

CASA AL MARE, AN AMERICAN INFLUENCED PROJECT BY ETTORE SOTTSSASS

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ABSTRACT

The work consists of an analysis of the influence that North American culture and architecture had on Europe after the Second World War. The study is carried out using as an example a project by the famous designer and architect, Ettore Sottsass (1917-2007), carried out in the middle of the century. The study is carried out room by room, establishing relationships between the Italian's Mediterranean villa and some of the most iconic homes of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States.

KEYWORDS

Ettore Sottsass; architecture; United States of America

As we know, today the United States is one of the most influential countries globally. Nations all over the world embrace and imitate the American culture that reaches them through the media and in the case of Europe, this influence develops after the Second World War. Thanks to the well-known Marshall Plan, approved in 1947, the old continent received an injection of capital for its reconstruction and simultaneously allowed the United States to begin to create an international market¹. In a short time, American culture flooded the pages

of magazines, billboards, cinemas and radios. The mid-twentieth century trend was focused on the other side of the Atlantic, with the United States and its consumer culture becoming a benchmark for Europe to imitate.

As for architecture, many professionals emigrated during wartime and settled in the new continent. The scarce participation of the United States in the wars and the great development of the war industry in the country led the country to become the seat of constructive innovations. The state of California was one of the territories that most increased its population during this period because several of the construction factories were located in this area². The influence of American architecture and culture in Europe can be analyzed by studying a project by the architect Ettore Sottsass (1917-2007), the result of which is strongly linked to his first trip to the United States of America in 1956³.

Ettore Sottsass, an architect by training, but with international recognition for his work as a designer for the Memphis Group (1981-1987), received an offer in the mid-1950s to work for a few months with the architect George Nelson (1908-1986), who, at that time, was working on the *Experimental House* project⁴. It is worth noting the radical change that this project meant for Sottsass, as it was completely different from anything the architect had done to date. At 39 years of age, at the architectural level, he had only worked on a few projects within the *INA Casa* social housing program, in which neither the use of lightweight materials nor, much less, the construction of

prefabricated modular systems was applied. In fact, all the proposals share the adaptation to pre-existences and local customs through the use of local materials together with others such as cement or reinforced concrete. During the months he spent in America, the architect

experienced first-hand the *American Way of Life* and the result of his visit was the project entitled *Casa al Mare*. In it can be seen his intention to establish a clear relationship between the Italian Mediterranean villa and some of the iconic homes of the time in the United States.

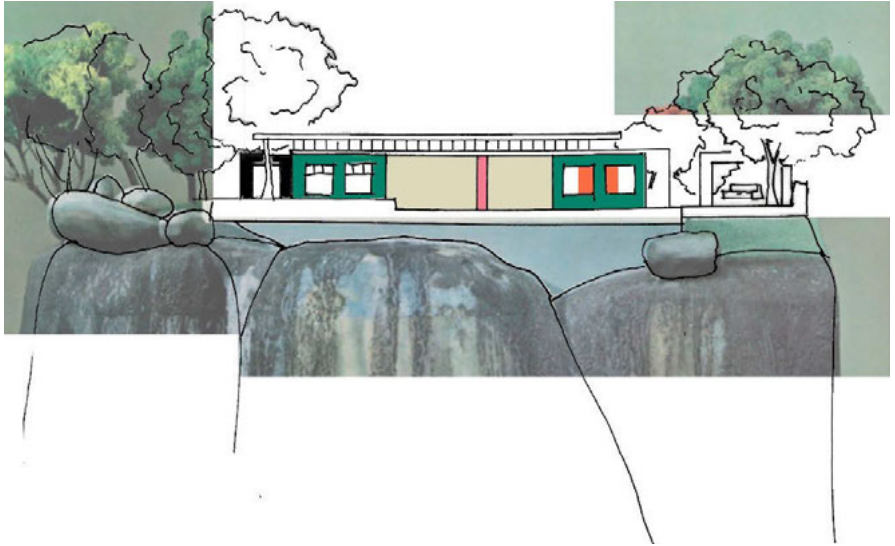


Figure 1. "Casa al Mare" of Ettore Sottsass, front view. Source: (Beatriz Martínez-Lauwers Dolz 2024)



Figures 2 and 3. "Dr. And Mrs. Stuart Bailey House" (Case Study #20) of Richard Neutra. Source: (Julius Shulman 1936-1997)

