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Vittorio Giorgini in New York: The Cultural Climate Influences and the "Made in USA" Projects Never Built

Denise Ulivieri

DESTeC, University of Pisa, 56126 Pisa, Italy; denise.ulivieri@unipi.it

Abstract: The Florentine architect Vittorio Giorgini (1926–2010) graduated in 1957 from his hometown School of Architecture. During the 1950s and 1960s, he came to maturity in the lively cultural climate of Florence. Giorgini's design process was based on the direct observation of natural structures. He coined the term "Spatiology" to define his studies of morphology. In 1969, he moved to New York City, where he worked as a professor of Architecture and Planning at the Pratt Institute until 1996. Giorgini took part in the artistic and cultural life of the Big Apple, and here, he frequented and formed a series of friendships with personalities of notable stature (John M. Johansen, Isamu Noguchi, Buckminster Fuller). The aim of the latter is to investigate Giorgini's USA period (1969–1996), which constituted a far-reaching design phase beginning in the Seventies. In particular, it is very interesting to study the relationships Giorgini established with architects, artists, and intellectuals in New York that constituted a source of seduction and inspiration for his design process. The research focuses on the "Made in USA" projects that were never built, in which the formal interpretation of natural organisms consisted mainly of tetrahedral and octahedral meshes.

Keywords: Vittorio Giorgini; New York; projects never built

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1. Introduction

Vittorio Giorgini (1926–2010) is a difficult figure to fit into a single category; his fields of investigation and interest are broad, and the complexity of cultural references and the dense network of relationships that he managed to weave can be disorienting. He lived his time to the full, participating in artistic and cultural life, first in Italy and then in the United States. Ahead of his time, Giorgini firmly believed in innovation and technology as tools to reduce the distance between man and nature. He particularly observed and drew natural structures, trying to grasp their static and morphological behaviors. In order to identify building techniques capable of producing housing solutions that were efficient, functional, suited to the needs of everyday life, and economically viable. However, our architect's structural and organic research resulted in architectural designs that were mostly unbuilt, often misunderstood, and labeled by critics as informal and bordering on utopian.

This paper takes a closer look at his long stay in New York (1969–1996), which has been little explored to date. Thus, after a brief introduction to his early formative and professional years in Italy, the paper analyses Giorgini's participation in the initiatives that characterized the American artistic and architectural culture of those years, attempting to reconstruct the framework of the complex network of relationships that he established with architects, artists, and intellectuals, who constituted a source of seduction and inspiration for his design process. The research thus focuses on the "Made in USA" projects that were never realized, in which, in addition to continuing the study of curved systems, such as

shells and membranes, already started in Italy, he arrived at construction systems with triangular geometries, and then at tetrahedral and octahedral structural meshes.

The research is conducted within the rich and heterogeneous corpus of materials housed in the architectural archive of Vittorio Giorgini[1], alongside an unpublished autobiography and the last interview he gave shortly before his death. The archival documents span an extensive chronological range, from Giorgini's early years through his time in Florence, his period in the United States, and his eventual return to Italy.

Declared in 2013 to be of "particularly important historical interest" by the Direzione Regionale per i Beni Culturali e Paesaggistici della Toscana (Regional Directorate for Cultural and Landscape Heritage of Tuscany), the archive has recently undergone a synthetic yet systematic reorganization. In 2016, a preliminary mapping and partial digitization of the archival materials were initiated through the assignment of a master's thesis. In recent years, additional documents have been incorporated, though they are still in the process of being cataloged.

The correspondence is particularly significant, as it has enabled the reconstruction of Giorgini's network of relationships and exchanges. Equally valuable is the analysis of his travel diaries and the substantial collection of drawings and design materials, which served as a primary source for understanding his research.

The analysis of these documents, and those preserved in other locations, together with studies by Marco Del Francia [1–3] and those already presented by the author at the Nexus Conference, Pisa (2018) [4] and Geometrias'19: Polyhedra and Beyond Conference, Porto (2019) [5], form the basis of this article.

2. The Years in Italy

Vittorio Giorgini (1926–2010) was born in Florence and grew up in a rather stimulating family environment. He descended from an ancient aristocratic family whose members contributed to the writing of significant pages of Italian history, including, among others, one of his direct ancestors who was the rapporteur of the national unification law passed in 1861. His father, Giovan Battista Giorgini, was the undisputed promotor of Italian fashion and an exporter of the made-in-Italy brand throughout the world. In the 1950s, Giovan Battista, who had a profound knowledge of American department stores, planned to invite his American clients to Florence for a fashion show organized along overseas commercial lines but imbued with an Italian cultural vision [6].

At the end of the 1940s, Florence turned its gaze to Europe, the Mediterranean, the world, and particularly to the United States. These were the years of important Italian-American cultural triangulations, of the evaluation of the relationship between artistic and artisanal production, of interest in industrial design, of Tuscan art critic Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti's ambitious project to create an international propulsive center dedicated to exhibitions and in particular, to major modern Italian and international architecture exhibitions (see the most recent works on the subject, which can be referred to for the extended bibliography) [7,8]. As part of this never-fully-realized project, Ragghianti organized major exhibitions dedicated to Frank Lloyd Wright (1951), Le Corbusier (1963) [9], and Alvar Aalto (1965) at Palazzo Strozzi.

When in February 1951, Giovan Battista organized the First Italian High Fashion Show [10] at his private residence, Villa Torrigiani in Florence (reiterated for several years after in the Sala Bianca at Palazzo Pitti) Vittorio, twenty-five years old and enrolled at the Faculty of Architecture in Florence, not only actively helped his father in setting up the fashion shows, but also accompanied him around Italy to various buyers.

On 24 June in the same year, in the presence of the American maestro himself, Ragghianti, together with Bruno Zevi, inaugurated Frank Lloyd Wright: Sixty Years of Living

Architecture, the Florentine version of the exhibition already presented in Philadelphia, and it was from here that the organic architecture movement would establish itself in Italy and Europe [11,12]. In the same days, Vittorio, along with his father Giovan Battista and several members of the tourism board, met Wright at the tables of Caffè Leland, an international café in Via Tornabuoni, to offer him a project for the creation of a Palazzo delle Esposizioni Fiorentine della Moda, a dedicated space for Florentine fashion exhibitions [13]. The proposal had no real follow-up, and Vittorio would use the subject for his degree thesis (1957). However, on that occasion, Wright autographed and gave the young aspiring architect the catalogue-itinerary of the Florentine exhibition, in which the introduction to the Wasmuth Portfolio, written by the master during his stay in Fiesole (1910–1914) for the 1910 Berlin exhibition [14], had been reprinted and translated into Italian.

Since his university years, his research focused on the 'question of the model in nature' and its application to architecture. He was convinced that through the study of objects existing in nature in relation to the constitution of their form, man would be able to develop similar building tools and models [1] (pp. 10–34). The world of nature is thus a great repertoire of building and function techniques.

However, the environment at the Faculty of Architecture at that time was somewhat unprepared and disinclined to understand a non-conformist architect like Giorgini. The renewal hoped for by Giovanni Michelucci [15–19], who Vittorio knew and admired thanks to his friendship with older students (Franco Borsi, Mario Bigongiari, Pier Luigi Spadolini, Ugo Saccardi, Giovanni Klaus Koenig), struggled to take root. He recounts that in 1946, the year of his enrolment in the Faculty, "no-one was talking about the modern movement, the various Le Corbusier, Wright, etc. came up as the years went by" [20].

The lessons of the masters of Modernism came to Giorgini, and not only to him, indirectly through magazines and directly through travel. Evidence of his early interest in Wright's work can be found in a notebook of photographs and drawings from his youth, dedicated in particular to the Usonian and Prairie houses, and other drawings and writings focusing on the concept of the organic in architecture (Figure 1).

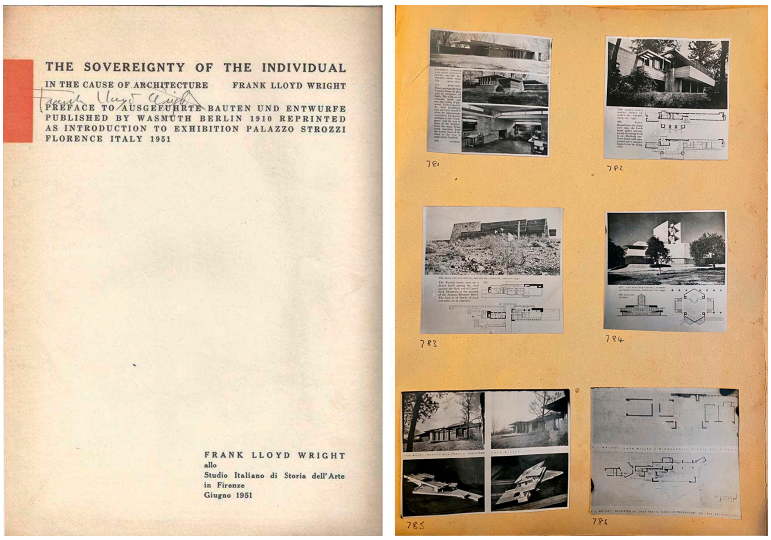


Figure 1. On the left is the catalog itinerary of the Florentine exhibition signed by Frank Lloyd Wright; on the right is the notebook of photographs of the works of the American architect (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

Around 1949, he also had the opportunity to meet Richard Neutra, who was in Tuscany with his wife. The couple visited the region's historic towns accompanied by a number of architecture students (Spadolini, Koenig, Bigongiari) and Giorgini, the only one who spoke

