Vesper
Rivista di architettura, arti e teoria
Journal of Architecture, Arts & Theory

No. 12 | Solar
Primavera | Estate 2025
Spring | Summer 2025

ISBN 978-88-229-2336-3
ISSN 2704-7598
DOI 10.57644/Vesper012

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Fringes. Casa Sassi, a Solar Pavilion by Filippo Monti

DOI 10.57644/Vesper012_028

Keywords
Solar pavilion, solar machine, villa, nature, Filippo Monti

Parole chiave
Padiglione solare, macchina solare, villa, natura, Filippo Monti

Abstract

Fringes. Casa Sassi, a Solar Pavilion by Filippo Monti

Casa Sassi, designed by architect Filippo Monti in the 1970s on the hill of San Biagio, near Faenza, constitutes a paradigmatic example of the author's design approach, characterized by a refined design research aimed at constructing relationships between materials, forms, and the environmental context. The contribution investigates Casa Sassi in relation to its capacity to function as a device for designing living spaces, connected to the vital rhythms suggested by the daily movement of the Sun. From the planimetric composition, achieved by the agglomeration of rhomboidal shapes, to the relationship between form and the ways in which spaces are appropriated, Casa Sassi presents itself as a solar machine – not conceived for its own movement, but rather to set in motion the life that flows within it, in harmony with the solar rhythm. In this sense, the architecture is assimilated to the etymology of the word 'pavilion', in which meanings are preserved that are as neglected as they are unexpected.

Fringes. Casa Sassi, a Solar Pavilion by Filippo Monti

Casa Sassi, progettata dall'architetto Filippo Monti negli anni Settanta sulla collina di San Biagio, nei pressi di Faenza, costituisce un esempio paradigmatico dell'approccio progettuale dell'autore, caratterizzato da una ricerca progettuale raffinata e tesa alla costruzione di relazioni tra materiali, forme e contesto ambientale. Il contributo indaga Casa Sassi in relazione alla sua capacità di porsi come dispositivo di progettazione dell'abitare, in relazione ai ritmi vitali suggeriti dal muoversi quotidiano del Sole. Dalla composizione planimetrica, ottenuta per agglomerazione di figure romboidali, al rapporto tra forma e modi dell'appropriazione degli spazi, Casa Sassi si presenta come una macchina solare, non pensata per il proprio movimento, ma piuttosto per muovere la vita che scorre al suo interno, in assonanza con il ritmo solare. In tal senso, l'architettura è assimilata all'etimo della parola "padiglione", nel quale vengono custoditi significati tanto disattesi quanto imprevisti.

Università Iuav di Venezia
Department of Architecture and Arts

VESPER No. 12

SOLAR

Quodlibet

9 788822 923363
ISBN 978-88-229-2336-3
ISSN 2704-7598 € 18

Università Iuav di Venezia
Dipartimento di Culture del progetto

VESPER No. 12

SOLAR

Luigi Ghirri, *Bastia*, 1976. © Eredi di | Heirs of Luigi Ghirri.

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Vesper
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Vesper è una rivista scientifica semestrale, multidisciplinare e bilingue, si occupa delle relazioni tra forme e processi del progetto e del pensiero. Ponendo lo sguardo al crepuscolo, quando la luce si confonde con il buio e l'oggetto illuminante non è più visibile, *Vesper* intende leggere l'atto progettuale seguendo e rendendo evidente il moto della trasformazione. Pitagora identificò nel pianeta Venere sia la stella della sera (*Hesperos*) che quella del mattino (*Phosphoros*), i due nomi si riferiscono allo stesso astro ma posto in condizioni temporali differenti. *Vesper* dichiara quindi una posizione più che un oggetto e privilegia il situarsi che ne profila lo statuto. Non è qui accesa la luce tagliente dell'alba, che promette giorni completamente nuovi e alti sol dell'avvenire, ma quella che fa intravedere nella penombra una possibilità nell'esistente.

