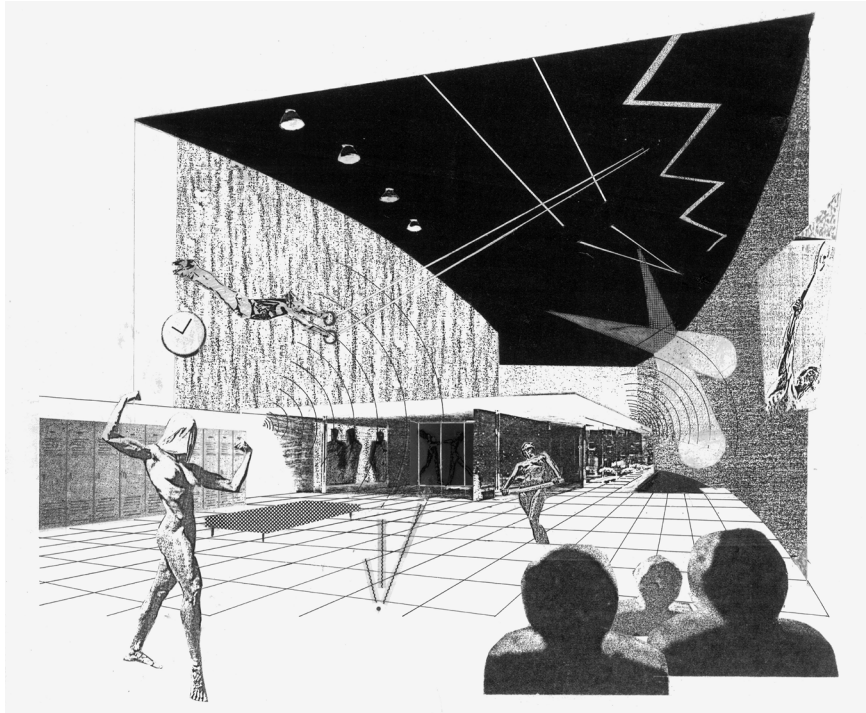


Machine for Pleasure: OMA's Casa Palestra and Physical Culture in Modern Architecture *Miriam Pistocchi*



OMA, collage for *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*, 1985. OMA Archive.

A project created for an exhibition offers a particularly clear insight into OMA's approach to the design of domestic space, beyond what can be gleaned from the firm's more famous realized residential projects from the eighties. Despite its title—*La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*—the project is neither a home nor a gym. Yet, through the wide range of materials produced—from design sketches to the installation itself, including collages and plans—the project makes evident the key elements of OMA's interpretation of the relationship between space and body, between architecture and its inhabitant.

The installation *La Casa Palestra* arose from an invitation that Mario Bellini addressed to the Office for Metropolitan Architecture in 1985, on the occasion of the exhibition *Il Progetto Domestico: La Casa dell'Uomo. Archetipi e Prototipi* (The Domestic Project: The House of Man. Archetypes and Prototypes), held the following year at the Triennale di Milano. Curated by Bellini with the scientific collaboration of Georges Teyssot and a group of historians including Marco De Michelis, Robin Middleton, Monique Mosser, and Anthony Vidler, the exhibition was organized as a preview of the 17th Triennale. This event was one of the most important exhibitions on the theme of domesticity ever hosted by the Milanese institution. The exhibition was structured into two parallel sections: the first primarily presented works of art, furniture, and objects, tracing the Western history of dwelling thematically. Rather than following a chronological order, the narrative was organized around models of habitation: monarchical, aristocratic, naturalistic, bourgeois, popular, artistic, and nomadic; the second section consisted of twenty-six installations by an equal number of architects, each addressing a specific theme. Each participant received a suggestion from the curators, a sort of request. For exam-

ple, Ettore Sottsass was invited to engage with the theme of sleep and rest, resulting in a telematic bedroom populated by devices that transmit information; Massimo Scolari developed the concept of the collector's house by metaphorically bringing together two opposing poles of collecting—oblivion, represented by the head of Hypnos, and the “total collection,” represented by Noah's Ark; Cini Boeri was tasked with reflecting on the dimensions of domestic space; Diller and Scofidio examined the window as a threshold; Peter Eisenman investigated the notion of a house capable of growth; and numerous other architects contributed explorations of similarly critical domestic themes.¹



Left: Massimo Scolari, *La stanza del collezionista*, in *Il Progetto Domestico: La Casa dell'Uomo: Archetipi e Prototipi*, Triennale di Milano, 1986.

Photograph by Matteo Piazza, Triennale Milano Archive.

Right: Cini Boeri, *Le dimensioni del domestico*, in *Il Progetto Domestico: La Casa dell'Uomo: Archetipi e Prototipi*, Triennale di Milano, 1986.

Photograph by Matteo Piazza, Triennale Milano Archive.

The curators requested that the installations be realized at a one-to-one scale, in keeping with the tradition long associated with the Triennale of exhibiting environments at full scale. The production of model interiors had in fact been the privileged medium for presenting furniture, construction systems, and ways of living, from the earliest editions of what was initially called the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts. The fourth edition of 1930 was the first to include the construction of entire model houses, a trajectory that subsequently led, at the eighth edition, to the realization of an actual neighborhood, the QT8. However, while model interiors and model houses presented themselves as actual prototypes with an immediately operative character, the installations of *Il Progetto Domestico* were something quite different, closer to works of art than to concrete housing proposals. This difference has origins and motivations that are worth investigating in order to understand the context in which the exhibition developed.

¹ The others authors involved are Alice Aycock, Andreas Brandt with Jadegar Asisi and Rudolph Böttcher, Andrea Branzi, Arduino Cantafora, Clino Trini Castelli, Achille Castiglioni, Paolo Deganello, Zaha Hadid, John Hejduk, Daniel Libeskind, Juan Navarro Baldeweg, Franco Purini and Laura Thermes, George Ranalli, Umberto Riva, Aldo Rossi, Denis Santachiara, Richard Sapper, and Heinz Tesar.

FROM PROTOTYPES TO *METAFORE ABITATIVE*

The transition from a realistic depiction of domestic space to a metaphorical one was fully established by the time of *Il Progetto Domestico*, but it had taken place gradually over the course of the previous two decades, due in particular to two circumstances. From the late sixties onwards, a new design culture emerged among architects: one that replaced functionality with an interest in the more anthropological and behavioral dimensions of architecture. On the other hand, these were the years in which exhibitions specifically dedicated to architecture became established in Italy. Moving away from trade fairs and international exhibitions aimed at a broad, non-specialist public, architecture entered the museum, addressing a specialized, intellectual, and highly educated audience.

One of the very first examples was the Trigon Biennale that took place in Graz in 1967. Titled *Ambiente/Environment*, this was an art biennale that also involved architects; it enabled designers to express themselves through art—via metaphor, parody, and spatial suggestion—and to focus more on experience than on functionality, on environment rather than on typology.² The term *Environment* is central in this respect and marks a clear departure from the earlier concept of the model house. Significantly, it was also used to designate a section of the exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, organized in 1972 at the Museum of Modern Art, which presented a series of domestic environments, most of which were approached metaphorically and conceptually.



View of the exhibition *Trigon 67. Ambiente/Environment*. Archive Neue Galerie Graz.
Photograph by Eckart Schuster.

