

**Sensuous Motion, Sensuous Boundaries, Sensuous Place:  
Angiolo Mazzoni's Blue Building**

*Michael McNamara*



In his book *Archetypes in Architecture*, Thomas Thiis-Evensen forges a path between the altars of rational technology and “subjective creativity.” His method, which draws closely upon Christian Norberg-Schulz’s pioneering research on the architecture of place, is intended to provide a framework for understanding the shared “emotional content” of place through a deep reflection on the nature of the floor, the wall and the roof as the critical elements which convey the existential character of a place.<sup>1</sup> This study utilizes Thiis Evensen’s floor, wall, and roof taxonomy to examine the elements of character in a early twentieth-century postal building in Sabaudia, Italy.

The Sabaudia Post Office, which opened in 1934, was designed by Angiolo Mazzoni, a public architect for the consolidated railways and postal service. During his career (1920-1946), Mazzoni designed twenty postal buildings and numerous railroad stations throughout the Italian peninsula, Sicily, and Sardinia.<sup>2,3</sup> Mazzoni’s influences, which include Italian Futurism, Garnier, Mendelsohn, and Wright, reveal a formal language emphasizing asymmetry, motion, curving masses and planes and an inventive use of bold colors and material palettes simultaneously ancient and modern.<sup>4</sup>

Sabaudia is a planned new town originally constructed in 1932–34 in the Agro Pontino region about fifty miles southwest of Rome. The town, which lies on a tidal plain, is surrounded on three sides by a lake and, just to the west, is the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>5</sup> In his book, *Building Modern Italy*, Dennis Doorden notes that Sabaudia differed from the other Italian new towns because the design followed rationalist rather than traditional principles, not only in planning, but also in the typical reinforced concrete frame structures with smooth exterior walls rendered in pale colors.<sup>6</sup>

The post office is located on a corner site two blocks northwest of the main square. The basic parti is an “L” shape which forms a complimentary “L”-shaped courtyard space bounded by a linear stair element. Functional elements in plan are composed to create a clearly differentiated sense of front and back. The public rooms are disposed in a low horizontal mass that extends the public front to the south and west sides.<sup>7</sup> Work rooms, offices and the second story living quarters are pushed behind the main mass to diminish their presence and to create the small courtyard which admits natural light to these support functions. Floor, wall, window and roof elements are orchestrated to emphasize continuous horizontal motion.

### Architecture of the Floor

The architecture of the floor contributes to the character of the building as a public place. A plinth, broad terraces wrapped in generous fan stairs, and paving materials combine to extend the interior into the exterior to delimit critical boundaries.

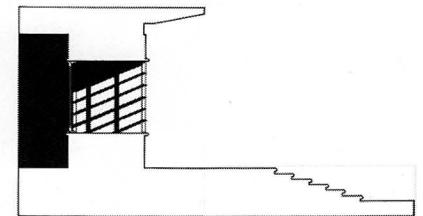
In an ancient civic gesture, Mazzone employs the plinth as a device which distinguishes this modest low building as a public domain, where, in the upward projection of the plinth, the building is drawn up and away from the site edges to suggest "a body growing directly from the earth."<sup>8</sup> At the

same time, the rising floor sets the post office apart from its neighbors and the extreme flatness of the region.

An expansive threshold, in a projection of the plinth, is created by a series of terraces and steps disposed around the low, solid base in an asymmetrical pattern. The terraces and stairs convey a sense of motion and weight. The asymmetrical pattern reinforces the overall theme of horizontal motion while the main terrace extends the interior floor into the exterior in its breadth and width. In an echo of the parti, this ter-

race wraps in an "L" shape around the front corner and extends from the west to the southern edge. This shape also conveys a sense of interlock between the building mass, the threshold and the ground as though these pieces have been wedged together. Like bridge abutments, the terraces also appear to buttress and firmly hold the base and the raised floor, especially where the terraces are placed on the corners (see diagram).