Richiamando e rinnovando la tradizione delle riviste cartacee italiane, *Vesper* ospita un paesaggio articolato di modalità narrative, accoglie forme di scrittura e stili differenti, privilegia l'intelligenza visiva del progetto, dell'espressione grafica, dell'immagine e delle contaminazioni tra linguaggi. La rivista è pensata nella sua successione di numeri tematici come discorso sulla contemporaneità, nello spazio di ogni singolo numero è articolata in un insieme di rubriche che gettano luci differenti sul tema. Nel procedere delle diverse sezioni – editoriale, citazione, progetto, racconto, lezione, saggio, inserto, traduzione, archivio, viaggio, ring, tutorial, fundamentals – mutano i riverberi tra idee e realtà, si accende l'intreccio tra evidenze concrete e loro potenzialità, potenziali trasformativi, immaginari. Le rubriche sono pensate non per aggiornare istantaneamente ma per indagare condizioni progettuali e per fornire strumenti e materiali dall'*ombra lunga*.

Vesper
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Vesper is a six-monthly, multidisciplinary and bilingual scientific journal which deals with the relationships between forms and processes of thought and of design. Gazing into the dusk, when light slowly merges with darkness and the illuminating object is no longer visible, *Vesper* aims to interpret the act of designing through tracing and revealing the movement of transformation. Pythagoras identified in the planet Venus both the evening star (*Hesperos*) and the morning star (*Phosphoros*), assigning the two names to the same star observed in different temporal conditions. *Vesper* thus states a perspective rather than an object, privileging the condition that defines its status. Rather than the sharp light of dawn, heralding a brand-new day and promising a brighter future, it is the twilight that allows you to have a glimpse at the potential of what is already there.

Following the tradition of Italian paper journals, *Vesper* revives it by hosting a wide spectrum of narratives, welcoming different writings and styles, privileging the visual intelligence of design, of graphic expression, of images and contaminations between different languages. The journal is conceived as a series of thematic issues that build a discourse on the contemporary. Each issue is divided into sections that offer a range of diverse perspectives on the theme analysed: editorial, quote, project, tale, lecture, essay, extra, translation, archive, journey, ring, tutorial, fundamentals. Throughout the different sections, reverberations between ideas and reality change, connections emerge between tangible facts and their potentials, transformative prospects, collective perception. The principal aim of these sections is not to provide instant news, but to offer an in-depth investigation of different instances of design and to provide tools and materials that have a long-lasting effect.

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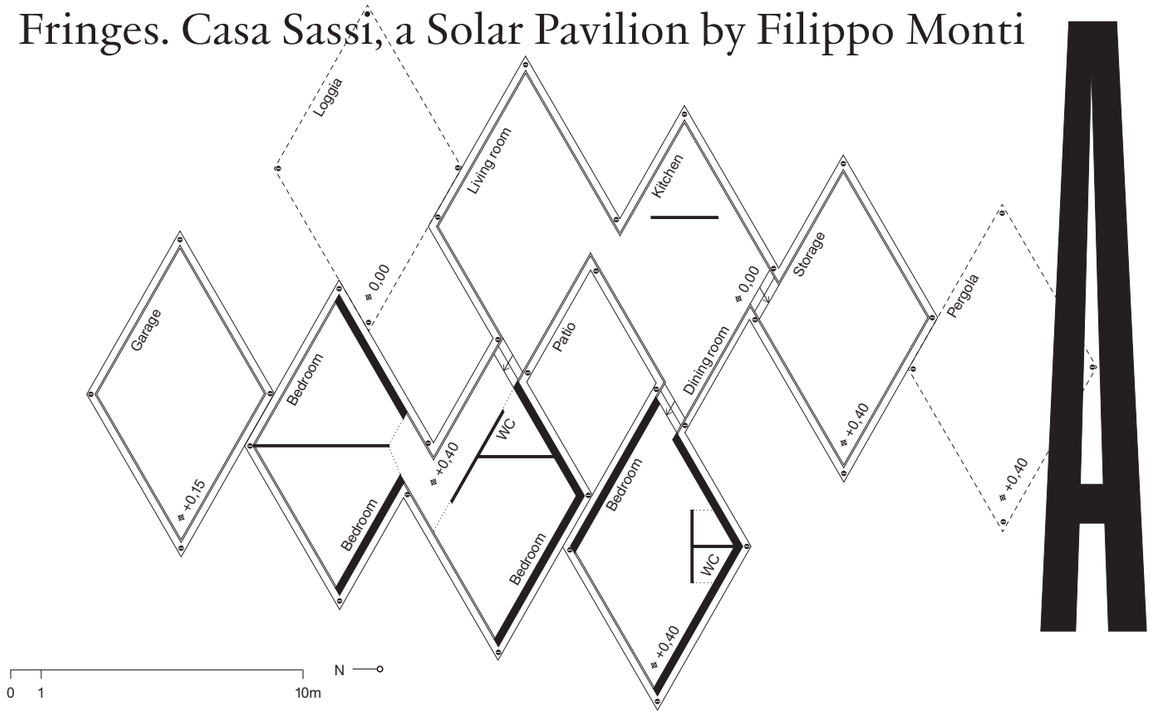
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Fringes. Casa Sassi, a Solar Pavilion by Filippo Monti