In Italy, at the Triennale, the first event that followed this new direction was a little-known exhibition, *La Casa Decorata* (The Decorated House), organized for the 16th Triennale in 1979 and resulting from an invitation-only competition for young architects. The brief focused on the architecture of interior space from a post-functionalist perspective, with “an anthropological attention to the world of objects and environments and to

2 A noteworthy precedent is the installation *Patio and Pavilion*, realized by architects Alison and Peter Smithson, together with artists Nigel Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi, at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1956, on the occasion of the exhibition *This is Tomorrow*. Like *Trigon*, this exhibition also involved the participation of architects within an art exhibition context.

the behaviors they convey to individuals and groups.”³ Among the exhibition’s organizers were also some of the architects who had participated in the 1972 MoMA show: Gae Aulenti, Mario Bellini, and Ettore Sottsass. The exhibition consisted of a sequence of rooms, each presenting its own interpretation of domestic space in a manner that was more artistic and metaphorical than didactic or illustrative, as had traditionally been the case in the history of the Triennale.



Left: Alessandro Colbertaldo, space designed for the exhibition *La Casa Decorata*, XVI Triennale di Milano, 1986. Triennale Milano Archive.

Right: Alessandro Guerriero, *La Casa degli Sposi*, in *Le Case della Triennale: Otto Progetti di Ambienti Domestici Contemporanei*, 1983. Archive of Miro Zagnoli.

The second case was a better-known exhibition: *Le Case della Triennale: Otto Progetti di Ambienti Domestici Contemporanei* (The Triennale Houses: Eight Projects for Contemporary Domestic Spaces) by Franco Raggi and Francesco Trabucco, held in 1983. Eight different architectural practices were invited to design as many houses based on specific themes, some of which had been explored in earlier Triennale editions (the newlyweds’ house, the artist’s house, the holiday house, the luxury house), while other themes were new and reflected a novel design sensibility (the oneiric house, the communal house, the working house, the resting house). Raggi referred to these houses as “*metafore abitative*” (“inhabitable metaphors”), a term that aptly captures their nature: “To the prosaic descriptiveness of the design they oppose the charm of poetic ellipsis and of the symbol applied to the domestic scene.”⁴ This constitutes a deliberate curatorial choice rather than a design decision, which gradually takes shape over the course of two decades, articulated by Raggi as follows:

3 Gae Aulenti et al., *Catalogo. Sistemazione Del Design. Raccolta Del Design* (Milan: Cooperativa il Guado, 1979), 19. The original quote: “[...] una attenzione antropologica al mondo degli oggetti e degli ambienti e ai comportamenti che essi veicolano negli individui e nei gruppi.” Translated by the author.

4 Franco Raggi and Francesco Trabucco, eds., *Le Case della Triennale: Otto Progetti di Ambienti Domestici Contemporanei* (Milan: Electa, 1983), 8. Translated by the author.

The house conceived as an aesthetic/anthropological model, and not merely a functional one, opens the doors to unpredictable and suspenseful design exercises, to daring and invention [...]. In a civilization registering the dramatic divergence between urban/collective and domestic/private spheres, the house increasingly appears as the final space for exercising one's imagination, banal or revolutionary, oppressive or tolerant, rigorous or eclectic. The 'machine for living' of rational design presupposed an external world that was friendly, an environment in harmony with the positive revolutions of progress; it was realized as a mere appendage of a total organism capable of representing the rational and egalitarian transformation of the world. City, factory, street, house, furnishing, furniture, spoon: the epiphanic chain of Saint Anthony, today broken, whose links experience the drama of their fragmentary survival. In these separate universes, the individual today seeks the possible spaces for self-representation, contested between supermarkets, mass media, mail-order catalogs, and tenuous memories, while 'design' proclaims its stratospheric coherences. The meaning of this exhibition must therefore be sought in antithesis to the turnkey project, to the design of ready-made solutions.⁵

Il Progetto Domestico follows precisely the trajectory traced by the preceding exhibitions, commissioning, in the curators' words, "prototypes that are something more, or something less, than a 'project' understood as a solution already prepared to become an industrial product."⁶

MODERN ARCHITECTURE AND PHYSICAL CULTURE

The exhibition catalog included excerpts from the invitation letters sent to the participating practices, in which Bellini outlined the themes to be addressed. The excerpt from the letter sent to OMA reads:

Do you remember Erwin Piscator's bedroom with a punching bag, or Walter Gropius's gym at the 1931 Berlin exhibition? We would like to propose that you accept the 'fiction' of a house today dedicated to the health and beauty of our bodies, and that you design today, once again, a body-building home: that is, a casa palestra. Clearly, there is no possibility of realizing an entire house. It will therefore be necessary either to resort to a series of drawings that can allude to the design of such a house, or else—together with the drawings of the house—to stage scenographically an element of the designed domestic environment: the vibro-massage bed, the staircase system, the mobile corridor, the exercise bicycle with a landscape synchronized on video, for example...⁷

When Bellini said, "designing today, once again, a body-building home," he may be alluding to the Patio Villa project in Rotterdam, with its gymnasium on the lower floor, which OMA had just completed. More likely, however, he was referring to a broader strand of modern architecture that integrated physical culture into the domestic environment. Indeed, the promotion of physical well-being constituted a central concern of modern

5 Ibid. Translated by the author.

6 Mario Bellini and Georges Teyssot, eds., *Il Progetto Domestico: la Casa dell'Uomo: Archetipi e Prototipi*, vol. I (Milan: Electa, 1986), 9. Translated by the author.

7 Bellini and Teyssot, *Il progetto domestico*, vol. II, 12. Translated by the author.

design, and the notion of domestic spaces hybridized with the functions of a gym or exercise facilities recurs in numerous modernist houses.

As Nile Greenberg and Matthew Kennedy have observed, there is a connection between a modern conception of physical culture and the social transformations associated with the Industrial Revolution, during which large numbers of rural inhabitants migrated to urban centers, radically transforming the organization of everyday life. Prior to this shift, physical exercise was primarily associated with military training, although as early as the eighteenth century some theoretical approaches had begun to define how physical activity should be practised in order to cultivate a healthy body and, through it, a healthy mind. This new way of conceiving physical exercise developed within the context of the Enlightenment.

