
Engie
Headquarters

Engie HQ
by Park Associati

Client
Generali Real Estate SGR S.p.a.
Fondo Effepi Real Estate

Address
Via Chiese 74, Milan

Year
Project: 2013
Onsite: 2016 - 2017
Completion: 2018

Area
sqm 12.000

Professional Service
Concept
Architectural Project
Artistic Site Supervision
Landscape Project

Project Management
Generali Immobiliare Italia SGR S.p.A., Milan

General Contractor
Carron SpA, Treviso S.p.A.

Site Supervision, Construction Management and Health & Safety
Arcadis Italia Srl, Milan

Structural, Mechanical and Electrical Engineering
General Planning Srl, Milan

Fire Consultancy
General Planning Srl, Milan

Certification LEED
Rina Service SpA, Genova S.p.A.

Background Milan

Excerpt from the article 'La Milano di sfondo' written by Valerio Paolo Mosco, published by The Plan # 109, October 2018

Talking about a city's style would seem inaccurate, and in part it is. Yet we feed on this inaccuracy, and Milan does have its own style; or rather, it has rediscovered it.
What is striking about Milan today is how the effects of a fairly corrective architecture have gone far beyond a corrective aesthetic. The architecture produced by the Milanese practices was anything but hasty; rather than opposing the aseptic international style, they simply revised it with the pragmatism that typifies the people of Lombardy. Seeking a language reduced to its bare essentials that expressed elegance through deduction, tailoring a sign so that it could appear on the threshold of representation while still remaining in the background.

Among the most important works created by Park Associati, the restyling of the La Serenissima building weaves together elements in a configuration that could be called a stylisation of an urban building; at the far end, Salewa Headquarters renounces the weaving of components in favour of wrap-around plastic that frees itself from urban suggestions to interact with the surrounding mountain ranges. The Engie Headquarters project finds its place between these extremes. In this case, it is the restyling of a thirty-year-old building – a typical example of the worst architecture of the 'Milano da bere '.
Park's intervention dismantled the old façades and replaced them with an architectural division consisting of two elements: a curtain wall with a double air chamber and aluminium lamellar intradoses slightly protruding from the façade's edge, which together form a veritable architectural order. Weaving this stylised brise soleil with the curtain wall is a simple move that, while characterising the building, maintains the aloofness and detachment that architects, like good Milanese, are reluctant to give up. Park's architecture is based on a sense of order that is neither overbearing nor theoretical; it's an empirical and adaptive architecture that aims to achieve a figurative expression of equal potential, and – as a result – is best expressed in the general structure and its overall vision. This is basically a 'background' architecture that makes an appearance on the threshold of figuration and then, almost out of restraint, takes a step back.

Bicocca District

If Sesto San Giovanni used to be called the Stalingrad of Italy and Little Manchester due to the massive presence of industrial plants and workers, the neighbouring area of Bicocca deserved the same epithets. From the end of the 19th century to the second half of the 20th, Pirelli, Falck, Breda, Ansaldo, Magneti Marelli and other symbolic names of the industrialisation of Lombardy and Italy turned this area northeast of the city of Milan into a hub of development and the driving force of the Italian economy.
It is strange to think that the neighbourhood takes its name from a stately manor house called Bicocca degli Arcimboldi, which was the country residence of the aristocratic Arcimboldi family from Parma. Built around 1450 and frequented by the family until the early 1700s, the house subsequently underwent several changes of ownership until, at the beginning of the 1800s, it was acquired by the Pirelli family, who already owned factories nearby.

From the 1970s onwards, as happened elsewhere, the relocation, deindustrialisation and eventual decommission of nearly all production resulted in a decline of the industrial course of the Bicocca area.
In the 1980s, it was Leopoldo Pirelli who launched an international competition focused on the reorganisation of former industrial areas. Vittorio Gregotti's winning project transformed the neighbourhood by reconnecting it to the Milanese urban fabric through the construction of dwellings and the detached section of the University of Milan. Between the 1990s and 2000s, the Arcimboldi Theatre and Bicocca Village were built, the latter one of the first large shopping centres in both the city and Italy, comprising 16 cinemas as well as shops, bars and restaurants. With the inauguration of Hangar Bicocca in 2004, the district also became the site of one of the most evocative exhibition venues in Italy for international contemporary art.

