

THE ARCHIVE SPEAKS VOLUMES

TOWER WITH A VIEW IN MARINA DI MASSA

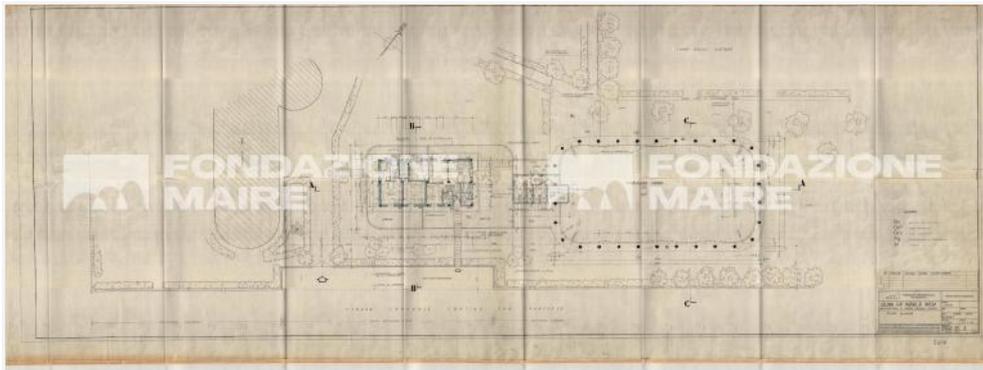


**FONDAZIONE
MAIRE**

Edoardo Agnelli's seaside colony

“The walls, the nuns' wings, and the children's clothes all in white, with an almost pure white light flooding everything.” This is how that snow-white skyscraper appears to her eyes – the eyes of an 11-year-old girl whom everyone calls Suni – contrasting the green of the Apuan pine forest of Marina di Massa, and on haze-free days along the coast, visible from La Spezia to Viareggio.

These are the early summer days of 1934, and the little girl is on a family outing on that stretch of the Tuscan coast where the strange 52-meter-high cylindrical building was inaugurated the year before, numbering no less than 17 stories high, and making one's head spin when looking straight up to the top.



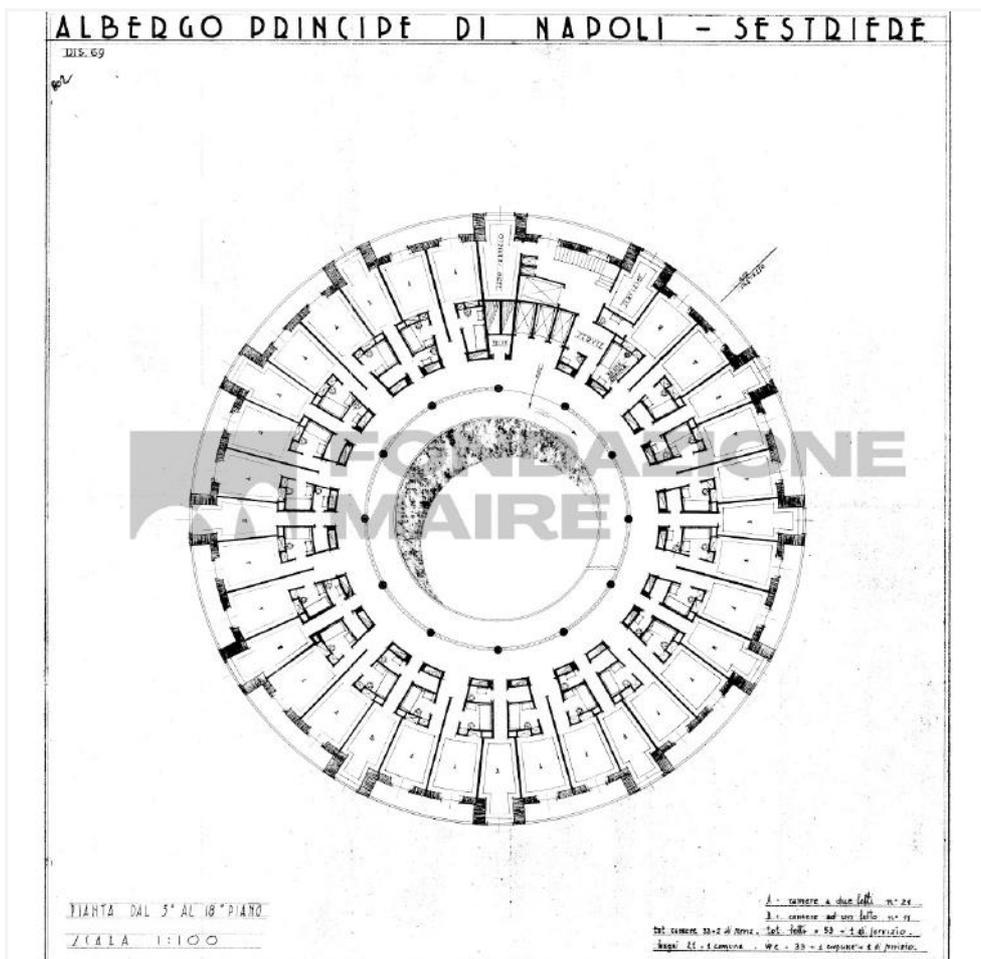
Suni is Susanna Agnelli, the daughter of a generation of entrepreneurial geniuses, and that cylindrically shaped mansion designed by architect Vittorio Bonadè Bottino is a seaside holiday camp designated to the summer holidays of the children of the workers and employees of Fiat, which at the time already numbered 27,000 employees.