During the summer of 1961 Sottsass realized *Appunti per un progetto di una casa al mare*. *Progetto di Villa Ingegnerer Fiorentino*⁵. This was published in issue 386 of *Domus* magazine in January 1962 under the title *Appunti per un progetto di una casa al mare*. As the architect notes, it consisted more of a series of ideas than a proposal per se⁶. Figure 1 shows that it is a single-story, low-profile volume integrated into the Mediterranean environment, a characteristic it shares with the projects carried out by Richard Neutra (1892-1970) as early as the 1940s and which in turn are influenced by the Usonian houses of Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), of whom he was a disciple. Neutra, an architect of Austrian origin like Sottsass, participated in the California Case Study program and was probably the most famous architect to participate in John

Entenza's initiative. When he emigrated to the United States in 1923, he spent some time in the city of Chicago where he came into contact with the metallic construction systems that made it possible to build tall skyscrapers and, through his partner Rudolph Schindler (1887-1953), he learned to apply the lessons learned from Loos and Wright to the Californian context, creating the *Bailey House*, *CSH20*, between 1947 and 1948⁷.

In the Sottsass project it can be seen how the house is resolved from a compact rectangular floor plan, whose configuration is made taking into account the environment and facing the sea. From the main entrance you can already enjoy views of the ocean, so that from the moment you enter the house the visual of the water is very present. The pedestrian entrance to the house shares its space with

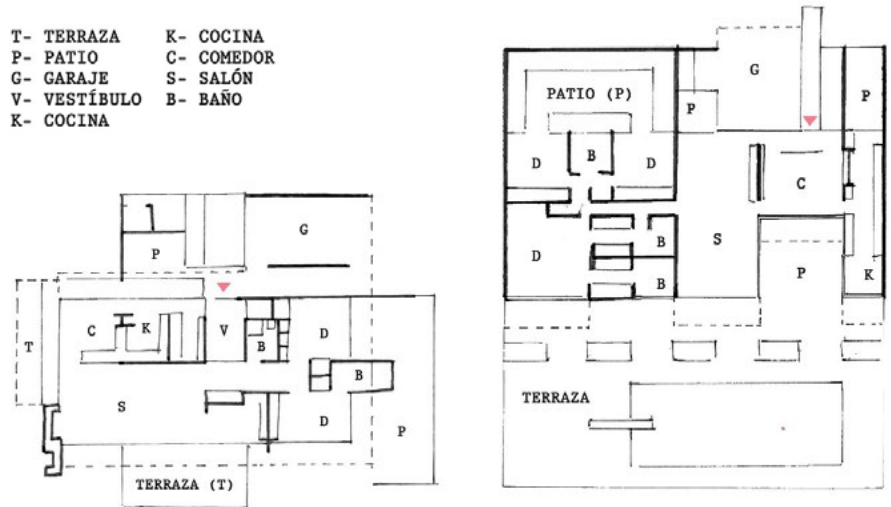


Figure 4. "Appunti per il progetto di una casa al mare" of Ettore Sottsass. Source: (*Domus* n°386)

a large paved courtyard and the garage, thus being the same for both vehicles and people. The first room upon entering is a hall that leads to a large open day area with the living room and dining room all in one space and, in turn, this hall has direct access to the side garden of the plot. It is interesting to note how, despite being a house of large dimensions, the architect chooses to unify spaces and leave a free floor losing some of the formality of each room. This feature is common among post-war American houses, so it may be one of the reasons on which this decision is based. The dining room is oriented and in contact with the main garden, which contains several of the common outdoor spaces. The separation between inside and outside is blurred, the inhabitants are in contact with nature and those in the garden are spectators of the life inside. A door connects the kitchen with the day area. It can be seen in plan as the distribution of the same consists of a large central island where the fires and storage furniture are located on three of the four sides of the perimeter of the

room. It is usual that the kitchens of this time begin to expand their storage space, because in these years domestic appliances of all kinds and their consumption proliferate. It can be seen that the kitchen has access through a large window to an inner courtyard shared with the service room. It is interesting to see how the architect equates the status of the kitchen to the rest of the servants' quarters of the house and gives it an outdoor patio that doubles the area of the room.

