

Rogue and Trickster

Luigi Moretti, Real Estate and the Villa Triptych

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Photograph of Luigi Moretti at the Istituto Nazionale di Architettura (Italian Institute of Architecture) Rome, circa 1960. From Luciana Finelli, *Luigi Moretti. La Promessa e il Debito. Architetture 1926-1973* (Officina Edizioni, Roma, 1989), 3.

“[This is] A work of extreme architectural importance for the principles and solutions it affirms... A rare and perhaps unique work in modern architecture. To the general public, it is not known, and yet it represents, perhaps, the most curious thing in recent years.”⁰¹

With these rather oddly self-congratulatory words, Luigi Moretti introduced ‘La Saracena,’ a holiday villa he designed between 1953 and 1957 in the seaside town of Santa Marinella, 60 km north of Rome. This villa was the first of the unfinished ‘Villa Triptych,’ which included ‘La Califfa’ and ‘La Moresca,’ all designed by Moretti on the same site for three different clients.⁰² Despite being successful and prolific, Moretti often felt compelled to defend his work, particularly in response to his ostracism and dismissal by the ‘gotha’ of Italian architectural criticism, such as Bruno Zevi and Manfredo Tafuri.⁰³

Among the many reasons for their criticism were Moretti’s sympathetic stance toward fascism, his political disinterest concerning postwar reconstruction by not involving himself in building houses, “for the poor,”⁰⁴ as he once patronizingly declared, and his eagerness to work for

01 Luigi Moretti’s letter to Iride Cerabona, March 28, 1969, ACSRo.

02 The other two villas making up the ‘Villa Triptych’ are La Califfa, designed for the same client between 1967 and 1971, and La Moresca, intended as a holiday villa and studio for the architect himself conceived in 1954 and completed by others in 1981 after the sudden death from cardiac arrest of the architect in 1973.

03 See, Alessandra Muntoni, “Luigi Moretti nella storia e nella critica,” in *Corrado Bozzoni and Daniela Fonti, Luigi Moretti: Architetto del Novecento* (Gangemi Editore, Roma, 2015), 43-59. Moretti’s work was discussed by notable foreign architecture intellectuals like Peter Eisenmann, *The Formal Basis of Modern Architecture* (Princeton Architectural Press, Cambridge 1963), 81-82. And Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (The Museum of Modern Art, Berkeley, 1966). See also Reynard Banham, “Casa del Girasole: Rationalism and Eclecticism in Architecture” in *The Architectural Review*, n. 674 (February, 1953): 73-78. In Italy, except for *Domus*, *Casabella*, and *L’Architettura Cronache e Storia* his body of work was ignored until the 1990s. One of the earliest articles in Italian celebrating the “expressive coherence of his works” is by Paolo Portoghesi, “La Scuola Romana,” in *Comunità* (December, 1961): 49

04 Moretti once stated, towards the end of his career, with a rather patronizing tone, as Roberto Morisi documented that “[...] After having designed almost everything I would like to give a good try at the poor people’s house.” Translated by the author from Italian. See Luciana Finelli, *Luigi Moretti la promessa e il debito. Architetture 1926-1973* (Officina Edizioni, Roma, 1989), 144.

for the elite and powerful.⁰⁵ Despite the controversy about Moretti's persona, in the last two decades there has been a renewed interest in his work, particularly in the 'Triptych' at Santa Marinella. This time critical attention was focused not so much on Moretti's politics, but more on the formalist bravura of his work.⁰⁶ Precisely because the pendulum of Moretti's critical fortune seems to have swung towards an uncritical reappraisal of his work, some historical contextualization of his projects is urgent, and distance is a necessary starting point.⁰⁷ Rather than as one of the masters of Italian postwar architecture, in the notes that follow, Moretti is interpreted as the archetype of the self-made real estate entrepreneur, a figure known in Italy as *impresario edile*. This role comes to the fore, especially with the project of Santa Marinella, which proved to be the exemplum for many building speculations on the Italian coast during the 1970s. However, Moretti's role as an entrepreneur cannot be disentangled from his formal virtuosity thanks to his skill as a designer. Moretti was able to produce a highly recognizable style that proved to be influential in the proliferation of coastal villas as speculative projects.

MORETTI AS A REAL ESTATE ENTREPRENEUR

The term entrepreneur found its origins in the Latin, *inter-prehendere*, which corresponds to the French verb *entreprendre*. This word evolved from its initial meaning of 'to grab' to the military term 'to attack.' The adjective 'entrepreneurial' thus has military roots underlining the necessity for complex organization, strategic thinking, and vision.⁰⁸ In his book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942), Joseph Schumpeter provided a theoretical framework for the contemporary concept of entrepreneurship.⁰⁹ Tracing the genealogy of the term from Medieval warlords to the general of the Napoleonic era, the Austrian economist identified *unternehmergeist* or the 'entrepreneurial spirit'¹⁰ as "the doing of new things or the doing of things that are already being done in a new way." This definition, therefore, underscores a creative element, inherent in the efforts of the entrepreneur subject.

