

Architecture, Design and More

Mario Bellini

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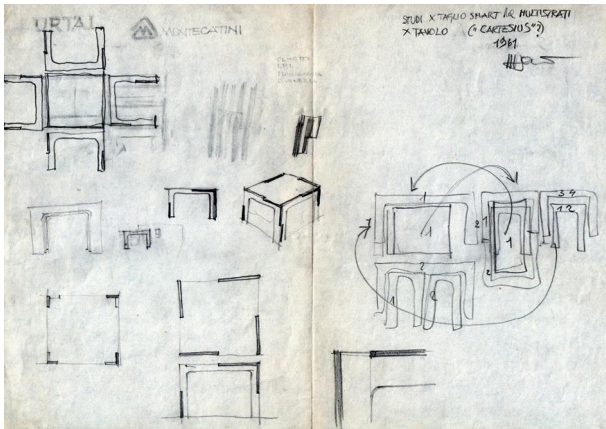
I started drawing at the age of five, a time when I always had pieces of paper and pencils in my hands, and I used to draw the most bizarre, the funniest things that came to my mind. I remember that I used to enjoy making objects look like humans, such as, for example, small funnels that I added

human legs and arms to; funnels that filled themselves with water from the top, making it come out at the bottom.

The examples I will go on to describe represent just a small selection of my major works, accompanied by various drawings and sketches made, precisely, during the design process. The aim, in fact, is that of showing how the creative idea takes shape, following the commission by a client or in relation to a competition, through a conceptual flow that starting from the mind reaches the hand, transforming itself into expression on a sheet of paper. In particular, one can draw well, or badly, but in general for an architect or a designer it is necessary to know how to draw well, that is,

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Fig. 1. M. Bellini, *Cartesius table for Pedretti, 1960*. Study sketches and photograph of the object.



to demonstrate a certain talent in the field of the figurative arts. When a young person shows up in my studio, the first thing I'm interested in seeing is how he draws; I'm not pleased if I see that he draws badly, because I understand that, in this case, there is a lack of correspondence between the graphic talent that he should have, and his ability to use it in the specific sector of project design.

I would like to start with my first significant project, the one for which I won the first *Golden Compass Award* of my life: it is the project for the *Cartesius table* designed for Pedretti in 1960 (fig. 1). I thought that the original drawings had been lost, but then fortunately they were found again, and they describe very well my way of proceeding in the conceptual phase. In particular, this strange table was made by cutting out all of its components from the same, single block of plywood and then assembling them together. Starting from this solution, several different versions were developed, that also differ for what regards the dimensional aspect.

Then there is a second table that I made a few years later, in 1976, strangely designed without first using the tools of drawing. The *La Corte table*, realized for Cassina, was designed directly, by making gestures with my hands, as I was sitting in the company's laboratory, without a real preliminary graphic elaboration. At a later time, I found myself observing the realized object, which is also in my own personal office, and I took a pencil and a piece of paper and did a 'portrait' of it (fig. 2). For Cassina, in the following year, 1977, I designed another table that I called *La Rotonda* (fig. 3). Unlike the previous one, in this case the drawing permitted understanding the behavior of light and shadows, also generating in me a particular satisfaction/challenge dictated by a not so simple representation. I then made a different version of this object, very large, for the Chinese market. The Chinese, in fact, dine with many people seated around a round table, who rotate a central platform to serve themselves. Instead of ordering from a menu, they pick their food directly. The central part of my table is made of glass and is flush with the wood surface: it is possible, therefore, to rotate it with a finger, loading it with everything needed.

For B&B Italia I then created the *Bolt table* in 2017. Of this project, there are several variations of the same idea. I made a series of sketches, a series of drawings that you usually make when you are on the phone and your hand never stops moving. I wanted to make a table from the idea of interlocking, jointed wood, but using metal, with L-profiles of stainless steel or corten, that is, an iron alloy that, when it oxidizes, stops making rust, and bolts. The name *Bolt*, is

Fig. 2. M. Bellini, La Corte table for Cassina, 1976.
Sketch and photograph of the object

