INTERNI

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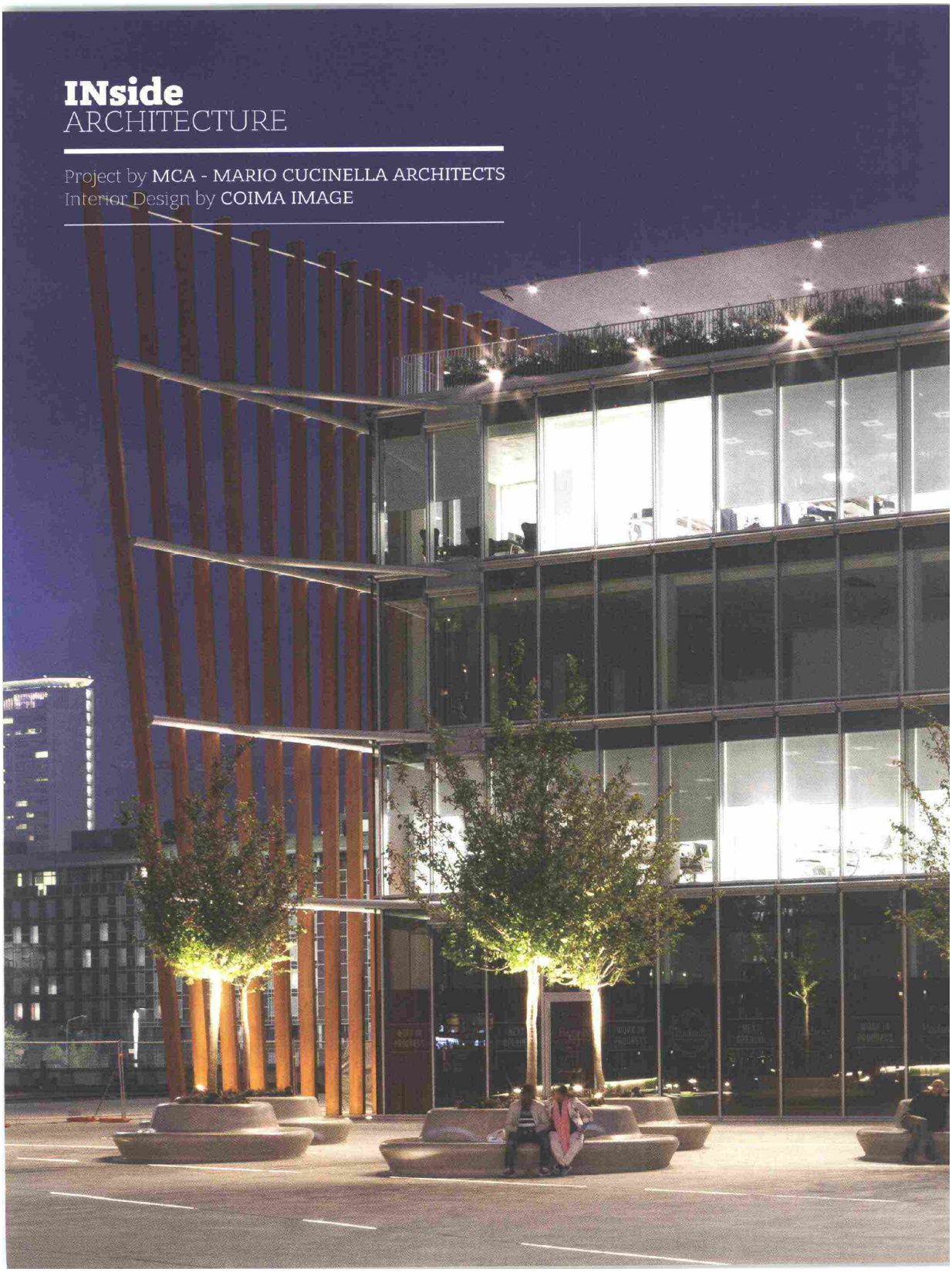
INside
ARCHITECTURE

Project by MCA - MARIO CUCINELLA ARCHITECTS
Interior Design by COIMA IMAGE



A glass tubes form between the two wooden 'wings' in front of the glass facade, creating a public private connection. Lighting design by Alexander Bellman - Gruppo C14.