In Peter Hende Brown's 2015 book, *How Real Estate Developers Think*, the 'Trickster' and the 'Rogue' are figures each identified with the two sides of real estate entrepreneurs. The mythological Hermes, often considered a 'divine trickster,' possesses qualities of plasticity, intelligence and adaptability enabling him to function as both the messenger and mediator. Tricksters "work at the borders and boundaries of life, between heaven and earth, gods and mortals, commerce and life. Sometimes they create new borders or bring old ones to life, rearrange things, and then come in to solve problems that they themselves created."¹¹ Hermes, in the words of Lewis Hyde, therefore, embodies the ultimate strategist who is "always keeping an eye out for naturally

05 Translated by the author from Italian. "The professionalism of Monaco and Luccichenti or the formal rarefactions of Luigi Moretti beat the path of disengagement. Despite [Moretti] declining alphabets that nevertheless have their roots in the tradition of the avant-garde, his [political] engagement -in its own way- seems to follow regressive paths." In Manfredo Tafuri, *Storia dell'Architettura Italiana 1944-1985* (Einaudi, Turine, 1982), 36-37. Bruno Zevi included only early project by Moretti in his first edition of *Storia dell'Architettura Moderna* (Einaudi, Turine, 1950). His criticism on the ambiguity of Moretti's personality can be found in the article "Ambizione contro ingegno: Moretti Doubleface" in *L'Espresso* (Febbraio, 1957). See also Bruno Zevi, "Il costo di un miracolo. Parco archeologico dell'Appia Antica" in *L'Espresso*, (9 August, 1959). Zevi drew a harsh and unapologetic obituary in 1973 after Moretti's death, where he reprehended the speculative nature of the architect. Read more in "Luigi Moretti: Computer Inceppato dal D'Annunzianesimo. La scomparsa di Luigi Moretti," in *L'Espresso* (29 July, 1973).

06 The monograph by Cecilia Rostagni, *Luigi Moretti 1907-1973* (Electa, Milano, 2008) and her article "Tra Professione e Ricerca: l'Avventura di Luigi Moretti a Milano," in *Archi.*, vol. 14, n. 3 (June, 2021) discusses this aspect at length. Recent publications celebrating the formal characters of Moretti's architecture and his achievement in the field of architectural research in parametric architecture with the creation of the IRMOU/Institute for Operations Research and Applied Mathematics Urbanism in 1957. See in *OASE* n. 86 on *Baroque* including a translation of Luigi Moretti's article "Le Serie di Strutture Generalizzate di Borromini" as well as Andre Leach's "Moretti: Last of Moderns" the review of the of the Exhibition at MAXXI Rome of 2008 titled *Luigi Moretti Architetto: dal Razionalismo all'Informale* curated by Bruno Reichlin and Maristella Casciato. See also, Annalisa Viati Navone, "De la tectonique à l'architecture paramétrique," in *Matières* (September, 2020): 153-165.

07 Carlo Severati, "La Formazione di Moretti al centro della vita," in *Parametro*, n. 154 (March, 1987): 10-17.

08 Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, *La Dîme Royale* (Librairie de la Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, 1911).

09 Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (Harper and Brothers, New York, 1942), 252.

10 Joseph Schumpeter; Richard V. Clemence, "The Creative Response in Economic History," in *Journal of Economic History*, n. 7 (1947): 149-159.

11 Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 1998).

occurring opportunities and creates them ad hoc when they do not occur by themselves.”¹² Hendee Brown also draws from the work of Robert Solomon, who characterizes the figure of the ‘Rogue’ in the business world as an individual living on the margins of society, often seen as an outcast. The ‘Rogue’ plays a ruthless and brave game “inspiring others rather than following them.”¹³ Hermes and the ‘Rogue’ can be viewed as two complementary and opposite characters, two facets of the same coin, which find their synthesis in the figure of the entrepreneur.

In *From Predators to Icons* (2009), sociologists Vilette and Vuillermot identified a historic shift from a negative connotation of the word entrepreneur in thirteenth-century France to the early eighteenth century as a person engaging in risky behaviors to a more positive figure who identifies “market imperfections.”¹⁴ They subsequently outlined the five major characteristics of ‘successful’ entrepreneurs: being raised in a family of entrepreneurs, having access to privileged education, being exposed to business experience very early on, having access to privileged financing or capital, and finally, being supported by a mentoring figure to introduce them to their first ‘real deal.’ This description of the entrepreneur seems to fit very well into Luigi Moretti’s biography up until the construction of the first building for the ‘Triptych.’¹⁵ Following the sociologist’s view, we can revisit Moretti’s life through the five milestones identified.

The architect was off to a rough start, when Moretti was a teenager, his father left him and his mother to move back to Belgium. Private schooling and enrollment in the *liceo classico* (humanities high school), allowed Moretti to gain access to Rome’s intelligentsia and to subsequently pursue his university studies at the *Scuola Superiore di Architettura* in Rome. As an architecture student, he excelled and was awarded an important scholarship. Following graduation, he taught alongside Gustavo Giovannoni before deciding to abandon academia to join public urban planning competitions. At the age of twenty-six, during the height of the Fascist Regime, after taking part in the V Triennale in Milan, Moretti was appointed as coordinator of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla*, the cultural institution which served as a paramilitary school for the education of the future Fascist youth. This marked the beginning of a flourishing career working for powerful clients, who contributed to Moretti’s introduction into the world of architectural politics.

