficient use of space, notably in the vast open areas and flexible internal configurations. The most competitive feature is the structural design, which facilitated durability and the ability to create expansive, column-free interiors suitable for exhibitions and large gatherings. For this reason, the layout emphasized functional zoning, with clear separations between different types of spaces. This thoughtful organization defined the flow of the building and most likely influenced the selection of materials.

Regarding materiality¹⁰, the mixed structure of the construction combines steel, glass and reinforced concrete (Fig. 4), with the latter being the primary material, used for its strength and its ability to be molded into sculptural forms. The focus on the structure is related to the historical context, the need to show that solid foundations are being laid for Italy, as if trying to convey security through the building's scale and massiveness. On the other hand, its exterior features glass cladding, as the transparency of this material leads the focus to remain on the structure. Thus, this contrasts with the roughness of the concrete finish, emphasizing strength over fragility at the material level.

Nonetheless, beyond the fragility of the glass, the transparency it creates conveys a sense of revealing itself as it is, something that wants to be seen and is displayed with honor. In this case, it would be about sharing with the world a strengthened Italy. However, analyzing from a functional perspective, the glass on the exterior allows natural light to pass through, and it is complemented by a system of louvers that can adjust their tilt according to solar exposure.

The building is far from conveying fragility in the physical realm; nevertheless, this takes on a different meaning in the intangible realm, where the concept of fragility represents a space, whose survival is unstable and may be prone to disappearing (Llorente, 2019). This work by Nervi, nowadays is a fragile piece of architecture, as despite the various uses it has housed, none have been stable enough to keep the space relevant in the contemporary urban reality. Also considering that a building of such monumental scale and vast area¹¹ represents a challenge in its preservation.

Despite its current state of abandonment, the building was an innovative project in its time, combining advanced engineering techniques and materials with a design that

¹⁰ Materiality refers to the technical composition of the material; it is concerned with its origin and treatment, and how the material is altered (García et al., 2015).

¹¹ The area of the Palazzo del Lavoro is 25,000 m² (Fernández, 2010).



Fig. 4 Materiality of the building's structure (Edited by the author based on Monti (1961b, CC BY-SA 4.0))

prioritized flexibility and functionality, all while maintaining a strong sense of modernity. Its significance has established it within the urban image¹² of Turin, which led it to be protected as a historical and artistic cultural asset¹³, implying that it holds significant value because of its importance to a community. The Palazzo by itself is part of Italy's cultural heritage, symbolizing the country's industrial and social progress during the 1960s, blending architectural innovation, cultural relevance, and historical importance.

Furthermore, the Palazzo del Lavoro could be seen as a glimpse of more organic forms belonging to biomorphism¹⁴, as the inspiration from nature in this building is an abstract theme in which the observer might be tempted to think of the tranquility and solidarity of a forest. The aesthetics of the column system (Fig. 5) evoke the shape of a tree, and

¹² Refers to how people interpret, comprehend, and mentally structure the environment of the city (Lynch, 1960).

¹³ Under the framework of Legislative Decree 42/2004. Codice dei Beni Culturali e del Paesaggio (Città di Torino Direzione Urbanistica e Territorio, 2024; Repubblica Italiana, 2004).

¹⁴ "In architecture in particular, the term is often used to describe forms and patterns inspired by nature" (Agkathidis, 2017).



Fig. 5 Palazzo del Lavoro: Column system seen from outside (Edited by the author based on Monti (1961c, CC BY-SA 4.0))

the lighting system located at the top creates the sensation of light filtering through the branches of trees. But beyond its design, this is a relevant case because it addresses a crucial issue in modern heritage¹⁵: buildings constructed with large areas that are often difficult to occupy.

5 Adaptive reuse examples

Section 5 aims to illustrate similar examples of buildings with comparable characteristics, primarily large dimensions that present a challenge since a single use is often insufficient to activate the entire available space. The objective of presenting these examples of adaptive reuse is to demonstrate how buildings with similar conditions can be repurposed with content that combines public and private elements. This hybrid approach can be beneficial for understanding the future of the case study presented in this paper.