English[2]. A long-lasting rapport based on humor developed between the young Florentine and the bio-realist architect: "With Neutra, we had fun, we had great laughs" [13] (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Vittorio Giorgini next to Richard Neutra and his wife, further back Mario Bigonciari, circa 1949 (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

Between the 1950s and 1960s, the neo-architect practiced professionally and taught in Florence, working with Giuseppe Gori [21] and becoming assistant to Leonardo Savioli [22] and his collaborator in the Sorgane neighborhood urban planning adventure. Also belonging to this period is the so-called Casa Esagono (1959), a pre-fabricated wooden construction with modular elements, a hexagonal layout suspended above the ground on a system of six cruciform [23,24], for which Giorgini also reflected on Buckminster Fuller's hexagonal Dymaxion House (1929), and certainly on the modular grid of Wright's Usonian houses (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The model of Casa Esagono and the house under construction, 1959 (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

Also dating back to 1959 is the unusual setup of the Quadrante Gallery in Florence, led by his sister Matilde, which Lara Vinca Masini described as a "continuous space" [25] with soft, sinuous, light shapes. Thanks to the Quadrante's international cultural activity, the architect had the chance to build a substantial network of relationships with the world of artists: "Apart from Melchiorri and other critics, I met Vedova, Dorazio, Savelli, Turcato, Frasca, Burri, Cagli, Fontana and many others. Several of them I met in Bologna with Aurelio C. (Ceccarelli), who was a friend of Matta. It was through Aurelio that I became friends with Matta [Roberto Sebastian]" [20].

One of the closest ties Vittorio established at this time was with André Bloc, founder of the magazine *Architecture d'aujourd'hui* (1930–present), invited to the gallery in 1962 to

exhibit his experiments in 'architecture-sculpture' of an organic nature [26]. As a result of this union, Vittorio learned about Frederick Kiesler's contemporary Action Architecture [27] and Hermann Finsterlin's soul and psychological space [28]. In the young Florentine, Bloc found a worthy representative of the "synthèse des arts", an idea already developed by Sigfried Giedion, which the French engineer-architect-sculptor had been promoting for years [29] (Figure 4).

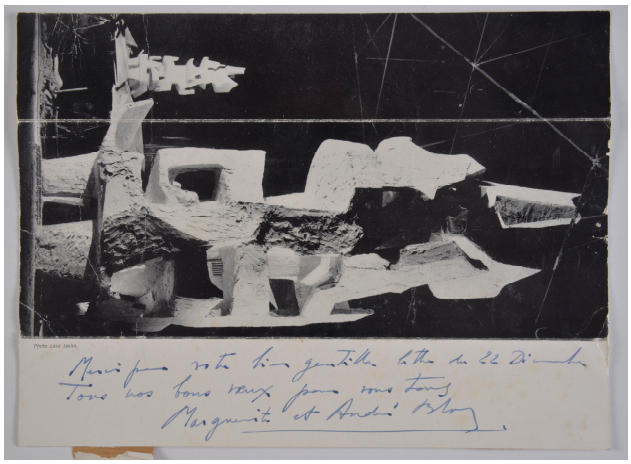


Figure 4. André Bloc, model of maisons habitacles, photo by Leni Iselin, circa 1962. The Christmas greeting card was sent by Marguerite and André Bloc to Vittorio Giorgini (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

The magazine *Aujourd'hui Art et Architecture* (1955–1967), a spin-off of the bigger *Architecture d'aujourd' hui*, published Giorgini's works [30–32], including the significant Casa Saldarini (1962) located a stone's throw from the Esagono, a building with zoomorphic features and topological characteristics, made with a thin iso-elastic membrane structure in wire mesh and concrete. In 1966, the latter was featured in the special issue of *Aujourd'hui*, entitled "Espaces Sculptés—Espaces Architecturés", included in the section dedicated to "Les architectes de Florence", published together with the designs of architects with a sculptural approach to architecture, such as Frederick Kiesler, Walter Förderer, Hermann Finsterlin, Paolo Soleri, Jacques Couëlle and Constant Nieuwenhuys [33,34] (Figure 5).

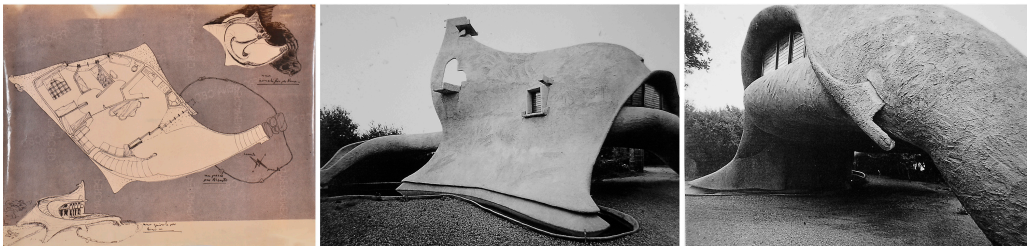


Figure 5. Casa Saldarini, Gulf of Baratti, Livorno, 1962 (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

At this very moment, in the wake of student unrest and in conjunction with the disaster caused by the flood (1966), the first groups around the Radical Architecture movement were formed in Florence (see the most recent works on the subject, to which we refer for the extended bibliography) [35–38]. The Florentine architect, although close, at least in some respects, to the cultural and experimental climate produced by the "radical" experience, maintained good relations with Gianni Pettena for a long time and did not join the radical groups, preferring to pursue his own independent personal research [1] (p. 136). In 1965, he was invited to the Prima Triennale Itinerante di Architettura Italiana Contemporanea (First Itinerant Triennial of Contemporary Italian Architecture), where he presented the

first Spatiology manifesto alongside, among others, Gregotti, Castiglioni, Gabetti/Isola, Magistretti, Portoghesi, Ricci, Savioli/Santi and Viganò [39].

Spatiology' was the term he coined to define his studies in morphology, where he learned "the modes, economies, functioning and thus the relationships between forms and static resistance systems, of the makeup of materials and its functions" [40] (p. 20). A term that, over time, expanded the original meaning with which he had christened his first programmatic work manifestos. He narrates the genesis of that name linked to the "study of space, based naturally on the morphology taught by nature and that could not be accepted by the culture of that time" [20].

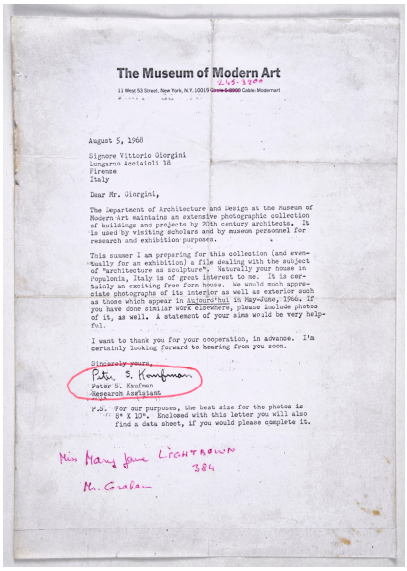
In fact, the more he dealt with these things, the more he became disliked by his colleagues and the Faculty of Architecture.

The personal exhibition, Ipotesi per un habitat più naturale (Hypotheses for a more natural habitat), organized in December 1968 in Ferrara, in the splendid setting of the Palazzo dei Diamanti, dedicated to his research on an urban scale, summarized in the second Spatiology manifesto [41], was his last act before leaving Italy for the United States.

3. Vittorio Giorgini in New York

Growing disappointment within the Faculty, his burning professional dissatisfaction with the failure to realize many projects, and frustration with the impossibility of following up on his studies pushed him to reach the decision to emigrate to New York. While he was still pondering on what to do, on 5 August 1968, Vittorio received an unexpected letter from Peter Kaufman, a research assistant in the Department of Architecture and Design of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Kaufman, who had seen Casa Saldarini in the magazine *Aujourd'hui*, invited him to participate in an exhibition on the theme "architecture as sculpture"[3].

The exhibition did not take place, but this invitation, together with constant incitements to leave Italy by his friend Neutra, who also emigrated to the United States, pushed Giorgini across the Atlantic (Figure 6).


The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Cable Modernart

August 5, 1968

Signore Vittorio Giorgini
Lungarno Acciaioli 16
Firenze
Italy

Dear Mr. Giorgini,

The Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art maintains an extensive photographic collection of buildings and projects by 20th century architects. It is used by visiting scholars and by museum personnel for research and exhibition purposes.

This summer I am preparing for this collection (and eventually for an exhibition) a file dealing with the subject of "Architecture as sculpture". Naturally your house in Populonia, Italy is of great interest to me. It is certainly an exciting free form house. We would much appreciate photographs of its interior as well as exterior such as those which appear in Aujourd'hui in May-June, 1966. If you have done similar work elsewhere, please include photos of it, as well. A statement of your aims would be very helpful.

I want to thank you for your cooperation, in advance. I'm certainly looking forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely yours,

Peter S. Kaufman

Peter S. Kaufman
Research Assistant

P.S. For our purposes, the best size for the photos is 8" x 10". Enclosed with this letter you will also find a data sheet, if you would please complete it.

Miss Mary Jane LIGHTBOWN
384
Mr. Graham

Figure 6. Letter from Peter Kaufman, MoMA research assistant, to Vittorio Giorgini, 5 August 1968 (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

3.1. An Intricate Web of Relationships

He arrived in New York on a cold day in January 1969.