Between 1942 and 1948 Moretti’s career experienced a hiatus, which he described as his years of “secret labor.”¹⁶ His involvement in the puppet Fascist state known as *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (RSI) or *Repubblica di Salò*, and his attempts to re-instate a neo-fascist movement in postwar Italy caused him a two-month detention in the San Vittore prison in Milan.¹⁷ While in prison, he crossed paths with Count Alfonso Fossataro,¹⁸ who was charmed by Moretti’s architectural portfolio and political views. Following their release from prison, the two cofounded *Cofimprese*, a real estate company hoping to profit from the post-war reconstruction of Italy. By doing so Fossataro financially supported Moretti in his efforts to reinvent himself professionally as a real estate entrepreneur between 1946 and 1954.¹⁹ Adopting what Robert Solomon defined as rogue behavior in business, consisting of “acts of creativity and courage, following one’s sense of integrity,”²⁰ Moretti founded a company that seamlessly merged design with finance within one single enterprise.

12 Ibid., 46-47.

13 Robert C. Solomon, *Ethics and Excellence: Cooperation and Integrity in Business* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1993) 246-251.

14 Michelle Vilette and Catherine Vuillermot, *From Predators to Icons: Exposing the Myth of the Business Hero* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca New York, 2009).

15 Luigi Moretti practiced as an architect, editor, gallerist, and critic; at the peak of his career, he became a successful real estate developer, revealing interesting points of contact with the aforementioned theoretical framework.

16 Giuseppe Ungaretti, *50 Immagini di architetture di Luigi Moretti* (De Luca, Roma, 1968).

17 According to Rostagni the reason for his imprisonment is still unknown. One theory is that he was held in prison for two months accused of wanting to set up a new political party (Raggruppamento Nazionale Repubblicano Socialista) together with the philosopher Edmondo Cione.

18 Alfonso Fossataro name was known to Moretti before his time in prison, he was the CEO of the Higher Life Standard National Company.

19 *Cofimprese* stands for Compagnia Finanziaria per le Imprese di Costruzione e Ricostruzione/ Financial Company for Construction and Reconstruction works.

20 C. Solomon, *Ethics and Excellence: Cooperation and Integrity in Business*, 246-251.

During Milan's reconstruction, Moretti and Fossataro responded to the invitation of Vice Mayor Piero Montagnani calling for "private property [to have] a large task to play in the reconstruction of the country [while]...harmonizing public and private interests."²¹ With the backing of lenders and financial institutions, *Cofimprese* was commissioned for the Case Albergo project, a boarding house and a novel typology within the Italian architecture of that time. Despite the short life of *Cofimprese*, this entrepreneurial endeavor introduced Moretti to a new type of clientele, the "aristocracy of money and the aristocracy of blood."²² Moretti's encounter with Francesco Malgeri, journalist and director of the daily *Il Messaggero*, along with other influential professionals, most likely enabled his subsequent involvement in real estate ventures such as the conglomerate Immobiliare.²³

THE 'TRIPTYCH' AS A SPECULATIVE PROJECT

Despite construction and completion that spanned nearly thirty years (from 1953 to 1981), Moretti's unfinished 'Triptych' in Tor Chiaruccia, near the town of Santa Marinella, has to be considered as one project.²⁴ Literature on the 'Triptych' has, until recently, predominantly centered around the first of its three buildings, villa La Saracena, built between 1955 and 1957. The focus on one building overshadowed the others, with the consequence of precluding the understanding of the three villas as the elaboration of a unified 'villa style' that had an impact on coastal villa architecture in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, critics' and historian's obsession with the radical forms of La Saracena as a one-off masterpiece has concealed the real premise of both the villa and the entire triad. Namely, the serial privatization and appropriation of the coastline by private clients, a phenomenon that became paramount in postwar Italy.



'Villa Triptych' (1957), Santa Marinella. Photo by the author, 2023.

The 'Triptych' concept originated in 1953 when Malgeri, who, as we have seen, was a close friend of Roman real estate moguls, approached

21 Convegno Internazionale per la Ricostruzione Edilizia (International Conference for Building Reconstruction) held at the Castello Sforzesco in Milan in 1945 discussed in Fabrizio Brunetti, *L'Architettura in Italia negli anni delle Ricostruzione* (Alinea, Firenze, 1986).

22 Extract from "L'Architettura di Luigi Moretti / Interviste e Testimonianze." Ludovico Quaroni interviewed by Gabriele Milelli and Salvatore Santuccio in *Parametro*, issue 28, n.157 (April, 1987). Translated by the author from Italian. "He abandoned the faculty of architecture almost immediately, having perhaps realized that a university career would waste too much of his time. ... He had many connections in the aristocracy. In the aristocracy of money and in the aristocracy of blood. And he knew his way around in that system, he was on a whole other level from ours."

23 In "L'Architettura di Luigi Moretti / Interviste e Testimonianze." Alfonso Fossataro interviewed by Carlo Severati, Gabriele Milelli and Salvatore Santuccio in *Parametro*, n. 157 (April, 1987): 29.

24 The project started in 1953, as a letter from the architect Gio Ponti of 1964 document however the first sketch showing the development of the building dates 1955.

