

The Alexander Calder exhibition

at Palazzo a Vela in Torino

Lorenzo Ciccarelli

FONDAZIONE
RENZO
PIANO

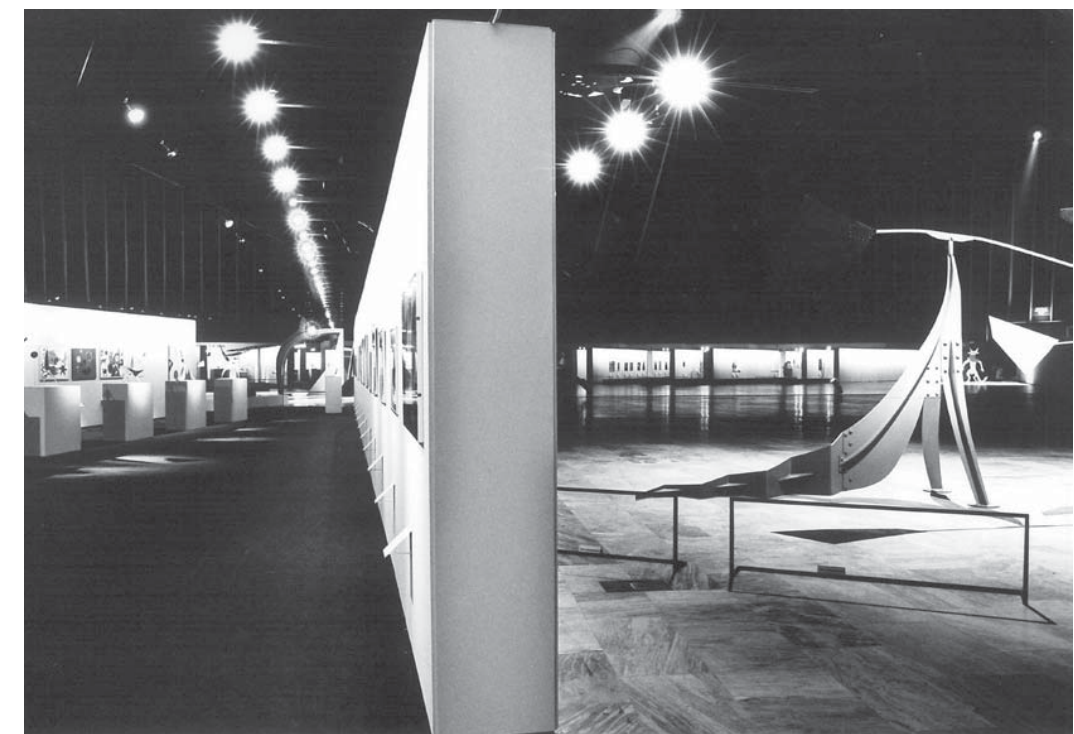
In his long career Renzo Piano has very rarely agreed to design exhibitions other than those devoted to his work. The exceptions are Jean Prouvé Constructeur at the Centre Pompidou (1990), Zero Gravity. Franco Albini, Building Modernity at the Milan Triennale (2006) – devoted to the work of two of the masters of his youth – and the Alexander Calder retrospective at the Palazzo a Vela in Turin in 1983. The occasion of the Calder exhibition, curated by the art historian Giovanni Carandente (1920-2009), was particularly important, since for the first time the Genoese architect devoted himself to a monographic exhibition and to studying the works of an artist by devising an ambiance that would set them off and enable them to be intimately understood. In the small workshop of the Calder exhibition it was possible to observe the care he took over the sources of light and his respect for the works to be exhibited, which he always put before the claims of architecture. Piano would invariably apply this principle in the numerous museums he designed in the following decades.

Piano regarded Calder's artistic practice as the reflection of his own interpretation of architecture. He saw the American sculptor not so much in terms of the classic profile of the artist but rather as a craftsman, a "cheerful mechanic, who had fun inventing states of equilibrium, coordinating the order of weights and forms in movement". Calder crafted moving sculptures, his famous mobiles, by assembling thin metal sheets and wires. The same composition of materials inspired by the principle of lightness that Piano had created in his youthful structures.

Photo 1_The grouping of mobiles and stabiles as the pivot of the exhibition.

Photo 2_The sign "Calder" made from metal letters suspended from a tensile structure marking the entrance to the exhibition.