These were years characterized by restless and feverish research; the solid certainties of the modern movement were now in crisis, and the architects of the new cycle interpreted the themes, languages, and methodologies developed by the Masters of Modern Movement in the post-war period, each in a very different way, measuring them against their own culture and experience. They manifest their restlessness by experimenting with values that have not yet been investigated, accentuating to excess the spatial and plastic effects that the Masters are creating in their latest masterpieces.

Giorgini immersed himself in these lively, pluralistic experiences. He had arrived in New York, the capital of "perpetual Surrealism" [42], with just a little money from the sale of the Esagono in his pocket, full of confidence and looking for collaborators to help develop his design ideas.

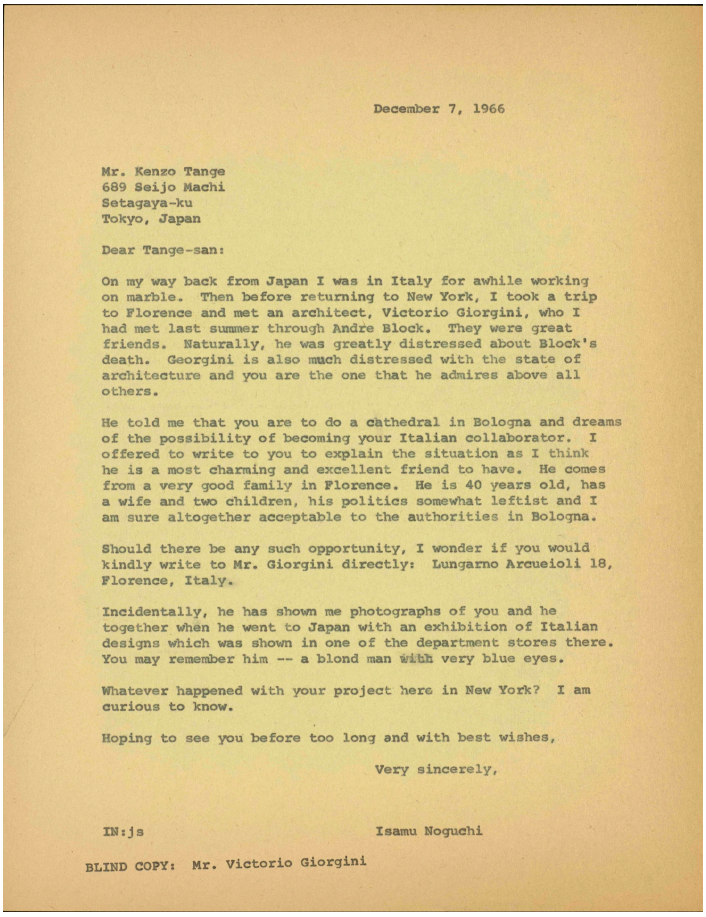
On the other hand, the US metropolis, which had made 'Total Congestion Culture' a paradigm [42] (p. 10), was nothing less than a collective experimental laboratory, where Manhattan became the model and prototype for a new urban development practice, constantly striving to push the limits at every possible level (Figure 7).



Figure 7. View of the World Trade Center, Manhattan, New York, photo by Vittorio Giorgini, 1970s (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

In the early days, Vittorio was the guest of Fred Coe, an extraordinaire and influential US producer and director of theatre, television, and film [43]. Giorgini almost certainly got to know Coe through his friend Isamu Noguchi, whom he met for the first time in the summer of 1966 in Querceta at the historic Henraux marble company. Here, between the 1960s and 1970s, renowned artists from all over the world, including Henri Moore, Jeans (Hans) Arp, Joan Miró, Alberto Viani, Georges Vantongerloo, and Giò Pomodoro, gathered to create their works with the companys specialized workers and marble, thus creating a center of international artistic experimentation. It was thanks to Bloc that the Florentine architect came into contact with this crossroads of trends, and it was here that he met Noguchi, with whom he immediately established a special rapport.

At the time, the Japanese American artist, who had his atelier in New York, had already designed the iconic Akari lamp (1951) and created sculptures, gardens, furniture, ceramics, buildings, landscapes, and stage sets. He was one of the most significant artists of the 20th century, with whom Giorgini had a privileged relationship, as evidenced by a series of archive documents. The friendship between the two is evidenced by a letter dated 7 December 1966, which Isamu wrote a month after Bloc's death to Kenzo Tange, with whom he had collaborated since the 1950s, to recommend his friend as a collaborator for the work planned in Bologna "[. . ..] You are the one that he admires above all others. He told me that you are to do a cathedral in Bologna and dreams of the possibility of becoming your Italian collaborator. I offered to write to you to explain the situation as I think he is a most charming and excellent friend to have"[4] (Figure 8).



December 7, 1966

Mr. Kenzo Tange
689 Seijo Machi
Setagaya-ku
Tokyo, Japan

Dear Tange-san:

On my way back from Japan I was in Italy for awhile working on marble. Then before returning to New York, I took a trip to Florence and met an architect, Victorio Giorgini, who I had met last summer through Andre Block. They were great friends. Naturally, he was greatly distressed about Block's death. Georgini is also much distressed with the state of architecture and you are the one that he admires above all others.

He told me that you are to do a cathedral in Bologna and dreams of the possibility of becoming your Italian collaborator. I offered to write to you to explain the situation as I think he is a most charming and excellent friend to have. He comes from a very good family in Florence. He is 40 years old, has a wife and two children, his politics somewhat leftist and I am sure altogether acceptable to the authorities in Bologna.

Should there be any such opportunity, I wonder if you would kindly write to Mr. Giorgini directly: Lungarno Arcueioli 18, Florence, Italy.

Incidentally, he has shown me photographs of you and he together when he went to Japan with an exhibition of Italian designs which was shown in one of the department stores there. You may remember him -- a blond man with very blue eyes.

Whatever happened with your project here in New York? I am curious to know.

Hoping to see you before too long and with best wishes,

Very sincerely,

IN:js Isamu Noguchi

BLIND COPY: Mr. Victorio Giorgini

Figure 8. Letter from Isamu Noguchi to Kenzo Tange, 7 December 1966 (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum Archives).

In the letter, Isamu mentions a project for a cathedral, but it is likely that he is referring instead to the new district to be planned in the northern outskirts of the Emilian city, which, a year later, the City Council entrusted to the Japanese architect, and which he only partially built, namely the Fiera District, a project on which Noguchi also collaborated [44].

Actually, Giorgini had already met Tange in Tokyo. In the same letter, Noguchi says that he had happened to see some photos of them together. In fact, in his travel diary for this trip to Japan, Florentine noted the Japanese architect's telephone number and photographed a number of stadiums built by Tange in the capital for the 1964 Olympics.

Giorgini traveled to Japan at least twice, in 1964 and 1965–1966. During the first trip, he met the famous Japanese artist Taro Okamoto, whom he also portrayed in his diary, and most probably met with Tange in 1966, when Giorgini was engaged, together

with Agnoldomenico Pica and Luigi Terragni, in the preparation of the exhibition Italia 1965. Architettura. Produzioni d'arte, an exhibition organized by the National Institute for Foreign Trade, where a selection of the works already presented at the Prima Triennale Itinerante di Architettura Italiana Contemporanea (Florence, 1965) was displayed. Giorgini opened the exhibition with an original installation (Synthesis of Tokyo). The public was welcomed by a boat taken directly from a nearby bay, lying along the stairs and enveloped by a cloud created with a thin iso-elastic membrane structure in wire mesh and cement, which stretched along the side wings of the ramps of stairs[5] (Figure 9).

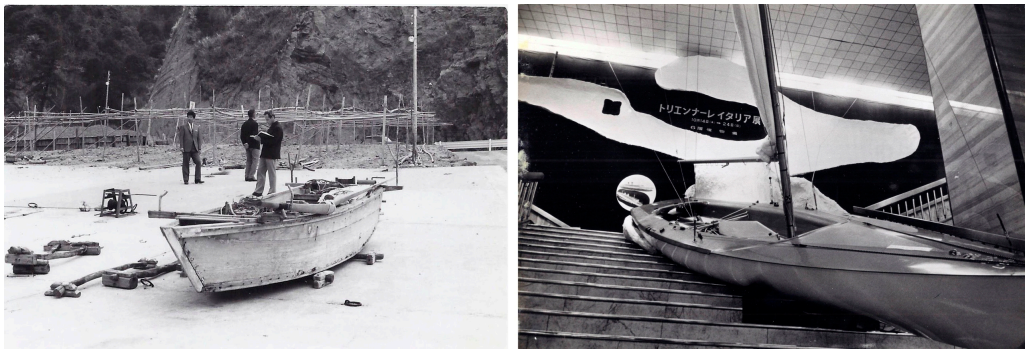


Figure 9. On the left, Giorgini in Tokyo Bay, accompanied by Japanese colleagues, while drawing the boat for the exhibition, 1966; on the right, Giorgini's original installation, 1966 (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

Already before his arrival in the United States, Giorgini had managed to build an extraordinary network of relations with artists, architects, and intellectuals. Indeed, Casa Esagono had become a sort of Cenacle where distinguished guests stayed [45] (p. 44).

In truth, when Noguchi heard that Giorgini had decided to leave for the United States, he tried to dissuade him, perhaps because, Vittorio explains, "the Japanese feel a lot of responsibility for their friends", "I was very fond of Noguchi. I liked him a lot, and we did many things together. First in Spoleto, when Noguchi was here, then in the United States. It was he who included me in the New York world. In Priscilla Morgan's salon room, let's call it a salon, [. . .] where we would meet with Buckminster Fuller, Christo, Rothko" [13]. Priscilla Morgan, described by The New York Times as "a doyenne of international culture", is "one of New York's most formidable builders of human networks and spotters of artistic talent [. . .] Morgan has nurtured a vast acquaintance of writers, artists, composers, designers, directors, producers and patrons of the arts" [46].