Today Bicocca is facing a new renovation process. Reached by the recently-inaugurated high-tech underground line, the district has become accessible and close to the other residential and commercial areas of the city. And it is the tertiary sector that is mostly taking advantage of this renewed communication network. Many companies are choosing to base their operational headquarters here, in buildings that have undergone restoration to be compliant with contemporary requirements of environmental sustainability and internal liveability. That is what Engie did when they decided to house their headquarters in the building on Via Chiese, trusting Park Associati with its complete redesign.

Story-telling of a Project

Communicating an architectural project has great charm, as it means following its evolution and trying to bring its peculiarities, its technical details, the transformation of ideas into hard facts and the reasons behind the choices out of the design office. Even the stages that are usually most overlooked can become elements of extreme interest for understanding a project.

Milano Design Film festival

Milano Design Film festival

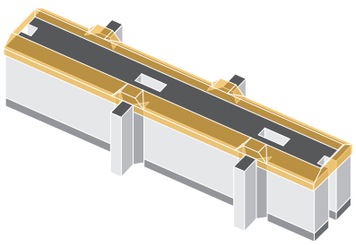
In recent years, architecture has had much more access to communication. The advent of new digital means of communication in the last decade has promoted the spreading of news on projects, architects, starchitects, futuristic masterplans, construction gambles, and power to the imagination . Thus, the gap between architecture and the general public has been narrowing. Today, every project gets discovered, launched and made public in the communication arena right from its conception, and also becomes the object of discussions in narrow academic spheres, in conversations between professionals and at the local bar. Take the construction site, for example: the physical place where theories become facts, where several professionals come together to give tangible form to an idea. The construction site corresponds to the film set, where the film really comes to life following the screenplay writing and the production agreements. Or, in the case of architectural restoration, consider the original building. Documenting the 'before' and then comparing it with the completed project. In our cities there are numerous examples of buildings that, while being iconic in their own way, lack the characteristics of sustainability, energy saving and living comfort required today. Many undergo a more or less integral transformation, so their current situation becomes an important part of communicating the transformation process.

A video entitled The light of construction filmed the Engie building's construction site in its main stages, up to completion; this became a very interesting document for increasing knowledge on restoration work. Choosing to use the black and white technique and only the noises typical of a construction site in the background gave the short video (two minutes) a particular style that earned it an invitation to the Milan Design Film Festival in 2017.

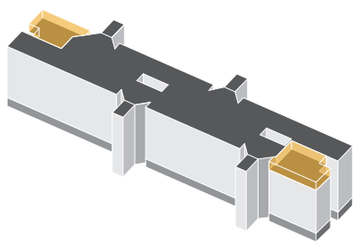
Press, social media, television, film festivals, international awards, architecture communication channels... the media are now many and diversified. Every step of a project can find the language to open up the understanding of the final result.

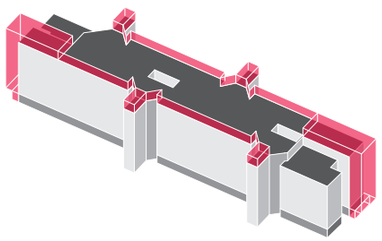
Time and adaptability

Demolitions

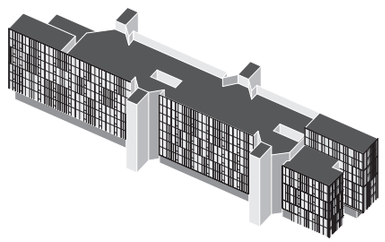


Demolitions





Reconstructions



Realization

In the projects of intervention on existing architectural heritage, one important variable emerges that is probably the most underestimated but significantly influences and alters the design activity: time.

When redeveloping a building that has already been lived in, the project is conceived while the life of the building is still ongoing. This is when a fascinating intellectual activity that overlaps three different moments is triggered.