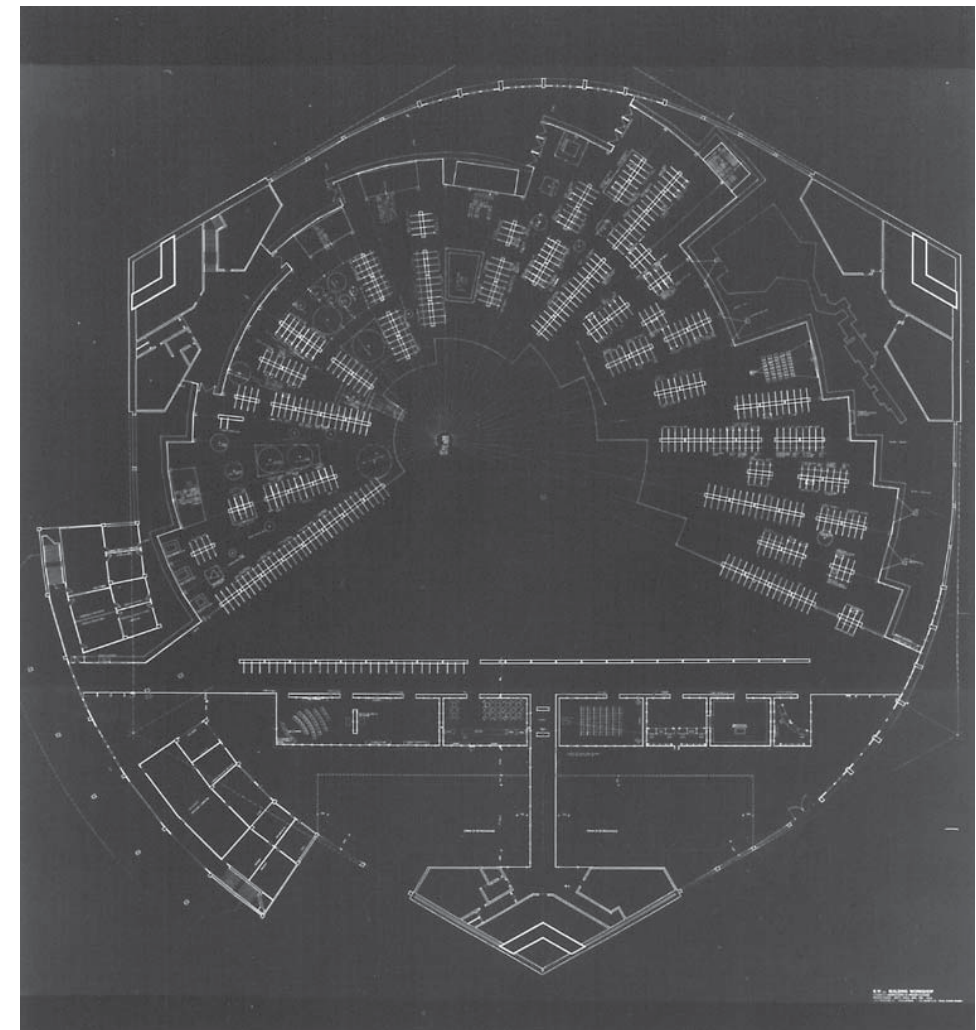
Photo 3_The long straight wall that ordered the exhibition layout.



In addition, the Municipality of Turin had decided that the exhibition venue should not be a museum, but the Palazzo a Vela, the iconic building designed by Franco Levi (1914-2009), with Annibale and Giorgio Rigotti, between 1959 and 1961 to celebrate the centenary of the unification of Italy. Below the roof consisting of a ribbed double slab of prestressed reinforced concrete, suspended on three support points, opened an impressive space, completely unobstructed, with a surface area of 15,000 square meters, 150 meters wide and up to 30 meters high. It was difficult to imagine a space less suitable for art exhibitions, and perhaps for this reason, besides admiring Calder's work, Piano was persuaded to accept the challenge.

The exhibition would number 450 works by Calder, of various kinds and sizes: most of them mobiles and some stabiles. The interior of the Palazzo a Vela was transfigured into a cavernous dark space. The glass side walls were obscured and the intrados of the roof painted dark blue. In this way, the sculptures, sensitively illuminated, appeared to visitors as stars in an ideal firmament. A long rectilinear wall crossed the space from one side to the other, ordering the large internal surface of the building, and continuing into the rear garden, where some works were positioned to prolong and conclude the exhibition. In a central position, close to the wall, Piano arranged three stabiles surmounted by two large mobiles suspended from the vault. This composition of five works served as the visual and distributional pivot of the exhibition, around which a series of movable walls were arranged to cut out radial sections, each of which exhibited a phase of Calder's creative career.