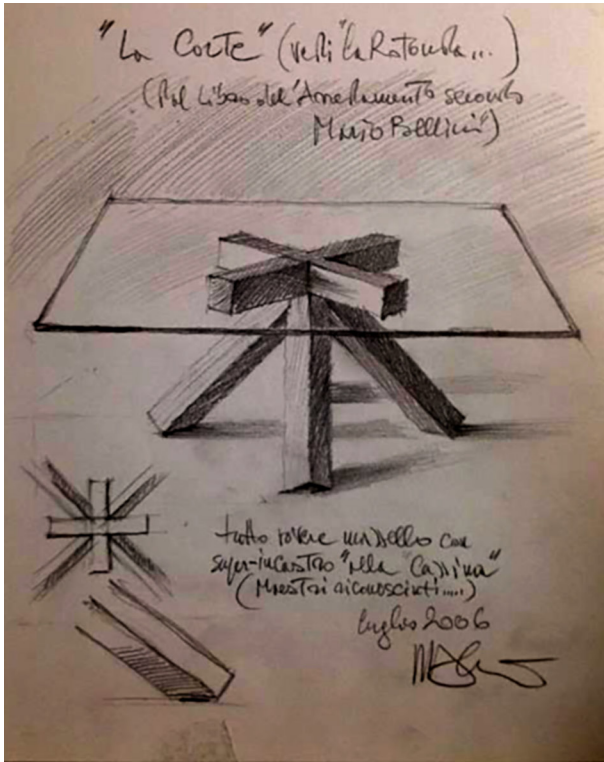


Fig. 3. M. Bellini, La Rotonda table for Cassina, 1977.
Sketch and photograph of the two solutions.

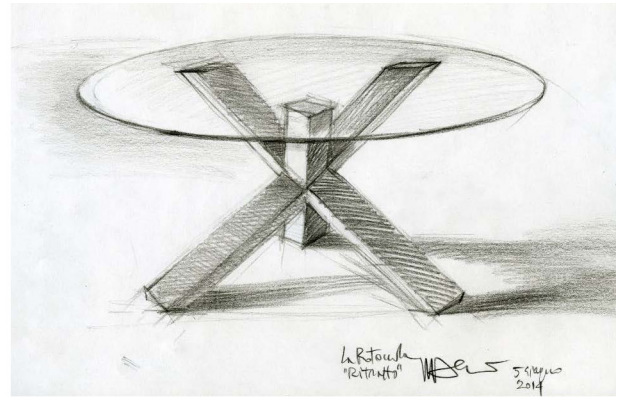
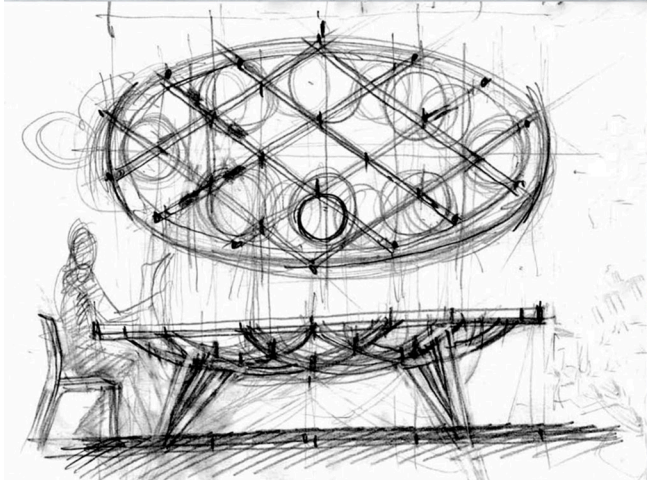
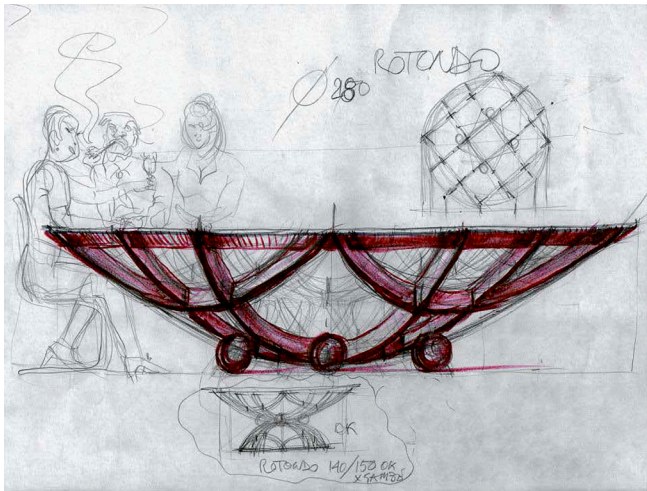


