

THE ARCHIVE SPEAKS VOLUMES

# PALAZZO GRASSI IN VENICE



**FONDAZIONE  
MAIRE**

# A restoration respecting the past signed by Gae Aulenti

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The palace seems to levitate over the Grand Canal, suspended between light and water in the continuous movement of shimmering fluidity. Mutable, iridescent, elusive.

Gaetana Aulenti, called Gae, looks at its graying, dull facade. And to think that once upon a time, the white stone, which was brought to Venice from Istria to build the most beautiful residences of the Serenissima, was all a glow.

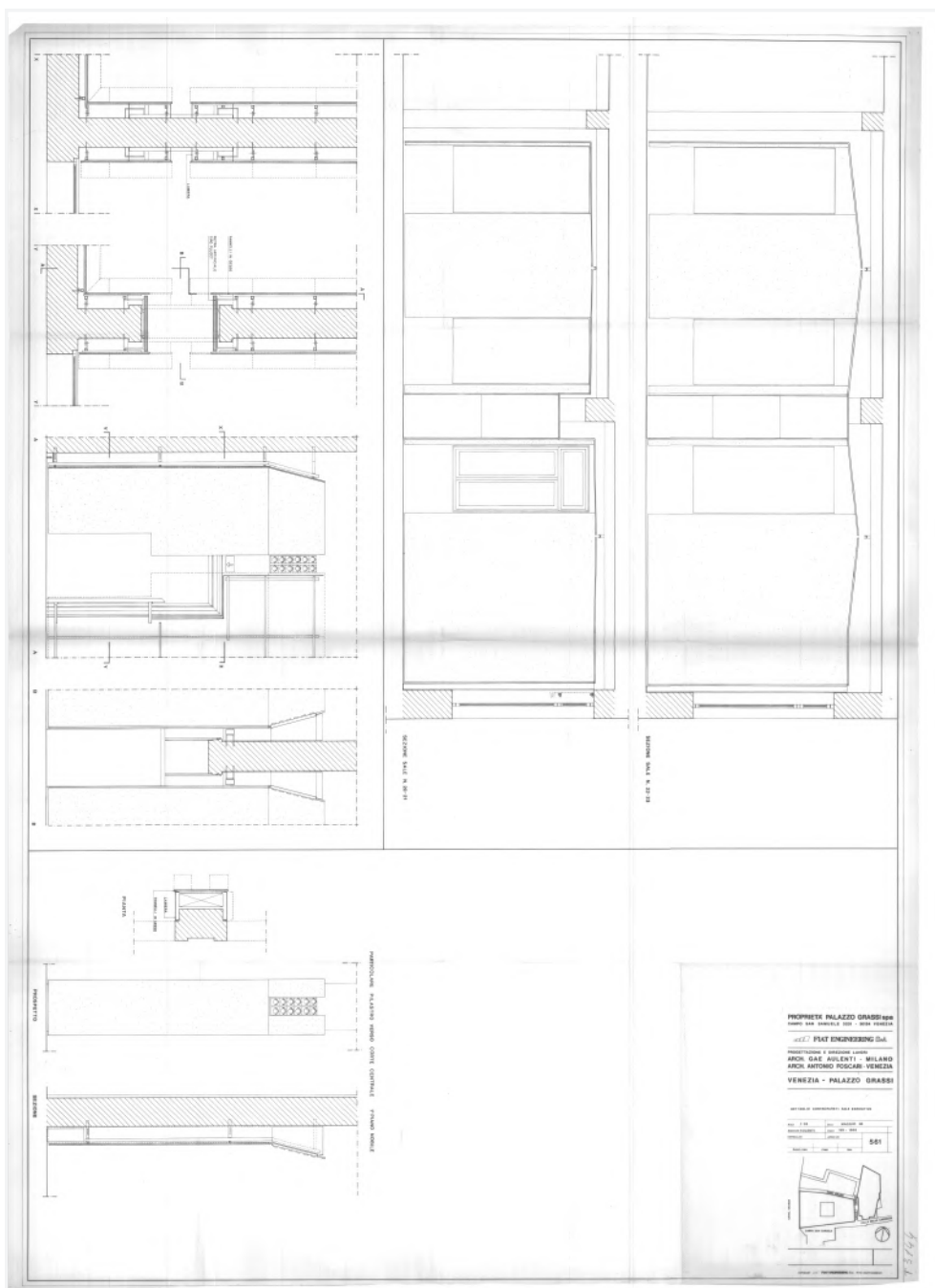
Inside, the private quarters and large reception rooms, arranged around a rectangular courtyard, are cluttered, confused, and dark. After an endless series of changes in ownership and subsequent rearranging - including those of entrepreneurs Vittorio Cini and Franco Marinotti, who ran the International Center of Art and Costume there between the 1950s and the 1970s - it is no longer possible to discern how much is still original of that old neoclassical residence, completed twenty-five years before Napoleon ended the independence of the Venetian Republic in 1795.