The first example is Tabakalera, an international center for contemporary culture located in San Sebastián, Spain, on one of the largest and most emblematic plots of land in the city's urban area, formerly a tobacco factory. After four years of works, it was inaugurated in September 2015, and its mission is to support the cultural and creative sector, contribute to the development of the creative and critical capacity of Basque society, and promote access to enjoyment of culture (Euskadi Basque Country, 2020; Tabakalera, 2026).

Its origins lie in the aftermath of the abolition of the regional privileges in 1876, when the State assumed

¹⁵ Is the set of material testimonies of the processes and trends derived from modernity, modernization and modernism, especially in the fields of urban planning, architecture, engineering and landscaping, from the end of the 18th century to the present day (Conti, 2017).

control of the tobacco monopoly and the San Sebastián City Council promoted its creation to absorb the workers from the former factories. Construction of the final building began in 1888. Its location in the Egia neighborhood was chosen based on strategic criteria such as its proximity to the railway, the port, and the border, facilitating the transport of raw materials and their distribution (Fernández Jubín, 2024). It ceased industrial activities in 2001, and its conversion reflects a European trend of reusing industrial spaces, linked to the transition to a post-industrial economy where art and culture acquire a central role as economic drivers within the framework of so-called artistic capitalism; where cultural production is integrated into the logic of the market, tourism, and territorial branding (Ansa Goicoechea, 2021).

The Tabakalera building, with its large surface area, is organized in a mixed-use format, combining its own cultural project with the presence of other cultural institutions and spaces dedicated to private initiatives (Balerdi, 2014). As a space, Tabakalera is defined by its hybrid character, with cultural, institutional, and business functions, housing both public and private initiatives, which generates a fusion between artistic production, leisure, and economic activity (Ansa Goicoechea, 2021). This is reflected even in its interior spaces, which combine public areas with art (Fig. 6). Projects like those found at Tabakalera foster citizen participation, collective learning, and artistic creation, as well as consolidating a culture of open innovation that contributes to social construction and the development of creativity within the community (Fernández, 2021). Therefore, its mixed-use program, combining public cultural functions with private and semi-private activities, demonstrates how adaptive reuse can reconnect a building with its urban context while preserving its architectural identity.

The next case is the Zollverein coal mine industrial complex in Essen, which demonstrates the rise and fall of this industry so vital to the economy over the past 150 years (Mainzer, 1999; WHC UNESCO, 2001a). The Zollverein coal mine was the last of approximately 290 coal mines in Essen to close on December 23, 1986, while the coking plant ceased operations on June 30, 1993. Around 60 companies, primarily from the creative and innovative sectors, are based in pits XII, 1/2/8, 3/7/10, as well as in the Zollverein coking plant. In addition, more than 70 companies are located in the Zollverein Future Center – Triple Z, in pits 4/5/11 (Zollverein, 2026).



Fig. 6 Tabakalera: Interior space (Created by the author)

It was declared a World Heritage Site in 2001 because it is an exceptional industrial monument; its buildings are outstanding examples of the application of Modern Movement design concepts in architecture within an industrial context, and its technological and other structures are representative of the development of traditional heavy industries in Europe (WHC UNESCO, 2001b). After its closure, Zollverein was transformed into a cultural space, housing museums, exhibitions, events, and design centers. It is currently part of the "Route of Industrial Culture" network, solidifying its position as a symbol of European industrial heritage and its preservation for the future.

Its evolution transformed it into a multifunctional space with museums, exhibitions, festivals, an art and design university, creative businesses, and tourism. This process has generated a new model for the use of industrial heritage, integrating contemporary activities without losing the site's historical identity. This transformation maintains original elements such as machinery, structures, and spatial layout, integrating them into the complex's new uses (Stiftung Zollverein, 2016). The largest building, formerly dedicated to coal washing, was converted into a visitor center and the new Ruhr Museum (Arquitectura Viva, 2015).