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We are in San Biagio, one of the first hills outside Faenza. In the early 1970s, Ivo Sassi and his wife, Carmen Fantinelli, purchased a piece of land on top of San Biagio hill and entrusted architect Filippo Monti with the design of their home. Ivo Sassi was both a sculptor and a ceramist, in kipping with Faenza's tradition, and he shared a bond of friendship and mutual respect with Monti. They met sporadically yet consistently, showing each other their work and listening attentively to each other's insights. Monti spoke little; Sassi was loquacious, with an undeniably strong personality.

At that time, Filippo Monti had already completed all his most important works within a few kilometres of Faenza's centre, redesigning the city's modernity on a domestic scale. His works were of remarkable refinement, though many in Faenza struggled to appreciate them. His story is a curious one: despite the significance of his work within Italy, it remained overlooked by architectural criticism and publications for over fifty years, relegated to a purely local dimension. It wasn't until *Italo Modern*, a publication by Martin and Werner Feiersinger on modern architecture in northern Italy – released in two volumes from 2012 – that his work gained wider recognition in Italy (Feiersinger, Feiersinger 2016).

Monti's work is strongly characterised by refined research into materials, forms and relationship with nature, or the broader surroundings. Casa Sassi, built between 1975 and 1977, is a fully realised example of this. 'When asked for a project, he would arrive with a doodle, a sketch on a piece of paper where he showed the idea, nothing more. For our house, he prepared a clay model, into which he had inserted toothpicks arranged in a rhomboidal grid with a sheet of paper placed over it. He simply asked, "Do you like it if we make the house like this, Ivo?"' (Fantinelli 2022). We reach the house via a steep climb. The landscape displays the gentle beauty of the Romagna hills, brightened with orchards and enriched by the nearby sea. It is a sunny morning, and the glare of the light in the summer haze quickly becomes blinding, as we realise upon arrival, when our gaze extends to the sea, facing the sun. We are welcomed by Mrs. Fantinelli, as talkative as her husband, who passed away just a few years ago. The house is a composition of rhomboidal elements that, depending on their position and function within the structure, interact uniquely with sunlight. The five east-facing lozenges constituting the living area are fully glazed and open up to views of the Adriatic, while the four lozenges at a higher level, facing west, contain the sleeping area and are screened by walls of solid bricks or lattice brick patterns.

Monti weaves layers of references. The rhomboidal plan recalls his first work, the Church of San Vincenzo de' Paoli in Bologna: the same lozenge pattern, the same roof supported by a pinpoint structure, the same glass walls. But while in Bologna Monti had to create an artificial landscape by constructing a high concrete wall and the control of light and paths, here the landscape is already present. On the summit of San Biagio hill, Monti envisions small steel pillars, painted grey, and a light roof. *Nothing more*: open, closed, semi-closed. The perimeter walls of the rhomboids constitute both the external and internal walls of the house, assigned a precise hierarchy: day, night; transparent, opaque; full, empty. Empty lozenges intersperse between the two wings to form internal courtyards. They interrupt, enrich and articulate the design. And between these solid and empty spaces, the house vibrates with tension. Furthermore, there is the gap created by the sharp edges of the rhomboids along the open perimeter – an external space around and between the full forms representing, once again, a vibrant space of tension, this time between inside and outside.