The Massa skyscraper, blossoming in just over three months like the “magic beans” in the fairy tale “Jack and the Beanstalk” thanks to a team of 1,000 men, is equipped with a 100-meter sandy shore with beach facilities, drinking fountains, toilets, playground equipment, able to accommodate 750 children aged 6 to 12. Their care is largely entrusted to nuns of the order of Don Bosco,



according to the Salesian pedagogical manifesto based on cheerfulness and respect for authority.

On July 23, 1933, there is a big party in Marina di Massa. The Fiat Tower, as the locals begin to call it, glitters in the sun; to many others it is the Balilla Tower, as the Regime wants it to be known. Suni is not present that day (though her impressions can be read in the book “To the Mountains and the Sea. One Hundred Years of Children’s Holiday Camps”, by Gian Carlo Jocteau, Fabbri publishers, 1991), but her beloved father Edoardo is there, a 41-year-old lawyer and son of Senator Giovanni Agnelli who was the promoter of the holiday camps as a corporate welfare system, in attendance among the flickering tricolor flags and numerous local dignitaries.



Edoardo is smiling on that summer day, his eyes looking up toward the Fiat Tower and the sky beyond. He will die in a plane crash two years later, also in July, and the marine resort will be dedicated to him.



The dozens of visitors who explore the holiday camp's spaces discover to their surprise that the Fiat Tower is a single dormitory: in fact, the dormitory rooms are located within the tower itself along a large helix-shaped walkway, each spiral comprising of two dormitories containing 20 beds each, the nun's and attendants' quarters, a group of washbasins and a group of toilets. The entire facility is served by an elevator of sufficient capacity to transport 30 children, one nun and an attendant.



The resort's unique design actually has two “twin brothers”: four years later, in New York, the Guggenheim Museum would be built in the same way, and in 1937 the Turinese architect would also repropose the cylindrical form for the FIAT mountain colony in Salice d'Ulzio.

But the brilliance of Massa's marine holiday camp lies underground. Namely, the very foundation made of the highest quality materials, as is the entire structure: gigantic trapezoidal pyramids joined together by a huge concrete slab resting directly on the sand, one and a half meters below sea level. A layout that creates, using an interplay of static and hydrodynamic counterthrusts, a sort of vacuum at the pressure points, protecting the building from outside elements.

A masterpiece of engineering studied by engineers from all over the world, particularly the Japanese, which, with the Fiat Tower having been turned into a vacation retreat, is after ninety years still intact: the White Tower has prevailed in its challenge against time, it is still there, elegant, bright and radiant, reaching toward the sky.

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