For Rousseau, for example, body and mind were not separated; rather, a healthy and well-trained body was a necessary condition for the proper functioning of reason. Rousseau inspired several educational reformers of the period, who advocated the introduction of gymnastics into educational programs. Among them, Johann Bernhard Basedow founded a school in Dessau in 1774 known as the Philanthropinum. Its educational method emphasized long excursions into the countryside and, although Basedow's experiment was short-lived, it provided an important reference for educational models developed in subsequent decades. In 1792, Johann Christoph Friedrich GutsMuths published his seminal text *Gymnastik für die Jugend* (Gymnastics for Youth), the first book to categorize and systematize physical exercise for a mass population. GutsMuths's book was highly successful and provided the basis for the opening, in 1799, of the first private gymnasium in Copenhagen by Franz Nachtegall. This was the first institution of its kind in Europe not affiliated with a school. GutsMuths also inspired the Swedish educator Per Henrik Ling, who, after reading his writings, moved to Denmark to be trained under Nachtegall before returning to Sweden, where he founded the Gymnastiska Centralinstitutet (Royal Central Institute of Gymnastics) in Stockholm in 1813. Ling introduced significant innovations in the field of gymnastic equipment, devising a series of simple apparatuses that could replace earlier, more cumbersome devices—such as various types of wooden horses, climbing poles, and ladders—with a range of more durable equipment, simpler in both form and use, including wall bars, beams, and the box horse, an early version of the vaulting horse. Ling claimed to approach the teaching of physical exercise through a scientific method. Moreover, he argued that gymnastics was not merely a means of providing the conditions for a healthy mind but also had positive effects on health more generally. Whereas for his predecessors physical activity was closely connected to the formation of the individual and carried a strong moral significance, Ling promoted an understanding of gymnastics primarily as a hygienic practice, that is, one directed towards the general health of the body. Despite the differences in their approaches and objectives, each of these systems of teaching revealed a desire to train, and thereby make use of, bodies, recalling what Foucault described in *Discipline and Punish* as a political technology of the body, the development of which he located between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Foucault described this ensemble of disciplines as “These methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility.”⁸ A trained body is a docile body—and therefore one that can be manipulated—as well as a useful body—that is, one that can be put to productive use. It is no coincidence that these technologies developed alongside the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism. As Foucault writes:

This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic

use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection [...]; the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body.⁹

The body subjected to disciplinary investment is the body of the factory worker, just as it is—although with much older origins—the body of the soldier. A slightly different variation on the soldier's exercise was introduced into gymnastics by the educator Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, who opened the so-called “Turnplatz”—an open-air gym equipped with gymnastics apparatus— in Berlin in 1811. Jahn developed a strong sense of humiliation following the Prussian defeat and the subsequent French occupation of German territories and regarded physical exercise as the means of developing the bodily strength necessary to defend German soil. In this way, Jahn endowed gymnastics with a distinctly patriotic and political significance.

A final example, which introduced another approach to physical culture and had a considerable impact, appears in the teachings of the French theatrical instructor François Delsarte. According to Greenberg and Kennedy, Delsarte developed a new method of actor training based on the idea that states of mind and emotions could be expressed through posture, facial expression, and bodily movement. His method achieved considerable success and, after his death, was continued by his pupils. It was not until 1885, however, that the first book devoted to his method, *The Delsarte System of Expression*, was published. This book exerted a strong influence on the early pioneers of modern dance and helped to establish the conceptual link—still evident today—between theatre, dance, and gymnastic exercises.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, therefore, physical exercise had become a complex phenomenon in which different aims coexisted: artistic and expressive, hygienic and health-related, moral and educational. As noted by Greenberg and Kennedy:

[...] the movements of the preceding centuries had given way to something far richer and more complex than mere gymnastics. At this crucial inflection point, it was no longer simply about what was natural, per Rousseau, but rather a question of what was modern. Emerging in concert with a broader modern movement, the aptly named physical culture was both scientific and poetic, intimate yet collective, and physical, intellectual, and spiritual all at once. Crucially, it was now facilitated by a rich universe of distinctive objects and equipment, increasingly mechanical, designed to enhance both the experience and results of physical exercise. Significantly, unlike the gymnastics movements that had preceded it, the physical culture of the early 20th century had begun to operate in direct dialogue with art—moving ever closer to a form of creative expression, even as it was increasingly embraced by the scientific community as crucial to health and hygiene. In all of this complexity, in its numerous forms, physical culture had begun to take its place as one of the indispensable rituals of modern life.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., 25–26.

¹⁰ Nile Greenberg and Matthew Kennedy, *The Advanced School of Collective Feeling: Inhabiting Modern Physical Culture 1926–38* (Zurich: Park Books, 2023), 13.



Franco Albini, *Stanza per un Uomo*, in VI Triennale di Milano, 1936. Triennale Milano Archive.

From the twenties onwards, a wide range of modern house projects incorporated gymnastic equipment, thereby integrating physical culture into the traditional functions of the domestic sphere. It is worth mentioning some of the most notable examples, beginning with the two cited by Bellini. In 1926, the theater and film director Erwin Piscator commissioned the young Marcel Breuer to redesign his Berlin flat for himself and his partner, the actress Hildegard Piscator. What's interesting is that the bedroom, in addition to a small bed in the corner of the room, included numerous pieces of exercise equipment that were integrated into the furniture design, such as a boxing speed bag, a double wall bar, a medicine ball, and skittles. The second project cited by Bellini is Walter Gropius's gym. This was Gropius's contribution to the *Exhibition on Housing* organized in Berlin in 1931, for the section curated by Mies van der Rohe. Gropius presented the communal areas of an apartment building, which included, among other elements, a space dedicated to physical exercise, equipped with a swimming pool and gym equipment.¹¹

Significant examples can also be found even when looking only at the city of Milan, where the Triennale is located. One notable example is the house the architect Luigi Figini designed for himself and his wife in the La Maggiolina neighborhood. The house showed clear influences from Le Corbusier in terms of style and formal principles and features several terraces. On the upper floor, one of these has been fitted out as an outdoor gym. Turning to the exhibitions at the Milan Triennale, it is important to mention also Franco Albini's *Stanza per un uomo* (A Room for a Man), of 1936. The design consisted of a studio flat equipped with a bed, bathroom facilities, and a desk lit by a lamp, suggesting intellectual work. In addition to these, stored beneath a loft bed were items for physical exercise, while next to the desk a glass panel illustrated a sequence of exercises. Moreover, the previous edition of the Triennale featured the *Casa per un aviatore* (Aviator's House) of 1933, in which a room was dedicated to physical exercise—a project that once again connected physical training to military exercise.

Another particularly interesting example illustrating the importance of physical exercise within the canon of modern architecture is a 1930

11 The same project had already been shown the previous year in Paris, in collaboration with Marcel Breuer and Herbert Bayer.

film by Pierre Chenal, *Architecture d'aujourd'hui*,¹² produced for the French journal on the occasion of its launch. One section of the video was devoted to the architecture of Le Corbusier and was realized with his collaboration; in a fragment of the film, the camera frames the terrace of the Villa Church, where two women and one man were performing a series of gymnastic exercises. The caption of the frame describes it as, “A little physical exercise before leaving for the city.” The three figures, dressed in gym outfits (with the women wearing high heels), were filmed from a low angle as they performed the exercises; the overall composition and the choice of performers inevitably convey something unexpectedly sensual, while at the same time clearly demonstrating the significance of physical exercise within the domestic culture envisioned by Le Corbusier.



Film stills from Pierre Chenal, *Architecture d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Architecture d'aujourd'hui, 1930), 35 millimeter film, 18:05, <https://vimeo.com/67793221>.



Film stills from Pierre Chenal, *Architecture d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Architecture d'aujourd'hui, 1930), 35 millimeter film, 18:05, <https://vimeo.com/67793221>.

12 Pierre Chenal, *Architecture d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Architecture d'aujourd'hui, 1930), 35 millimeter film, 18:05, <https://vimeo.com/67793221>.

