

Back to the Future The Future in the Past



ICDHS 10th+1
BARCELONA 2018

Conference Proceedings Book
Oriol Moret (ed.)

ICDHS 10th+1 Conference / Barcelona 2018

o Opening Pages



In memory of Anna Calvera (1954–2018)

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IN MEMORY OF ANNA CAROLINE NI
(1924-2018)

In memory of Anna Calvera
(1954–2018)

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Italian Design for Colonial Equipment (1931–1942)

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Italian design / Design history / Colonial equipment / Mediterranean / Carlo Enrico Rava

The history of Italian design is strictly connected to the history of Mediterranean design for obvious geographical reasons. One specific episode of this history will be discussed here: the design of equipment for the Italian colonies during the fascist regime. The Italian colonial empire reached its maximum extension at the end of the 1930s and it included a good part of the Mediterranean area. The subject discussed here

is still little known and analyzed because of the controversial historical period to which it relates. Anyway, for the purposes of design history, it seems of great interest to rediscover the case study of furniture and equipment design “for the colonies”, promoted during the 1930s, due to its avant-gardist experimentation of standardized systems for the serial production of furniture and objects. One of the main promot-

ers of this experience was the Italian architect Carlo Enrico Rava, in fact, the paper will follow his steps through the pages of *Domus* magazine, between 1931 and 1942, to shed light on this episode which would significantly influence Italian design history after WWII.

Italian colonialism and the evolution of the “Latin spirit” in architecture

The history of Italian design is strictly connected to the history of Mediterranean design for obvious geographical reasons. One specific episode of this history will be discussed here: the design of equipment for the Italian colonies during the fascist regime. The Italian colonial empire reached its maximum extension at the end of the 1930s: its territory was extended from the Rhone to the Balkans (Southern France, Dalmatia, Croatia, Montenegro, Albania and Greece), on the Aegean islands, in North Africa (Libya) and Eastern Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia), on the small Chinese concessions of Tianjin, Shanghai and Amoy. The Italian colonial empire thus comprised a good part of the Mediterranean area (ANTONICELLI, 1961; LABANCA, 2007).

The subject under discussion is not so much studied and analyzed because of the controversial historical period to which it is related, however for the history of design it is very interesting to rediscover the case of the design of furniture and equipment “for the colonies”, promoted during the 1930s, as an opportunity for avant-garde experimentation of interesting standardization systems for the mass production of furniture and objects (IRACE, 2015).

Among the main proponents of this experience there was the Italian architect Carlo Enrico Rava. Rava was among the founders of the “Group 7”¹ in 1926, a group that he left two years later to promote his vision of the modern project that would draw on the so-called “Latin spirit” of which Italy, and its architects, were depositaries (RAVA, 1931).

Along with the concept of “Latin spirit”, also an interest in colonial architecture emerges in Rava. This interest is certainly fueled by his condition as a son of Maurizio Rava, who was vice-governor of Tripolitania from 1930 to 1931 and governor of Somalia from 1931 to 1935, but also by the many travels made by Carlo Enrico himself since 1927 in those same countries (RAVA, 1936).

The question of the Mediterranean nature of Italian architecture is exposed by Rava through numerous articles published in *Domus* in 1931, mainly dedicated to the vision of “A modern colonial architecture”.

In 1936 the fascist regime intensified its interest in the overseas colonies by implementing the conquest of the Horn of Africa, which was followed by the five years of the Italian empire in Italian East Africa.² In these years the Italian colonialist operation assumes a more bloody form and it “sees a more massive

operation of economic exploitation and (Italian) repopulation of the conquered areas” (COLOMBO, 2016: 719). Therefore it does not appear to be a coincidence that, in 1936, the subject of the colonies returned to be treated on the pages of *Domus* through a new cycle of articles on the major problems of the colonial construction industry, alternately edited by Carlo Enrico Rava and Luigi Piccinato.

Rava still continues to deal with the colonial theme: first in 1938 as a curator, with Franco Petrucci, of the preparation of the Italian Africa pavilion at the Mostra autarchica del minerale italiano (Autarchic Exhibition of Italian Minerals) in Rome; then as curator and designer of the preparation of the *Mostra dell'attrezzatura coloniale* (Exhibition of Colonial Equipment)³ on the occasion of the VII Triennale di Milano in 1940.

