

# MILAN LABS

BIOLOGY BUILDING  
MILAN UNIVERSITY

ARCHITECT:  
VICO MAGISTRETTI

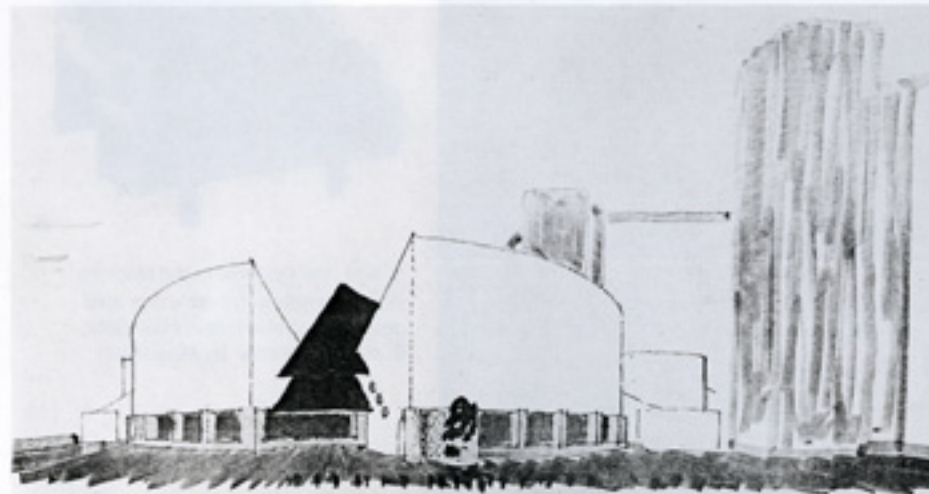
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- 1, 4, the simple boxes of the laboratory buildings are enlivened by bright red stripes and gold leaf circles.
- 2, the lecture halls are dramatically lit from above.
- 3, brightly painted structural elements dominate the classrooms.

Vico Magistretti is one of the most accessible members of the effervescent—and lately overheated—Milan community of designer-architects. His Ruskinian dislike of transience, of effect for effect's sake, tends to produce straightforward expressions of structure and underlies some of the most constant elements in his furniture designs: respect for materials, for example, and love of primary colours. Magistretti's success as an industrial designer has in recent years overshadowed his role as an architect: so that a new complex of buildings he has designed in association with Franco Soro, for the biology department of Milan University is of particular interest. The complex is divided into two sections, with scientific laboratories contained in three towers on the east, and auditoria and classrooms in a two-storey building on the west. On plan the separate elements are spun in seemingly centrifugal motion around a central core, a glazed entrance lobby. The laboratory buildings dominate the site, rising above their dismal post-war surroundings. Since Italian universities are short of money, the budget for the site was tight and construction, particularly of the

laboratories, had to be fast. The buildings are therefore of prefabricated construction and clad in modular concrete panels. Each block has a similar plan determined by structure and function—the university wanted lab spaces to be open and flexible—so that a central closed service core is surrounded by a ring of clear working spaces where partitions can be inserted or changed as required. Exhaust ducts for the labs in each building terminate in four huge chimneys that shoot squarely out of the pitched roof. Drama comes from elemental composition, primary geometries and decoration. Vertical elements, 'streams of strength', are emphasised by primary colours, blue and red, while the concrete cladding has been enlivened by panels of white enamelled tile which gleam in the sun. Bright red structural columns have been made into stylised trees by replacing the tiles with moulded circles covered with gold leaf. Colour, is one of the few freedoms left in prefabrication. Seen from a distance, these buildings with their chequered exteriors, pyramidal roofs, chimneys and Klimtian decoration vaguely suggest a sophisticated set of building blocks. With its auditoria and central staircase powerfully expressed and carried on columns, the teaching block counterbalances the square monumentality of the laboratory blocks. Form was determined by the plans of the auditoria, segments of concentric semi-circles set around the grandly-scaled and spiralling staircase. The suggestion on plan that they are barely held apart with a wedge is reinforced by the broken roofscape. The roofs of the auditoria slope down from the outer edge towards the centre and the lecturer's dais, while the stair tower is pitched sharply in the opposite direction so that the apex projects at the top of the building. Such deliberate awkwardness, implying forces barely repressed, appears characteristic of Magistretti when the splayed base of the Sinbad chair recalled.