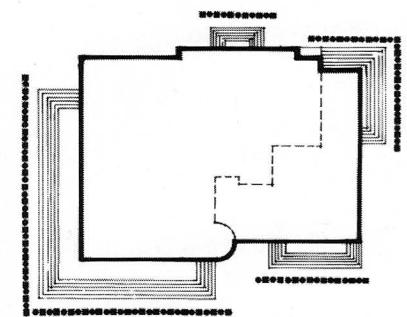
Fan shaped stairs, which wrap continuously around three sides of each terrace, reinforce the joining of the building to



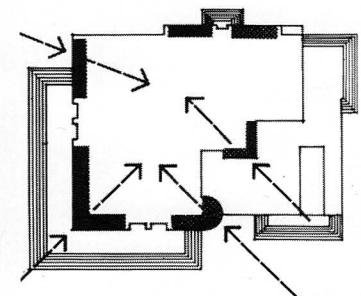
*Section detail*

the ground plane. The fan stair motif implies a motion outward and downward from above and, by extension, from inside toward the ground in a flowing motion.<sup>9</sup> The extreme breadth of the stairs echoes the horizontal cadence of the whole.

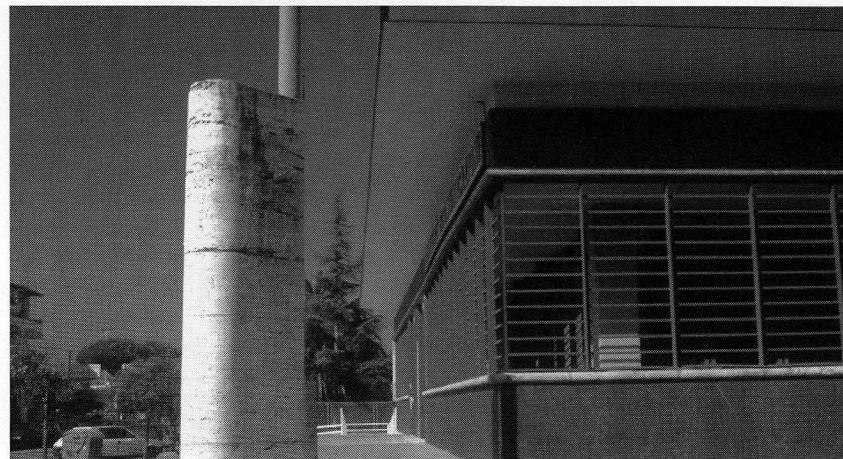
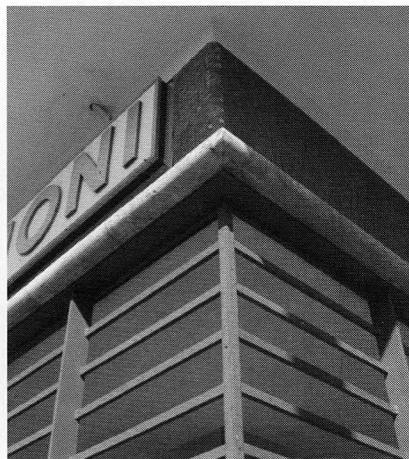
The main terrace steps are characterized by a gentle slope with a very shallow riser and a broad tread (5":16"). Like the exposed base wall, the risers are made of thin marble strips arranged in a vertical pattern, while the treads, which have a curved nosing, are large planks made of



*Flowing Stairs/bracing stairs*



*Inside/outside layered window openings*



### Architecture of the Wall

cream colored marble. The gravity of the steps is reinforced by the thickness of the marble stair tread and the curved nosing. The thickness of the nosing, which is nearly equal to the riser thickness, diminishes the apparent riser height and adds to the sense of weight and lowness. The subdued upward motion of the broad shallow steps transforms Thiis Evensen's "climbing impulse" to a gliding impulse. The gentle steps suggest calm ascension, accessibility, and independence of movement, since the form of approach permits many points of access.<sup>10</sup>

The character of the wall draws upon two elemental qualities: the complexity of the wall form and the material nature of the envelope. Where the floor projects the inside to the outside with its terraces and steps, in a reversal, the architecture of the wall draws the outside into the inside with a deep sill and a plane of windows set far inside the exterior wall surface. The building skin is an energetic juxtaposition of materials, textures, and colors and carefully crafted joints. These qualities are fused to give a sense of continuous horizontal movement, and constant dialogue between the inside and the outside.