A truly unique example of its kind, however, is the Tugendhat House, designed from 1928 onwards as a private residence for Grete and Fritz Tugendhat. This was a detached house built in the city of Brno. The three stories of the house were arranged along a slope, such that the first two stories were partially underground and housed, respectively, the utility areas—such as the laundry and service rooms—and a living area—comprising the living room, kitchen, study, and staff flat. The third floor, by contrast, was entirely above ground, faced directly onto the street, and housed the bedrooms. The most noteworthy part of the house is the living room, which shares several features with the Barcelona Pavilion, designed during the same period. This area alternated between a regular arrangement of cross-shaped pillars in chrome-plated steel and walls arranged more freely outside the grid formed by the pillars: a straight wall of onyx and a curved wall clad in Macassar ebony. The fluid space thus created is enclosed horizontally by continuous elements, such as the linoleum floor and the white-plastered ceiling. Although the house did not include sports equipment and gymnastics were not part of its functional program, its subsequent history became closely intertwined with physical culture and with a specific idea of modernity. Moreover, retracing the house's historical and political trajectory is essential to understanding the project of the *Casa Palestra*, which was explicitly inspired by these precedents.

The house was commissioned in what was then Czechoslovakia by the Tugendhats, a Jewish family of textile industrialists who were highly active in the League for Human Rights—an organization which assisted German political refugees following Hitler's rise to power. For this reason, in 1938—after the expansion of Nazi Germany and its growing influence over Czechoslovakia, and scarcely a decade after the completion of the house—the family was forced to abandon the villa and flee Brno, in the same year that Mies also had to leave Europe. They initially sought refuge in Switzerland and later in Venezuela, where they owned some factories. From that moment on, the events that followed led to the house's severe decline. The villa remained unoccupied for a year, during which some of the furniture was stolen. In 1939, it was confiscated by the Gestapo and occupied by a Nazi official, who sold some of the original furnishings to neighboring residents. In 1942, the house was declared property of the Third Reich and leased to Messerschmitt, an aircraft manufacturer, which installed its technical offices in the building. In this context, the semicircular glass wall of the central staircase was replaced by a brick wall to reduce heat loss, the travertine on the terrace was replaced with pink marble, and shoddy lighting fixtures were replaced. In 1944, a bombing destroyed the glazing, the ebony veneer was stolen, and, for a short period, a Soviet cavalry platoon was quartered in the house. On that occasion, much of the furniture and the linoleum flooring were damaged; the wooden elements were used as firewood and the villa was subsequently abandoned in a state of serious devastation. By the end of the year, the spatial layout of the rooms appeared unchanged, but very little of the original material survived; the plasterwork had deteriorated, swollen from humidity, as had the paint finishes on the metal components.

Following the Yalta Conference in 1945, Czechoslovakia entered the Soviet sphere of influence, and all property belonging to German citizens or Nazi collaborators passed under state administration, including the Tugendhat House. From that autumn, the villa entered a new phase of its existence, devoted to physical activity and body care. After being refurbished, the villa was given to a dance teacher, who used it for her classes for another five years. As Greenberg and Kennedy note: "Though the school's existence was short-lived, this period seems to have established a powerful precedent for the perceived utility of the house in the public imagination, as evidenced by its subsequent uses."¹³ In 1950, indeed, the State Institute for Curative Physiotherapy was relocated to the villa; from 1955 it housed

the Faculty Children's Hospital, specializing in physiotherapy for children with spinal conditions; and from 1958, while maintaining its "vocation" for physical health, it was assigned to the Regional Institute of National Health. For decades, therefore, the spaces of the house accommodated beds, treatment rooms, offices, and surgical facilities. During those years, the characteristic elements of Miesian architecture were adopted by new users for purposes unforeseen by the architect: the fluid spatiality of the interiors—particularly the living room—and the resulting expansive open spaces proved well-suited to the organization of physical activity. Period photographs show pupils or children performing exercises on the continuous floor, in front of the onyx wall. The cruciform columns were used as supports for the exercises, to maintain balance or correct spinal posture, while the large openings ensured both good visibility and an abundance of sunlight, which was considered beneficial against illness at the time.¹⁴



Tugendhat House as a physiotherapy gym, 1956. Courtesy of Michaela Těžká.
Photograph by ©Miloš Budík.

Whether explicitly stated or not, the modern house is also a house for health. But while Le Corbusier viewed his own architecture as standing in explicit opposition to the old, unhealthy architecture of "*Paris historique et tuberculeuse*,"¹⁵ Mies did not articulate his architecture through the same hygienist rhetoric. Questions of health, hygiene, and physical well-being were not explicitly foregrounded as principles of Miesian architectural discourse. Transparency, compositional clarity, clean lines, and spatial openness were primarily articulated in spatial, perceptual, and material terms rather than presented as instruments of a hygienic program. Yet, precisely because of these characteristics, the Tugendhat House could also embody the principles of the health-conscious modernity that was establishing a new relationship between domestic space and the body. The modern house adhered to high hygienic standards, was well-lit—reflecting the belief that sunlight could cure tuberculosis—and well-ventilated to prevent stagnation and disease: it is a healthy house for a healthy body. Physical exercise is thus integral to the construction of the healthy body

14 For further photographs by Miloš Budík, see the villa's website: Villa Tugendhat, "Miloš Budík," accessed August 14, 2026, <https://www.tugendhat.eu/en/vila-online/researcher/obrazovy-archiv/milos-budik/>

15 See Le Corbusier, *La ville radieuse: Éléments d'une doctrine d'urbanisme pour l'équipement de la civilisation machiniste* (Paris: Éditions Vincent Fréal, 1964 [1935]), 100.

that modern architecture accommodates, while simultaneously producing the very body it hosts. According to Beatriz Colomina, there is a strong correlation between the growing interest in physical health and modern architecture. In her book *X-Ray Architecture* she observes: “The modern house was understood not just as a kind of medical equipment, a mechanism for caring for the body, but as a piece of exercise equipment designed to enhance it, to produce a strong and healthy body.”¹⁶ This healthy body, shaped by modernity, is often the productive body, the standardized body of industrial society and the assembly line, capable of inhabiting the *machines à habiter* promoted by modern architecture. What Bellini ultimately asks OMA to do is to update this approach.

OMA’S ANSWER

Based on the suggestions offered by Mario Bellini, OMA took the opportunity to assert its own interpretation of physical culture within modern architecture. As stated in the report of the *Casa Palestra*: “Recent attacks on modern architecture have described it as lifeless, empty, puritanical. However, it has always been our conviction that modern architecture is a hedonistic movement, that its abstraction, rigor and severity are in fact plots to create the most provocative settings for the experiment that is modern life.”¹⁷ The installation presented by OMA consisted of a replica of one of the most representative buildings of modern architecture: the Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich, built for the 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition.



OMA, *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*, Triennale di Milano, 1986. OMA Archive.

The pavilion became the backdrop for the staging orchestrated by OMA. It was scaled down and bent to fit the curved shape of the area assigned within the Palazzo dell’Arte at the Triennale. Its materials were modified, and it was filled with gymnasium equipment and curious elements that Koolhaas derived from a story invented and broadcast within the in-

¹⁶ Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2019), 27.