HEADQUARTERS WITH A VIEW

The new **COIMA** headquarters **in Milan** faces the park of the 'Biblioteca degli Alberi' while keeping an eye on **innovative working methods**. The building completes the urban area of Porta Nuova: **2000 square meters of glass and iron**, embraced by two dramatic sheets of lamellar bark. **Interni got a preview**, meeting with the protagonists of the project

photos Paolo Riolzi
article Laura Ragazzola

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Manfredi Catella - **founder and CEO of COIMA**

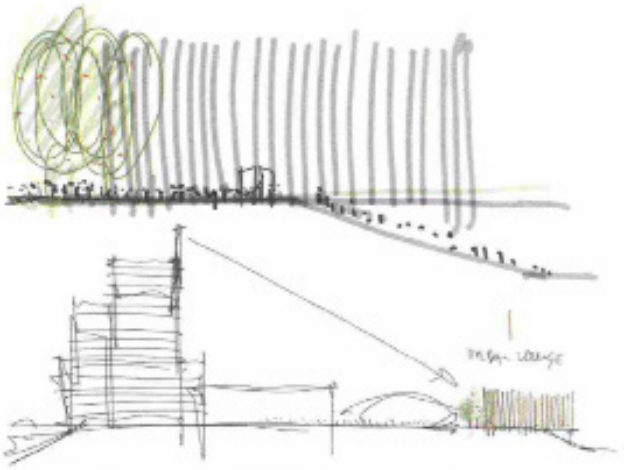
The new headquarters of COIMA reinforces your bond with Milan and adds another facet to the urban design of the Porta Nuova area. How did this choice come about?
The new headquarters is a very important step for our company: just consider the key moments of our history. COIMA (which stands for Consulenti Immobiliari Associati) was founded by my father Riccardo in 1974; in 1999 (I was already working with him at the time) we decided to create a joint venture with Gerald and Jeff Hines, founders of the American Hines Emerging Market Fund, and a few years later, in 2005, this led to a visionary project: the regeneration of the area of Porta Nuova, an abandoned railyard in the heart of Milan. It was one of the biggest worksites in Europe in those years. In 2007, together with Hines, we formed Hines Italia SGR – now COIMA SGR – specializing in real estate investments. The year 2015 marked a breakthrough, 'the decisive entrepreneurial move of my time at the helm: I acquired a majority share in Hines Italia SGR to create a single platform composed of COIMA Srl and COIMA SGR, an all-Italian venture. I was convinced that if we live and work in Italy, we should concentrate our forces and energies here. Quite a wager, given the fact that a serious economic crisis was in progress in those years. We went against the trend, we bought when everyone else was selling. Then, in 2016, COIMA RES was listed on the stock exchange, completing the present arrangement.

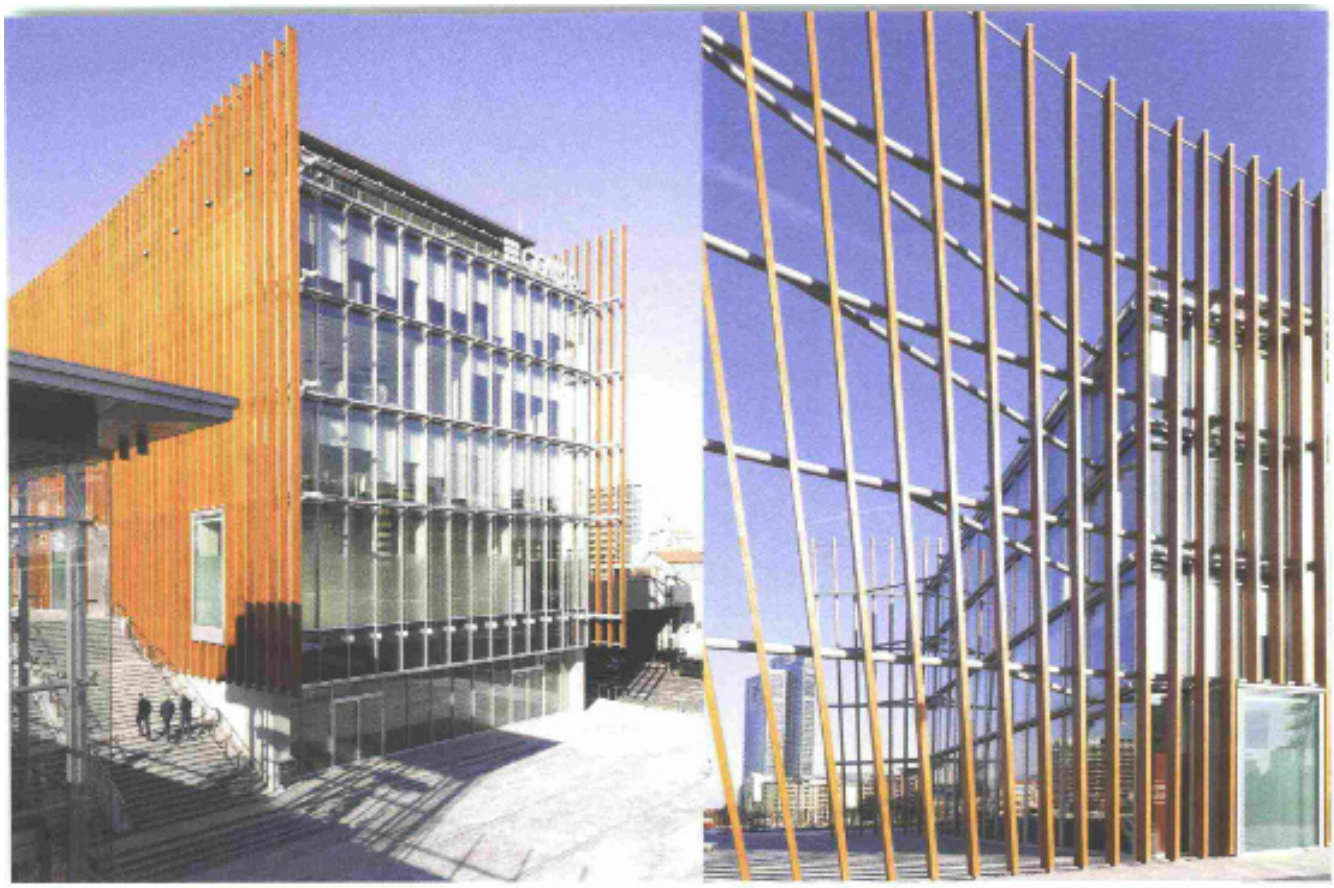
So there are three companies that now 'reside' in this new building?
Actually there are four. There is also COIMA Image, which since the 1980s has focused on consulting and integrated design, with expertise in the fields of architecture, interior design and space planning, starting with our own offices (see the interview on the following pages). But you were right to use the term 'reside': this building really is our home, and for the first time we have brought together all our different organizations and 40 years of our history. We have concentrated all the energies here, to remain firmly rooted in the national territory, to promote a new business culture. Made in Italy, capable of producing innovative models, real estate operations of the latest generation.