'The Roman domus was essentially composed of simple bodies resting on boundary walls and opening onto an internal void. This void was essential because, by removing openings from the perimeter walls, it enable construction to adjoin on all sides and thus to fit into the insula and the city. When the principle of an internal void migrated to extra-urban structures, to villas, it lost its necessity and became a feature chosen for aesthetic and practical purposes' (Monti 1971, p. 151).

The theme of the central void recurs in Monti's houses. In the small lots of single-family homes, it gives the dwelling an additional dimension – that of the outside within – an intimate, private exterior that withdraws the inhabitants from the proximity of the surrounding context. In suburban villas, it introduces further complexity, generated by introspection and concentration, two aspects that were fundamental for Monti in a typology usually oriented toward direct relationship with the surroundings.

'To do things right, I need to dedicate time to them', Monti used to say, a principle that guided his life and work alike: a life focused on the craft of architecture, which he always pursued alone, without assistants. He had close relationships with few people, likely out of a need to grasp their deeper aspects. He wasn't one to scatter himself. Famous anecdotes, recounted by Matteucci's wife, describes afternoons between the two, passed almost in silence. It was a concentration that made their dialogue always revolve around artistic or professional matters (Cristofani 2022).

The void is conceived as a catalyst, a space where things can happen. And it is entirely about the void, albeit on a different scale, that Monti's most extraordinary project, Santa Margherita, is articulated, where the houses are built around the central void of a park – a memory of an old canal that once flowed into the nearby Lamone. Here, the dimension of connection comes to life – both between the houses that encircle the void and among the inhabitants who gather within it.

Focus and connection: architecture marks the rhythm of the days and opens up different possibilities. At Casa Sassi, each lozenge is independent and, at the same time, part of the whole. Like the architecture, so are people. When Carmen Fantinelli tells us about her life in this house, we hear reflections we've encountered elsewhere.

A PLACE



Filippo Monti, Casa Sassi, 1975-1977. Plan drawing by the authors. Ph. Ivo Sassi, 1977.

'According to Monti, there shouldn't be furniture or curtains. According to him, the greenery should have been what shaded the light. At first, it wasn't easy for me to live in this house. I was young, used to a traditional home, and here I felt very exposed. The house distinctly separates the day area, open and glazed, and a night area, more secluded, intimate, with few openings and an interior wood finish. Over time, I learned to love the great freedom of this house. Here, you experience emotions that would be unimaginable anywhere else' (*ibid.*). Living, sharing: that is Monti's architecture. Spaces for gathering that become hubs around which the whole layout of the house is structured. Within them, what to look at and how to look, as well as how to enter or exit toward the outside, are substantial themes. Spaces integrally connected with greenery – another central aspect of the project –, often extend to the threshold or regulate light and view. They should remain clear, airy, meticulously designed because with Monti, although the construction component is strong, nothing is left to chance.

In contrast, the private spaces are of modest dimensions; sleeping and washing areas occupied just a few square meters. The master bedroom is a separate lozenge, along with a small triangular bathroom that completes the form. Every room has a door to the outside. For Monti, comfort evokes outdoor living, almost akin to camping. There are large continuous spaces, no furniture, no curtains – a dissolving internal-external boundary – to which some find it hard to adapt. It is the dilemma of the bourgeoisie, with all its *things* and codes (Perec 1965).

At that time, the area was empty. It was a small hill with an extraordinary view that, on clear days, reached as far as the coast. Monti wanted the intervention to barely rest on the summit, to be invisible; he thought of a kite (Fantinelli 2022). In Monti's words, drawings and works, the idea of a house that resting lightly on the ground like a tent frequently recurs, engaging with the surrounding environment without altering it – interpreting, adapting and belonging to it. It is the sheet of paper leaning on the toothpicks in the first model. It is the lightness of architecture that does not anchor itself to the ground, the allure of the void as a space where something can always happen, the continuity between inside and outside. The house thrives on this liminal condition between nature and construction and, once again, in a space of tension. Eugenio Turri writes that the desert nomads live between the emptiness of the desert and urban civilization, in what is called the Sahel, which in Arabic means shore, edge, or fringe. For Monti, this liminality defines the human dimension of habitation.