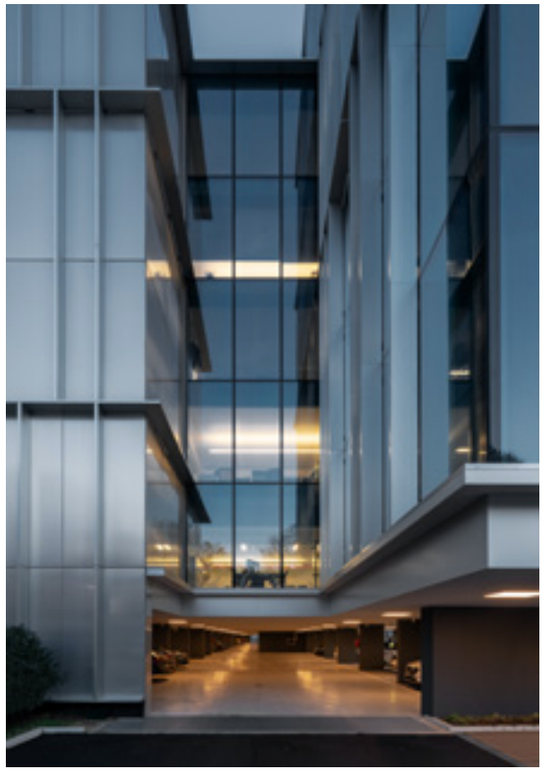
The history of the project – sometimes manifold. This time-scale of days-months-years from beginning to end starts when the existing building takes shape, and covers all the anthropic, urban and natural activities that change its aspect-function-use, up to the private or public idea of reviewing its characteristics and questioning the peculiarities underlying the genesis of the original project.

The present time of the project, which profoundly impacts the building's new second life. This is when the most contemporary design methods are applied and the even more contemporary needs of owners, users and clients are satisfied. In this lapse of time, which is much shorter than the other two, the sustainable design process is governed by current regulations and construction techniques.

The future of the project. Compared with the other two, this is an uncertain time. Nobody can presume to visualise it with certainty. Yet the project must try to tackle it in order to adapt today's ideas to the most diverse needs and requirements of tomorrow. A few years often pass from the moment a project begins to when the building lights up upon completion; then, after ten years or even less, the users or needs within it might change. Therefore, a redevelopment project should not perhaps be thought of as an isolated, unique and self-referential expression of a multidisciplinary group of professionals. First of all, we should reappraise ourselves as interpreters of different moments and convince ourselves that we are part of an architectural-construction development process that should adapt to the passing of time. A time that is intersected by ever-changing and evolving aesthetic, functional, natural, economic, social and health needs.

Glass: light and matter

The use of matter and materials in the construction process focuses on assessing and controlling a material's main peculiarity, its imperfect and unpredictable belonging to physical reality that, by definition, is susceptible to tolerance and error.
Assessing and controlling matter are the vehicles for transforming a project's semantic area into reality, in the shape of a building that any user can be aware of directly when observing an architectural structure, which will show a good balance of its own material composition, affected by many transformations in response to the changing time and seasons.



The difference between project and construction, between transposing an architectural idea to a project's outline and its implementation, is as obvious as it is critical.
Over time, thanks to the extreme development of the software and hardware available to professionals who are increasingly specialised to meet the requirements of ever more demanding clients, this gap has been gradually narrowing. Thanks to more than realistic virtual depictions and the use of three-dimensional, parametric and multidisciplinary design modes, the two worlds are in fact getting increasingly closer.
The notable difference that still exists is marked by matter and its relationship with light in all its variations.
As sine and cosine complement each other in trigonometric relations, so reflection and transparency balance each other out in glass, which is able to reflect light and the surrounding scenery at the same time as revealing what it is protecting within. Reflection in fact doubles and distorts the shapes and geometries of the elements adjoining the glass itself. It picks up the light of day in its time-specific shade, varying its tone and intensity according to its characteristics. It reveals its inner life through its colours, shades and depths.
No material has a univocal, immutable aspect, but glass surfaces and casings lend an architectural project a perceptual mutability and dynamism that, if alternated and made discontinuous by choosing different materials, seem to always manifest their being the expression of their own time, as if surprised by their changeable hues and perspectives and by the changing light.