Like Porta Nuova?
Of course. It was no coincidence that we chose Porta Nuova as the site of our new offices. Just consider the fact that over the last 15 years we have made a 'home' for 15,000 workers, from Unicredit to Google to Nike... just to mention a few of the facilities we have made, so the time had come to do the same thing for ourselves. It has been a challenge, but also a great opportunity to be able to 'test' a building as developer and tenant at the same time... and to be able to explore new practices of 'smart working' with our 150 employees. For example, the most beautiful part of the building, the upper level with the terrace overlooking the park and Porta Nuova, contains the COIMA Caffè, a space for work, socializing and relaxation. A few days ago we opened it up to 87 kids, the children of our staff... The average age in our firm is 37.

Getting back to Porta Nuova and its transformation, ten years after the start of construction, what do you think has been the innovative force behind the project?
We all know something about the history of Porta Nuova. But I think it is important to underline the fact that it is a history of people, a project conceived by many people for many people. This is its force: the fact that it involved experimentation with unusual forms of public-private collaboration for the benefit of the community. A collaboration that has been a winning factor in the past, we should recall, almost a genetic trait that has guided our urban evolution. The idea was to rediscover that totally Italian approach – that had been lost for year – to 'making' architecture, building the city. So Porta Nuova set out to reawaken, to regenerate that approach: this is the innovative factor, and it is more cultural that design-related. I believe today we can again set an example for the world: presenting

View from above of the Porta Nuova area the COIMA building designed by Mario Cucinella (project sketches, to the side) can be seen between Via Melchiorre Gioia and the Unicredit Pavilion
In the foreground, the new 'Biblioteca degli Alberi' park that will open in May 2018





Above, the facade of the building on Via Melchiorre Gioia with the steps leading to the entrance of the offices. Upper right, one of the two dramatic wooden sunscreen facades enclosing the public plaza

our work as a model of excellence, also beyond our borders, exporting our idea of the city of the future... just consider the 'phenomenon' of the Bosco Verticale...

A sort of 'Mediterranean diet' applied to architecture...

Exactly. The ingredients are all of excellent quality, to make projects at a very high level, also in technological terms: we have the expertise and know-how to make high-performance buildings, capable of solving ecological and environmental issues that cannot be overlooked today. Our new headquarters is a good example. Mario has been amazing (the architect Mario Cucinella, see interview, ed.): he has designed a super-technological building, but close to the needs of people, in perfect tune with the environment and the city. A building born under the sign of sustainability, which has been given LEED Platinum certification, one of the most 'severe' of its kind on an international level.