In view of the 1940 exhibition, about a year before Rava publishes on the pages of *Domus* an accurate manifesto that establishes what the contents and the selection criteria of the exhibits would have been. The Exhibition of Colonial Equipment would have been first and foremost an addition to the largest and most important *Mostra dell'Oltremare* (Overseas Exhibition) organized in Naples in 1940.

In the field of this ‘equipment’ that goes from the houses to decor, to furnishings and to certain categories of personal objects, not much has been done yet, nor does it seem to us that specialized industries or artisanal

[1] Carlo Enrico Rava, Ubaldo Castagnoli (who after a while was replaced by Adalberto Libera), Luigi Figini, Guido Frette, Sebastiano Larco Silva, Gino Pollini and Giuseppe Terragni.

[2] Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea and Abyssinia.

[3] The Exhibition of Colonial Equipment of 1940 was preceded by two exhibitions dedicated to overseas colonies in Milan: the Italian Colonial Exhibition, held in conjunction with the III Trade Fair (*Fiera Campionaria*) of Milan in 1922 and the Exhibition of Colonial Art of 1936 housed in the Palazzo della Permanente.

productions have, with some exceptions, ‘put in line’ in this sense, at least to this day. On the other hand, it is well known that in 1940 the first great *Mostra dell’Oltremare* (Overseas Exhibition) will be held in Naples, which will certainly place, among its many goals, also that of presenting the best Italian realizations in every colonial sector [...]. Therefore, in parallel with the Naples exhibition, and with the precise aim of perfecting the technical and artistic organization of the national industries related to this sector, not only adapting the production to the needs of a high standard of living, but also taking into account the E42—the World’s Fair of Rome—[...] the Triennale has decided to include in its program next year also a section dedicated to colonial equipment, entrusting me with the task of coordinating the preparation and taking care of the staging (RAVA, 1939: xv11).

The Exhibition of Colonial Equipment at the VII Triennale of Milano, 1940

The terms of the Rava program in view of the *Exhibition of Colonial Equipment* deviate from the previous folkloristic references linked to the world of colonies and their exotic imaginary. Rava’s intentions are instead much more concrete and aimed at demonstrating a high production quality of the national landscape, useful for the realization of really practical and efficient equipment for life in the colony, seen mostly as a “nomadic” life (RAVA, 1939). In his program, Rava specifies first of all what the categories of objects would have been: modular, separable, multi-functional, foldable, light and easy to transport furniture; furniture accessories (fabrics, rugs, mats, lamps, lanterns, tablecloths, blankets); eating equipment; travel equipment; details of equipment (RAVA, 1939).

Within his program the most interesting point lies in the request for a high level of production, reachable according to the author by means of a double task: controlling the existing production, assisting it and improving it; spurring those industries whose equipment seemed suitable

for the purposes specifically exposed in the program with the creation, on special designs and projects (especially by architects), of new types of equipment (RAVA, 1939).

The projects selected for the *Exhibition of Colonial Equipment* of the VII Triennial (Fig. 1) are divided by Rava into two main types; those “designed for that nomadic life” (RAVA 1940: 22), among which: a model of field cot with mosquito net (Pecorini company in Florence), and two wicker armchairs designed by Giancarlo Malchiodi (Pacini, Florentine chair-maker); some special types of light metal cots and suspended cots based on a Piccinato project; several models of leather foldable armchairs and small chairs and an extendable armchair designed by Giovanni Pellegrini (Viganò company from Tripoli).⁴ In addition to this category, there are also furnishings for camping and caravans of the historic Moretti company from Milan,⁵ which created a new series specifically for the Triennale of 1940.

The second group includes projects designed for more stable living conditions, such as: tables and stools in ‘special wood with multiple receding elements’ (RAVA, January 1940: 22) and four different models of chairs (Carpenterie Tripoline) designed by Pellegrini. There are also some models of metal furniture made for colonial officers and functionaries by the company Parma Antonio & Figli from Saronno, the company (which had specialized since the early 1930s in the production of safes) had begun its collaboration with Franco Albini and Giancarlo Palanti for the project of a series of “disassembling furniture for officers in East Africa” as early as 1935, presenting some models at the Trade Fair of Milan (Fig. 2).