Luigi Moretti with the idea of gifting a holiday villa to his daughter, Luciana Pignatelli Aragona Cortez, her husband, Nicola Duke of Grifalco, and their two children. The family possessed two adjoining, long and narrow plots, measuring approximately 50 meters in length and 20 meters in width, totaling an area of roughly 1000 square meters. The land that would become La Saracena's plot was bordered by the Tyrrhenian Sea to the southwest, a local street to the northeast, and another plot owned by Caterina di Girolamo to the north. Together, these adjacencies determined the orientation of the first villa. This constraint typified what became common in postwar Italy, where, often starting from agricultural plots, large stretches of coastline fell prey to parcellation and subdivision, unhindered by building regulations.²⁵



Siteplan of 'Villa Triptych' illustrating the ground floor. Redrawing by the author. Original drawings from Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACSRo) Fondo Luigi Moretti, Rome. A. Villa La Saracena (1953-57), B. Villa La Califfa (1961-67), C. Villa La Moresca (1970-81).

Drawing from his real estate experience in Milan, and in the absence of a clear national planning framework, Moretti formulated a contract between the two landowners. This document delineated the project's architectural limits,²⁶ the maximum heights of the buildings, party wall regulations, and the distance from the street and seafront sides.²⁷ The architect's plan served two goals: to take advantage of lax planning regulations and to provide opportunistic guidelines for the design. It also aimed to facilitate the acquisition of Caterina di Girolamo's plot for the construction of Moretti's holiday villa, La Moresca. In essence, the 'Triptych' was nothing less than a speculative strategy, an experiment orchestrated by Moretti. His goal was not simply to build three beautiful villas but to increase the value of the land, thus building equity through the construction of his own villa. This somewhat crass speculative operation was symbolically packaged with the naming of the villas—La Saracena, La Califfa, and La Moresca—objectifying and derogatory epithets of female figures chosen by Moretti to attribute an aura of 'otherness' to

25 Alessandro Bonanno, "Theories of the State: The Case of Land Reform in Italy, 1944-1961," in *The Sociological Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (1988): 131-47.

26 See Fiorentino Sullo, *Lo scandalo urbanistico* (Mezzo Secolo, Vallecchi Editore, Firenze, 1964) and Ivan Blečić, *Lo scandalo urbanistico 50 anni dopo: Sguardi e orizzonti sulla proposta di riforma di Fiorentino Sullo* (Franco Angeli Edizioni, Milano, 2017).

27 This document was consulted by scholar Annalisa Viati Navone in the Ufficio Tecnico of the Municipality of Santa Marinella, as described in the volume *La Saracena di Luigi Moretti. Tra suggestion Mediterranee, Barocche e Informali* (Academy Press, Mendrisio, 2012).

these buildings. The reference to the so-called torri saracene, watchtowers built on the Italian coast, and the openly exoticizing attitude, underscore the intent to interpret these buildings as idealized enclaves. Consequently, the villas serve as empty signifiers and caricatures, a distracting strategy to obscure their role as speculative assets.

OPULENCE AND EXCESS: THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE ‘TRIPTYCH’

What is remarkable about the ‘Triptych,’ however, is that Moretti’s role as an entrepreneur was not only the result of his business opportunism but also his spectacular architectural virtuosity. Despite the possibility of peeking above the three pedestrian gates, a solid boundary wall along the plot’s street side makes the three villas visually and physically inaccessible to non-residents—creating an aura of anticipation and mystery about what lies beyond.²⁸ Three truncated conical posts, each a different shade of red, mark the plot boundaries and help enclose the driveways.²⁹

Their sculptural presence, however, serves as a playful distraction from the harsh reality that the car made it to the sea and is now an essential part of architecture. The front boundary wall extends perpendicularly towards the sea, becoming a party wall along the east and west sides of the plots. By the seafront, the wall appears taller and more monumental, due to the elevation change, conferring a fortresses-like quality to the buildings.³⁰ This feeling is enhanced by the local limestone cladding, deployed to soften the presence of the three buildings along the public beachfront. At the back, large impenetrable gates enclose the private boathouses below the gardens, connected by stairs and repeating the sense of mystery.



Entrance gates of villa La Califfa, La Saracena and La Moresca, Santa Marinella.
Photo by the author, 2023.

Beyond the perimeter walls, lush vegetation overflows on all sides. Each building features a private garden serving as a buffer between the plot’s limit and the domestic spaces. La Saracena’s landscape strategy, adopting the *fauces* device to create a tranquil and exclusive front garden akin to a *hortus conclusus*, influenced the design of La Califfa and La Moresca.³¹

28 Translated from Italian by the author. “This is why, whenever possible, our houses are made isolating, and introverted, and the feared intrusiveness is countered by walls that become symbolic or symptomatic of a state of mind that, feeling restless, erects walls that are more protective of a longed-for inner peace than of the intrusiveness of others.” Gio Ponti, “Tre Architetture di Luigi Moretti,” in *Domus*, n. 429 (October, 1964): 3.

29 The villa La Califfa was not equipped with a driveway as it was indented as an appendix of La Saracena.

30 A recent interview with the owners of La Moresca revealed that once these villas enjoyed a private pier and private use of the beach, which was modified by national legislation. E.T. (Owner of La Moresca) interviewed by Michela Bonomo on June 15th 2023.

31 The *Fauces* are long and ceremonial entrances to the Roman domus, a trope that Moretti cultivated since the early phase of design.