Giorgini met Priscilla in 1968 in Spoleto, where he often went to accompany Gian Carlo Menotti, composer, and founder of the Festival of the Two Worlds. Morgan, who was in an intimate relationship with Noguchi, was Menotti's right hand and was involved in programming and recruiting artists for the Festival's summer events. Thanks to Morgan, renowned international artists who gathered at her New York garden apartment on the Upper East Side came to Spoleto. In 1967, Buckminster Fuller, known to most as Bucky, built a geodesic dome, Spoletosfera, in Spoleto with his collaborator, Shoji Sadao. The following year, Noguchi created a sculpture for children comprising tetrahedral modules with hexagonal smooth surfaces and central cavities, the project for which was assigned to Sadao and Bucky [47]. Giorgini joined his friend in Spoleto, and it was on this occasion that he met the brilliant and eccentric American inventor Shoji and Priscilla for the first time. A series of photographs and a video film document the days spent by the group in the Umbrian city (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Shoji Sadao, Isamu Noguchi, Priscilla Morgan, Vittorio Giorgini in Spoleto, 1968 (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

Initially, Priscilla felt a certain mistrust for the Italian architect. In a letter sent to Isamu on 10 March 1969, she expressed a rather severe judgment on him and does not hide her irritation towards her companion, who had not told her about his arrival: "I find Vittorio Giorgini a bit of an opportunist, not too nice, and not too bright. Was that why you were so quiet on his arrival? More of that later. He's moved in with Fred Coe"[6].

With time, however, Priscilla Morgan must have changed her mind because our architect became an assiduous frequenter of her "salon," where art, film, and television personalities gravitated, where he encountered people he had already met in Italy, such as Bucky and Christo, among others, and established new relationships.

While Casa Saldarini was branded as "kitsch" [48] in Italy, it aroused a certain interest in the United States, and the magazine *Shelter* presented it as an example of a valid contribution to the housing design problem [49].

In the summer of 1971, Giorgini began to teach design at the Pratt Institute School of Architecture. There, he had the opportunity to meet and interact with William Katavolos, Haresh Lalvani, and John M. Johansen, who, like him, but each with different research paths and outcomes, tried to integrate advanced and emerging building technologies with the creation and modeling of architectural structures based on principles observed in nature. It was precisely with these aims that since his arrival at Pratt, he had worked with his colleagues on the idea of creating a Center for Experimental Structures [50][7].

Giorgini was a particularly "close friend" of Johansen, the brilliant pupil of Walter Gropius, whose daughter Ati he had married, one of America's most innovative modern architects, who plumbed the depths of all the expressive potential of a vast range of formal languages [51].

When the two met, the American had recently designed the Mummers Theater in Oklahoma City (1970), one of the United States' most daring post-war works [52,53] (pp. 97–106). The many papers in the Florentine architect's archive tell of this close friendship (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Giorgini with John M. Johansen showing the Walking Tall model, circa 1983 (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

In his unpublished autobiography, Giorgini recalls those dynamic 1970s:

> "I concentrated my work in New York through Pratt. This allowed me to set up an exhibition at Columbia University, give lectures, and have an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art at Columbus Circle, where I presented the ideogram for New York and another exhibition at Howard Wise. So, I got to know the people of ON SITE, and my things, my ideas, and my friends' projects began to be published, giving me the opportunity, little by little, to build my own space" [20].

In Morgan's living room, and through Isamu, Vittorio met Lillian, widow of the multifaceted artist, architect, and sculptor Frederick Kiesler, who immediately grasped the affinities between her husband's research on the notion of endlessly flowing space and the Tuscan architect's topological projects. Since the 1950s, Kiesler has been working on the scale model of the Endless House [54], which was the precedent most similar to Casa Saldarini, both in terms of the use of folded envelopes and of the organization of internal space. So similar that when Lillian, always committed to promoting Frederick's work, organized an exhibition at the Howard Wise Gallery in Manhattan in 1970, she involved Giorgini, who on that occasion exhibited the III Manifesto of Spatiology, a real collage of images in which he summarized the work completed up to that moment and cited some stimulating references from which he drew: from Finsterlin, with his magmatic and primordial spaces, to Kiesler, Gaudì and Mendelsohn, as well as the ancestral forms of Rudolf Steiner. Giorgini was also attracted to Le Corbusier's interest in the sculptural resonance of a building in relation to the place, a "principle that underlies the "visual acoustics" of Ronchamp, which he cites in the manifesto, as well as the reason for the shapes of miniature volcanoes and mountains that burst out from the roof terrace of the Unité d' habitation [55] (pp. 270–271) (Figure 12).

Here, he also exhibited two drawings from the series Scenari Urbani Futuribili, which continue the research already undertaken in Italy on how to redefine the functions of the great metropolis in light of a profound unease in which the contemporary city now found itself. This question is addressed by architects and architectural movements throughout the world and finds an echo through a mass-media apparatus—magazines, conventions,

university exercises, conferences, and exhibitions—already developed and reactive on an international scale. Thus, Giorgini's experience fits into this context, in which futuristic imagination ran wild: Tange designed the science fiction technologies of the Tokyo Plan; the Metabolism group proposed "serial successions of prefabricated cells and macrostructures that are intended to get round the overdeveloped Japanese urban scene" [56] (p. 17); the Archigram group circulated a series of deliberately utopian models with a fun, ironic tone; Yona Friedman and Bucky Fuller, on the other hand, take the issue seriously, with the former designing immense aerial platforms made of pylons, and the latter, a gigantic geodesic dome above the entire central part of Manhattan to protect against smog and improbable nuclear attacks.



Figure 12. The roof terrace of the Unité d'habitation in Marseille under construction, Giorgini notes "the childhood garden and a chimney", travel diary in Ireland, 1949–1950 (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

Faced with the collapse of the metropolis, Giorgini's futuristic urban scenarios propose new ways of living in the city through integrated models of productive, social, and residential spaces. These are organic complexes with an articulated network of connections at altitude with ducts and surfaces with multiple topological variants. The drawings, mostly watercolors or lithographs, are enriched with surreal science fiction colors, with highly powerful figurative results, but, perhaps for this very reason, misunderstood and considered as the product of a search for pure escape. These ideas for a more natural habitat are also conveyed through suggestive ideograms, that is, models made of plastic material, which represent the continuation of those in aluminum already made and exhibited in his homeland (Figure 13).

One of these models, "the great model of an ideogram for New York [. . .] which was later destroyed during a move" [20], was presented in 1972 at the Making Megalopolis Matter: The Artists' Answer exhibition held at the New York Cultural Center in Manhattan, which a month before had housed another similar exhibition entitled Making New York Understandable. The theme was metropolitan chaos; the artists were called to answer the question: "What's the Matter with the Megalopolis?". "This exhibition featured a number of performance and installation artists who [. . .] argued for a shift toward a greater

display of individualism on city streets and more opportunity for chaos" [57] (pp. 141–184) (Figure 14).



Figure 13. Exhibition at the Howard Wise Gallery, New York, 1970; on the left, foreground Frederick Kiesler, "Model for an Endless House"; on the right, Giorgini and the works exhibited on this occasion (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).



Figure 14. Ideogram for New York, created for the exhibition Making Megalopolis Matter: The Artists' Answer, New York Cultural Center, 1972 (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

In this same period, between the autumn of 1971 and the spring of 1972, the Columbia University School of Architecture, led by Alexander Kouzmanoff, organized a series of exhibitions and symposiums attended by, among others, Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph, Robert Venturi, John Johansen, and James Stirling, and in which Giorgini also participated together with his friend and architect Paolo Riani. Moreover, from a couple of letters by Kouzmanoff, author of the award-winning underground expansion of the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library at Columbia (1974), we know that the Florentine architect was also involved in the work of reviewing student projects at Columbia. Moreover, according to the chairman of the School of Architecture, "The exchange between students and reviewers is still one of the most vital elements of project criticism"[8] (Figure 15).