In this category we also find a series of bedroom furniture such as: the disassembling wardrobe and sideboard in larch and striped hemp by Alessandro Pasquali; the disassembling bedroom in bleached hardboard and sandblasted oak by G.G. Schirollo and Rava (made by Grazioli and Gaudenzi): “This room, made for the largest part in masonite, presents the particularly notable feature that it can be assembled and disassembled with maximum quickness and ease, without the need for nails, screws, or tools of any kind, being able to be packed all in a single box of limited size” (RAVA, January 1940: 22). Still on a project by Rava, we find a disassembling writing desk and office furniture in masonite and

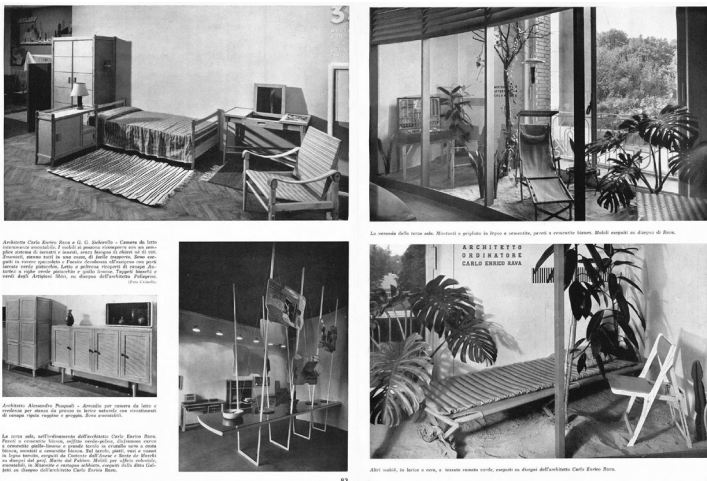


Fig. 1 C. E. RAVA, *Mostra delle attrezzature Coloniali*, VII Triennale di Milano 1940, details of the disassembling bedroom designed by Rava and other views of the exhibition, *Domus* n°150, June 1940.

- [4] The Paolo Viganò company was already known for the production of the iconic foldable field chair known as “Tripolina” (as it was produced in Tripoli), in the then Italian colony in Libya and given to the Italian armed forces during the Libyan war (1922–1932). The “Tripolina” has since become an icon of modern furnishing thanks to its practicality and transportability, but its patent dates back to 1881 by the work of the Englishman Joseph Beverley Fenby (Bassi, 2007).
- [5] The Ettore Moretti company, founded in the early 1920s in Milan and operating until the end of the 1960s, achieved a high level of specialization in the production of field tents, removable

pavilions, camping materials and waterproof fabrics, also thanks to the numerous field activities connected with the fascist regime. An example of this are the names of the numerous models in the catalog in the mid-thirties: “Milano” tent for the Air Force; “Lombardy, Romagna and Tuscany” tents used in the colonies of the *Figli italiani* (Italian Sons); “Campania” tent for the *Opera Balilla*; “Monza and Como” pyramidal tents; “Monterosa” alpine tent; colonial tents “Mogadishu, Massawa, Azizia, Asmara, Congo, Gondar” (Ettore Moretti, 1935).

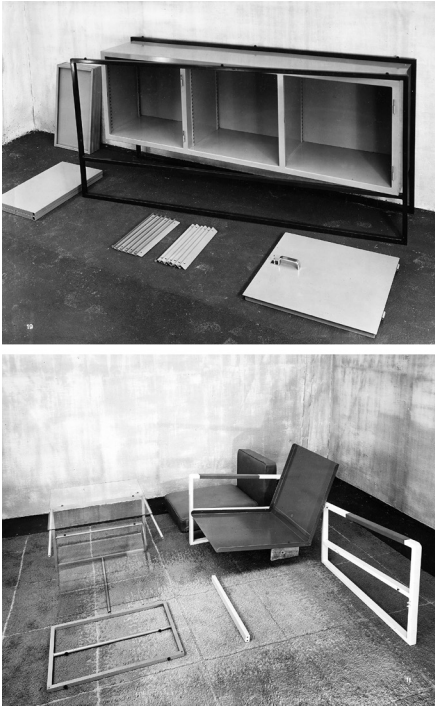


Fig. 2. FRANCO ALBINI and GIANCARLO PALANTI, disassembling metal furniture for officials' accommodations in East Africa, production of Parma Antonio & Figli (Saronno), Fiera Campionaria di Milano, 1935.