¹⁷ OMA, “La Casa Palestra,” *AA files*, no. 13 (Autumn 1986), 8.

stallation. At the location where the statue of Georg Kolbe would have stood, a television screen displayed a video in which a series of images flow against the backdrop of a still image of Alex Wall, in the role of narrator, illustrating the vicissitudes of the pavilion. In the story, which appears to draw inspiration from the history of the Tugendhat House, the pavilion was caught up in a sequence of events that included diplomatic affairs, continuous relocations, dismantling, changes of use, and repeated abandonment, as can be inferred from a selection of extracts:

At some point for a few days the pavilion became headquarters for the Republicans but they quarreled about the space, who would be inside, who would be covered, who would be in the open air. In the end, one of them made a plan so ridiculous, with such an absurd profusion of desks, cabinets, chairs, and waiting benches that the result was catastrophic. This experience made the Republicans the first to decide that modern architecture didn't work. The pavilion was abandoned once again. In later fighting it was seriously damaged. [...] The new regime was serious about resolving the issue of the pavilion once and for all. They had good relations with the new government in the pavilion's homeland. They did not like the former Republican's headquarters and decided to send it back to its home by train, as a friendly gesture. [...] First it became part of the décor for one of their propaganda movies. [...] To soften the contours of the marble slabs and approve the acoustics, they were partly wrapped in purple satin. Later the stone was incorporated into the construction of a ministry where it ended up as the floor of the service entrance. [...] A more convenient use was later found as the locker room for a new gigantic sports complex planned for the 1952 Olympic Games that were to cement the friendship between all Europeans, but the games became a victim of the cold war. Only the locker room was built, standing on the abandoned terrain used by random passers-by and soccer fanatics. It more or less became an informal club.¹⁸



OMA, *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*, Triennale di Milano, 1986. OMA Archive.

18 This text appears for the first time in the video shown within the exhibition, but it was subsequently published in the aforementioned issue of *AA files* (OMA, “La Casa Palestra,” 8) and on the OMA website. See: “Casa Palestra,” OMA, accessed April 12, 2025, <https://www.oma.com/projects/casa-palestra>.



Film still from the video broadcasted in *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*, 1985. OMA Archive.

What visitors encountered at the Triennale was presented as the final stage of this long story. The exhibition included pieces from all the preceding stages, fragments from every phase of the pavilion's journey: a record player, velvet fabrics on marble walls, bar furnishings, Soviet posters, gym equipment, and so forth. The set-up did not consist solely of architecture and objects but also included carefully designed sounds, lighting, and smells. In addition, an actress gave a performance during the exhibition's opening. Compared to Mies's pavilion, the materials used by OMA were very cheap, typical of eighties installations: plywood, laminate, and plastic. Consequently, according to Mike Guyer, who worked at OMA at the time and was responsible for the project:

To not create our own space, we looked for a symbol of Modernism, found the Mies pavilion in Barcelona, researched the history of its dismantling, and discovered the mystery of the loss of all the precious materials. We wrote a narrative about how the pavilion finds its way through all the decades and appeared again at the Triennale in 1986, not in the ideal layout of the right angle, but with curved walls, lustful and with a wink integrated into the classical head of the palazzo. The spaces and atmosphere we showed in montages and collages.¹⁹

Presenting the project as a narrative is a common feature in many of Rem Koolhaas's works, who for years collaborated with a group of filmmakers called *1,2,3 Groep*, contributing as a scriptwriter and writer. This approach reflected his view of buildings as moving characters, representing their stories through narrative sequences.²⁰ Another notable aspect is that this narrative is presented as the "real" story: frequently, in Koolhaas's narratives and more broadly in OMA's work, there was a persistent tension between the true and the false, the revealed and the concealed, or, more generally, the notion of unveiling something hidden. One might also recall Madelon Vriesendorp's series of paintings, *The Secret Life of*

¹⁹ Mike Guyer, email to author, August 1, 2025.

²⁰ See Roberto Gargiani, *Rem Koolhaas/OMA: The Construction of Merveilles* (Lausanne: EPFL Press, 2008).

Buildings, which similarly explored secrecy, as well as her painting *Freud Unlimited*, which investigates the city's unconscious by contrasting what appears on the surface with what the city conceals. In the presentation booklet of the *Casa Palestra*, it is similarly noted that the aim was “to shock people into an awareness of the possible ‘hidden’ dimensions of modern architecture.”²¹ Thus, this hidden dimension—the pavilion's true story, the authentic nature of modern architecture, and so forth—becomes a central concern.



OMA, *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*, Triennale di Milano, 1986. OMA Archive.



OMA, *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*, Triennale di Milano, 1986. OMA Archive.

The history of the pavilion can be read from multiple perspectives. On one hand, as has already been mentioned, there are evident references to the events surrounding Villa Tugendhat, which in 1985 saw the completion of its restoration. On the other hand, it should be noted that in 1986, the faithful reconstruction of the Barcelona Pavilion was also being completed on its original site, where it had temporarily stood fifty-seven years earlier. Koolhaas strongly criticized this decision. In his view the recon-

21 OMA, *Proposal for the 17th Triennale of Milano: "A Slice of Modernity"* (Milan: Triennale Archive, 1985), TRN_17PRGD_PA_028, 2.

struction of the pavilion was nothing more than a sham. He wrote: “How fundamentally did it differ from Disney? In the name of a higher authenticity, we researched the true history of the pavilion after the closing of the 1929 World’s Fair and collected whatever archeological remnants it had left across Europe on its return journey.”²² After all, the Barcelona Pavilion and the Brno villa share many common elements: they were constructed in the same years and embody Mies’s idea of modernity, characterized by precious materials—onyx, travertine, chrome-plated steel—a certain spatial fluidity achieved through the composition of walls, and continuous horizontal planes that frame the view. The distance from a classical idea of domesticity and familial warmth that this architecture expresses invites a reconsideration of the atmosphere of domestic space in Mies’s modernity, a domesticity that opens up a broad ambiguity in the use of space, and thus firmly situates the Barcelona Pavilion within the series of Mies’s domestic architectures.²³

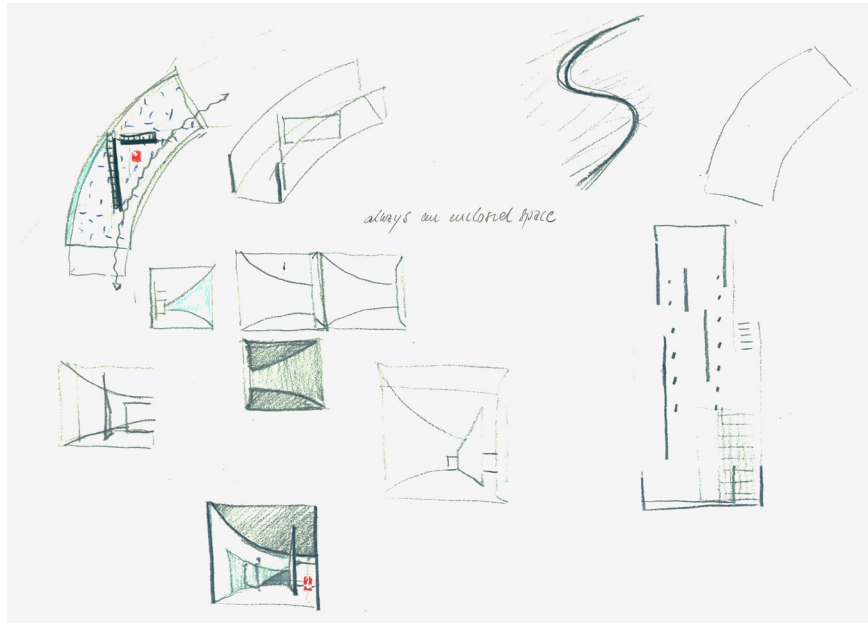


OMA, *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*. Eredi di Luigi Ghirri Archive.