A seafront view of the villas, Santa Marinella.
Photo by the author, 2023.

In these buildings, however, the elliptical device of the fauces is broken and reduced to fragments, scattered across the garden. The greenery trope in the ‘Triptych’ serves a twofold purpose. It reinforces the concept of ‘otherness’ through the forceful introduction of non-autochthonous vegetation—like the green lawn—aligning with the postwar Italian trend of creating a new Mediterranean landscape language.³² In doing so, the landscape functions as a tool for class differentiation, aiming to create a sense of desirability and exclusiveness.



The garden of villa La Saracena, Santa Marinella.
Photo by the author, 2023.

Upon entering the front garden of villa La Saracena, one encounters an expanded interior promenade spanning 30 meters. The promenade visually and spatially connects the entrance hallway to the rear terrace, from the street to the sea, and vice versa. The villa is organized around this corridor, which, akin to a backbone, contains the load-bearing wall on the northeast side and the more abstract glazed facade overlooking the inner garden. This promenade neatly divides the staff from the owner's quarters. Villa La Saracena primarily consists of this corridor, serving as a transitional circulation space to welcome guests and enjoy the uninterrupted view, only possible due to the privatization of the coastline.

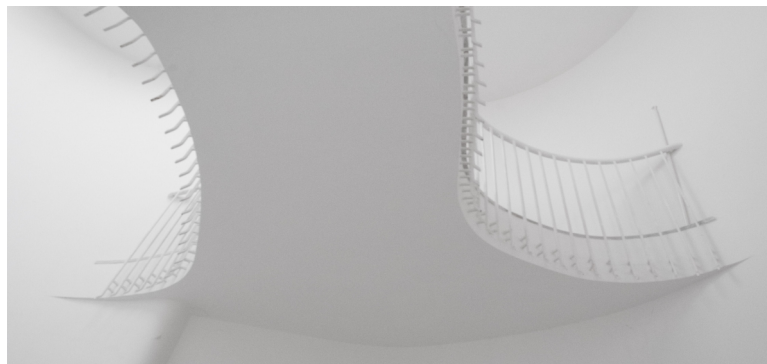
³² The scholar Pisana Posocco wrote extensively on this aspect taking as an example the trope of the green lawn introduction in the Costa Smeralda development in the north of Sardinia.

This radical approach to domestic architecture was arguably aimed at offering the illusion of a unique, unconventional, and unrepeatable experience of dwelling. It is for this reason that in La Califfa and La Moresca, this element is tempered, and the promenade is drastically reduced as a standard corridor, while still maintaining the street-to-sea axis.



The view from the ground floor bedrooms of villa La Saracena, Santa Marinella.
Photo by the author, 2023.

Moretti further emphasizes the circulation in the three villas by incorporating multiple staircases in various locations. In La Saracena there are six distinct sets of stairs which become prominent features in their own right, impacting the villa's external appearance. The two staircases nearest the entrance are sculpturally enclosed by a wall, creating two tower-like structures that divide the house between the night quarters on the left and service areas on the right. Moretti's decision to elevate the utilitarian element of a staircase to a central design feature reinforces the villa as a means of expressing the architect's virtuosity, measuring himself against popular masters of the past.³³ In La Saracena, he recreates the opulence and excess of the Baroque examples, where space doesn't always respond to a strictly functional purpose but represents a status to be attained.



The interior promenade facing the sea, villa La Saracena, Santa Marinella.
Photo by the author, 2023.

33 Moretti's interest towards the masters of the Renaissance and Baroque is documented by his writing published on *Spazio*. "Ecclettismo e Unità di Linguaggio," in *Spazio*, n.1 (July 1950): 5-7; "Genesi di Forme dalla Figura Umana," in *Spazio*, n.2 (August, 1950): 2; "Forme Astratte nelle scultura barocca," in *Spazio*, n. 3 (October, 1950): 9-20. See, also, "Le strutture idelai della architettura di Michelangelo e dei Barocchi," [1956] and "La serie di strutture generalizzate in Borromini" [1967]. English translations of these articles were published for the first time in Federico Bucci, *Luigi Moretti: Works and Writings* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 160-204.

In the adjacent buildings, the staircase takes the central role as the starting point of the design allowing the development of the other spaces in a centrifugal movement. Both La Califfa and La Moresca are designed around the theme of the tower, justifying the large space given to the staircase.³⁴ Moretti's commercial and design tactics invested not only in the sculptural form of the villa but also in the typological arrangement of the interior. The design of bedrooms for the three villas was influenced by the successful Case Albergo project in Milan—a form of single-room occupancy apartment completed a few years prior to Moretti's involvement in La Saracena.³⁵ The night quarter in La Saracena, although connected to the main atrium and promenade via a spiral staircase, has to be understood as an essentially independent building. The four bedrooms are articulated as compact studio spaces, each with its own entrance, ensuite, wardrobe, and individual access to the balcony overlooking the sea. By standardizing the size of the bedrooms, any hierarchy between parents and children is removed, suggesting that the house could equally accommodate a group of friends. The concept of self-contained units appears also in La Califfa and La Moresca. There, however, the bedrooms are situated on either side of the corridor. While they lose their 'hotel-like' status, they maintain their independence, also equipped with ensuite bathrooms and storage spaces. Moretti's adoption of the self-contained unit directly establishes a link between his earlier entrepreneurial venture and the 'Triptych,' indicating that the speculative attitude can translate from the urban scale to the private scale, from the urban to the countryside.