Fig. 4. M. Bellini, Opera table for Meritalia, 2014. Study sketches and photographs of the two solutions.



in reference to its characteristic double bolts. In this case, I had drawn it first, to see how it could work and then a T-profile variant was made. Usually my sketches are 'real' but it can also happen that I make simulated sketches. For example, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York dedicated a solo show to me in 1987, after having received the compliments for the works destined to the exhibition, they peremptorily asked me to also send their preparatory sketches. But I didn't have any sketches of those projects, because I had created them, each time, directly in the workshop. Since they kept on asking for them insistently, one Sunday I decided to take some large sheets of paper and I invented various beautiful "preparatory" sketches, claiming to have found them in the archive.

The 2015 *Cab Lounge* for Cassina, instead, is a long-chair with a footrest designed from many real research sketches, not 'portraits' gradually supported in an interactive way by the first prototype realizations.

In 2014, I created a fairly large round table for Meritalia, a medium-sized company where very talented people worked. It rests on just four spheres and is made of interlocking oak ribs, as in the carpentry framework of a boat's hull, of which there is a series of drawings I made during the conceptual phase, also drawing people around it (fig. 4). The table is called *Opera*, a name that makes you think of the under-works (*opera viva*) or the upper-works ("*opera morta*"), typical of boat hulls. I began by drawing an oval table, imagining the crisscrossed ribbing that supported a border on which to rest a large crystal table top, with an interlocking structure, later realized in many variations of essence and color.

Again for Meritalia, in the same year, I realized some sofas which I called *Freud*, in thinking of the direct relationship that there is between the sofa and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. I imagined arms and backs folded back on themselves but opened as if they were human, revealing a different heart, a hidden intimacy of a different color and another type of finish. From opaque black, for example, they open revealing a shiny red of silk. From the initial drawing, the one the idea was born from, its realization was achieved. In some of my sketches, as we often see, I insert disturbing characters, with long devil ears, and enigmatic expressions.

From my innate passion for geometrically complex elements that twist and turn came the *Tango table* for the brand MGM (*Marmi Graniti Mariano*) (fig. 5), designed in stone or marble and realized in 2016, with a helical form that ends in a flared cup and pierced like a fountain plate, to support a crystal disk.

Also in this case there is a sketch from 2015, of a version marked by bold veining from which in 2016 I created the *Torsion table* from a sketch made up of diagonal lines representing intense veining. Constructed with six twisted elements, like olive-wood rudders, that are connected in an invisible manner and bound together by this large, very heavy crystal table top which stabilizes the entire object with its weight. The table was produced by Natuzzi, which greatly appreciated the work itself, as well as its reference to the place where the company is located, the land of olive trees.

Fig. 5. M. Bellini, *Tango table* for MGM (*Marmi Graniti Mariano*), 2015-2016. Study sketches and photograph of the object.

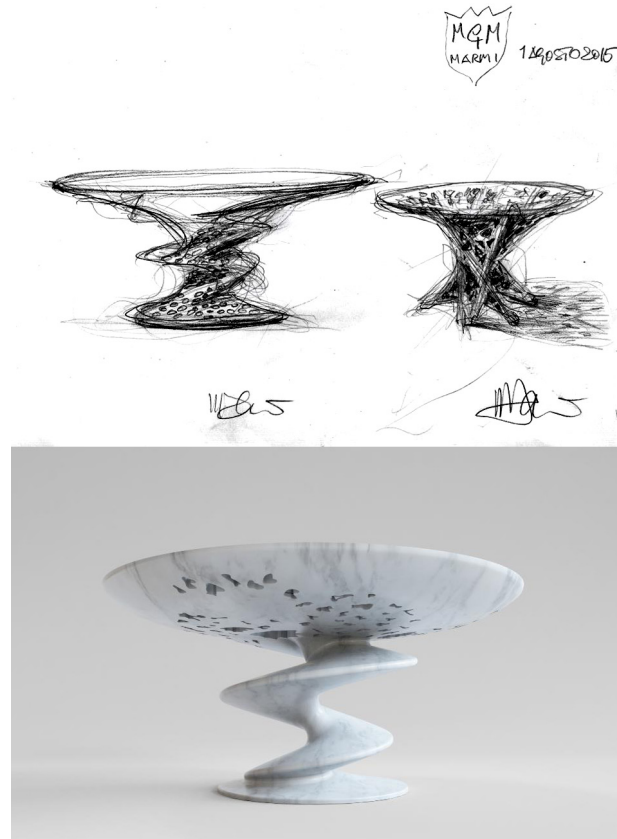


Fig. 6. M. Bellini, *Teneride Torsion office chair for Cassina, 1970*. Study sketches and photographs of the object.