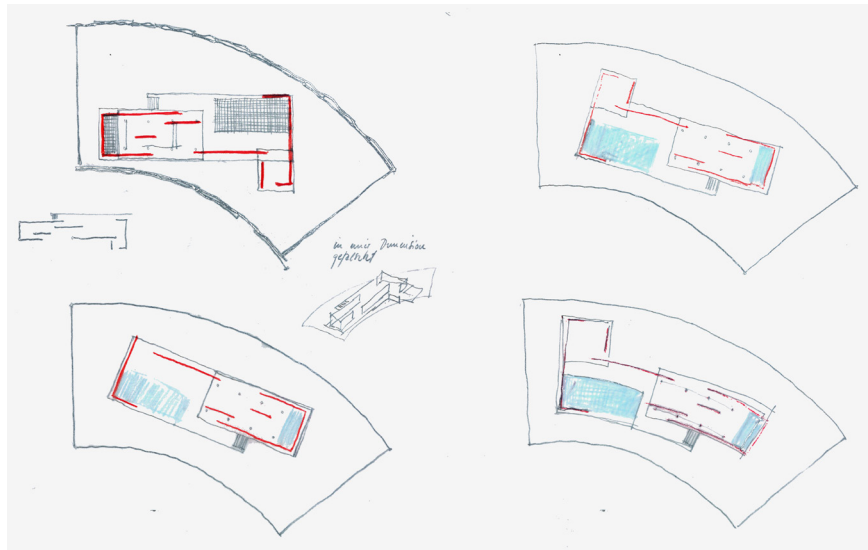
However, since OMA was assigned a portion of the curved section of the Palazzo dell'Arte, the pavilion's floor plan was modified to fit this space, its dimensions were reduced, and the plan itself was bent. This transformation of the original design produced an almost oneiric—perhaps uncanny—space, as suggested by the photographs: a space simultaneously familiar (for instance, in the presence of the cross-shaped pillars), particularly for those who had visited the reproduction in Barcelona, yet transformed and transfigured. From the project sketches, it is evident that Mike Guyer addressed from the outset the challenge of positioning the pavilion within the curved geometry of the assigned site. The initial approach involved merely reducing the pavilion's size, but gradually the idea of curving the floor plan to follow the shape of the allocated space emerged.

²² OMA, Rem Koolhaas, and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 49.

²³ An interesting continuation of this approach is represented by the *Ground-Floor House*, realized with Lily Reich for the exhibition *The Dwelling of Our Time* (Berlin 1931), and by the series of courtyard houses that Mies designed between 1931 and 1938, of which Iñaki Ábalos provides a superb description in the first chapter of *The Good Life*. See Iñaki Ábalos, *The Good Life: A Guided Visit to the Houses of Modernity* (Zurich: Park Books, 2017 [2000]).



OMA (Mike Guyer), sketches for *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*, 1985. OMA Archive.



OMA (Mike Guyer), sketches for *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*, 1985. OMA Archive.

Although OMA produced several versions of the project plan, publications almost always presented the same one: a drawing very different from traditional architectural representations, which includes not only architectural elements, such as walls, frames, and steps, but also lighting, projections, lasers, pathways, and even sounds and smells. The result is a plan densely populated with signs, difficult to read but capable of conveying the density and intensity of the visitor's experience—an intensity that Koolhaas had identified as foundational to his conception of modern life. In particular, the installation and its representation reflect an idea of modernity that Koolhaas had articulated years earlier in *Delirious New York*, where he describes a metropolitan, hedonistic modernity grounded in density and the intensity of experience.²⁴ This reference was further emphasized by the fact that the wallpaper surrounding the pavilion—sometimes damaged, sometimes torn—depicts a city from above, in the manner of a diorama, as if Koolhaas had positioned the pavilion atop a Manhattan skyscraper²⁵.

24 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994 [1978]).

25 See Gargiani, *Rem Koolhaas/OMA*, 70.



OMA, plan for *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*, 1985. OMA Archive.



Project of the Globe Tower, a building designed for Coney Island in New York but never built. Image from *Bomb Magazine*.

Numerous references can be drawn between the *Casa Palestra* and concepts articulated by Koolhaas in *Delirious New York*. One of these is the so-called Paranoid-Critical Method (PCM), originally devised by the painter Salvador Dalí and employed to produce the scenes in his paintings. The method began with an initial phase in which a delirious, paranoid state is invoked, from which images emerge that traverse the unconscious, establishing new connections among elements in an entirely irrational and uncontrolled manner. In the second phase, a critical process intervenes,

reorganizing these images and translating them into drawings, poetry, films, or other artistic productions in a rational way. This method exploits the brain's capacity to perceive connections between elements that are not logically related, thereby revealing unexpected correspondences and surprising combinations. Through delirium and paranoia—understood as a deliberate misinterpretation of reality—the method can produce a new reality, a new set of facts: a *sur-reality*. For Koolhaas, this was precisely what rendered the method so compelling. As he writes in *Delirious New York*, in the twentieth century, “all facts, ingredients, phenomena, etc., of the world have been categorized and cataloged, the definitive stock of the world has been taken. Everything is known, including that which is still unknown.”²⁶ This state of comprehensive knowledge produces a sense of anxiety, and, as Koolhaas later observes:

The PCM is both the product of and the remedy against that anxiety: it promises that, through conceptual recycling, the worn, consumed contents of the world can be recharged or enriched like uranium, and that ever new generations of false facts and fabricated evidences can be generated simply through the act of interpretation. [...] The PCM proposes [...] to make a fresh start—as if the world can be reshuffled like a pack of cards whose original sequence is a disappointment. PC activity is like cheating with the last moves of a game of solitaire that refuses to come out, or like banging a piece into a jigsaw puzzle so that it sticks, if not fits.²⁷



OMA, *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*, Triennale di Milano, 1986. OMA Archive

This approach was highly relevant to the story of the pavilion and to the manner in which it was represented at the Triennale; the final sentence clearly evokes the way in which the pavilion was “fitted” into the curved section of the Palazzo dell’Arte. In Koolhaas’s approach, reality is not necessarily paramount; it is no more real than any interpretation or reproduction of reality. In this context, Koolhaas’s narrative for the pavilion, presented as the “true” story, demonstrates that, ultimately, what mattered was the narrative, with the factual accuracy of events being secondary—and this, whether he likes it or not, makes Koolhaas truly postmodern.