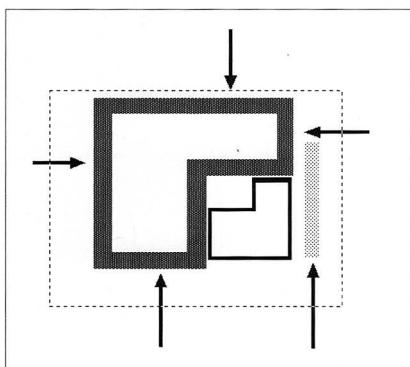
The singular sensual presence of this building is, in large measure, due to the external wall revetted in deep ultramarine blue ceramic tiles. This vivid skin, which wraps around the building in a continuous glaze, is composed of 3/4" square tiles reshaped into curves when they intersect a corner or terminate in the upper reaches of the wall. The saturation of the color adds weight and a sense of closure to the walls.<sup>11</sup> In the most public facades, the azure wall panels are formed into horizontal bands with vertical panels selectively used at the northwest corner and in three elements around the doors, where a sense of protection and security is expressed. Here, the walls are a foil to the windows, where the solid, homogenous skin contrasts with the deep cavities and open corner treatments.

The effect is simply dazzling. The shining glossy solidity of the wall provides a rich contrast with the typical pastel and white concrete frame buildings of the town. One speculates that the choice of the deep blue color is intended as a symbol of the sky, of the lake which forms a boundary with the town or is a reference to the Mediterranean Sea beyond.

The boundary between the base and the central wall is a horizontal marble profile which extends around the building in areas where there are no terraces. The curved nosing profile matches the curved profile of the steps to reinforce the feeling of continuous motion. The profile extends beyond the wall plane to create a distinctive horizontal shadow line which marks the floor level and the joint between the base and the central wall element.

In a similar manner, a projecting curved stone profile, fashioned in an ethereal light pink Sienese marble, forms a boundary seam between the tile wall and the layered windows, while creating a dramatic contrast with the shining blue flat wall surface and the deep cavities of the windows and doors. This profile also reinforces the theme of continuous motion since it extends in a horizontal band across the lintels of the doors and windows. Where the tile wall is a monolithic membrane, the window system is a highly articulated layered element composed of two window planes. Mazzoni created an ingenious layered window system to screen out malarial mosquitos that have haunted the region for centuries. The outer layer is an industrial sash frame originally filled with steel screen wire.<sup>12</sup> The inner layer is a series of operable wood sash windows set six feet inside the outer layer while the sill that joins the two layers was designed for potted flowers. The window cavities formed by the two layers mediate between the inside and the outside while becoming a locus for complex shadow patterns formed by the fine grained outer sash and the deep sill. These elements and corner window treatments are fused to convey a sense of transparency and dynamic flowing motion, where the shadowed window wall winds its way around the wall planes to create a feeling of continuity while revealing the interior structure and the inner layers.