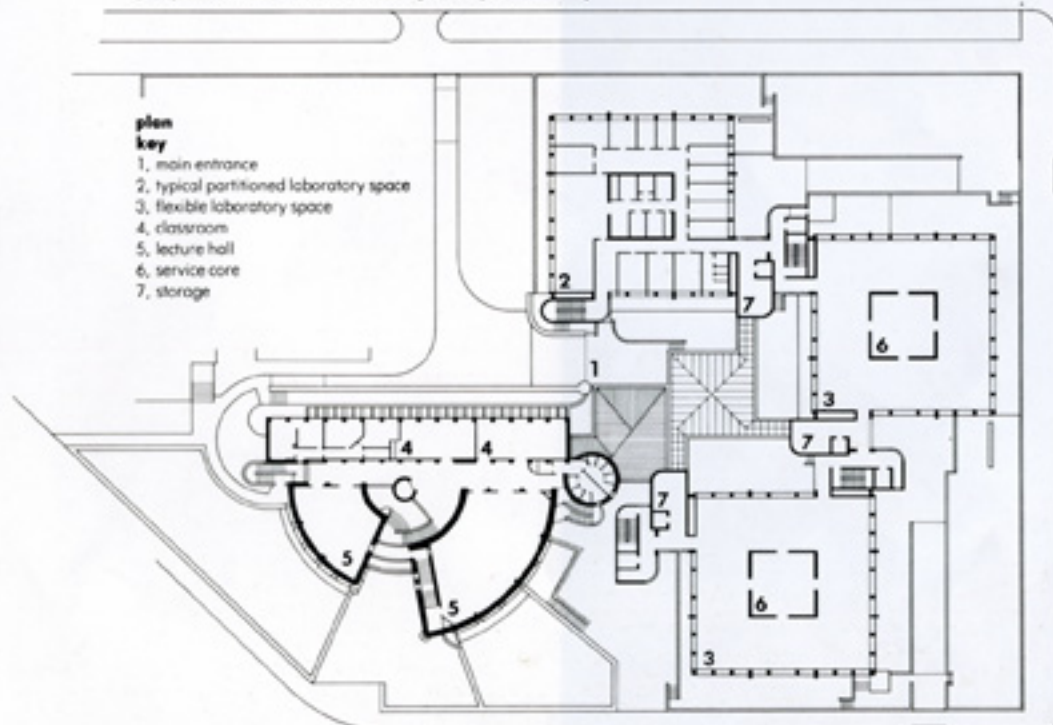
What you see on the outside is what you experience inside: the vocabulary that creates the drama of form, space and movement may be familiar but when skilfully handled, as it is here, it is a constant pleasure. Magistretti is adept at the art of surprise, cutting through elements to admit the unexpected view: spaces interpenetrate, the voids moulded by the architecture. Spartan surfaces—plain painted walls, exposed concrete pillars and stairs, gingham linoleum—and standard workmanlike furniture in classrooms and auditoria are reminders of cost restrictions (as is the woeful lack of landscaping). But in any case they are appropriate. The buildings are primarily for students and have to be able to withstand wear and tear. And Magistretti, who says he would have liked just one per cent more money ('I think one should spend more on youth and less on banks'), was surely right to opt for architecture over interior decoration.



perspective of entrance to teaching block (lecture halls)

plan  
key

- 1, main entrance
- 2, typical partitioned laboratory space
- 3, flexible laboratory space
- 4, classroom
- 5, lecture hall
- 6, service core
- 7, storage



Penny MacGuire