Interview with Claudio Sposato

Responsible for Real Estate, General Services and Mobility of Engie Italia.

Q: Eng. Sposato, you are in charge of Real Estate, General Services and Mobility of Engie Italia. When your assignment started, the architectural project for the restoration of the building in Via Chiese in Milan was already under way and works were already advanced. What impact did the new design have on you? Do you think that in some way it embodies the philosophy that an international company dealing in energy intends to convey, also by means of its headquarters?
R: The impact was positive. The reasons that steered me towards choosing this building for the new HQ of ENGIE Italia in Milan were mainly dictated by three factors: the quality of the architectural redevelopment project; the straightforwardness of the plans, which lent themselves well to flexible and efficient layout solutions; and the proposed technological solutions.
In time, the choice proved right. Thanks to the completion interventions and the management of facility services, the building is currently a 'Low CO2 emission' property, with values 96% lower than in the previous HQ – and this is all consistent with ENGIE's mission to be a leader in energy transition to zero CO2 emissions.

Q: The building was designed to satisfy criteria of energy saving, sustainability and, in particular, indoor liveability. Openness, fluidity and transparency have been the key words in planning its interiors. What is working inside Engie's Headquarters like? Are the spaces lived differently depending on employee age? Are there any aspects that are particularly valued or criticised? What are the reactions of those visiting the building?
R: Moving from the previous offices to the new premises aroused interest and in some maybe a slight sense of uncertainty. Being used to working in offices designed according to old logics was deep-rooted, and the challenge we were posing was great – innovative solutions, different environments depending on the activity characterised by a higher level of design and technology. Today, we can proudly claim that the new work environments have proven to be pleasant, functional and productive, and have promoted new exchanges among the teams, as well as new management and collaboration methods – encouraging synergy, innovation and integration irrespective of age or job.
The new headquarters also serve as showrooms where our guests can discover the technological and management solutions that ENGIE and its partners are able to offer in a pleasant environment. We have received many compliments and lots of positive feedback.

Q: Bicocca, the district that accommodates Engie, boasts a glorious industrial past and, following a period of semi-abandonment, has become once again the object of settlement, particularly of cultural and third-sector activities. The arrival of the underground in 2015 has undoubtedly changed the perception of this area, once considered to be very far from the city centre. How do Engie's employees experience the location? Are decentralised premises with a fast, well-served route to and from the workplace better? How do you see the ongoing development in this area?
R: The redevelopment of the outer cities has led many large companies to favour new, decentralised headquarters, a trend that in my opinion is set to increase in the coming years.
The arrival of the underground's Line 5 to the Bicocca district has undoubtedly streamlined the links with the city centre, significantly changing the perception of 'distance from the centre'; reaching the workplace with public transport is very important to our employees, and it was one of the factors that influenced the choice of location for the new HQ of ENGIE Italia.
The Bicocca district is bound to undergo further development (several building sites are already under way) and will be linked to the extensive redevelopment of the former railway yard Greco-Pirelli – the projects of which are under way as part of the 'Reinventing Cities 2020' programme.
Moreover, in partnership with the 'mobility managers' of some of the district's main companies and institutions, we presented a plan of action to the Municipality of Milan and the Lombardy Region that aims to transform the Bicocca district into a 'liveable, slow' area.
Devised following the emergence of Covid-19, the project favours and rethinks new methods of using both transport and spaces, taking into account the new habits dictated by the pandemic.
The project envisages the creation of a cycle path from Piazzale Lagosta to Monza, and promotes the development of electric mobility and sustainable transport – from bicycles to Segways – as well as the installation of cycle-stations near underground and railway stations and, finally, interventions on squares and green spaces.
ENGIE will contribute its know-how to the development of a new model for a more modern, evolved and environmentally-friendly district.

Photos:
Marco Bay
Diego Depol
Mario Frusca
Andrea Martiradonna
Filippo Romano

Texts:
Luciana Rappo
Alessandro Rossi

Graphic design:
Federica Cocco
Marinella Ferrari

Park Associati
Via Garofalo 31
20133, Milan

info@parkassociati.com
www.parkassociati.com

Printed on 100% recycled paper
Printed in Italy


PARKASSOCIATI