

# The father of mountain Modernism

Architecture | Carlo Mollino

designed cars, planes,  
furniture and Alpine homes,  
writes *Edwin Heathcote*



We might think of the world of ski architecture as a convivial place of warm blankets, roaring fires and cheesy dips. And I'm sure some of that went on in these buildings. But it is not how Mollino lived back in Turin. There he designed himself, over the years, seven apartments, mostly unlivable. But in their mix of Surrealist fittings (including a phallus coat hanger, padded walls, lip-shaped sofas, mirrored walls and disembodied limbs) and dreamy Art Nouveau-inflected furniture, they constituted a theatrical world of illusion and have become more influential with time. These were interiors for accommodating the imagination rather than the body, irrational responses to the Modernist desire for pure function.

At Via Napione 2 (1960) — now the Casa Mollino museum — he created the ultimate fantasy, a space divorced from the exterior and conceived solely as a background for a series of photographs. Mollino had already used his interiors as sets for staged scenarios, with women friends posing for highly stylised and charged photos, but he used this apartment to snap Polaroids of strangers. He would cruise the streets in his limo, stopping occasionally for his chauffeur to offer money to women to come back to the apartment. There Mollino would create elaborate scenes, sometimes clothe the women in garments of his own design and snap them in the format that Andy Warhol would make his leit-motif in New York.

The 2,000 pictures, only found on Mollino's death, constitute an incredible archive of a fetishistic and unsettling imagination. In one, a woman in a corset kneels on a chair in front of a typewriter, her naked backside inscribed with Mollino's initials. In others, semi-naked women sit astride his own chairs, posing with suggestive cigarette holders. Certainly they appear misogynistic but they continue to exert a powerful pull on fashion designers and collectors.

There is speculation, notably by Fulvio Ferrari, founder of the Casa Mollino museum, that the architect — who became fascinated with the occult in his later years — had designed his own home for the afterlife, filling it with meaningful objects and ritual spaces as the ancient Egyptians had done for their tombs in schema laid out in the *Book of the Dead*. With his pencil moustache and deep, dark eyes, there was perhaps always something a little intense and sinister about him. His friend Bruno Zevi wrote in an essay that Mollino was “a man surely in league with the devil”. And he was being nice. Perhaps the designs worked and Mollino is in an afterlife, enjoying the prices his pieces fetch at auction and reveling in an appreciation that was largely lacking in his lifetime but seems, now, assured.

*Edwin Heathcote is the FT's architecture and design critic*

There is a story that the only attendees at Carlo Mollino's funeral were a cluster of sex workers. It is possible that he had paid them to be there. And it is possible that he designed their mourning clothes. Like so much about Mollino's intensely private life, it will remain a mystery.

Yet this architect is one of design's great cult figures. He was also a stunt pilot, race car driver, engineer, furniture designer, Surrealist, fetishist, occultist and a champion skier. A novelist wouldn't dare create such an unlikely character. Perhaps because his designs have become such a sensation at auction and his fetish photography has become so influential in fashion and visual culture, the importance of the mountains, of skiing and of Alpine architecture in his oeuvre has been downplayed.

But they are at the heart of his development as a designer — and the evolution of mountain Modernism. Also, and rather remarkably for such an avant-garde architect, his work foreshadows ideas about sustainability and a Modernism eager to learn from the vernacular rather than replace it.

Mollino, who died 50 years ago this year, was born in Turin in 1905. He worked out of a small office with his father's brass nameplate outside the door, which he never changed until the end of his life in 1973, two decades after his father had died. Eugenio Mollino, an architect, engineer and a man of some means, seems to have had little but contempt for his son, calling him a “feckless good-for-nothing”.

Yet he also taught the young Carlo everything. The aeroplane company Eugenio part-owned facilitated his son's daredevil stunt-flying and the

(Clockwise from top) Mollino's Lago Nero lodge (1947) infused traditional Alpine design with Frank Lloyd Wright modernity; Casa Garelli, his Duchamp-esque 'ready-made'; his home in Via Napione, Turin, now a museum; Mollino in the 1930s; his Bisiluro 'Twin Torpedo', designed in 1955, competed in the 24-hour race at Le Mans

Berikalla-Bressano; Marcello Mariani; Alessandro Nasser; Museo Nazionale della Scienza e della Tecnologia Leonardo da Vinci

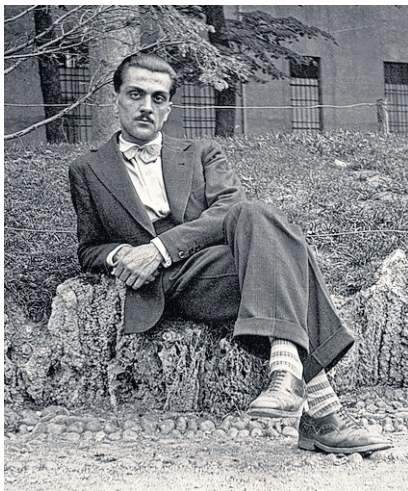


designs for his own planes; the dark-room he built allowed Carlo to develop a life-long passion for photography; and the skiing Carlo learnt at his father's side led to a serious sporting career in which he competed first regionally and then nationally.