Gae surveys it all with the foreknowledge of her expert gaze and multitasking skills. A few years earlier, colleague Vittorio Gregotti wrote that she, as an architect, designer, and set designer, has managed to consolidate these three activities, which govern the interior as the stage of contemporary life, giving them a unity of language and meaning.

It is therefore time to set to work to make the jewel that is Palazzo Grassi shine: the attorney Gianni Agnelli, as the chairman of Fiat and new owner of the precious property, entrusted her with the design and direction of the project, together with another professional and scholar of architectural history, Antonio Foscari.



It is March 11, 1985, the construction site opens like a curtain, and she, Gae - a “young” 57-year-old, internationally famous for her architectural projects known for being an organic whole between decoration and structural layout, always “nourished” by a deep study of literary, historical, and artistic research - jumps on stage with the lightness of a woman, intellectual, scientist, artist, letting her signature style burst forth. Beginning with a historical reinterpretation of the setting, because - as she always repeats - “very often the roots are concealed, hidden underground, and one must know how to recognize them.”



In thirteen months - with the aim of respecting most rigorously the original typology of the building by restoring its original atmosphere and splendor while at the same time adapting it to the regulations in effect for buildings open to the public - Gae Aulenti and Antonio Foscari disassemble then reassemble the palace, not before having studied in great detail the other works of Giorgio Massari, to whom we owe the initial design of Palazzo Grassi, as well as the compositional details of the structure and other buildings of the same period.

It starts with the restoration of the original masonry, scarred by holes and cracks caused by the practice of burying the utility systems within them. Where possible, Gae tries to preserve them or replaces them with bricks salvaged from a large 19th-century building in the process of demolition.

New systems, including alarm and air conditioning installations, are mounted in moldings, casings and crawl spaces, built into the structure, disappearing from the outside and not affecting the integrity of the original masonry.

A winning result - "all of the essentials invisible to the naked eye" - achieved through meticulous systems planning, paired and integrated with the architectural design of the venue.

The floors slabs and the stained-glass courtyard window are also reinforced, and many elements of the building are repainted in the aquamarine, which stands out against the pink marmorino (a decoration in stucco painted to imitate marble).

After a year and a bit, Palazzo Grassi is shining. Gae gazes fondly at that fragile creature, which has also regained its radiance on the outside with a thorough cleaning of the Istrian stone, once again gleaming white along the Grand Canal.

On April 15, 1985, the curtain is lifted on a new, but still ancient, Palazzo Grassi, which for many years will be the home of colossal exhibitions, such as those on the Phoenicians, the Etruscans, and



Futurism, which will attract millions of visitors from all over Europe.

Gaetana Aulenti has been gone for a long time now, but thanks to her, “her palace,” which has been owned by French businessman François Pinault since 2005, retains a remarkably similar appearance to the original, still able to tell us about those grandiose times when Venice was Serenissima.

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