As I have already said, I often make 'posthumous' sketches, under pressing demands, as in the aforementioned case of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), of which this sketch is an example (flanked by a series of small study sketches for details), unfortunately lost.

I now only have its digital scan. It is the *Teneride* office chair of 1970 (fig. 6), which only shortly later would go into production, when technology finally permitted doing so.

The *Teneride* office chair of 1970 in red leather has a reflective steel base and is completely covered with the same material which is sewn so that, when you sit down, "springs back" while it is free to turn around.

At the exhibition in New York there was also my stitched leather *Cab chair* (fig. 7) (always with its posthumous sketch), an object that is very popular all over the world. As many as 600-700,000 copies have already been produced worldwide and, even for this work, I never had any preparatory sketches. As you can understand, I would never have been able to imagine it without going through its practical realization by logical-inventive attempts in a workshop-laboratory. In fact it was a fortunate, long process of imagination. With this sketch I only pretended to have a drawing that revealed the construction details, and the proportions.

It is a chair with a welded steel skeleton, covered with a sort of stitched leather jacket, which slips on like boots, closed with zippers. A type of chair; one of this kind, had never been made, so many were inspired by it to generate imitations. If an object is imitated this means, in fact, that the idea was good, and for this I am more pleased than disturbed.

For the tea and coffee service produced by Cleto Munari in 1981 (fig. 8) I made a series of sketches that I found again despite the many relocations of the studio that I made over the years in Milan. Moving is often disastrous, because the dozens and hundreds of sketches that I make all the time cannot find always a precise arrangement, to the point that, as in this case, in fact they had been lost and have only recently been found. The idea behind this work lies in the desire to create a serving tray, as though it were a sixteenth-century courtyard, surrounded by columns, and in the middle the coffee pot, the creamer and other objects. Made of precious stones and sterling silver; I gave them the title of *The Ideal City*. I found an authentic one at an antique dealer's, with little pink quartz columns, complete with the creamer, coffee pot and sugar bowl.

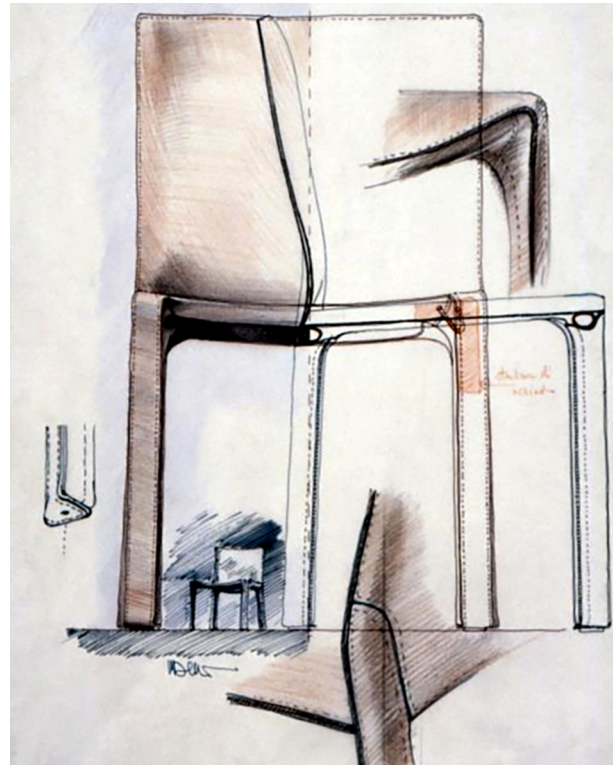
The sketches I made while studying the plan, later realized, for the exhibition and conference spaces of Villa Erba in Cernobbio, inside the beautiful park, are obviously au-

