
Gae Aulenti

There is a discreet door, camouflaged to the point of nearly vanishing. It is the point of contact between two buildings, one with an entrance on Via Fiori Oscuri, the other on Piazza San Marco. A fairytale door, where like Alice and the mirror you passed from one world to another, one identity to another. On one side there was *la Gae*, on the other *l'architetto Aulenti*.

You were born in Friuli, where your father Aldo worked as an accountant, scion of “a family of judges, lawyers, doctors and bishops” with roots in Apulia and Calabria. As a girl you moved to Biella with your family, where you restlessly longed for a high school in Florence, to get away from home. The war put a stop to those plans, and the partisan cause determined your ideals. You completed your schooling in Turin, but you were clear about the next step: “as soon as I could, I chose Milan and the Politecnico.” You graduated in 1953 and never left this city.

There were few women at the Politecnico: Anna Ferrieri, then Castelli by marriage, or “Cini” Mariani Dameno, then wed to Boeri. You also got married, Gae, fresh out of college, with a classmate, but you had no intention of taking his surname: you had a daughter with him, Giovanna, but you hadn't the slightest interest in being a housewife. You lived on Via Cesariano, and one room in the apartment was set up as your studio. Those were the years of research and encounters. A tireless reader, curious and enthusiastic about everything, you traveled in the world “in pursuit of architecture and its protagonists.” The editorial staff of *Casabella* was your experimental proving ground, where Ernesto Nathan Rogers, a true adoptive father, had the task of supervising the “cockfight” of your boisterous colleagues: Vittorio Gregotti, Aldo Rossi, Guido Canella. You watched them with amusement, the only woman in the group, “pretending not to notice.” Because you never wanted your gender to become a limitation.

Milan was a city where you worked on competitions late into the night, after which you went dancing till dawn. You had bangs like Crepax's Valentina, knee-length skirts and flats. Italian design was being born, thanks to older siblings – Magistretti, Zanuso, Castiglioni – and contemporaries of the “third generation,” the one Alberto Arbasino had described as “angry,” an irascible, political generation. For you, champing at the bit, it seemed like “intellectual bricolage on a small scale, on the leftovers of the golden age.” But you were there, and Adriano Olivetti also took notice, deciding to assign you the design of two stores, in Paris and Buenos Aires. Theory became practice. You created stores like urban works of architecture, and you invented lighting systems that due to their quality were immediately put into production: the zoomorphic *Pipistrello*, the futuristic *King Sun*. There are objects that seem timeless, and others such as your *Rimorchiatore* and *Ruspa* lamps, or your *Locus Solus* garden furniture, that seem to define the spirit of the times, better than many others.

In 1965 you rented a new house and outfitted the semi-basement as a studio. A home and place of work, as always. You had but four collaborators, never wishing to lose the artisan dimension of your work. Via dell'Annunciata 7 became the new crossroads of encounters, relationships, friendships. The

salon was in your nature, to discuss art, architecture, cinema, politics. With Carlo Ripa di Meana, you were perhaps the most handsome couple in the city. Gianni Agnelli asked you to renovate his apartment in Milan. You were sought out by an up-to-date, erudite bourgeoisie, because you were the architect capable of shaking off all that monastic gravity inherited from the fathers of Rationalism, to imagine festive, pop homes, worthy of a “swinging” Milan. The showrooms for Fiat – in Turin, Rome, Zurich, Vienna, Brussels – were opportunities for sculptural experimentation, futuristic installations.

Your last move came in 1974, Gae. There was a building on Via Fiori Oscuri, still standing but showing signs of wartime bombing. For you, renovating that building was a chance to design a house on multiple levels, spanned by internal metal footbridges, small passages, open-plan areas, terraces and windows facing Piazza San Marco. Next to the building there was a smaller one, on two levels, where it is said that Giuseppe Verdi composed the requiem for the first anniversary of the death of Alessandro Manzoni, then conducted inside the aisles of the church on 22 May 1874, precisely by the venerable maestro. You refurbished that building, creating a space worthy of Escher, a new studio with dizzying slopes of metal ramps, staggered floors, recessed areas. Then, finally, you opened a door. Discreet, easily hidden, almost invisible. A passage between the house on Via Fiori Oscuri and the small building on Piazza San Marco. Home and work. On one side you were *la Gae*, on the other *l'architetto Aulenti*. It remained your home, forever.