On the left side of the floor plan, we find the private area of the house where two bedrooms and the bathroom they share are grouped together. Both rooms have a private outdoor space. Once again, the separation between the house and the surroundings disappears. This mechanism of complementing the interior spaces with an adjacent exterior space of greater or lesser privacy depending on the characteristics of the room, is present in the three projects carried out by the American architect Craig Ellwood (1922-1992) for the Entenza program.



Figures 5 and 6. Case Study House #16 y Case Study House #18 de Craig Ellwood. Source: (Beatriz Martínez-Lauwers Dolz 2024)

It can be seen that in both *CSH16* and *CSH18* by Ellwood, the garage and the main entrance share the same space, as in *Casa al Mare*. Ellwood was one of the most renowned architects in the United States after the Second World War. He studied engineering at the University of California (UCLA) in Los Angeles and his architecture stands out for its light metal structures with a clear Miesian influence⁸.

It can be seen that for Sottsass the relationship with the environment in which the project is located is of great importance. The architect controls the interior-external connection by proposing large sliding metal panels that can be completely opened, making the barrier between the two spaces disappear and connecting completely with nature. Another technique he uses is the game with the pavements, which do not respond to vertical partitions, but to another distribution whose boundaries are found in nature. This resource allows the area of the rooms to be expanded. The use of large sliding windows is found in Neutra's *CSH20*, but, just as Neutra makes them purely from glass, Sottsass proposes them with metal sheets of different colors. And for the architect, one of the main themes of the project is color. He makes use of pigments, not only to highlight the structure itself or to have a secondary function, but to perform their own expressive work⁹. With the interplay of openings and the different colors of each window, the façade of the house changes according to the combination of tones created by the users: *"una casa colorata è un simbolo di presenza umana"*¹⁰.

As for volume, it is worth highlighting the horizontal opening with black metal carpentry that separates the facades and the roof of the house. This design creates the impression of floating in the environment and also allows more light to enter the interior spaces. We find this detail very similar to the *Baley House* by Neutra and another point of great importance for Sottsass in this project is light. This topic becomes a matter of interest and study for the architecture of the moment,

as we find examples such as George Nelson's translucent vaults in the *Experimental House*, the translucent panels typical of Ellwood's architecture and present in the Fields House, for example, and other cases that do not necessarily have to be from the other side of the Atlantic, such as the walls of pavés or glass blocks that appear in Gio Ponti's proposal for the 11th edition of the *Triennale di Milano* that took place in 1957¹¹. All these examples study light and the way of illuminating spaces in indirect or filtered ways, creating the desired atmosphere inside.

The last of the central themes of the project is the atmosphere, because as the author tells us, rather than as a project to be built, it should be seen as a series of notes for the future. This is where one of the most distinctive and poetic traits of the architect comes in, and it consists of creating an anthropological architecture, which emphasizes the habits and daily gestures of its tenants. All the spaces are thought out in detail, taking into account the rituals of its inhabitants, from an architectural scale to the design of the furniture itself. We see a sketch, Figure 7, in which the architect proposes a marble bench in the hall that has a space where visitors can wash their hands before entering, for example. Therefore, these types of details are not only designed to fulfill a function or complete the aesthetics of a space, but they manifest the lifestyle of the inhabitants and invite visitors to take part in the daily rituals of the family.

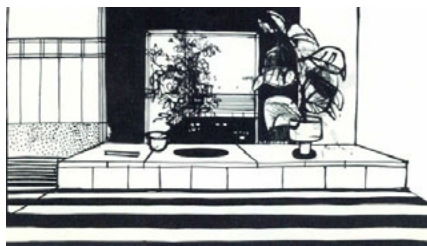


Figure 7. "Appunti per il progetto di una casa al mare" of Ettore Sottsass. Source: (*Domus* n°386)

The layout of the terraces, patios and outdoor gardens and the boundaries that delimit each of these spaces is designed with the same emphasis on people's habits rather than on function. We can see how the plan of the project, Figure 8, is full of notes in which the architect suggests what takes place in each area: "vasca per sedersi davanti al mare", "fuoco all'aperto per cucinare pesce di fronte al mare...etc"¹².