thentic. This is the 1991 *Villa Erba International Exhibition and Congress Center* in Cernobbio (fig. 9). These are sketches showing the idea of a compositive center, around which three structures built as wings are organized, each one with a central corridor. Not far away there is the Visconti villa, owned by the Visconti family, that also owned the entire site. Again a series of sketches shows the large central pavilion, entirely openable, (having the same diameter of the Pantheon) at the intersection of the three adjacent solid bodies covered with marble, bodies that, with steel beams and rods, support the suspended roof at three points. The drawings that we realized were done with the best techniques of the time, axonometric and perspectives drawn with pens on tracing paper, on Radex, since at the time we didn't do renderings yet. We imagined, through drawing, how these large interior spaces would work, creating perspectives with vanishing points and horizon lines. I know projective and descriptive geometry very well, and very competent people worked with me to realize them, even down to the details of the vegetation, with leaves and pine needles drawn by hand with sepia ink. Some sketches can be compared with the photographs of the intervention realized: the interior space, the corridors. Opposite there is the view of Lake Como, the Visconti villa and the huge trees, including beautiful plane trees thirty-five meters tall.

One day I received a phone call from a gentleman, whom I later met and became friends with, from a large Japanese firm, asking me to design a project on a large street, the Sakurada Dori, which leads to Tokyo's Gotanda Station. Some proposals had already been presented that had not convinced the client. They asked me if I felt like taking on this task right away. I asked for a day to think about it and then confirmed that I would do it, knowing immediately that I intended to do it. I started to make some sketches that then led to the creation of the *Tokyo Design Center* (1988-1992): a project near Shinto shrines. Precisely in Japan, a nation I knew and will know better and better, having been there one hundred and thirty times.

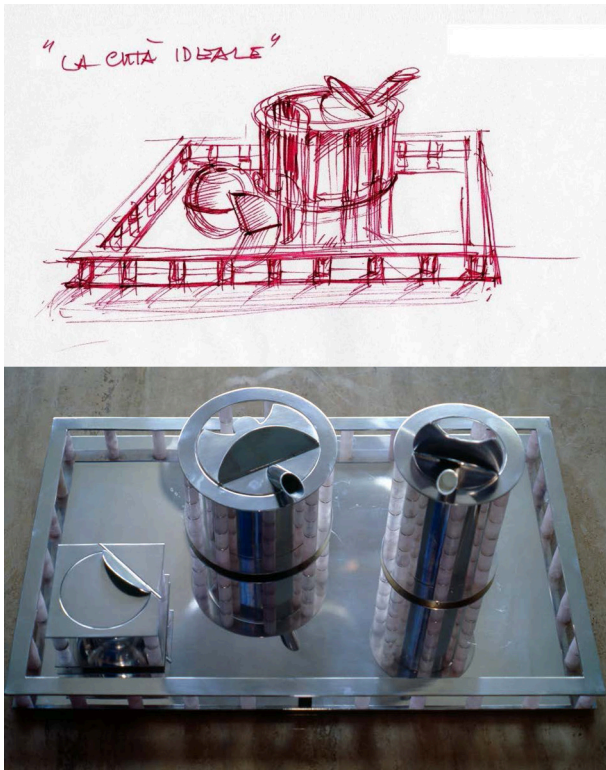
Between 1987 and 1997 I worked on a very interesting project: the *Milano International Trade Fair*, in the Portello district of Milan (1987-1997), where the former Fiera used to be (fig. 10). We made some drawings to help us imagine the new urban situation with this body almost 900 meters long, which was the prelude to the disposal of the area of the old fair, on which *City Life* will rise, the new complex with its skyscrapers. The building is eight hundred meters long and I had pointed this out to my studio staff, saying that we were

Fig. 7. M. Bellini, Cab 412 chair for Cassina, 1977. Drawing and photograph of the chair.



designing an object almost one kilometer long, like the walls of a city. I took a sheet of paper –I remember– and put it up on the wall and showed them that we were designing a piece of the city, not just a building. We also made a model, about nine meters long, on a 1:100 scale, in wood, realized with great care and of great scenic effect. The model was then stored in the warehouses of the Fondazione Fiera, but when I requested it for an exhibition they told me that they had burned it, because they needed space: that's incredible. Before the render era, for the same project, we had invented very effective photomontages, even revised now, superimposing the images of the model on photographs of context and playing with the shading, false skies and reflections, so that it looked like a plausible view of the city. I elaborated