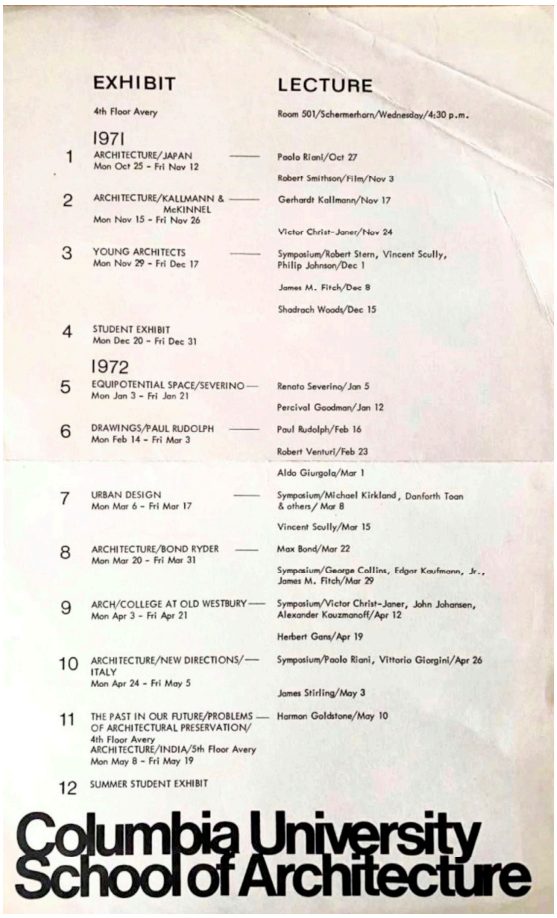


Figure 15. Exhibit and Lecture at Columbia University, Graduate School of Architecture, 1971–1972 (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

On closer inspection, the 1960s and the 1970s were a pivotal period in twentieth-century art, with the rise of Pop Art, Op Art, Minimalism, Conceptual Art, Performance Art, and Feminist Art, among many other styles and movements. All of the artists shared a fascination with mass media, mass production, and mass culture [57]. Vittorio met Leo Castelli, gallery owner and discoverer of great talents, was attracted by the works of American Pop Art, met Andy Warhol [13], was seduced by the everyday objects created by Claes Oldenburg, and was interested in the results of the artistic movement Art & Language and the writings of Charles Harrison [1] (p. 149). Among the many artistic circles frequented by Giorgini in New York, there was his membership in the avant-garde group Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T), founded in 1967 by Robert Rauschenber—whom he also probably met in Priscilla Morgan's salon—together with Remo Saraceni, with the aim of promoting collaboration between artists and engineers and pushing them to work together on experimental projects with a high technological content [1] (p. 149). In the 1970s, he encountered SITE, "a New York City-based architecture and environmental arts organization chartered in 1970 by James Wines, Alyson Sky, and Michelle Stone". The group distanced itself from all modernist or anti-modernist tendencies and preferred the negative formula of "de-architecture" [58] coined by Wines. Giorgini participated in one of the volumes of the ON SITE [59] series, to which Lewis Mumford, Hugh Hardy, and Denise Scott Brown, among others, contributed. In 1975 he took part in the ON SITE conference on the energy question and its potential impact on the habitat, presenting his fifth and last Spatiology Manifesto.

In this climate of continuous experimentation, in collaboration with Riani, photomontages were created by combining images of sonic structures by Hans Jenny, a Swiss doctor and naturalist, with those of urban and non-urban landscapes—such as, for example, the Manhattan skyline—which for Giorgini represented hypotheses for new types of habitat to be created with the technique of sounds (Giorgini and Riani presented the sonic structures for the first time in 1971 at the exhibition entitled "Enviro Vision" organized at Syracuse University in New York). Since the 1960s, in fact, he had been investigating the vibratory phenomena of Jenny, a family friend who was involved in Cymatics. He experimented with the ability of sound to create forms and eventually proved that vibrations influence matter [60]. In the same period, Katavalos also developed an architectural theory similar to that of Giorgini, according to which new discoveries in chemistry could lead to the birth of a new architecture known as Chemical Architecture [61].

Giorgini chose the technique of photomontage and collage, first used by avant-garde artists in the first two decades of the twentieth century and then taken up in a pop version by the neo-avant-garde. It is "a method that draws its virtue from its irony [. . .] and is also a strategy that allows us to approach utopia as an image, to accept it in fragments rather than in its entirety" [62] (pp. 230–231). Thus, in the case of Giorgini, this technique appears even more ironic, as the insertion of sonic structures in the urban context of New York or in the natural context of an island in the Pacific is clearly fictitious. The sonic structures are extraordinarily insensitive to the context in which they are inserted, but this decontextualization must be understood as Giorgini's deliberate wish to free them from the constraints of local dependence (Figure 16).



Figure 16. Vittorio Giorgini and Paolo Riani, photomontages of Manhattan with sonic structures, 1970s (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

It was at the end of the 1970s, with the multiplication of opportunities for debate conferences, exhibitions, and meetings at university locations, that Giorgini continued to weave his dense web of relationships to the point of being called to participate in the 1978 Venice Biennale centered on the theme Dalla natura all'arte, dall'arte alla natura [63] (From nature to art, from art to nature), and a year later, at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) for the major exhibition Transformations in Modern Architecture curated by Arthur Drexler, an American critic and historian of architecture, director of the Architecture and Design Department at the MoMA. In the latter, which aims to "review modern architecture from

1960 to approximately 1980, analyzing the changes in theory and practice that have occurred during these years"[9], Casa Saldarini was presented in the Sculpture: Organic Form [64] (pp. 54–59) section, alongside Kiesler's Endless House and David Jacob's Photomontage-model of The Continuous Room. Moreover, according to most critics, Kiesler's house profoundly influenced Giorgini's work, so much so that they defined, perhaps exaggerating, the Austrian-American artist as the Tuscan architect's "prophet and guru" [65] (p. 72) (Figure 17).



Figure 17. Casa Saldarini in the foreground, view of the exhibition "Transformations in Modern Architecture". MoMA, New York, 21 February–24 April 1979. Photographer: Mali Olatunji (copyright: The Museum of Modern Art, New York). Digital image ©2025 The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Firenze).

3.2. The "Made in USA" Projects Unbuilt

In the United States, Giorgini continued to experiment with the building technique used for Casa Saldarini, namely the cement mesh consisting of a very thin electro-welded wire mesh covered with a layer of cement, useful for thin, very flexible, elastic membranes. There, he had the opportunity to better specify the static characteristics of his design idea, which defined the architectural object through curvilinear shapes featuring various curvatures depending on the required structural needs.

Through Lilian Kiesler, in the summer of 1969, Giorgini met the renowned abstract artist Toshiko Takaezu [66], a friend of Isamu Noguchi. Shortly thereafter, in 1972, the ceramic artist commissioned him to design her studio-house in Clinton, New Jersey [1] (p. 174) [4] (p. 198). Numerous sketches and drawings, preserved in the architect's archive, document the study of the spiral shape, which wraps around the central organs—the ramp, the oven, the Japanese bath, the hearth, the rooms—like the exoskeleton of a crustacean (Figure 18).

But after Giorgini had made "three models and drawings, and a very large clay model that Takaezu left to crumble over time because she didn't fire it" [20], she disappeared without a word. "I later learned from Lilian Kiesler that someone told Toshiko that the housestudio would become more important than her work and that everyone would go to see the architecture and not her works" [20]. In the meantime, he threw himself

enthusiastically into teaching. It is quite clear that Giorgini's teaching method was steeped in the same experimental approach that characterized his investigations.



Figure 18. Model of Toshiko Takaezu's studio-house, 1972 (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

He encouraged his students to study the past, drawing, and writing notes in a sketchbook, "which was the sort of daily diary everyone should have" [20]. Sifting through the files, handwritten and typed notes, and slides preserved in his archive, we discover the cultural and architectural references that Giorgini used for his lessons. In addition to documents relating to the masters of modern architecture are those regarding contemporary painters and sculptors, with particular attention to the historical avant-gardes, and those relating to the Metabolists, the Archigrams, and a large section dedicated to modern Italian and Florentine architecture, with particular focus on the works of Giovanni Michelucci and Leonardo Savioli.

Just like his much-revered mentor, Michelucci [67], Giorgini also had a certain aversion to teaching rules and notions, so his teaching approach was aimed at continuous, stimulating, and equal dialogue with students to arouse their interest (Figure 19).

At Pratt, Vittorio earned the appreciation of his students, who regularly nominate him "Distinguished Teacher", and the esteem of colleagues, such as Johansen, who wrote of him: he is "an unusually talented and valuable man of our architectural profession [. . .] he enjoys an international reputation as a structural theorist and architectural visionary [. . .] he is an extraordinary teacher who has inspired a host of devoted students for several decades"[10]. At Pratt, he also met Giuliano Fiorenzoli, seventeen years younger, whom he met in Florence at the Faculty, founder of the radical architecture group Zziggurat, visionary designer of utopian and dystopian towers and architecture, with whom Vittorio established a solid, enduring friendship [68] (p. 84).

Around the mid-1970s, another opportunity arose to put into practice his theoretical and geometric studies on non-orientable and asymmetrical shell beams in which the internal surface continues until it transforms into the external surface. An organization in Harlem, whose purpose was to educate and help the children of the ghetto, commissioned Giorgini, through the Pratt Institute, perhaps through the mediation of his colleague Sydney Katz,

to design a rural youth center. Together with the students, for four consecutive summers between 1976 and 1979, Giorgini organized an educational workshop to design and build a community center in the cement and mesh in Liberty, a small town surrounded by valleys, wood, and ponds in New York State. With the elimination of internal and external surfaces, the Liberty Centre represents the maximum expression of the architect's studies. Indeed, it was at this moment he worked on manipulating the topological aspect of geometric figures, such as the Möbius band and the Klein bottle, and eventually configuring new three-dimensional figures with multiple curvatures, such as the Giorgini sphere and torus.



Figure 19. Giorgini at Pratt Institute with students (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

For four long years, during six weeks in the summer months, he was involved in this project, for which he built the entire structure in electro-welded mesh. It was a rather imposing construction, more than 12 m high, modeled according to the desired shape, and supported by the use of wooden poles (Figure 20).



Figure 20. Liberty Rural Community Centre, Parksville (1976–1979). Giorgini and the students walk on the structure to manually model the meshes (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

But the Liberty Rural Community Centre did not go unnoticed. Stanley Abercrombie, in his publications dedicated to the use of ferrocement [69] (pp. 36–37, 108, 134–135, 140–141), [70–72] described this "extraordinary structure" as a "pioneering prototype", both for the originality of the technique, a novelty in the United States, and for the topological forms used. Abercrombie emphasized the exceptional nature of Giorgini's experimental research, which "involved the study of giving structural strength to plastic materials by bending them (rather than simply by making them thicker, the usual method). This has led him to the development of what he calls asymmetrically curved beams" [71] (p. 73).