This example illustrates how an industrial complex with a large area can be reactivated through a bottom-up, incremental process, where adaptive reuse is defined by a gradual accumulation of uses, events, and cultural activities.

The last example is Westergasfabriek, which originated in 1885 as a gas production plant to illuminate Amsterdam. It grew and modernized until the beginning of the 20th century but went into decline in the 1960s, closing in 1967 and leaving a contaminated site that, after decades of abandonment, was rediscovered in the 1990s by artists and cultural entrepreneurs, transforming since 2003 into a cultural park, now known as Westergas (Westergas, 2026). Kathryn Gustafson was in charge of the "Changement" proposal, which responds to the park's master plan by creating a diversity of spaces with civic, social, cultural and ecological uses, integrating existing elements of the site such as canals, historical structures and the natural environment (ArchDaily, 2017). Instead of a traditional park, it proposes a set of distinct but connected areas that reflect the complexity of the city, prioritizing residents, strengthening the natural environment and offering spaces for everyday recreation and public events.

A central aspect of the project is strong community involvement. A working group was created, composed of residents, politicians, landscape professionals, and members of local committees. This group designed a lengthy and open selection process in which citizens could actively participate. Designers were given freedom to propose the program and they respected the criteria defined based on the residents' expectations (De Marco and Limido, 2005). Westergas operates within a network economy where constant innovation and symbolic value are essential. It fosters a combination of permanent and temporary uses that keeps the area active and sustainable, seeks to attract a diverse public interested in culture, stands out for its experimental nature that drives creativity in a flexible and accessible environment, and relies on a collaboration between public and private investment that guarantees economic viability and the preservation of its cultural and historical identity (Bonink and Hitters, 2001). This exemplifies how large structures can be successfully reused through flexible, mixed-use strategies that reconnect them with contemporary urban life, taking into account citizen opinion.

Taken together, the analyzed cases reveal distinct strategies for addressing the reuse of large-scale structures that have become obsolete within the contemporary urban context. While Tabakalera demonstrates the potential of a clearly defined institutional program that

articulates cultural and productive uses, Zollverein highlights large-scale reuse through the progressive accumulation of functions within a complex heritage system, and Westergasfabriek introduces a more flexible model based on incremental processes and social participation. Despite their differences, all the examples coincide in the implementation of hybrid models that combine public and private elements as a mechanism to ensure the continuous activation of the space and its reintegration into the urban dynamic. These experiences demonstrate that the reuse of large buildings does not depend on a single formal solution, but rather on the capacity to articulate diverse, adaptable programs connected to their surroundings, thus offering a useful frame of reference.

6 Conclusion

Palazzo del Lavoro illustrates the paradox faced by much of modern architecture: the juxtaposition of structural innovation and functional obsolescence. Its design is an achievement of engineering, artistry and aesthetic ambition; however, it has fallen into disuse, revealing the inadequacies of an approach to flexibility and durability typical of mid-20th century designs. Such buildings invite a critical reflection on how modern heritage can be a culture for adaptive reuse interventions that respect contemporary urban functions while responding to the spirit of preservation.

This case just like many other buildings of its era, poses challenges for contemporary urban dynamics. These large spaces, though innovative when built, can become underused due to their size, complexity, and the changing needs of urban spaces over time. It is essential to analyze the surrounding environment and, when possible, identify common patterns that may explain the reasons for their abandonment. Often, these spaces face underutilization due to lack of adaptation for new functions, which negatively impacts their preservation. Nonetheless, these spaces can regain vitality and become dynamic hubs for creativity, social interaction, and sustainable urban development when they are successfully reactivated through adaptive reuse that includes cultural programming and a balanced combination of public and private investment.

However, it is also important to recognize the reasons that lend significance to these spaces, such as their architectural, historical, and cultural value. In many cases, re-evaluating these buildings could contribute to the strengthening of urban heritage and offer creative solutions for their reuse in contemporary society. In the end, the history of buildings like the Palazzo del Lavoro

illustrates the evolving connection between architecture, society, and the urban landscape; by opening a discussion on how to preserve modern heritage.

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