



ARCHITECTURE / MILAN

# SCHOOL'S IN SESSION

In their efforts to build a better society following the Second World War, Italian architects designed forward-thinking schools. Today these startling – if not perfectly functioning – buildings are a curious symbol of postwar optimism. We meet Stefan Gifthaler who has turned his lens onto these unconventional structures to capture their enduring charm.

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A chance visit to a state school in Milan sent 36-year-old fashion photographer Stefan Gifthaler on a journey into the past. With a growing interest in shooting locations, rather than models, he was fascinated by the school's vintage furniture and colour scheme and the memories it brought back from his own childhood.

Delving into the history of school architecture, he discovered that many of Italy's leading 20th-century architects, such as Aldo Rossi, Caccia Dominioni, Enrico Castiglioni and Guido Canella, had built schools in and around Milan that expressed the optimism of the postwar era. The buildings, mostly dating to the 1960s and 1970s, are remarkable for their theatrical post-modernist structures, bold forms, generously planned open spaces and liberal use of vibrant colours.

Guido Canella, mostly known for his civic buildings, was particularly prolific and his striking architecture makes a frequent appearance in Gifthaler's photographs. Canella's stand-out designs range from a nursery in Milan's Pieve Emanuele, built in 1969, with a moss-green auditorium and glass-brick windows, to a secondary school in the same area, with turquoise window frames and rails, and swerving patterns on the tiled floors.

Aldo Rossi, meanwhile, a leading Milan architect who rose to prominence in the 1960s, built a secondary school in Broni, south of Milan. Although he rejected the post-modernist moniker, his bold historical referencing and use of colour places him squarely in that camp (his San Cataldo cemetery in Modena is considered one of the first and most important post-modern buildings). The entrance to the school, for instance, features a simplified classical temple front with a clock. Rossi was also the first Italian recipient of the Pritzker prize, which was awarded in 1990. The jury described his work as "at once bold and ordinary, original without being novel, refreshingly simple in appearance but extremely complex in content and meaning".

Gifthaler's warm images are an ode to a time when architects felt that they had a social calling and that their buildings could trigger certain behaviours and emotions, affect social transformation and shape people into better versions of themselves. This can be clearly seen in their school architecture; Gifthaler's photographic series is the first to celebrate their legacy, which is more than ripe for rediscovery.

**MONOCLE: How did this project come about?**

**STEFAN GIFTHALER:** I thought it could be interesting to do a photographic series on the aesthetics of Italian public schools, with their desks, globes and maps on the walls that give them this old-time feeling. I went on to research their history and found that in Milan many good architects were designing schools in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

**M: Why do these buildings appeal to you?**

**SG:** What I found interesting in shooting these buildings is that they reflect the visionary and utopian mission of education during the years that followed the Second World War, when Italy was starting over. The design and shapes reflect this message of building a better society. Everything was quite new for the time so people were experimenting a lot and the results were rather esoteric. One of the architects, Aldo Rossi, went on a study trip to the Soviet Union. You can see [this socialist influence] in his designs.

**M: What is it about this architecture that stands out?**

**SG:** They worked on colour, on the shape of the windows, on the shape of the buildings; they're very particular. They have really big auditoriums for all the students and some of them have big green spaces.

**M: How was it received at the time?**

**SG:** Not so well. Most of these schools are in small towns around Milan and have quite strong shapes – one is shaped like a boomerang – and strong materials such as concrete. They don't match their environments but that's something that I quite like. Nowadays the people who run the schools tend to say that they're not so good in terms of functionality; they get hot in summer and cold in winter. Maybe these buildings look amazing to us now but living with them can be difficult. And sometimes people are surprised when students of architecture come to look around.

**M: What was your artistic approach?**

**SG:** I wanted to have the pictures empty, without people, because I wanted the place, the colours and the atmosphere to really stand out, to assume importance in the picture. If you see a person, you somehow identify with them but if the picture is empty it brings you back to the time when you were at school and it's more open to interpretation that way.

**M: Which school was the most striking?**

**SG:** I like them all in their own way; they each have their own personality. Canella's school in Pieve Emanuele was very striking. The shapes are rational, with a touch of post-modernism. Here the shape of corridors, mixed with the spiral pattern on the floors, gives you a sensation of restless movement, which I think is somehow connected to the fact that schools are dynamic places where many different people and energies exist together. For example, in some pictures you will see signs or the chairs around the classrooms will be a bit messy. You see traces of the students in the pencils they left behind on their desks. What was interesting was to feel the vibration of life in this building that is filled with young people every day.



Left: *Da Vinci secondary school in Cesano Bosconi, by Guido Canella; Don Zeno Santini nursery in Pieve Emanuele, by Guido Canella*



Left: *Da Vinci secondary school by Guido Canella; Viquarterio secondary school by Guido Canella*



Clockwise from left: *Isis Facchinetti school in Castellanza, by Enrico Castiglioni; Rodari nursery in Pieve Emanuele, by Laura Lazzari; Jewish school in Milan by Eugenio Gentili Tedeschi; Viquarterio secondary school in Pieve Emanuele, by Guido Canella*