Photo 4_Plan of the exhibition design



The protagonist of the exhibition was light, whose control engaged Piano and his collaborators – Shunji Ishida, Ottavio Di Blasi, Giorgio Fascioli, Flavio Marano, Peter Terbuchte, Alessandro Traldi – in addition to the fundamental collaboration of Piero Castiglioni (b. 1944). The voltage of the lamps, the appropriate color tone to be achieved, the shape and the position of the light source was at the center of Piano’s exhibition design. By positioning 800 12-volt lamps, each work was illuminated on average by two light bodies: one that shed an enveloping light, the other that picked out an interesting aspect of the single sculpture. Hence meticulous observation of each of Calder’s works was the preliminary and crucial work in designing the exhibition, with the lighting concentrated on the individual mobiles that cast a play of Chinese shadows on the panels and roof vault. In this exhibition, Piano began to experiment the rightness of a museum architecture based on restraint and the modesty of the gesture, in which the architectural project seeks to create the best setting for the art exhibits.

Photo 5_Renzo Piano, with Giovanni Carandente (on his left) and the project team.

Photo 6_Model of the exhibition design.

Photo 7_Section of the exhibition design showing the radial walls and mobiles suspended from the vault.

Photo 8 e 9_Calder’s works scenically illuminated in the darkness of the Palazzo a Vela space.

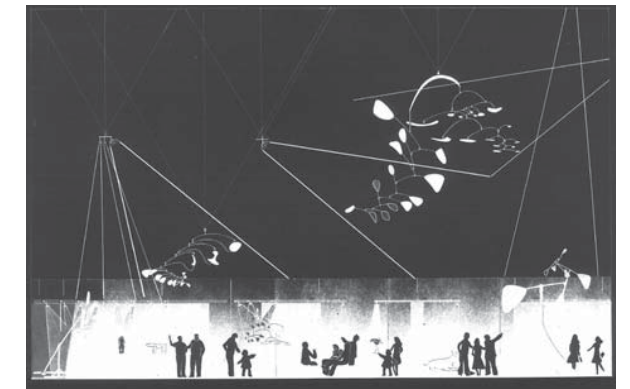
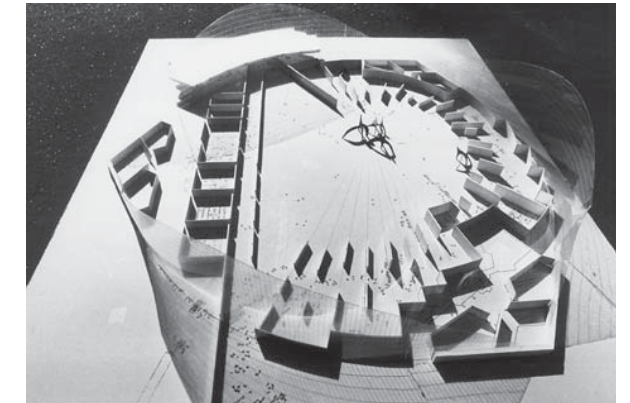


PHOTO CREDITS

Photo 1, cover_The grouping of mobiles and stables as the pivot of the exhibition, 1983.

Alexander Calder Retrospective Exhibition, 1982/83
Renzo Piano Foundation Archives, Cal__051
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Photo 2, pag. 3_The sign “Calder” made from metal letters suspended from a tensile structure marking the entrance to the exhibition 1983.

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Photo 3, pag. 3_The long straight wall that ordered the exhibition layout, 1983.

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Photo 4, pag. 5_Plan of the exhibition design, 1982.

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Photo 5, pag. 7_Renzo Piano, with Giovanni Carandente (on his left) and the project team, 1982.

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Photo 7, pag. 7_Section of the exhibition design showing the radial walls and mobiles suspended from the vault, 1982.

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Photo 8-9, pag. 7_Calder’s works scenically illuminated in the darkness of the Palazzo a Vela space, 1983.

Alexander Calder Retrospective Exhibition, 1982/83
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