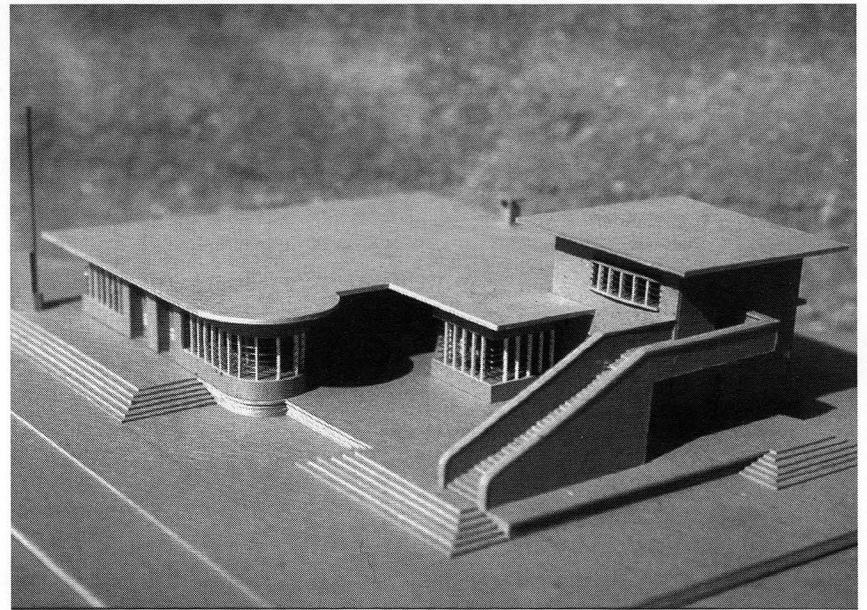
The top of the wall is a thin, smooth concrete reveal which is recessed to mediate the boundary between the wall and the roof. This light element receives the rising blue wall which slips gracefully over the higher surface and terminates in curving tiles.



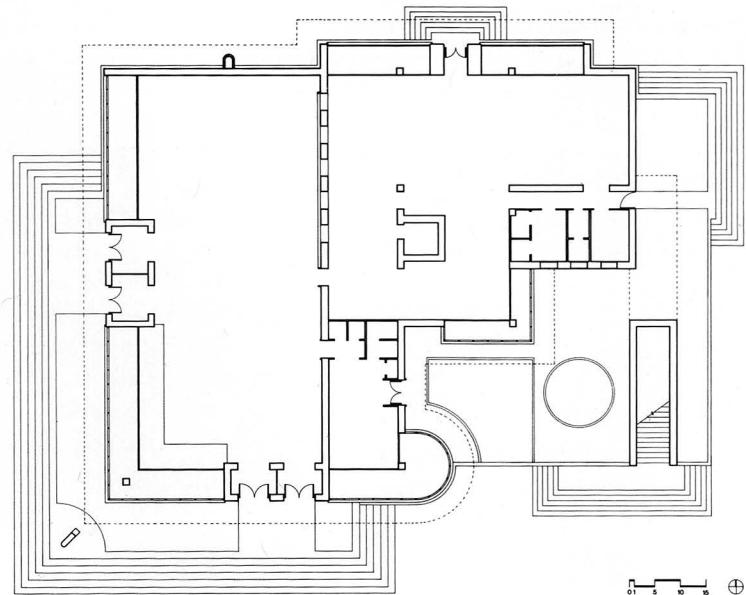
*Parti Diagram*

### Architecture of the Roof

The dynamic projecting and receding qualities of the floor and the wall are contrasted with the subdued character of the roof. The flat cantilevered roof plane forms a subtle protective plane above the building, where the thinness and apparent lightness of the roof is exaggerated by the gently tapering white soffit and by the roof/wall intersection with its narrow horizontal wall reveal. The chalk colored soffit and the wall merge to form another horizontal element. The receding roof/wall intersection serves to reinforce the prominence of the dark horizontal tile walls, while the cantilever and the whiteness of the roof simultaneously convey the ideas of sheltering and hovering or floating.