brushed chestnut. Another note has to be dedicated to the numerous artifacts of Libyan artisan production we can find at the exhibition, including numerous fabrics for furniture and clothing in wool, cotton and silk, hemp rugs, objects in braided esparto, burlap screens made of palm leaves, all designed by Pellegrini “according to a modern taste free from any folkloristic sympathy” (RAVA, January 1940: 22). And yet a series of earthenware tableware designed by Pellegrini and made with the techniques of the North African potters of Libya, Tunisia, and Djerba island (RAVA, January 1940; RAVA, June 1940).

Beyond the description of the projects featured in the exhibition, it is interesting to highlight the attention that Rava gives to a particular experimentation element applied in some of the projects, namely:

The use, not only in the accessories, but also in the furniture destined to the colony, of the so-called ‘plastic materials’, synthetic resins and the like, an experiment of singular interest given the characteristic of the total resistance of this material (as much from climatological factors as from the corrosion of insects) that could be used in exteriors of any species, an

element which is of fundamental value in the colony (RAVA, January 1940: 23).

An experimentation on materials which will result in the post-war years of strategic importance for the production of industrial design in Italy.

The column “Per la casa e la vita in colonia” (For home and life in colony) (1941–1942)

Following the Triennale exhibition, there is the column that Rava is called to write throughout 1941 in *Domus*, once again dedicated to “colonial equipment”. A column consisting of a total of twelve mainly technical articles with brief texts alongside design drawings of furniture and accessories, particularly designed for life in the colony, “excluding those furnitures to which a mannered exoticism demands to give superficial and false colonial aspects, and also those objects, more or less decorative, which are in fact perfectly useless for life in Africa” (RAVA, 1941: 60). Also on this occasion, Rava underlines the interest and importance of experiments with materials with high resistance, non-flammability, and anti-corrosion properties, which can be attributed (according to the author) to African life, such as: masonite, hardboard and plastic materials for furniture and, for the accessories, stainless metals and all synthetic resins for their unbreakability.

For example, in the first issue of the column (RAVA, January 1941), Rava writes about the project of the architect Salvo D’Angelo for the kitchen furniture transportable by a wooden caravan, covered in aluminum sheet and linoleum, furniture that was already present as a prototype at the exhibition of 1940 (Fig. 3). A complex and compact object that can be closed on itself becoming of the size of a trunk. In the second issue of the column, there is the project by Mario Dal Fabbro for living room furniture adaptable also for a bedroom that includes a cabinet with doors, shelves and drawers that can be used both as a closet and for crockery, whose internal part is hermetically sealed by a waterproof fabric with zipper (RAVA, February 1941).

The following issues are rich in projects that follow the guidelines repeated and analyzed by Rava about the concepts of flexibility and lightness, such as the various models of chairs that can be converted into a chaise longue, types of foldable field beds that can be reduced to a suitcase and, again, a whole series of small foldable furniture (magazine racks, flowerpots, stools, etc.), most of them signed by Dal Fabbro (Fig. 4). The final result would be an exceptional collection of projects (mostly never realized) of proto-industrial furniture-equipment joined by the same rational principles of modularity, detachability, lightness, compactness and adaptability.