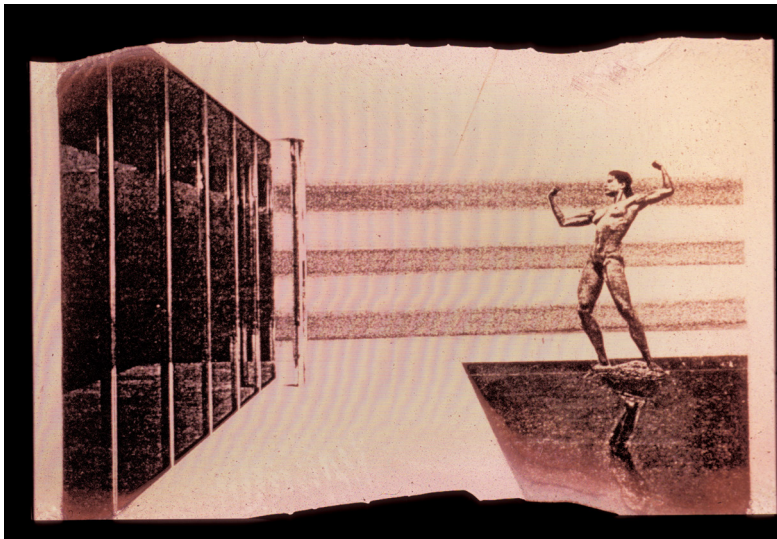
²⁶ Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 241.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 241–43.

Most importantly, it also illuminates his critique of the reconstruction of the pavilion in Barcelona: ultimately, both pavilions—the one envisioned by Koolhaas and the one rebuilt in Barcelona—are simultaneously real and fictive, embodying truth and fabrication in equal measure.

HEDONIST ARCHITECTURE

Faced with a disciplinary conception of modern architecture—rigid and severe, intent on controlling, organizing, dividing, and disciplining bodies—OMA responded with a hedonistic house oriented towards the pleasures of the body: to health, it opposed pleasure. Central to this project is the body—not a generic body, and certainly not a healthy body, but an erotic, provocative body, nonconforming to the discipline of the Modern Movement. It appears in numerous project collages and within the installation itself, which hosted a performance by the actress and dancer Judith Bovenberg.²⁸ Even in the earliest design sketches, this tension is evident, as Mike Guyer highlights: “The sketches show the search for a scenography of human hedonism, of physical education, voyeurism, seen and to be seen—as a contrast to the classical architecture of the Palazzo dell’Arte.”²⁹ More than in the performance itself, the clearest representation of life in the *Casa Palestra* was found in the collages that OMA produced in abundance. These collages are openly inspired by Mies’s own collage style, and it is precisely through this proximity that their differences are emphasized.



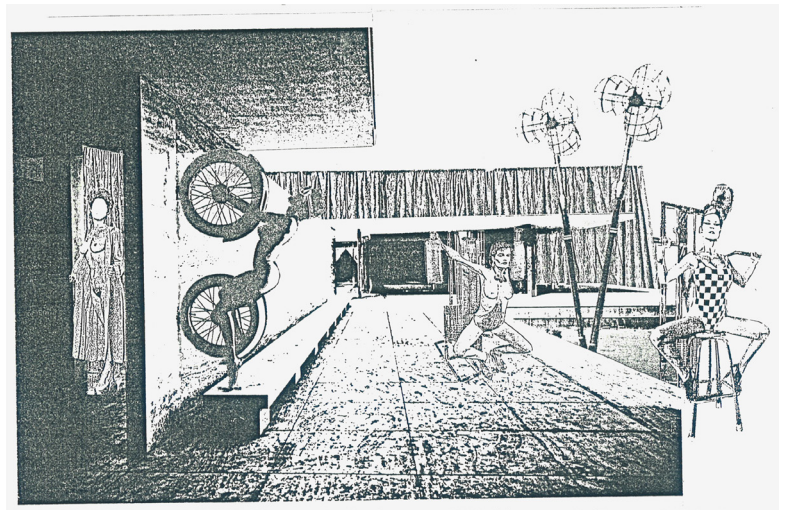
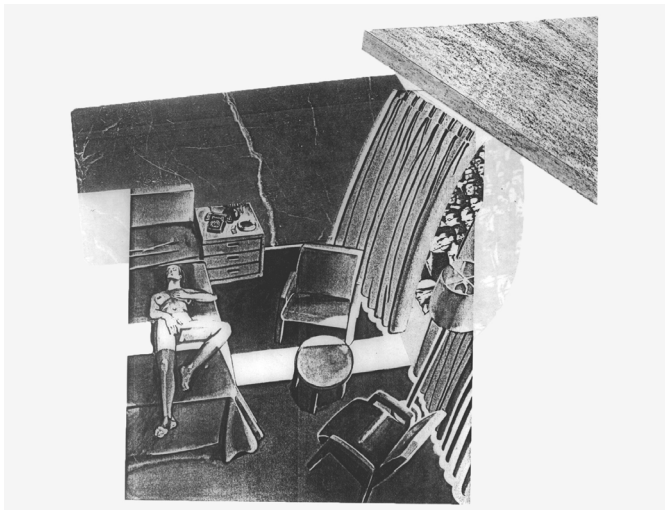
OMA, collages for *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*, 1985. OMA Archive.

One of the most emblematic of these collages depicts a famous photograph of the pavilion: the central perspective view in which one side is occupied by the smaller pool, enclosed by marble-clad walls, and the other by the facing glass façade. In the position where the camera would normally capture Georg Kolbe’s *Der Morgen* statue, we instead see the figure of a female bodybuilder, completely naked, her arms raised in the gesture of contracting her biceps. Another image draws on Mies’s collage of an interior perspective for the 1942 Concert Hall project and superimposes

²⁸ Kees Christiaanse, email to author, February 20, 2025.

²⁹ Mike Guyer, email to author, August 1, 2025.

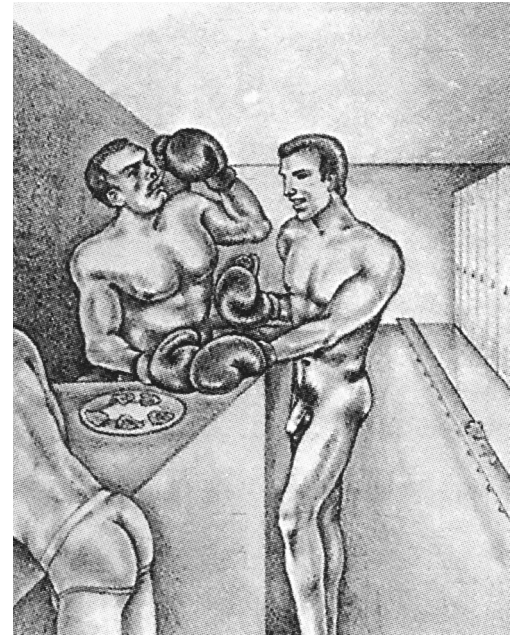
upon it certain elements of the Barcelona Pavilion, such as continuous walls running alongside cross-shaped pillars. In the foreground, a naked woman, her face covered by a white cloth, displays her biceps. The back wall features panels depicting nude figures, while at the top, athletes perform acrobatic maneuvers on trapezes and pole volts. The composition conveys all the eroticism that lies behind physical activity, illustrating the kind of relationship with the body that OMA establishes within modern architecture. While the architectural space in these collages remains Miesian, the athletes and bodybuilders—displaying their strength and musculature—evoke instead the collages of Richard Hamilton. It is, in effect, as if Mies’s architecture becomes the backdrop for Hamilton’s characters. Many collages were produced, although only three or four were ever published and widely circulated; by analyzing even the unpublished collages, it becomes clear that they aim not so much to depict the actual space of the pavilion as to convey an imagined way of life within it—one that is fundamentally hedonistic, grounded in physical exercise and eroticism, where the boundary between the two is frequently blurred. For example, during the exhibition, “an abstract soundtrack of the human voice—somewhere in the ambiguous zone between exercise and sexual pleasure—will complete the spectacle.” Here, this ambiguity was explicitly intentional.³⁰ Another recurring element was voyeurism, evident, for instance, in a collage showing unidentified figures secretly observing through a curtain as a woman touches herself, in a space with a Miesian feel, with the addition of a marble wall, a curtain, and a flat roof. And as seen in the first image of this text, mysterious, shadowy figures watch the events unfolding inside the house through a glass wall.