*Model View*

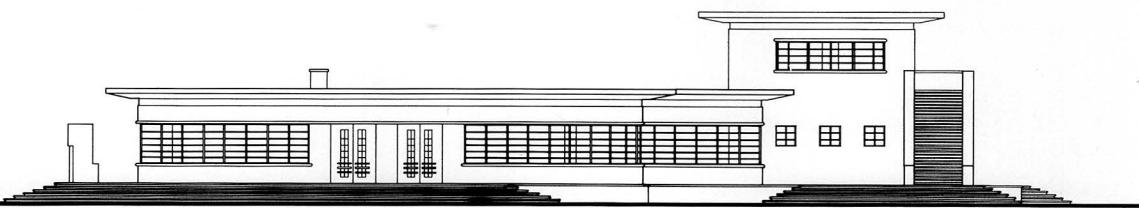


*Plan*

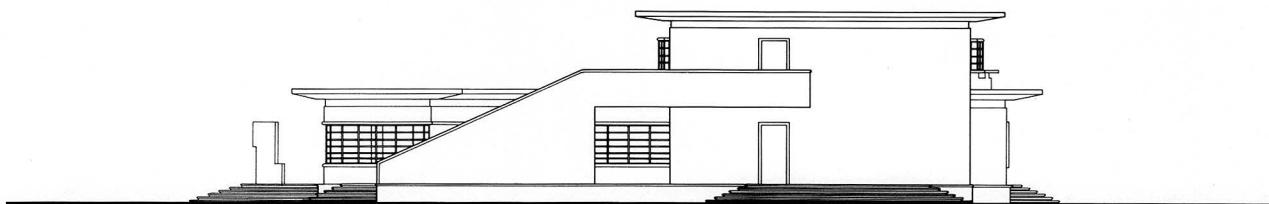
## Conclusion

The character and atmosphere of the Sabaudia Post Office are derived, in large measure, from the motion, weight and substance of the floor, the wall and the roof. The projecting floor, upward with its low plinth and outward with broad terraces and shallow steps, interlocks the inside with outside to convey a sense of openness and accessibility so essential to truly public architecture. The sensuous character of the wall springs to life in the dazzling blue revetment of ceramic tile to create a vivid contrast with the surrounding buildings and, in this gesture, to forever mark its place in the memories of the town citizens. The inside/outside connection first established by the exterior terraces and steps is complemented by the layered window openings, with their broad, deep cavities, to strengthen the inside/outside relationship by revealing the inside, while the sills between the two window planes are simultaneously part of the inside and the outside. The separation of the structure from the wall combined with the use of continuous windows at the corners dematerializes parts of the wall to maximize the sense of openness. The roof plane is the foil to the energetic play of the floor and the wall planes. Here smooth thin planes lightly hover above the blue wall to form a subtle, graceful meeting with the Mediterranean sky.

Angiolo Mazzoni's Sabaudia Post Office is a sensual gift to the public realm. It is a dynamic example of the architecture of place where functional requirements are melodically reconciled with a fluid, expressive, formal language; a language which challenges our senses at the levels of formal manipulation, path orchestration, and highly refined material textures, colors, and details. The struggle to create a public architecture of openness, energy and engagement was Mazzoni's struggle, and today, it is our struggle. This building addresses a central question of our time: how can architects create "presence" and "significance" in the "ordinary" architecture of daily life.<sup>13</sup>



South elevation



East elevation

## Notes:

1. Thomas Thiis Evensen, *Archetypes in Architecture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
2. Richard Etlin, *Modernism In Italian Architecture 1890-1940*, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1991). p 312-321.
3. *Angiolo Mazzoni (1894-1979) Architetto nell'Italia tra l'e due guerre* (Bologna, Grafis Edizioni, 1985). p 176-177.
4. Alfredo Forti *Angiolo Mazzoni architetto fra fascismo e liberta'* (Florence, Edam, 1978). p 41-45, 58
5. Diane Ghirardo, *Building New Communities New Deal America and Fascist Italy*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989). p 74-78.
6. Dennis Doorden *Building Modern Italy Italian Architecture 1914-1936*, (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1988). p 105-110.
7. *Angiolo Mazzoni Architetto 1932/1942 dieci anni di attivita' in Agro Pontino* (Latina, exhibition catalog, Regione Lazio Amministrazione Provinciale Latina, 1980). p 29-30.
8. Thiis Evensen op cit p 55.
9. Thiis Evensen op cit p 109.
10. Thiis Evensen op cit p 89.
11. Thiis Evensen op cit p 240-247.
12. Fotri op cit p 44
13. Michael Benedikt *For An Architecture of Reality* (New York, Lumen Books, 1987)

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