Fig. 8. M. Bellini, *La "Città Ideale" tea and coffee service for Cleto Munari, 1981. Study sketch and photograph of the object.*



other drawings to imagine how this very long façade of the Portello fairgrounds in Milan could be realized, with a portico covered with greenery, and with the façade of the fair set further back. I also imagined, through my ink and colors sketches, to get the effect of reflections on the road, as if it were wet from the rain. Today there are 3D programs, such as *SketchUp*, very useful for quickly generating and modifying three-dimensional models, while you think of objects or entire architectural scenes, which unfortunately do not generate reflections.

I also participated in the international competition for the *National Gallery of Victoria* in Melbourne, Australia (1996-2003), and after the selection, restricted to only four competitors, I actually executed there, transferring a dedicated studio to Melbourne, the whole project (fig. 11). I made a series of sketches during many flights from Milan to Melbourne, which lasted about 24-25 hours, so there was plenty of time to think and draw. Once I arrived, very dazed by the flight (in which I lost track of time, day and night), I took part, at 8 am local time, in the meeting with ministers and technical staff. The interior of the National Gallery is now realized in stainless steel mesh, which I have used many other times, such as for the Department of Islamic Arts at the Louvre in Paris. The building, now become a very popular museum, overlooks on the beautiful *Queen Victoria Garden* with its central entrance.

I then designed and built, between 1996 and 1998, the *Natuzzi Americas Headquarters* in High Point, North Carolina. In this case, the clients wanted a building that would contain all the activities inside: from the offices to the showrooms. So I decided to propose a sort of ship's bow, starting from a sketch that immediately convinced me and my client. A sketch imagined during a mesmerizing world tour while at the same time I was forced to stop over in Singapore for other urgent projects, such as the *Arsoa Headquarters* (1996-1998), in Kobuchizawa (Japan). It was a matter of proposing a memorial in honor of one of the Japanese emperors, in particular the emperor who had reunified the nation. Japan, in fact, was divided for centuries into many small kingdoms. Following an international competition, my idea –also in the form of several sketches– will be realized for another customer. I am convinced that certain successful projects or architectural works can find more lives and reincarnate in other contexts, in the face of the foolishness that says "form follows function."

I also participated in the international competition for designing a new *Cultural Center* in Turin in 2001, with the crea-

Fig. 9. M. Bellini, Villa Erba International Exhibition and Congress Center in Cernobbio, 1991. Study sketches and aerial view of the realization.