You were wearing your hair shorter, in those days, letting the gray show, which seemed to go well with your men's jackets made to measure and your impeccable trousers. Shortly thereafter other friends and acquaintances came to live on Fiori Oscuri, like Ennio Brion, and you advised Lina Sotis to buy the apartment above yours. It was your natural taste for socializing. You got into the habit, on 25 December, of organizing a party for the single, the separated, the workaholics and loners who would have had to celebrate Christmas on their own. Over time it became a tradition, the most worldly of all Milanese gatherings. Around the tables sat grandparents and grandchildren, friends and acquaintances, intellectuals and entrepreneurs, artists and philosophers, students and professors. Umberto Eco and Ettore Sottsass, Vittorio Gregotti and Maurizio Pollini, Andrea De Carlo and Ludovico Einaudi, Emilio Tadini and Stefano Boeri. No one was missing, because your house had become “the place to be.”

Convivial but selective in your relations, you were equally precise and demanding at work, which led to some legendary outbursts. You expected a great deal from everyone, not just with the junior collaborators but also with the foremost clients, to whom you left no possibility of choice. To know you was to fear you. Only with Luca Ronconi did you seem to ease up a bit. You loved the theater, fascinated by this aesthetic context, where space and time blend together. For Ronconi you designed the sets for memorable productions at the Laboratorio di Progettazione Teatrale in Prato. You also cultivated the passion for theater across the years to follow, to the point of directing Rossini's *La donna del lago* in 1981 (with Maurizio Pollini conducting the orchestra).

Exhibit design, graphic design, construction, products, theater. You worked on everything, “from the spoon to the city” as your mentor Ernesto Nathan Rogers put it. Tullio De Mauro wrote that Pasolini was the first intellectual without dialect in Italy. You were undoubtedly the first non-regionalist architect in Italy. If to some extent Michelucci was Tuscany, or Scarpa was the Veneto, due to your personal history, your family origins and a generational attitude, you were naturally international. Which is why you enjoyed living in Milan. “What makes Milan appealing,” you once said in an article in *Corriere della Sera*, “is that there are only a few Milanese. Multiculturalism is an asset, otherwise one immediately becomes provincial.”

This was the curious, strong-willed spirit with which you met the challenge of the competition for the regeneration of the Gare d'Orsay in Paris. And you were the winner. Six years of expeditious work, from the competition to the opening. No one can go to Paris today without making a stop at your museum of French Impressionism. From that day on you had countless international successes: the renovation of Palazzo Grassi in Venice, the National Art Museum of Catalonia in Barcelona, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the Italian Cultural Institute in Tokyo.

There is a photograph that shows you from behind, deep in the worksite of the Gare d'Orsay. You are holding hands with a little girl with a red coat, red like the helmets you are wearing. Red, like the spatial installation you designed for the exhibition curated by Emilio Ambasz in New York, like the pillars of the canopies of Piazzale Cadorna, like the façades of the airport of Perugia. An "Aulenti red." In point of fact, that photographic defuses the idea of a public part and a private one, of *la Gae* on the one hand and *l'architetto Aulenti* on the other. That girl is your granddaughter Nina, now an architect like you, and the devoted curator of the archives of your studio. On that chilly morning you were acquainting her with the magic of the worksite. In that image, you demonstrate that the magical door of your home does not divide two spaces, but unites them. You were always there, always yourself, on both sides. Because you were your work, always.

You brought your human relationships, your affections, into the profession, and the world you encountered grew layer upon layer inside your home. Gae the designer was there, in the prototypes of lamps, tables, chairs in your spaces; Gae the traveler was there, in the enormous rug by Lichtenstein purchased in New York and hung on the wall like a tapestry; Gae the theater lover was there, in the *Premio Ubu* by Alighiero Boetti, as was the designer of museums, in the rose window of Musée d'Orsay. And then sculptures by Melotti, reproductions of Oldenburg, an ostrich egg from the exhibition of Palazzo Grassi. A sort of elegant, erudite *Wunderkammer* in the heart of Brera. The house is a burrow, you wrote. A not necessarily peaceful shelter, because it is the place "where we come to terms with ourselves. The house is simultaneously reassuring and frightening." A place where introspection and knowledge are constantly face to face.

You were like that, and maybe this is why the people of Milan always admired you. I can still see you there, going out on the terrace of your home, cigarette in hand, to watch the city: to the right, your historical past with the church of San Marco, to the left your modern tradition, with the building by Vico Magistretti. And in the background, towards the horizon, the tip of the new skyscraper by Cesar Pelli at Porta Nuova. Where, less than two months after your death, it seemed only natural to name the piazza in your honor. Unforgettable.