What undeniably unites the three buildings is the façade, which wraps the envelope like a protective skin. The Roman architect recognized the significance of the façade as a speculative tool, a project within a project. In this sense, Moretti performed the roles of the engineer, architect, and real estate developer all at once. The façade features narrow and elongated cuts by the street and open expanses towards the sea respond to the different needs of privacy or exposure. As Marco Mulazzani put it, "the surfaces of the La Saracena are like a canvas; they can be torn and lifted, or abstract signs can solidify on them: they are transfigured surfaces."³⁶ The influence of art, architecture history, and sculpture played an important role in the formal resolution of Moretti's 'Triptych.' A few years prior to the design of La Saracena the architect directed the magazine *Spazio*, where he discussed the work of Italian contemporary artists like Lucio Fontana and Giuseppe Capogrossi.³⁷ The concept of the cut, initially experimented within the 'palazzine' projects built by Cofimprese in Rome and Milan, is here taken to its extreme.³⁸ While the self-contained bedroom represented a subtle typological transfer, the facades of the villas in Santa Marinella openly declared paternity with the speculative urban project, effectively making them a manifesto of real estate development.

34 In villa La Moresca the entrance staircase, located in the elliptical semi-public atrium, subdivides functionally the different flats. This building was designed to host the architect's house at basement and ground floor level and his office at the top floor.

35 Moretti presents this novel typology as building "to host unmarried, single, married without children and with one child ... and belonging to that class of clerks, teachers, magistrates, professionals, students, technicians, workers who only today find refuge in so-called furnished rooms." Translated by the author from Luigi Moretti's essay "Le case albergo. Questa iniziativa risolve un grave problema cittadino", in *Un alloggio per ogni famiglia*, in the exhibition catalogue of Mostra Permanente della costruzione, curated by Organizzazione cantieri (Milano 1946): 34.

36 Marco Mulazzani, "Luigi Moretti: La Califfa, La Saracena, La Moresca. Le ville dove le storie si intrecciano," in *Casabella* (July-August, 1999): 62-81.

37 Alongside his career as an architect, Luigi Moretti became curator and editor of the journal *Spazio* published between 1950 and 1953. The magazine interests ranged from architecture to fine art and sculpture. For a detailed analysis of the relationship between painting and architecture in the work of Moretti see Federico Bucci's "Painted Works" in *Luigi Moretti: Words and Writings* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 136-155.

38 "By calling attention to profile in architecture, Moretti suggests its role as a marker of undecidable relationship and engages space as an object for close reading. As a hierarchy and singularity of meaning are made problematic, the rhetoric becomes textual rather than formal." In Peter Eisenmann, *Ten canonical Buildings: 1950-2000* (Rizzoli, New York, 2007).



Left: Photograph of Casa Albergo, Milan 1948.

Right: Photograph of villa La Saracena's side entrance, Santa Marinella, 1954.
From ACSRo, Fondo Luigi Moretti.

TYPE AND STRUCTURAL TENSION IN MORETTI'S VILLA

Another necessary step to understand Moretti's 'Triptych' requires defining the very idea of the villa as a building type. In *The Villa: Forms and Technology of Countryside Homes*, James Ackerman traces a genealogy of the origins of the villa from the Roman times until the twentieth century. Despite the different interpretations that the term 'villa' may encompass, Ackerman identifies a common thread throughout the evolution of the villa type.

Ackerman asserts that "the villa has remained substantially the same because it fills a need that never alters, a need which, because it is not material but psychological and ideological, is not subject to the influences of evolving societies and technologies. The villa accommodates a fantasy that is impervious to reality."³⁹ This building is viewed as the quintessential architecture of experimentation and an excuse to go all the way in proposing ingenious technologies and detailed solutions. Particularly since the Renaissance—a time marked by the rediscovery of this ancient type of house—the villa has offered architects the best place to push boundaries of domesticity, norms, and codes. Ackerman suggests that studying the villa should involve a synchronous perspective. This entails examining works from different periods in history and identifying commonalities based on their form. Such historical comparative work allows for the identification of structural analogies, which are crucial in distilling a typological identity for the villa, one that persists across time and places.

Moretti seems to have understood that the success of his 'Triptych' depended upon the dichotomous tension between the monolithic character of the villa and the possibility of understanding the villa form as one composed of detachable elements, to use Martí Arís' analysis.⁴⁰ This analogy aligns with Moretti's description of architecture as consisting of an ideal and real structure.⁴¹ The former encompasses the collective figurative qualities that evoke a sense of enchantment: the interior layout, the density of light, the chiaroscuro and the values of moldings. The latter comprises the architecture's infrastructure—the backbone, including the system of transfer of loads, stability, and properties of the construction