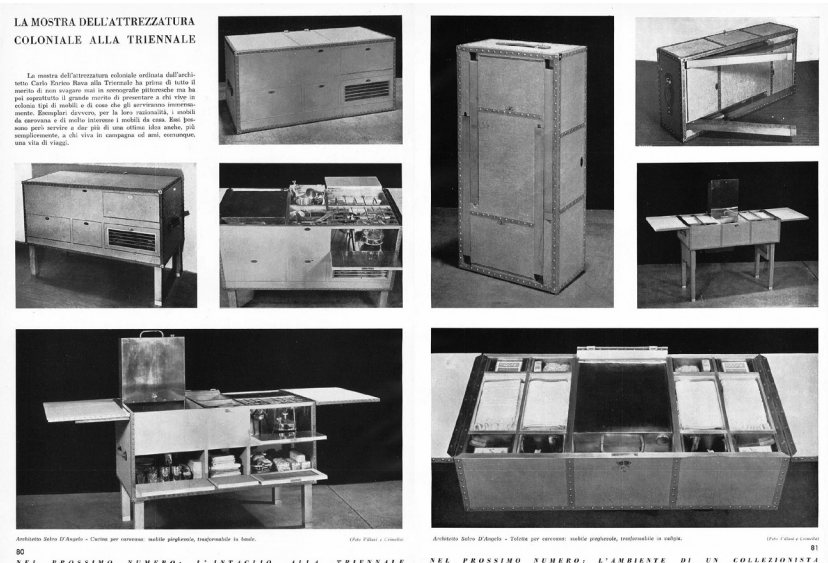


Fig. 3. C. E. RAVA, *Mostra delle attrezzature Coloniali*, VII Triennale of Milan 1940, detail of the kitchen and the dressing table for caravan travels designed by the architect Salvo D’Angelo, *Domus* n° 150, June 1940, 80–81.

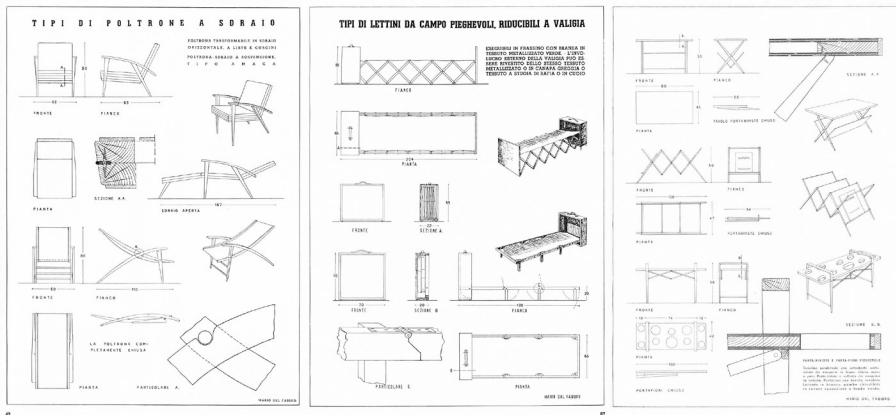


Fig. 4 From left to right: MARIO DAL FABBRIO, drawings for a chair convertible into chaise lounge and a suspension armchair-lawn chair, *Domus* n°160, April 1941, p.42; MARIO DAL FABBRIO, types of folding camp-beds reducible into a suitcase, *Domus* n°162, June 1941, p.67; MARIO DAL FABBRIO, folding magazine rack and flowerpot, *Domus* n°167, November 1941, p.31.

In January 1942, Rava writes an article entitled “Of the utilitarian equipment of the dwelling” (RAVA, 1942) in which he states:

During the whole of 1941 I kept alive in the pages of *Domus* the issue of colonial equipment and I noticed that this problem should fundamentally interest the categories of small-scale artisans, while waiting for the big mass production to become possible, a production that, by ensuring a constant average of high quality, must be the supreme purpose of every industrial activity. Now, it seems almost superfluous to specify that these considerations, beyond the limited colonial sector, are good for the whole field of furniture production, and that consequently, since this year our column regards the entire field of utilitarian household equipment, the above principle will be the basis of our directives and of our criterion of choice (RAVA, 1942: 88).

This last article by Rava represents a true watershed between the collapse of the colonial empire and what would have happened after the world war, representing a valid testimony of that crucial passage that we want to highlight here: a movement of translation that took place between those principles of design and production triggered by the “practical” necessities of life in the colony, towards those that instead would have been the essential prerequisites of the design for Italian industrial production in the post-war period.

Heritage of the “practical” spirit in the Italy of reconstruction

The projects for colonial equipment can fall into that history in which “the productive pragmatism and the tension to the project as a technique of mediation and negotiation between different cultures served to partially redeem the colonial adventure from its more hateful and backward events, building a platform of dialogue that was not only depredation and oppression, but also enhancement and understanding” (IRACE, 2015: 203).

