

POLITECNICO DI TORINO  
SECOND SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE  
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***Honors theses***

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**Riccardo Gualino's private theater: reconstruction of a memory**

by Rossella Riu

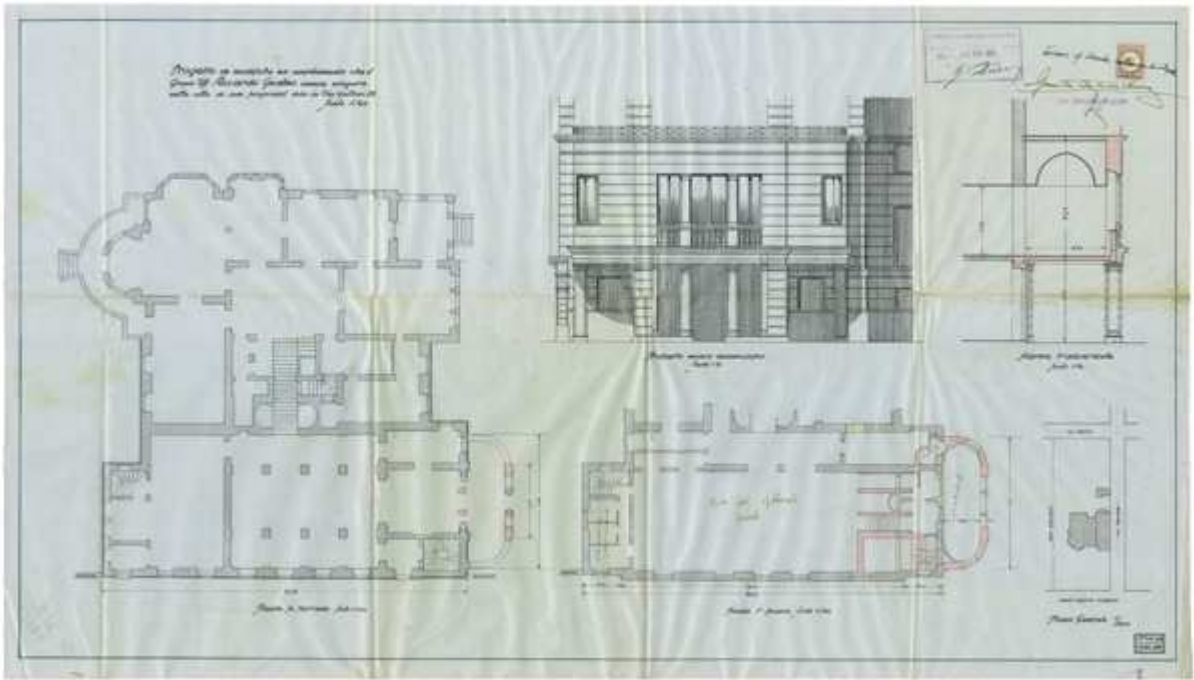
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Much has been already written about the life and architectures of Riccardo Gualino, a most debated character of the last century. They have praised his cultured patronage, his refined style like a Renaissance character, his dreamy and romantic mood; in the meantime, they have blamed his unconventional, unscrupulous financial decisions, charging him of being just a sharp investor. His offices have been described like palaces, his factories and residences like medieval castles. Still, we know very little about his private theater, built in 1925 in his dwelling in Via Bernardino Gallinari 28, which had been bought by Gualino, when he arrived in Turin in 1917, from the banker family of De Fernex. That place had been a stage not only for avant-garde theater shows, but also for the unused lives of the owners, protagonists of the 20s and now faded away from our memories.

There is no sign left to remind us of the existence of Villa Gualino and its private theater. Therefore, by studying surviving sketches, projects, documents and (often conflicting) witnesses, the aim of my research has been to think back over the steps which led to the creation of that place, which today is physically lost, but still, even if partially, documentable, by following its trails and redrawing its outlines, in order to restore, as far as possible, its architectural beauty and value of "architecture – document – place", as both witness and witnessed subject of a cultural moment which left its deep mark on not only the Italian culture.

First, my research focused on the XIX century residence, which had been destroyed by bombings in 1943: it had previously been a "theater" for cultural performances of Gualino's family towards some exponents of the outline of the intellectual élite of that time, and it housed a rich art collection, organized together with Lionello Venturi. I have restored its architectural history until Gualino's extension works in order to house the new theater and through the analysis of the original projects I could graphically reproduce the residence, both in a comprehensive view and in its internal details.



Antonio Bocca's extension project for Villa Gualino, 1924



Conjectural graphical reproduction of Villa Gualino when the theater was finished

Conceived by the young architect Alberto Sartoris and by the most known painter Felice Casorati, the little theater was planned on the grounds of the repertory of Art Déco, made of linear structures, elementary geometrical figures and plastered in white or covered with light precious materials. This is a theater whose importance is not to be researched just in the high rank shows that were performed, but also in the planning of a somehow magical hall, made possible by the blending of Casorati's *metaphysical painting* and Sartoris' *metaphysical architecture*. Attending a show within Gualino's theater meant for the audience to achieve, or to confirm, their rank within the intellectual and public city life. Important personalities led the nights and the shows organized in that little theater, from Djagilev to Mary Wigman, from Emma Gramatica to Ildebrando Pizzetti: the cultural and artistic élite of the city, carefully selected, got together at Villa Gualino to discover and admire new artists in a refined atmosphere in which marbled walls framed Gualino's ancient art collections. The reconstruction of the theatrical schedules and shows has been made possible thanks to surviving theatrical programs and invitations, which had been alternately drawn by Chessa, Casorati and Sartoris.



Tridimensional reconstruction of Gualino's Theater, made by comparing original photos and descriptions

The destruction during World War II and the difficult reconstruction period after the war decreed the physical and historical removal of the theater. For this reason I designed a tridimensional model of it at the end of my research, trying to restore as accurately as possible the colors and the lights in order to give you a direct awareness of how it should have appeared when it was built. It is my hope for the future that studies and researches about the most important Gualino's buildings will consider also "minor" works, like the little theater and the Villa, within a program of circulation and actuation of cultural events which will give Turin back its awareness of these facts faded in time, in which the protagonists of the cultural city life were the economical, but especially cultural activities of Riccardo Gualino.

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