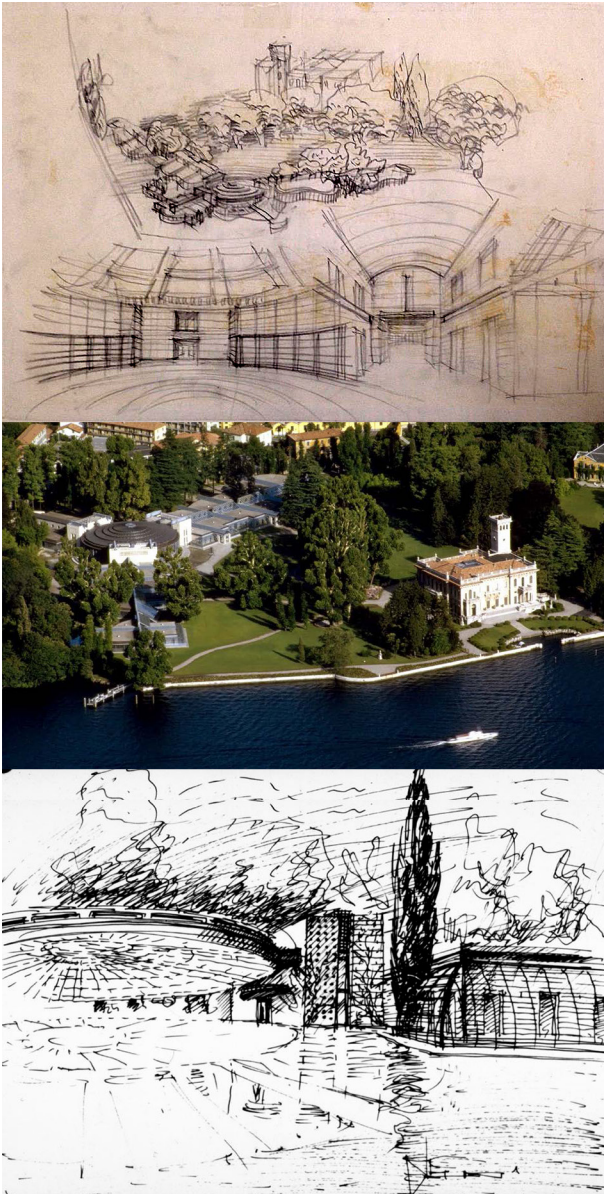
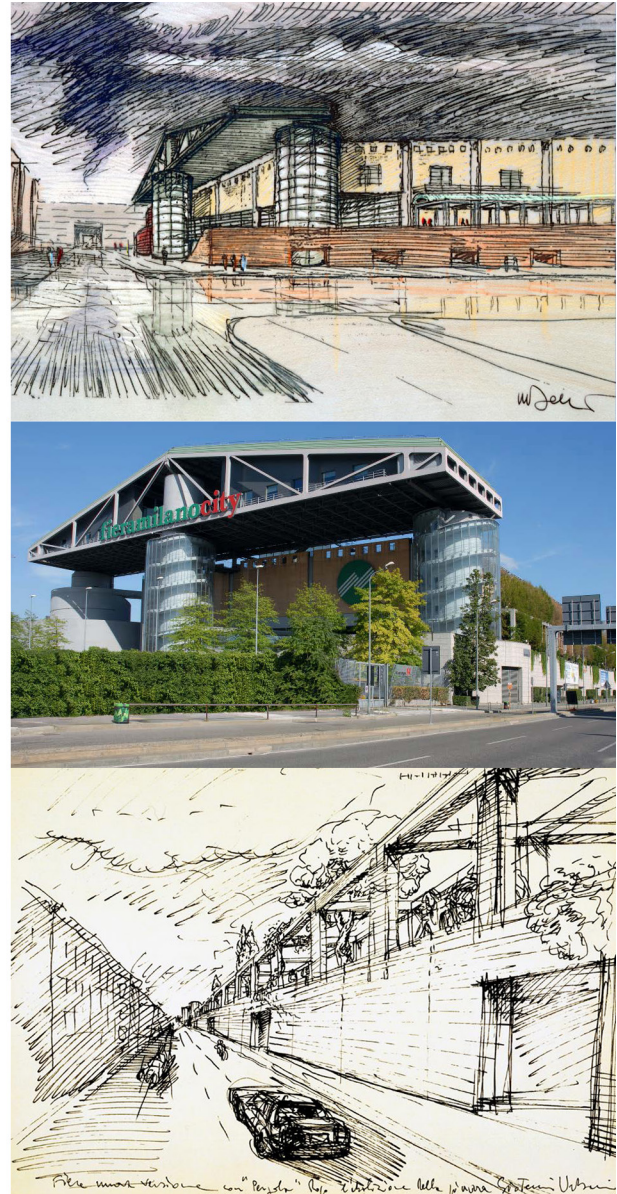


Fig. 10. M. Bellini, Milan International Trade Fair, Portello District in Milan, 1987-1997. Study sketches and view of the realized project.



tion of the new, large *Turin Civic Library*. My project was the winner, but then it was not realized, as often happens with the calls of Italian public administrations, despite the fact that the cost of the executive project had already been paid, as required by law, with a signed contract. In this case I had drawn a series of sketches on a small sheet of paper, and one, in particular, seemed to us to be the most significant, the source of the initial idea, which described the front of the project. The sketch was cleaned up, enlarged and became the symbol, the reference design that I have repeatedly reproduced and reinterpreted in various environmental moods, as well as being a guide to create a scale model.