Standing before the internal courtyards, Mrs. Fantinelli asks us for advice: 'I had to replace the original glass, you see; condensation formed between the panes and they offered me these frames with a better seal. Now I should replace the others too, but I'm not sure it's the right choice'. A relatively simple question, yet the restoration of modern architecture is a complex issue. Monti intentionally left all materials deeply exposed to light, air and water, as if time were integral to their essence and the natural order. His materials – iron, glass, wood, copper, marble – now show the effects of time. Maintenance has become an outdated word. Driven by incentives, the cost of energy consumption and the idea of the performance of different parts of the house, owners of Monti's homes question what to do. At Casa Sassi, as elsewhere, repairs and maintenance are considered less cost-effective than replacement, certification and tax deductions. Some lament that with each passing day, another detail of Monti's is lost: a hinge, a gate, a glass pane – the list goes on. Even as accumulated furniture of a lifetime fills the space, the concept of space endures.

Before we leave, we take a long walk around the house. The reeds have grown. They now screen what was intended to be screened. Nature, as Monti envisioned it together with architecture, is now complete. Sunlight filters through the latticework and the leaves. Renato Albonetti, the craftsman who created nearly all of Monti's works in Faenza and the only true mediator between the architect and his clients, describes Monti's approach this way: 'Monti observed nature and architecture as one. He considered what was needed for that nature, what would bring it out. But he never talked about these things. He didn't talk, but you could tell he was looking for harmony'.

Casa Sassi is a solar machine, not meant to rotate but designed to move its inhabitants according to the position of the sun and time of day and, like many of his houses, it has the character of a pavilion. The word 'pavilion' derives from the Latin *papilio*, meaning butterfly – a connection still clear in French (*pavillon*/*papillon*) – but also tent, specifically a richly adorned military tent. By the 17th century, the word pavilion began to refer to a small, precious isolated structure surrounded by greenery and used for various purposes. With lightness and elegance, the pavilion often emerges in Monti's architecture, and in contexts like the San Biagio hill or Santa Margherita, where the architecture is set within a park, this form becomes even more apparent. We leave the house with the impression of having visited a solar pavilion. As we say goodbye, Mrs. Fantinelli tells us that the house has been sought out as a location for an important movie. Who knows what its next story might be?

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Vesper
Rivista di architettura, arti e teoria
Journal of Architecture, Arts & Theory

Vesper è un progetto di | is a project by Pard – Publishing Actions and Research Development / Ir.Ide – Infrastruttura di Ricerca Integral Design Environment
Dipartimento di Culture del progetto – Dipartimento di eccellenza
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Layout grafico | Graphic Layout
bruno, Venezia

Impaginazione | Layout
Redazione Vesper | Vesper Editorial Staff

Caratteri tipografici | Typefaces
Union, Radim Peško, 2006
JJannon, François Rappo, 2019

Editore | Publisher
Quodlibet srl
via Giuseppe e Bartolomeo Mozzi, 23 - 62100 Macerata
www.quodlibet.it

Abbonamento annuo (due numeri) | One Year Subscription (two issues)
Italia | Italy € 25 Estero | International € 50

Per abbonamenti e ulteriori informazioni | For subscriptions and any further information: ordini@quodlibet.it

© Vesper. Rivista di architettura, arti e teoria | Journal of Architecture, Arts & Theory

Periodicità semestrale | Six-monthly Journal

Fondi per la pubblicazione | Publication Funding
Dipartimento di eccellenza 2023-2027 - Finanziamento Mur

Iscrizione al Registro Stampa del Tribunale di Venezia n. 4/2019 del 24/10/2019
Direttore responsabile: Sara Marini

No. 12 | Solar
Primavera | Estate 2025
Spring | Summer 2025

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ISBN 978-88-229-2336-3
ISSN 2704-7598

Finito di stampare nel mese di maggio 2025 da | Printed on May 2025 by Tecnostampa srl, Loreto (AN).



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