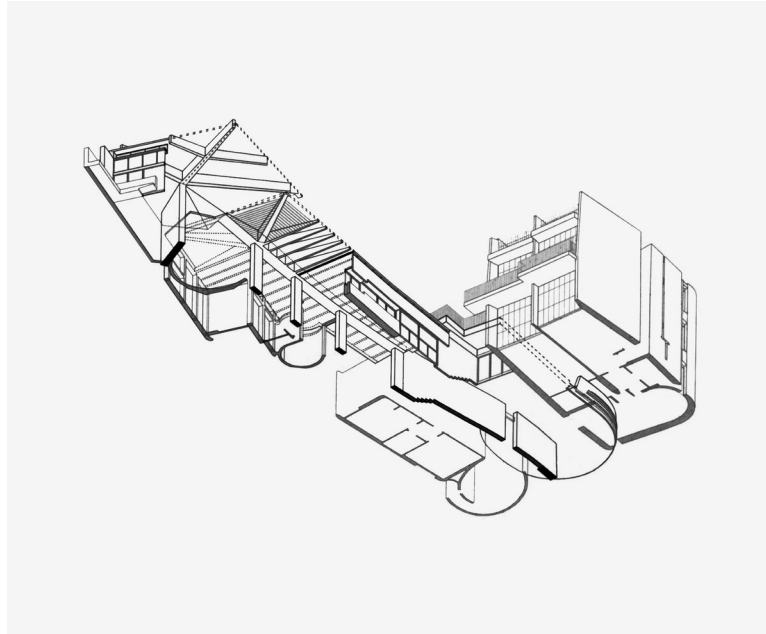
39 James Ackerman, *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses* (Thames and Hudson, London 1990), 9.

40 According to Martí Arís the monolithic character of 'traditional' architecture means that "the various subsystems that make up the building coincide and overlap in an exact, unambiguous manner, thus clearly expressing their typological form. Meanwhile, in modern architecture, all these subsystems can be isolated and abstracted...." Carlo Martí Arís, *Le variazioni dell'Indentità. Il tipo in Architettura* (Città Studi Edizioni, Milano, 1993), 172-176.

41 See Sergio Poretti, *La Struttura Ideale in Moretti' in Modernismi italiani: architettura e costruzione nel Novecento. Architettura e costruzione* (Gangemi, Roma, 2008), 271. Original article by Moretti Strutta, "Struttura come Forma," in *Spazio*, n. 6 (Dicembre 1951-April 1952): 21-30.

materials.⁴²

Sergio Poretti, in his chapter dedicated to Moretti's architecture in *Modernismi Italiani: Architettura e Costruzione del Novecento*, examines villa La Saracena as an example where the ideal and real structure diverge. He dissects the design device adopted in the promenade leading from the entrance to the sea. There, the real structure of the roof, which runs parallel to the garden and extends in various directions with a trellis-like beam structure, is concealed by a sequence of ceilings of varying heights, representing the ideal structure.



Axonometric view of villa La Saracena.

Image from Sergio Poretti, *La struttura ideale di Luigi Moretti in Modernismi Italiani: architettura e costruzione nel Novecento* (Gangemi, Roma, 2008), 281.

This design choice accentuates the tension between the perceived spatial experience and the underlying infrastructure that enables it. The tension and interplay between the real and the ideal structure define the 'Triptych' as typical. The independence of the ideal structure from the real structure accentuates the uncompromised plasticity of the volumes, making the villa look like a sculptural event. Therefore, it becomes an abstract and somewhat vague representation of the 'exoticist' tendency that Moretti evoked through the naming of the villas.

It can be argued that for Moretti, the 'Triptych' stood as one of the highest points of his architectural career as a designer, encapsulating the very essence of his lifelong 'project' as an architect, and real estate speculation. The formal 'virtuosities' adopted in the 'Triptych' should be viewed not only as clever ingenious inventions but rather as carefully selected devices aimed at promoting the uniqueness of the design. This concept may seem contradictory, given that the product is essentially repeated three times. However, in this sense, the 'Triptych' embodies a successfully marketed and strategic real estate product,⁴³ serving as a key element in Moretti's career.

The 'Triptych' experience became a stepping stone for Moretti's further endeavors in real estate and his involvement with Società Generale

42 Moretti expresses the social and technological connotation of the Modern Movement as a tension between ideal structure and real structure. See "I valori della Modanatura" in *Spazio*, n. 6 (Dicembre 1951-April 1952), 5-12.

43 Annalisa Viati Navone, in *La Saracena di Luigi Moretti. Tra suggestioni Mediterranee, barocche e informali* (Academy Press, Mendrisio, 2012) looks at the genealogy of La Saracena identifying so-called "design invariants." This interpretation was used as a blueprint to analyze what in this essay are interpreted as architectural devices for speculation purposes.

Immobiliare (SGI), the largest real estate developer operating in postwar Italy.⁴⁴ As documented in the interview given by Alfonso Fossataro, it is likely that the meeting between the Roman architect and Aldo Samaritani, who served as CEO of SGI between 1945 and 1973, was facilitated through the network of Francesco Malgeri, the commissioner of La Saracena.⁴⁵

Moretti's virtuosic plasticity was not only the result of his formal bravura but was also the product of an artisanal construction technique vital in Italy at that time. Manfredo Tafuri has argued that the anti-industrial ethos within the Italian construction industry was, de facto, promoted by the Christian Democrats to foster small to medium firms as a strategy to effectively soften unemployment. According to Poretti, Moretti's disengaged stance, exemplified by his refusal to be involved in social housing projects such as the well-known INA casa plan, and his ostensibly siding with real estate speculators, can be located in his conception of architecture as an expression of building virtuosity, of which the plasticity of his villa was the most spectacular representation.⁴⁶ Moretti's plastic conception of architecture, as a result, became emblematic of a particular wave of Italian architecture that peaked between the 1950s and 1960s. One which saw in the exuberance of wealthy villas the antidote to the more restrained language of social housing so much disdained by Moretti.