A redemption that occurs above all in terms of a design legacy rather than a real cultural or more concretely productive contamination (in fact, the traces of important collaborations with producers in the area of North Africa or East Africa are lost in the post-war period). What undoubtedly strikes is the continuity of thought that is rediscovered in the years of reconstruction, after the war, relative to the principles of practicality and economy dictated by the new urgent need to

give back a house (and therefore also all its “equipment”) to all those who had lost it. Architecture remained obviously of primary interest, but right from the start the same architects also jointly deal with the theme of the interiors. This is borne out by the words of Ernesto Nathan Rogers (editor of *Domus* magazine since 1946, whose subtitle would be “The House of Man”): “The furniture, the saved one, come back to the city: we architects want to help it in this first act of reconstruction. Reconstruction of one’s home” (ROGERS, January 1946: 6).

A few years earlier there is an episode that is worth mentioning here, namely the “Riponibili” (Storable) furniture program undertaken by Gio Ponti with the company SAFFA⁶ between 1943 and 1945.

The meeting with the industry was an opportunity to create a program that expressed a practical concept of furniture. The “Riponibili” (Storable) furniture program consisted of the definition of standard-type furniture, to be produced in series, low cost, conceived in the sign of minimum obstruction and maximum furniture transformability and mobility. This standard-type furniture is traced back to a series of furnishing elements according to the characteristics: storable, foldable, modular and stackable (BOSONI, PICCHI, STRINA, 1995: 62).

The production was not successful, but this is undoubtedly one of the first attempts to apply industrial organization in the field of wooden furniture, an attempt that anticipates by a few years the most extensive programming introduced first by the RIMA exhibition of 1946 and again by the VIII Triennale of the 1947. RIMA (*Riunione Italiana Mostre Arredamento*, Italian Assembly of Furniture Exhibitions) was a private initiative that in 1946 took charge of rebuilding the bombed Palazzo dell’Arte to set up a series of exhibitions of individual furniture projects oriented by the principles of “economy, practicality and good taste” (ROGERS, July 1946: 6), with the primary objective of an upcoming future series production. It is interesting to report the impressions of Rogers concerning the general tone of the RIMA furniture exhibition:

[6] *Società Anonima Fabbriche Fiammiferi ed Affini* (Anonymous Society of Matches and Like Companies; Milan, 1871–2002), since the 1930s also started to produce poplar plywood for the production of wooden furniture and packaging.

The set of furnishings could be entitled to the wandering man. We still have to use the verb *errare* (note: in Italian “*errare*” means “to wander” but also “to err”). To wander and to err in Italian have the same origin, *errare*, so that has a double meaning: go here and there without knowing where. *Errare* seems to be the verb of contemporary man, if one must believe in the conception of life that is deduced from these pieces of furniture (ROGERS, July 1946: 6).

It does not seem only a coincidence that the uncertain psychological condition of the Italian post-war orients architects (especially the young ones, as emphasized by Rogers in the same article) to design furniture systems that incorporate the same principles of practicality, lightness and adaptability of that colonial “equipment” so long studied by Rava. This is shown by the assignment of the *Grand Prix* of the 1946 exhibition to the young architect Ignazio Gardella. Gardella offers a series of prototypes (Spezzo company in Milan) of furniture for a hypothetical accommodation for three people, designed for “precise needs of life but with a certain flexibility: various modularity of bookcases, reversibility of the cabinets, interchangeability of internal equipment, etc.” (GARDELLA, 1946: 7). Furniture therefore designed to adapt itself to different types of interiors according to the needs of those who live there such as, for example, the remarkable modular system of bookcases: so modular that it can be placed against the wall, approached specularly therefore self-supporting, and stackable in height (Fig. 5).

Another well-known example of furniture present at the RIMA exhibition of 1946 and associated with this same housing philosophy is the furniture designed by Vico Magistretti as: the folding beech chair with canvas seat-back (Fumagalli company of Meda) and the bookcase with movable shelves, supported by two patented struts working under pressure between ceiling and floor (Crespi company in Milan). The RIMA exhibition of 1946 is often indicated in the history books as a first important nucleus of what in the 1950s would be the true triumph of Italian design. A success that has materialized above all thanks to the productive relationship between architects and industries, whose origin can also be traced back to the experience of colonial equipment, which, beyond its controversial political nature, played a significant role in training a design spirit and mentality oriented towards simplification and mass production.

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Fig. 5 IGNAZIO GARDELLA, “Alloggio per 3 persone” (Accommodation for three people), details of some transformable and foldable furnitures designed for the RIMA contest, *Domus* n° 211, July 1946, pp.7–9.