After Porta Nuova? What comes next?

A more sustainable economic model. The formula is: 'less' (immediate) profit, because the investments have to be made to achieve better quality; 'more' (long-term) value, which means designing a more livable city. Starting with the places where people work...

Mario Cucinella - architect and founder of MCA – Mario Cucinella Architects

Would you tell us about the genesis of the project?

It comes from an invitational competition, which I originally won for a bigger building with an oblong form, which was supposed to contain the COIMA offices as well as a new pavilion for Unicredit. Then the clients decided to separate the two functions in different volumes: so I developed the COIMA headquarters while Arch. Michele De Lucchi did the Pavilion for Unicredit. Of course they asked us to make the two buildings have a relationship.

How?

Starting with material choices, for example. In particular, we decided to explore the theme of transparency, designing a volume in iron and glass, a sort of mini-greenhouse that faces the new park and the buildings of Porta Nuova. On two sides, north and south, a wooden 'bark' extends, doubling into two wings of lamellar wood to protect the building while conserving transparency thanks to the sunscreens. Simplicity conquers all, the sense of rhythm and order, to create a more human urban scale with respect to the tall surrounding buildings.

So the blending of forms and materials can make the difference?

*Overall view of the second floor: the lounge areas, desks and meeting rooms alternate in the workspace tables by **Unifor**, chairs and cabinets by **Herman Miller**, chairs by **Arper**. At the center, the 'locker' block with personal spots to store things. Upper right, a small meeting room for three persons and, below, the open spaces on the third floor. Here the locker area is concealed by a wall with a max-view of Porta Nuova. Interior design by COIMA Image*

It can definitely play a central role to improve building performance: the sense of space can have an impact on efficiency and comfort, and materials can become true players as opposed to overly aggressive technological choices. You have to make form and materials work together to accomplish more...

Does this make the building more sustainable?

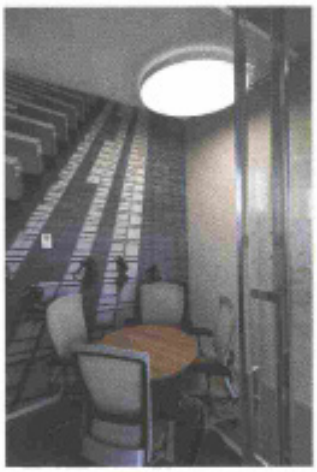
Certainly. Sustainability has always been my central focus: environmental and ecological questions have a close impact on the lives of people. You cannot overlook these matters. And I would add that there can be no sustainability without great determination to make cities more livable, more open, to make buildings that are more beautiful inside and out.

From this viewpoint, what is the social responsibility of the architect? How does this fit into the delicate relationship between public and private, between complex urban processes and the community?

The architect has an increasingly important role. Any private building necessarily generates a public space: if it exists, everyone can see it... Of course there has to be a very precise intention: here, for example, in the COIMA headquarters, we decided a priori that the volume of the offices would also generate a public space that could be used and enjoyed by all. So we might say that my studio has always thought about projects where public spaces have to play a role. I have always been convinced that buildings not only have to communicate, to reflect experimentation, but also have to give something back...

In short, a commitment to making architecture more generous?

Yes, more empathy and generosity. Only in this way can there be an important, real, constructive return from the viewpoint of urban planning and sustainable growth of our cities. The idea is to generate spaces on a human scale, places that are easy to live in, with a strong relationship with the surrounding landscape, constructed or natural. In the end, the Porta Nuova operation tries to recoup this basic idea: to experiment with forms of public/private collaboration, because when private initiative fails to generate public space it is destined to fail. This is why mediation becomes important, and in this perspective the role of the architect, as a third party who tries to put needs of



investment together with themes of public interest, becomes central. But there's more. Because the designer is also the first one to see what the results will be like, so he is a figure of mediation, but also of vision.

A tough job, then...

Sometimes. Let's say the mission of the architect is to transform an economic action into a cultural action. An architecture studio, in my view, is a cultural enterprise in every sense. Of course the designer can simply respond to the requests of the client, but he can also help the client to refine the questions, putting certain themes into focus, like energy and public interest, which have been overlooked for all too long.

Does this engagement also extend to the community?

Naturally. Every new building has to become a concrete opportunity to demonstrate how we can build things in a new way. Every time an urban project comes up, a committee of opposition takes form. This is a sign of the fact that people fear the future. In Italy, too, this phenomenon is becoming chronic, and I see it as a positive signal, something that generates dialogue. To accompany, to explain, to mediate... these are important actions. The architect simply has to become responsible, and architecture has to become human.