FROM TYPE TO MODEL: THE 'TRIPTYCH' AS BLUEPRINT

In accordance with Schumpeter's perspective, entrepreneurs contribute to the technological innovation of a nation within a capitalist society by revolutionizing products or by creating entirely new markets. Moretti's formalism, which effortlessly connects all the elements of the villa into a stylish continuum, should not be seen solely as a design bravura per se. Instead, it can be read as a promotional strategy aimed at accentuating the villa's uniqueness and seemingly unrepeatable experience. Interestingly, this was reduced to a well-rehearsed template that Moretti could use for the other villas, which were, in fact, built either side of the La Saracena as well as in other part of the Italian coastline.⁴⁷

Copying the 'Triptych,' rows of holiday villas designed by others started appearing around Moretti's buildings, all products of the farraginous planning system. The set-out height and distances from the shore and street retrace the contract set out by Moretti and Malgeri in 1955.⁴⁸ Moreover, the most noticeable aspect of this replication was the treatment of the façade, characterized by open balconies, deep cuts, and rough textured walls. The aesthetic of the 'Triptych' was absorbed and translated into cheaper and more affordable versions.

The 'Triptych' aesthetic therefore generated an aura of fame around the architect, not only within specialized fields but also outside professional circles.⁴⁹ The popularization of the character is probably to blame for the imitation not just of his architecture but of his speculative approach toward it.

44 For most recent publications on Società Generale Immobiliare (SGI) see Davide Spina, "The Bureaucratisation of Architecture in Post-War Italy: SGI under Aldo Samaritani, 1945–73," in *Architectural History* 65 (January 2022): 81–104. Also, see Davide Spina, "Christian Democrats, Architecture and Capitalist Development in Post-War Italy: Società Generale Immobiliare (SGI), 1945–75" (PhD Dissertation ETH Zurich, 2021) and Paola Pozzuoli, *La Società generale immobiliare. Storia, archivio, testimonianze* (Palombi Editore, 1996).

45 See, for instance, "L'Architettura di Luigi Moretti / Interviste e Testimonianze." Alfonso Fossataro interviewed by Carlo Severati, Gabriele Milelli and Salvatore Santuccio in *Parametro*, n. 157 (April, 1987): 29.

46 The INA Casa Plan was a public residential programme promoted by the Ministry of Work Amilore Fanfani between 1949 and 1963 channeling the Marshall Plan Fund for reconstruction after the war. It saw the involvement of hundreds of architects, with the exception of Luigi Moretti.

47 For a full list of the villas designed by Luigi Moretti refer to Carmen L. Guerrero and Salvatore Santuccio, *Luigi Moretti. Le ville: disegni e modelli* (Palombi, Rome, 2009).

48 *Ibid.*, 26.

49 This was probably concurrent to the presence of Moretti in the magazine *Oggi*, that dedicated to him three numbers: in its pages, he could help housewives with banal and everyday problems to be solved through affordable solutions of layout and furniture. Corrado Bozzoni and Daniela Fonti, *Luigi Moretti: architetto del Novecento* (Gangemi Editore, 2015), 375.

mitation not just of his architecture but of his speculative approach toward it.

Moretti's life trajectory served as inspiration for those who aimed to get "in between and take." The so-called *speculatore edile*, the real estate speculator, often mimicked Moretti's journey on a smaller scale. These individuals might have had less formal training in architecture and more modest architectural ambitions, but they shared the same high hopes around property speculation. Their endeavor contributed to reinforcing the villa as a problematic and unsustainable model to idealize and reproduce.⁵⁰ Italo Calvino vividly depicted this character in his novel *A Plunge into Real Estate*, published while *La Califfa* was under construction.⁵¹



A view of 'Villa Triptych's' neighbouring properties, Santa Marinella.
Photo by the author, 2023.

"When Quintus walked up to his villa, once dominating the expanse of the roofs of the new city and the low quarters of the marina and the port...he could see nothing but a geometric superposition of parallelepipeds and polyhedrons, edges and sides of houses, here and there, roofs, windows, blind walls for contiguous servants with only the frosted windows of toilets one above the other."⁵²

50 Often supported by a *Geometra* (building surveyor) is a figure which start acquiring more importance in the Italy of the postwar period specifically in relation to the assistance of planning documentation submission.

51 See, for instance, "L'Architettura di Luigi Moretti / Interviste e Testimonianze." Alfonso Fossataro interviewed by Carlo Severati, Gabriele Milelli and Salvatore Santuccio in *Parametro*, n. 157 (April, 1987): 29.

52 See, for instance, Francesco Tentori, "Ordine per le coste italiane," in *Casabella Continuità*, issue 283 (January, 1964): 8-9; Ernesto Nathan Rogers, "Homo Additus Naturae," in *Casabella Continuità*, issue 283 (January 1964): 3; Ernesto Nathan Rogers, "Creazione del paesaggio," in *Casabella Continuità*, issue 284 (February, 1964): 1.

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