However, the Liberty project was suspended for lack of funds when only casting cement on the wire mesh was lacking for its completion [1] (p. 180) [4] (pp. 198–199). "All that is left are photographs of these meshes, which became a heap of junk in the end" [20] said the embittered architect.

Despite everything, Giorgini continued his investigations, increasingly combining his research with teaching at the Pratt Institute.

During his stay in America, Giorgini came across the work of British biologist and mathematician D'Arcy Thompson, *On Growth and Form* (published in 1917 and republished in the United States in 1945) [73,74], which investigated the form and growth dynamics of living organisms. In particular, the architect focused his attention on the Thompsonian concept, according to which "the form of an object is a diagram of forces" [74] (p. 16), applying the "theory of transformations" [74] (pp. 1026–1095) to symmetrical and asymmetrical meshes.

Giorgini attempts to define static diagrams in order to quantify the forces that transformed the original symmetrical model, with the aim of investigating more efficient and economical design techniques. He understands that "the trilithic modes used in traditional architecture do not exist in nature, but the membrane system does exist almost entirely" [39] (p. 102) [4] (p. 200). He seeks to clarify the relationships between straight and curved lines and the planes and solids that derive from them [4] (pp. 200–201). According to Giorgini, natural structures, being complex, composite, and generally asymmetric, can be read more clearly if reduced to recognizable models, that is, to conventional systems, those identified by the straight line, the flat surface, and the volumes defined by straight lines and flat surfaces [1] (pp. 37–38). "Leaving aside the orthogonality of the usual space, Giorgini developed an ante-litteram morphing process, based on the rectification—a sort of discretization—of curved lines" [5] (p. 112) (Figure 21).

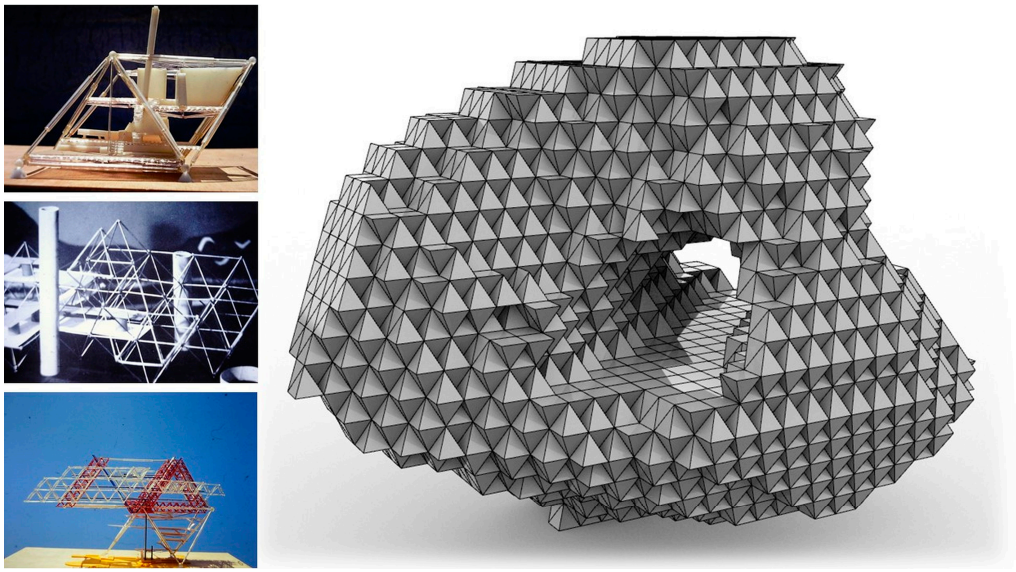


Figure 21. On the left: Giorgini experimental models of structures based on the triangle tetrahedron. On the right: digital elaboration of a modular structure like those designed by Giorgini [5] (p. 113).

Haresh Lalvani himself identified Thompson's concepts as the basic paradigm that characterizes the Florentine architect's design [75] (p. 175), including him among the members of that School, which Charles Jencks calls Biomorphic School, which includes Gaudì, Wright, Soleri, Kiesler, The Metabolists, Johansen, Bloc and Katavalos [76] (p. 99); Lalvani prefers to define it as the Morphological School [75] (p. 174).

Since the mid-1970s, he had thus arrived at triangular geometric construction systems and tetrahedral and octahedral structural meshes, which demonstrate functional,

formal, and technological qualities. Moreover, he realized that "in the study of nature [. . .] ultimately the systems, even those that did not seem so, were based on triangular geometries" [20]. His American "urbological" studies, as the architect himself defined them, meditate on the way to intervene within the urban environment, in particular on the road-sidewalk-building relationship, and offer complex design proposals of great scope, developed according to staggered and articulated spatial meshes, which overlap with the existing urban grid, according to a model that provides for the insertion of three levels above the ground floor and one underground, each of which is designed to satisfy different functions. It is an urban scale design organized according to a network of blocks, connected by elevated road routes, which are anchored to the ground through nodes, i.e., transition elements between the ground and the structure, in such a way as to free the street level from any congestion and interference between pedestrian life and mechanized traffic [40] (p. 119) (Figure 22).

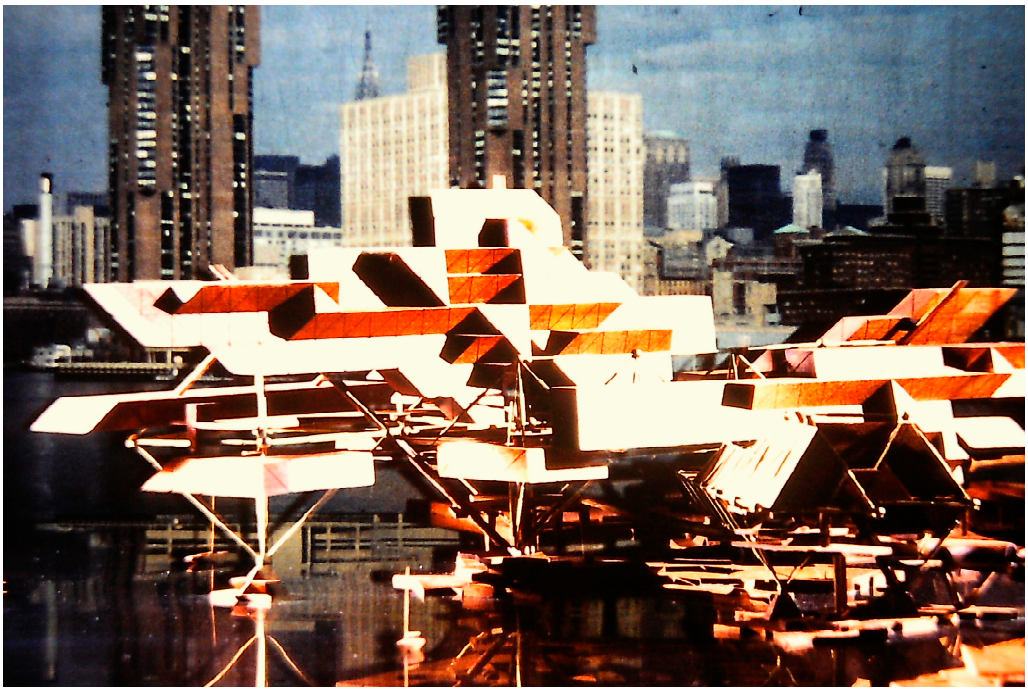


Figure 22. The model of Hydropolis, East River, Manhattan, 1981–1982 (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

These are "counter-projects", as Giorgini calls them, or alternative solutions to traditional environmental design started at Pratt, created in collaboration with young colleagues or selected students, and then developed in his studio, a 400-square-meter loft at 22 Wooster Street, purchased by Giorgini in the mid-1970s when SoHo was still a run-down area. Giorgini's home studio became a laboratory of ideas where experiments were conducted, collective discussions were held, and models were developed, the latter being the founding and essential elements of all his research. From an early age, he cultivated a taste for building things and the pleasure of drawing. In the storeroom on the roof of the house on Lungarno Corsini in Florence, he contemplated and drew Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical tables and botanical studies and built "models by making ribs with spars, making the skeleton of the wings of the tailplanes of the fuselage" [20]. Donna Ruth Hadjipopov, the architect's companion in the 1980s, daughter of the famous American composer Edwin Judd Woldin, a friend of Giorgini, also a regular at Priscilla Morgan's salon and in contact with Buckminster Fuller and Johansen, says that "the Soho loft was always filled with colleagues, friends, students (who were always working on models). [. . .] They worked on

the East River model, Hydropolis and Walking Tall while I lived with him". Also living in the red brick building on Wooster Street, which Ruth described as a "co-op", where everyone cooperated in the management of the apartment block, was avantgarde theatre director Elizabeth LeCompte, the actor William James Dafoe and the acclaimed writer and performer, Spaulding Gray[11] (Figure 23).



Figure 23. Giorgini's loft at 22 Wooster Street, SoHo, New York (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

The 1980s opened up other interesting opportunities for Giorgini.

In 1982, The National Institute for Architectural Education, a storied American institution, formerly the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects—the current Van Alen Institute—invited him to exhibit his counter-projects: Interstate Highway Oasis prototype (1973), Roosevelt Island Housing Project (1976), Biscayne Bay (1976), Machu Picchu (1976–1978), South Street Seaport Housing (1978), Hydropolis (1981–1982). The catalog for the exhibition has the significant title "Urbology. Six Urban Projects" [77] was graphically curated by his friend Tony Palladino, the famous creator of the typographic title for Robert Bloch's novel "Psycho".