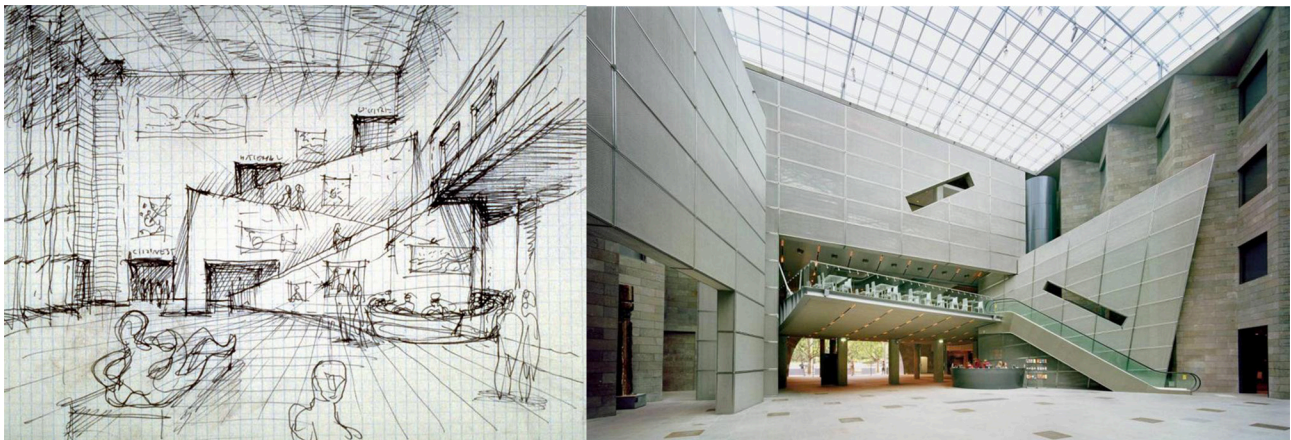
For the *Department of Islamic Arts* inside the *Cour Visconti* of the Musée du Louvre in Paris (2005-2012) I created, in a design competition which I won, this kind of golden, flying sheet, supported by a series of 'dancing' tubes (fig. 12). A sketch in particular is quite effective, even if it is substantially posthumous (even here it was necessary to 'have' a sketch –for public relations– while in reality I had created the cloud by modeling with my hands a piece of metal mesh, then sampled digitally with a cloud of dots), that I often use as a reference, redrawing it with different colors and then giving it away, perhaps at charity auctions, with my signature. It is a kind of cloak that seems to be lifted from the ground, as though it were floating in the air; inside the *Cour Visconti*, one of the Louvre's eighteenth-century courtyards: a covering enclosed by invisible glass. The work continues

inside a highly-frequented subterranean gallery, which can be reached by entering from the pyramid. This is another one of those cases where they wanted the sketch, which I drew afterwards, of course. On this occasion, several renderings were also done, because the managing director of the Louvre was very impressed with our project, and wanted to see the envisaged solution, with its extraordinary iridescent roof. The renderings, therefore, had to serve to show the final effect.

For this reason we have also produced some segments in real scale as example, trying to convince our client and, subsequently to carry out the project (very successfully). The structure is made up of triangles, which are able to make this surface 'flying' –almost 'dream-like'– from anodized stretched aluminum mesh, gold and silver in color, with an even more interesting effect under the light.

For MiCo, the *Milan International Congress Center* (2008-2012) in Milan, I designed a roof in the shape of a cloak, a canopy, later realized in a silvery, golden color. I often found myself having lunch in a restaurant in the Navigli, where I had my studio, and I used to draw in pencil on the butcher paper placemats. On those occasions I had invented this idea: a sort of canopy covering the terminal of the building of the former Portello Fiera, overlooking the city, facing towards the current *CityLife*. The voids and cuts in the roof must meet precise fire safety specifications: these spaces are escape routes, open at the top.

Fig. 1 | M. Bellini, *National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne (Australia), 1996-2003. Study sketch and view of the inner courtyard.*



One of my most recent projects is the *Oasis Residential, Cultural and Sports Complex* (2012) in the Gulf Area, in Doha, Qatar. In this area, which will host the world football championships scheduled for 2022, I designed, on commission, ele-

ments flying in space, reproduced with renderings. I imagined the exterior of this huge system entirely terraced, and complete with equipment and structures. Thirty-two soccer fields, training fields and hotels for soccer teams were planned.

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The text will shortly be published in *Mario Bellini. Il disegno del progetto* by Camilla Casonato and Marco Muscogiuri.

Fig. 12. M. Bellini, Louvre Museum, Department of Islamic Arts in Paris (France), 2005-2012. Study sketch, view of the realized project and rendering.