Alida Catella - Chief Executive Officer of COIMA Image, and **Gianmarco Bocchiola**, partner of COIMA Image

What is the mission of COIMA Image?

Alida Catella. COIMA Image is a team specializing in architectural and interior design, and space planning. We have design over 100 office buildings, with the aim of combining functional and aesthetic quality, also through the use of sustainable practices to improve quality of life.

I imagine that the 'smart working' philosophy lies behind the COIMA offices as well.

Of course. In our dual role as designers and clients we have had a chance to further implement the 'smart' approach to work through a process of 'workplace analysis' that took about two months, involving all of the 150 persons who work inside COIMA.

What was the substance?

Gianmarco Bocchiola. The idea was to understand how people move and operate inside the workspace. We used four 'tools'. First, we applied 'activity analysis' as a way to gather quantitative data: 9 daily surveys for 10 working days, indications of presence of colleagues in offices, for an understanding of the types of activities involved, such as desk work and meeting rooms. The results were rather interesting, for example, we discovered that 30% of the staff is not there at the office, because they are busy elsewhere, mostly on construction sites, or calling on clients. So we realized we had a desk surplus, and that 60% of our meeting rooms were oversized for the number of people actually using them (seldom more than 4). This quantitative analysis was followed by a second, qualitative phase with an online survey: we talked with employees to learn about their needs (workspace, technology, other factors), and we listened to their suggestions to create a useful space planning draft.

For example?

Some talked about a good cup of coffee. Others about the possibility of getting some physical exercise during work breaks, also thanks to the proximity of the park. In the end, we have created an entire floor for relaxation (the upper level), and a fitness area with locker rooms and showers.

And what about the third and fourth tools?

The third phase involved top management one-

The fourth and upper level of the building contains the COIMA Caffè. In the foreground, the lounge area lights by **Artemide**, bookcase by **Poliform**, armchairs and tables by **Arper** can be transformed to make an informal meeting space, and a reading room screened by an accessorized partition

on-one interviews to understand the specific needs of each division and headcount forecast. We also created 'focus groups' of 12 participants (fourth tool), combining all levels of management and business division, to stimulate and share ideas, proposals and project guidelines.

The results?

It became clear that there was a lot of desire to cooperate, but there was also a need for more privacy, for individual activities. So we created the so-called 'Focus Rooms' as well as meeting rooms for just three or four persons.

In short, quality of life in the office becomes a decisive factor for smart working?

A.C. Definitely. This means wellness and comfort inside the workspace. Starting with acoustics, which is an important factor because silence is relaxing and conducive to concentration. Then there is the quality of lighting, both natural and artificial. And the overall quality of the environment, which should be healthy, with proper temperature and ventilation, and appealing furniture.

Speaking of furniture and interior design, how have you organized the office layout?

In our offices no one has a fixed position... the workers are mobile, they can interact with different counterparts, leaving more room for creativity. Without personal positions there is more synergy, you can work with colleagues in a more natural way. Anywhere, even at the COIMA Caffè, or in the relaxation spaces we have created on the upper level of the building and the terrace, facing the park. From a psychological standpoint, smart working breaks down barriers of rank, eliminating symbolic spaces: managerial offices, restricted meeting rooms.

How did the employees react?

At first they were a bit disoriented. I too was not so comfortable at first to have to give up my own desk. But now I really enjoy this sense of 'non-possession' and sharing. Locker areas have been created so people can store their own personal items. I like to remind people that sustainability also means subtraction, eliminating the superfluous. Here all the offices are paperless, there are no wastebaskets, just a concentrated, differentiated disposal facility on each level.

G.B. The interior design has achieved Leed for Commercial Interior, and 20% of construction and fit-out material and products have been selected with 'Cradle to Cradle' certification, because it encourages total recycling of materials, just as happens in nature... façades, carpeting, suspended ceilings, seating, etc.

A totally sustainable project, then...

A.C. I'd say so. Because sustainability also has an impact on individuals, their quality of life in the workplace. And giving people greater comfort and wellbeing means making them feel more satisfied, more motivated, ready to make a bigger contribution. Benefits for workers become benefits for the company as well. This is an equation we need to remember today, in the awareness that smart working is just the starting point for new challenges and opportunities. ■

*View of the COIMA Caffè, with tables and chairs for breaks or informal meals (furnishings by **Arper**, lights by **Artemide**). The upper level includes a terrace with a spectacular view of the park and the Porta Nuova area (outdoor furnishings by **Frassinago18**)*