In the preface to the book, Johansen underlines how technology and organic process clearly merge in the work of this 'artist' and 'humanist', whose projects, although still unrealized, are "logical, serious, according to natural law, and beautiful [. . .] visionary yet not science fiction" [78] (p. 3).

Precisely because of their extensive spatial dimension, Giorgini's projects were almost all conceived for a metropolis like New York, particularly Manhattan, which, according to the architect, was the "symbolic city, as beautiful as it is hideous" [79] (p. 110), the perfect example of an environmental balance violated by inappropriate building speculation carried out in areas adjacent to the water [1] (p. 110) [4] (p. 204) [79].

As can be seen, Hydropolis is a multifunctional "cyclopean artificial peninsula" [80] (p. 71) raised on the water stretching along the East River, between 16th and 24th Street, which was proposed as an alternative to the winning project of the competition announced for this area, harshly criticized by Giorgini [81]. Walking Tall (1982–1983) was a one-hundred-story skyscraper that was different from the usual office towers proposed and then built between 49th and 50th Street and 8th and 9th Avenue, where Giorgini relied on the possibilities offered by the tensile structures that he used on several occasions [82,83] (Figure 24).

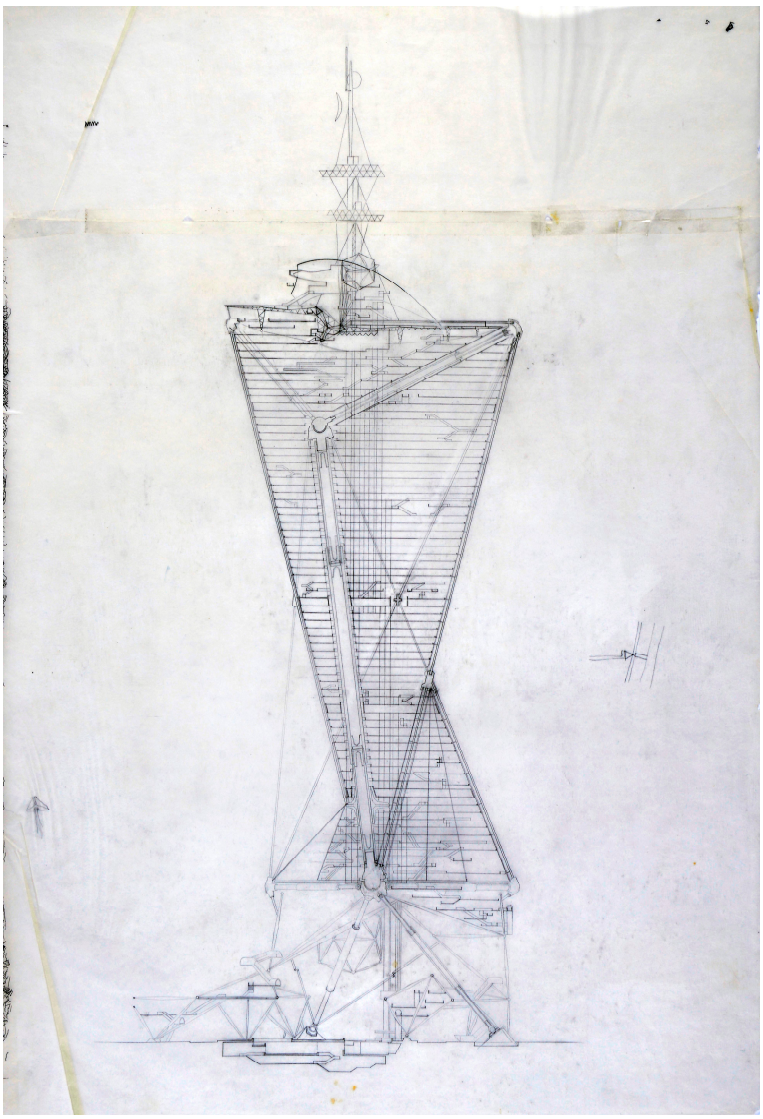


Figure 24. Walking Tall, New York, 1981–1982 (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

Genesis, a project with which Giorgini participated in the 1984 international competition for ideas for Times Square, was conceived as a macrostructure for residences and offices, which functionally reorganized a large urban area through a simple arrangement above the pre-existing urban grid.

For Giorgini, the modern city had to grow by additions at the aerial level, according to an open system, with the separation of connections according to different functional categories, as already proposed by Le Corbusier and before him, by Leonardo da Vinci. Giorgini's solutions opened architecture in all directions, eliminating any type of hierarchy between elevations and allowing for uniform isotropic planning, which could be raised in height and without cumbersome supports on the ground [4] (p. 205). Without a doubt, he reflected on the numerous variants of futuristic cities proposed by the young people of the Metabolism group: the Aerial City (1962) by Isozaki, or rather the Helix City (1966) by Kurokawa. Certainly, for Giorgini, the large-scale urban planning proposals, such as Paul Maymont's floating vertical cities, Katavolos's marine city, and Yona Friedman's mobile city or spatial city, constituted the numerous variants of indisputable appeal from which to draw [84]. Above all, he is very clear about the model of the multi-layered city conceived for New York and the Lower Manhattan Expressway designed by Paul Rudolph, whom he knew personally [85].

Giorgini's designs were based on the Octa Frame System, an octahedral mesh construction system where basic modules are assembled together to form the Octet building unit, which recalled the structural system of Buckminster Fuller's Octet Truss System (1940–1943). Giorgini also created a singular metal hinge-attachment system between the pillar and the hexagonal foundation plinth in reinforced concrete, defined as the "universal connective node". He was certainly familiar with the MERO component created by engineer Max Mengeringhausen or the connection points designed by Konrad Wachsmann for the US Air Force [4] (p. 204).

Rewinding the thread of his countless acquaintances, it is easy for the writer to imagine Giorgini in Morgan's living room debating with Bucky, Noguchi, and others on how to apply the laws of nature to architecture, reflecting on the tetrahedron, or the "lowest common denominator of the Universe", and on the complementary octahedron, and on their application in construction.

The Florentine architect grasped the significance of a transitional age, which, from the Industrial Revolution, was moving from the mass-media revolution to the age of computers. "He understood that only with the help of technology and electronic instruments would it be possible to obtain a mathematical control of meshes. In 1978, during the 38th Venice Biennale, he declared that he was convinced that new tools, introduced by the developments of genetics, electronics, and information technology, would pave the way for more structurally efficient building techniques" [5] (pp. 111–112). Giorgini intuited the enormous creative possibilities offered by digital language. He was in contact with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and since the 1980s, he began experimenting with the first CAD software (the Miranim system) at the Pratt Institute.

In 1987, he exhibited the digital model of "Genesis—A Neighborhood Proposal for Times Square" at the exhibition entitled "Computer Images of Architectures", organized by the American Institute of Architects (AIA). Genesis had not, in fact, been included among the hundred projects selected, then exhibited, for the 1984 ideas competition, all imbued with a clear postmodern approach, a tendency judged by our architect as "loaded with rhetoric, destined to succumb because imbued with passive formalism" [40] (pp. 16–17) (Figure 25).

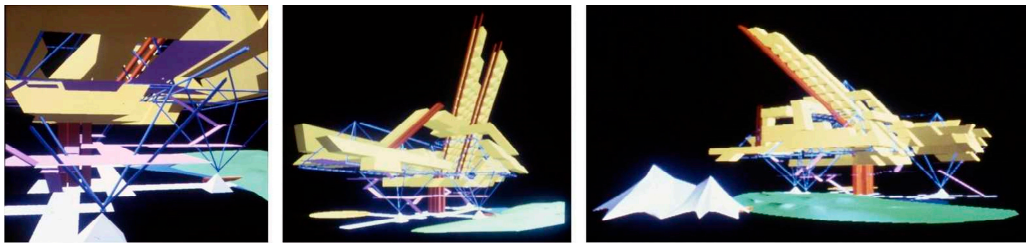


Figure 25. Genesis, digital model made with early CAD software, Times Square, New York, 1984 (Courtesy B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive).

Between the 1980s and 1990s, he continued his research and developed a series of design proposals, participating in international exhibitions and scientific conferences.

The centenary of Bucky Fuller's birth in 1995 became an opportunity to present a selection of works by the Fuller and Sadao studio in New York and to investigate the innovative developments of other pioneers in Design Science and Morphology worldwide. The Pratt Institute and The Buckminster Fuller Institute, together with the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, organized "Contemporary Developments in Design Science", a traveling exhibition curated by Haresh Lalvani, which "deals with the exploration of fundamental structures (patterns, relationships, grammars) across disciplines, and their applications to architecture"[12]. This was an exhibition that had a certain international reach due to

the participation of key names in architecture, including Giorgini, also included in the International Advisory Board alongside Felix Candela, Santiago Calatrava, Norman Foster, John Johansen, William Katavalos, and Anne Tyng.