OMA, collages for *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*, 1985. OMA Archive.

Thus, these were, according to OMA, the subjects of modern architecture, with a clear reference to the athletes of the Downtown Athletic Club, described once again in *Delirious New York*. Within the skyscraper that housed the Club, athletic facilities span thirty-eight floors, while the tenth floor was dedicated to bodily care and enhancement, featuring Turkish baths, massage rooms, sun decks, and barbershops. Koolhaas described these activities as forms of bodily “restoration.” By navigating the Club’s multiple floors, these metropolitan subjects were capable of “transforming themselves into new beings, this time according to their individual

designs.”³¹ The architecture of the Club itself, as Koolhaas argued, constituted an “aleatory form of ‘planning’ life itself.”³² Furthermore, access to the Club was given exclusively to male, urban, single subjects “free from family concerns,” as one advertisement for the Club explicitly states.³³ Within this environment, subjects self-generate and self-construct; the Club functions as an “incubator” for adult men, a “machine for metropolitan bachelors.”



Left: OMA, *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*, Triennale di Milano, 1986.
OMA Archive

Right: Members of the Downtown Athletic Club. Originally titled “A Machine for metropolitan bachelors...” Drawing by Madelon Vriesendorp.

Image from Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

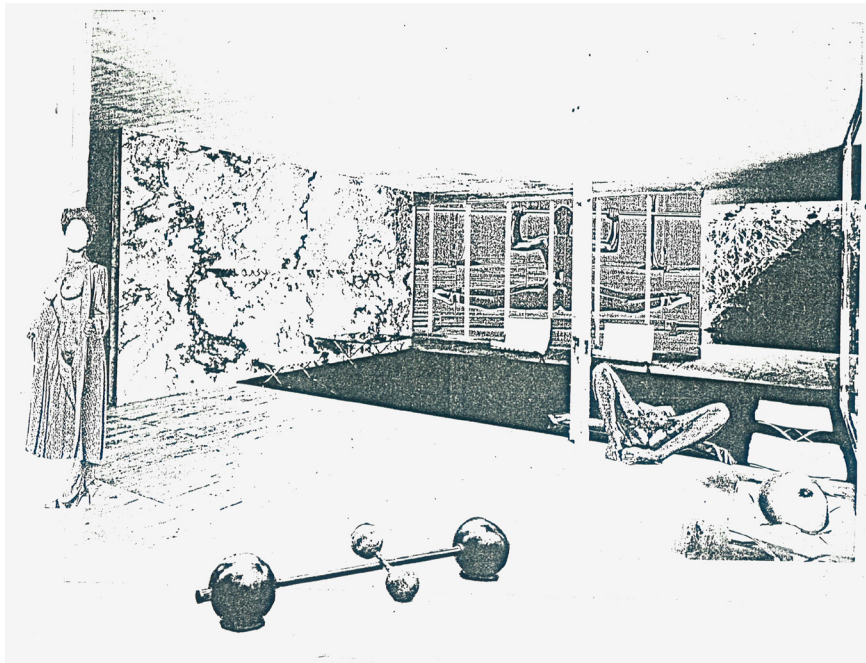
However, there is a notable, if peculiar, lack of correspondence between the characters depicted in the collages and the live performer in the exhibition. In the collages, one could encounter athletes and female bodybuilders exhibiting strength and sculpted physiques, whereas the performer embodies the opposite: slender, largely immobile, and wearing an uncertain, hesitant expression. In the photographic documentation, she is shown lying upon a vaulting horse or dragging herself across the pavilion floor. The character is marked by an ambiguous gender expression, and not by chance, for what unites all of these figures—both those in the collages and the live performance—is a form of gender ambiguity that effectively removes them from predetermined social roles. It is plausible to interpret the performance as a parody, offering both an ironic and critical reflection on the modern subject, as partially confirmed by Guyer, who states: “The gender ambiguity in the sense of hedonism and the ironic criticism of the 80s post-modernism was clearly intended.”³⁴

31 Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 158.

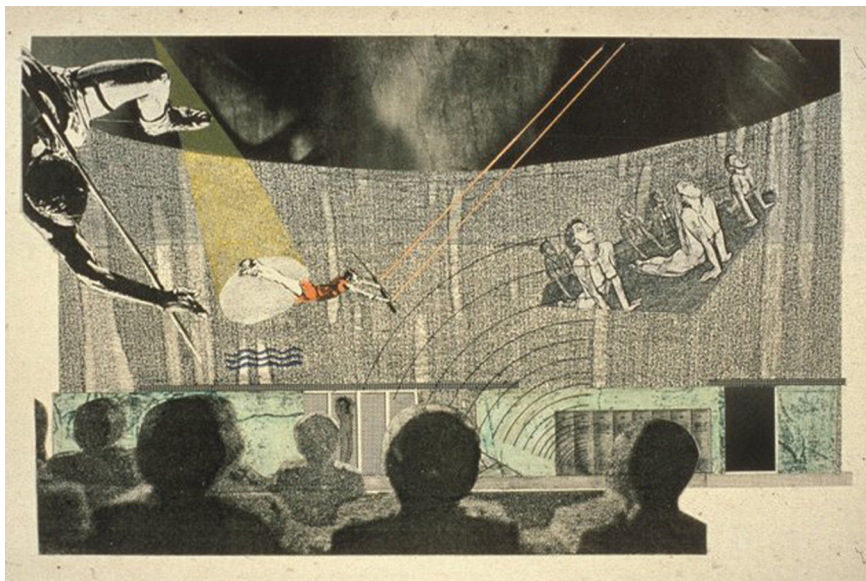
32 Ibid., 157.

33 William Parker Chase, *New York the Wonder City* (New York: New York Bound, 1984), 63; quoted in Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 158.

34 Mike Guyer, email to author, August 1, 2025.



OMA, collage for *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*, 1985. OMA Archive.



OMA, collage for *La Casa Palestra/The Body-Building Home*, 1985. OMA Archive.

Female bodybuilders or metropolitan bachelors: these were the kinds of bodies that inhabit modernity in OMA's vision. They were not the standardized bodies produced by industrial society and mass production, but bodies transformed by metropolitan subjects according to individual and precise designs. For OMA, the modern house was not a family dwelling, in which sexuality and parental privacy are envisaged as forms of social reproduction. Rather, it was a space that hosted a sterile eroticism, oriented towards pure enjoyment. The idea of architecture as a "machine" was not refuted—the house remains a device acting upon its inhabitant—but it was no longer the *machine à habiter*. It was instead the machine for pleasure, the machine for the enjoyment of the body.

AUTHOR

Miriam Pistocchi is an architect. She is a PhD candidate at the Politecnico di Milano and a visiting PhD student at EPFL. Her research focuses on the representation of domestic space in architecture exhibitions.

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