In figure 1, it is worth paying attention to the model of the project (reproduced through a sketch), as we see how the house is built on a heavy concrete base that in turn clings to the rocky surface of the terrain. This base

is more reminiscent of a classical temple than a Case Study model¹³. The way in which the Californian models had to relate to the exterior was through the creation of artificial landscapes that in a certain way idealize the environment: "The structural lightness and temporality question the permanence and transcendent sense of the room, defining an architecture that renounces the direct relationship with the earth. The nostalgia for this connection with the roots leads to the integration of the built landscape in the house, and the articulation of all the interior spaces around an artificial exterior, representing the potential of the true nature of the place."¹⁴

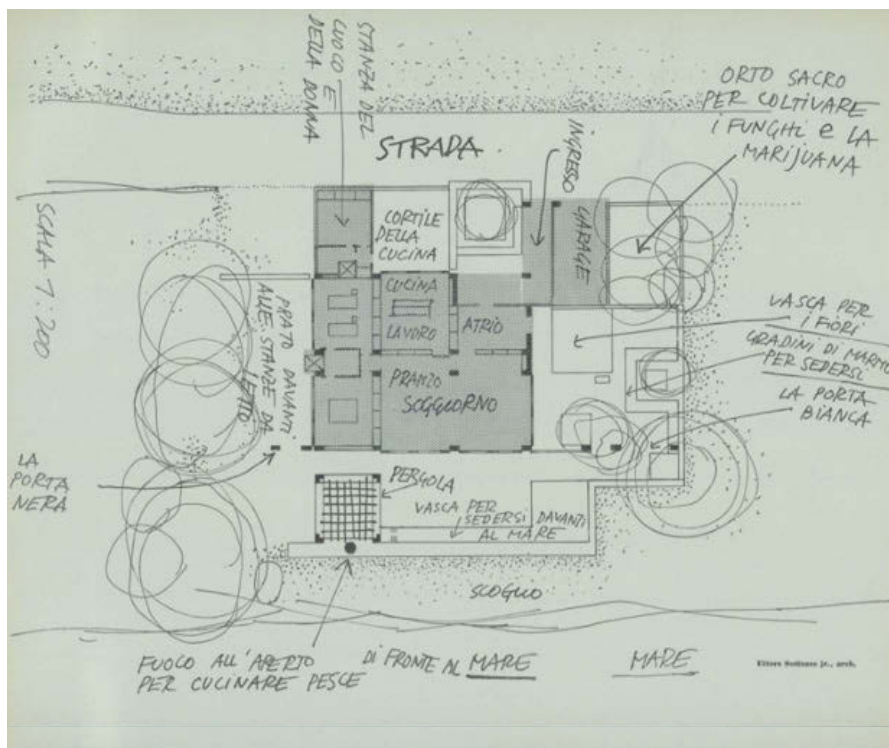


Figure 8. "Appunti per il progetto di una casa al mare" of Ettore Sottsass. Source: (Domus n°386)

Ettore Sottsass' *Casa al Mare* project is undoubtedly the result of his first trip to the United States. Coming into contact for the first time with a culture so different from that of Italy, in a country that was experiencing a phase of growth and well-being more advanced than that of Italy, inspired the architect to take inspiration from what he observed during his stay. In fact, that trip led to the beginning of the foundations of his own architecture. Color, light and the development of an anthropological architecture created for the inhabitant and adapted to their daily rituals are the most notable points of the *Casa al Mare* project, and in turn, are the most representative characteristics of the architect and are present in most of his architectural work.

NOTES

¹ Ginsborg, *Storia d'Italia dal dopoguerra ad oggi*, 9.

² Parra Martínez, *Modernos y Militantes. California a través de Harwell Hamilton Harris y Gordon Drake*, 57.

³ Thomé, *Ettore Sottsass*, 29.

⁴ Zanella, *Catalogo ragionato dell'archivio 1922-1978 CSAC/ Università di Parma*, 321.

⁵ Ibidem, 269-371.

⁶ Domus n° 386, "Appunti per il progetto di una casa al mare", 55-62.

⁷ Esguevillas Cuesta, *Modelos y series en la casa americana de posguerra*, 34.

⁸ Ibidem, 88.

⁹ Domus n° 299, "Struttura e Colore", 95-96.

¹⁰ Domus n° 386, "Appunti per il progetto di una casa al mare", 55.

¹¹ Fiell, *Domus. Vol.4, 1955-1959*, 345.

¹² Domus n° 386, "Appunti per il progetto di una casa al mare", 55-62.

¹³ Zanella, *Catalogo ragionato dell'archivio 1922-1978 CSAC/ Università di Parma*, 271.

¹⁴ Esguevillas Cuesta, *Modelos y series en la casa americana de posguerra*, 38.

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