1995 was also the year in which he published his book *Spatiology. The morphology of the natural sciences in architecture and design* [40], which represented a fundamental recapitulation of his theoretical itinerary and an account of his projects. The book, which included a preface by Johansen and an afterword by Lalvani, was presented in February 1996 by Kenneth Frampton and structural engineer Guy Nordenson in the prestigious setting of the Italian Cultural Institute in New York. It is a work that is "intensely serious in its purpose, thorough in its investigations and exuberant in spirit" [86] (p. 8), wrote Johansen. Indeed, it was the latter who included his Florentine friend "in the distinguished company of the inventive engineers", Pier Luigi Nervi, Felix Candela, Frei Otto, Buckminster Fuller, and Konrad Wachsmann, because like them, he "delved into the disciplines of mathematics, geometry, statics, and kinetics and having actually applied these disciplines to designs for solving contemporary social problems" [86] (p. 8). To this list, we should also add Robert Maillart, admired by Giorgini since 1948, when an Italian Swiss architecture student, Jean-Marc Lamunière, who later enjoyed a certain success, brought a monograph on the work of the Swiss engineer, together with another by Le Corbusier, almost certainly *Vers une architecture* [20].

Moreover, Giorgini himself declared he was fascinated by "construction systems using columns, beams, and cantilevers, compounded and expressive of the static behavior diagrams of the experiments of Maillart, Nervi, Candela" [40] (p. 17), and "by Eduardo Torroja, Konrad Wachsmann, Frei Otto, Robert Le Ricolais" [40] (p. 158).

During the first semester of 1995, Giorgini discovered that he was suffering from an irreversible eye disease, which would lead to blindness. "Horrified by no longer being able to work at the levels to which I was accustomed," [20] said the architect, "I decided to stop teaching" and to leave New York permanently to return to Florence.

4. Discussion

Vittorio Giorgini's American experience is fully embedded within the complex framework of that phase of intellectual migrations that constitutes part of the rich transatlantic narrative of modern architecture. Giorgini's journey, until now largely overlooked, is linked to that of his father, Giovan Battista [6], a widely studied figure and one of the principal commercial mediators of the transatlantic route [87].

Giorgini's biography thus provides new insights into the multifaceted landscape of cultural transfer phenomena in architecture, already explored in specific research projects (see the most recent works on the subject, to which we refer for the extended bibliography) [88–93]. Although it represents a microhistory, when placed within the broader investigation of the Italian presence in postwar American architecture, the study of the Florentine architect's personal trajectory acquires significant relevance within the intricate networks of interactions between Europe and the United States. He belongs to that second generation of European emigrants who, despite choosing to remain in the New World, never lost their relational and cultural ties with their homeland.

The independent stories of figures such as Edgardo Contini [94], Romaldo Giurgola [95], Bruno Funaro [96], Paolo Soleri, and Leonardo Ricci [97]—with whom Giorgini had an openly contentious relationship [1] (p. 129)—Giuliano Fiorenzoli, and Mario Salvadori, whom he had known since the 1960s, converge in the United States. This country served as the stage for the representation of twentieth-century modernity [98] (pp. 9–24).

The motivations driving a significant number of Europeans to set sail for the United States and, in many cases, to settle there permanently were varied. Giorgini, too, projected his dreams, desires, and hopes onto American soil.

However, unlike many other émigrés, the Florentine architect's research did not materialize into built works. One may ask: why did his projects remain on paper? Why was he not sufficiently accepted by his contemporaries?

His designs were founded on a strong belief in the potential of technology, which at the time—and perhaps even today—was prohibitively expensive and far from standardized. It is likely that he never truly questioned whether his works could be realized. Even Johansen remarked that his friend's projects "are for the time probably uneconomical and may not be as such built, yet with our present technology could indeed be built" [78] (p. 2).

This also explains why many of his works lack the conventional architectural definitions of plan, elevation, and section at various scales; rather, they were deliberately conceived to remain within the realm of "technical and functional credibility".

His persistent and often agonizing research into natural structures—aimed at understanding their static behavior and applying it to architecture—was carried out through an individual, solitary path, which proved particularly frustrating for him. Despite numerous challenges and opposition, Giorgini pursued his ideas with unwavering determination, often taking controversial and unconventional positions, which ultimately led to his progressive isolation.

Giorgini belongs to that category of "tenacious and innovative architects, whose destiny has so far been to be archived in the great filing system of lost opportunities across the ages" [99] (p. 225). A sense of deep disappointment emerges in his last interview, in which he expressed regret for "having reached the end of the road" without having been able "to produce more" [4,13] (p. 208).

This stubbornness and perseverance led Aldo Castellano to describe him as "one of those rare researcher-architect figures in the pre-Renaissance tradition who still survive (albeit with the greatest difficulty) on the international panorama; a panorama often dominated by formalistic extremisms" [82] (p. 77).

5. Conclusions

The End of the American Journey: Some Thoughts

Giorgini did not belong to a group or a movement; he always maintained an autonomous position, remaining a solitary architect-artist like his friend Emilio Vedova. On reflection, his was an individual path, similar to that undertaken a few years earlier by Paolo Soleri [1] (p. 136), whom the Florentine architect went to meet in Arizona in the early 1970s, in the anthropomorphic town of Arcosanti in pursuit of a possible collaboration, an encounter which resulted in nothing, however[13].

A loneliness that the Florentine architect did not hide but let transpire several times in his memoirs: "I realize that my political attitudes, my ideas never mentioned, have always created a certain emptiness around me. So even in New York, as happened in Florence, people knew me, but I evoked little or no understanding" [13].

In the seventh volume of the ON SITE series, with the significant title *Unbuilt America*, a review of projects for the United States that remained on paper, edited by Alison Sky and Michelle Stone of SITE [100], published in 1976, we find no reference to Giorgini's projects. On closer inspection, by this date, he had already developed the prototype of a highway parking service, a multifunctional lattice tripod (Interstate Highway Oasis prototype) (1973), and had received an honorable mention from the City Planning Commission of New York for the design of a playground (Play Ground) for the inclusion of disabled children (the games for which were designed by Sidney Katz), but he was still working on the Roosevelt

Island Housing Project complex on the East River and on Biscayne Bay for Miami. This perhaps explains the lack of reference to Giorgini, given that in 1974, when the book was still in preparation, he published the "Spatiology" manifesto in the same series, and the following year, he participated in the conference and collective exhibition organized by SITE. It is somewhat surprising, however, that neither the book *Never Built New York* by Sam Lubell and Greg Goldin [101], published in 2016, nor even the exhibition inspired by it, organized a year later at the Queens Museum, made mention of even one of Giorgini's counter projects among the parade of two centuries of unbuilt visionary, bold designs developed for the Big Apple.

Marginalized from the cultural debate and only recently rehabilitated, often misunderstood as an informal or idealistic architect [102], he was careful, on several occasions, to affirm that his projects, despite not being realized, were neither science fiction nor techno-aesthetic, but "within the limits of technical and functional credibility" [40]. Moreover, his long-time friend and colleague Fiorenzoli states that Giorgini was constantly critical of anyone who dealt with "aesthetics" [68] (p. 84). Several times he reiterated that it is impossible to reduce architecture to sculpture, underlining that his work has never been that of "copying" the forms of nature or of "making sculpture". Nevertheless, the visual impact of his models and the powerful imagery of his drawings are immediate and memorable and also aroused the wonder and attention of the Centre Pompidou [103] and the Frac Centre-Val de Loire [104], which in 2002, through the interest of Frédéric Migayrou, enriched their collections with several of his works.

In 1995, Lalvani expressed his certainty that Giorgini's pioneering projects "will stand out as a beacon in the architectural evolution and will continue to inspire us by their masterful synthesis of art and science of architecture into forceful works of a daring visionary" [75] (p. 177). Perhaps, at least in part, Giorgini's arduous research journey enriched and inspired the morphological studies conducted at the Center for Experimental Structures at the Pratt School of Architecture [50], an institution he contributed to establishing but did not live to see come to fruition.

Upon closer examination, Giorgini's research anticipates solutions recently developed in digital architecture. Parametric design operates within a continuous and unified space-volume, where solids and voids open and close freely, much like a malleable material undergoing a sculptural process [105]. The concept of continuous construction, based on self-supporting surfaces in digital architecture, unexpectedly resonates with Giorgini's investigations [5]. His profound insights continue to endure, though they did not define his era.

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Notes

1 B.A.Co.-Vittorio Giorgini Archive—Follonica (GR), Italy, info@archiviovittoriogiorgini.it.

2 "Vittorio told me that they (Neutra and Giorgini) stayed in touch for years and that Neutra urged him to go to America to work for him". Testimony of Marco Del Francia to Denise Ulivieri, October 2024.

3 Letter from Peter Kaufman to Vittorio Giorgini, 5 August 1968, Vittorio Giorgini Archive.

4 Letter from Isamu Noguchi to Kenzo Tange, 7 December 1966. The Noguchi Museum Archives: MS_COR_083_048.
5 Almost certainly on this occasion a conference was organized to which Giorgini contributed by presenting his research work and Casa Saldarini. The typescript of the text of his speech, dated 26 October 1966, is deposited in his archive.
6 Letter from Priscilla Morgan to Isamu Noguchi, 10 March 1969. The Noguchi Museum Archives: MS_COR_296_003.
7 The Center was created after Giorgini's departure for Italy.
8 Letter from Alexander Kouzmanoff to Vittorio Giorgini, 6 June 1972, Vittorio Giorgini Archive.
9 Letter from Arthur Drexler to Anna Querci, 8 February 1978, Vittorio Giorgini Archive.
10 Letter from John M. Johansen to John Hajduk (the correct surname is Hejduk), 17 November 1988, Vittorio Giorgini Archive.
11 Testimony of D.R. Hadjipopov to M. Del Francia, 20–21 January 2023.
12 Exhibition Brochure, Vittorio Giorgini Archive.
13 Testimony of Marco Del Francia to Denise Ulivieri, September 2024.

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