His specialism was downhill skiing and he defined techniques that became mainstream, codifying them in a best-selling 1951 book *Introduzione al Discismo* (An Introduction to Downhill Skiing). To illustrate it, he photographed himself on skis in his studio and turned these into stylised, dynamic drawings. Turning his camera on the slopes, he recorded the “arabesques”, the patterns made in the snow by skiers, their traces reinterpreted as abstract images of speed carved into the landscape.

Mollino effectively aestheticised skiing, transforming it into a kind of art, a mode of expression. Greatly influenced by the speed-freak language of the early 20th-century Italian Futurists and their obsessions with motion and machinery, Mollino dragged their passions into the mid-century, toning down the fascism.

He channelled some more of his seemingly inexhaustible appetite for motion into automobiles. The remarkable-looking Bisiluro “Twin Torpedo”, which he designed in 1955, competed in the 24-hour race at Le Mans that year, resembling a souped-up catamaran hull on wheels. When not racing on the track, Mollino would pilot his plane over the Alps and point his camera down,



framing the snow-covered peaks with the struts and wings of his plane, the landscape always seen through the aperture of technology and filtered through a machine and at great speed.

It is impossible to look at his organic, twisting, swirling, hand-carved furniture designs without thinking of the construction of an aeroplane wing or the aerodynamic curves of a propeller.

It is a little surprising then to return to the snow-covered surfaces below and find that this speed and tech-obsessed architect conducted deep studies of local traditional building methods. His meticulous 1930s drawings of “rascard” houses in Italy's Val d'Aosta brim with energy. He records the exact cuts and joints of the timbers, the piling up of structure and the log walls.

Despite the established form of these homes, Mollino clearly perceived a kind of modernity in the economy of their construction, the way they utilised the materials at hand and jutted out into the landscape, overshooting their rocky masonry bases.

So when he came to design an Alpine house, the Villa Lora Totino (1946), you can sense in his drawings those folk forms, but they are sharpened up, laced through with a little Frank Lloyd Wright and a touch of California modern. This one wasn't realised but the ideas resurfaced in 1947's Lago Nero ski-lift and lodge (one of the few of his buildings to survive). An odd, sculptural structure in concrete and timber, its roof resembles a plane from some angles, its concrete supports look like landing gear and a huge deck sweeps out to catch the skiers and view the landscape.

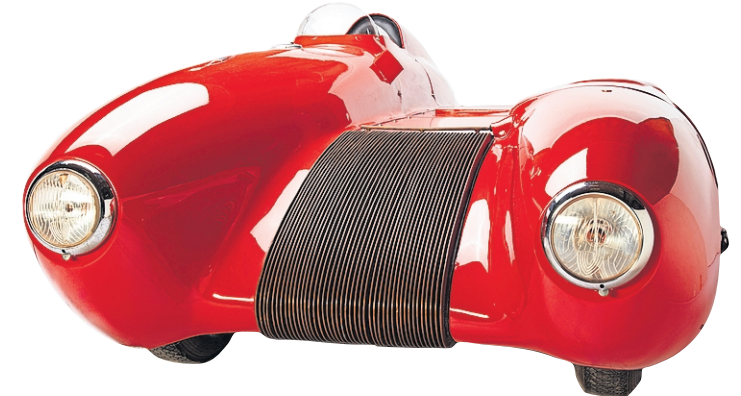
The motifs re-emerged with a bang in his house on the Agra Plateau, Lombardy (1952), a long wooden cabin elevated on elegant concrete legs, a little like a canopied coffee table.

With the Casa Garelli in Champoluc (1963-65), however, he does something different. Channelling Marcel Duchamp,

Look how he places Alpine lodges on the rooftops of Modernist towers. He turns them into Surrealist gestures

he creates a “ready-made”. Just as the artist appropriated everyday objects as artworks, Mollino took an existing Alpine house, disassembled it and moved it across the way, recreating it like a kit, using all his knowledge of traditional joinery. The vernacular suddenly becomes a piece of modern art.

If this sounds a little extreme as an interpretation (others had reassembled buildings before him), just look at the way he places Alpine lodges on the rooftops of Modernist towers. He turns them into Surrealist gestures. In his early designs for a tourist village in Cervinia (1945-47), he crowns a sweeping international-style slab with a steep-pitched roofed house, dangling a little precariously over the edge, as if it were about to jump.



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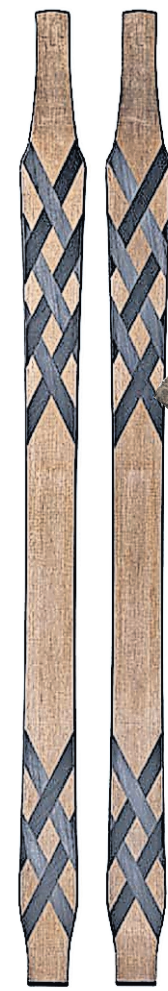
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