

# ITALIA'61 A CENTURY OF ITALIAN ARCHITECTURE, 1861-1961<sup>1</sup>

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This idea of mine and then the intention to get to know more throroughly, with its interconnecctions and contradictions, the architecture of a country which has an extremely complex historical past, and yet is barely one hundred years old, was finally conceived, although not without antecedents, in the April of 1961. That spring Turin, the 'capital' of FIAT, was preparing for centenary festivities. One hundred years before, on the 17th March of 1861, after the adhering of Tuscany, and then Sicily, Naples, the Marches (Marche) and Umbria, the Parliament of Turin proclaimed Victor Emmanuel II King of Italy and thus, with the exception of Venice and Rome for the time being, unified Italy was born. To celebrate this historical event the city of Turin and the executives of the FIAT works organized a large national exhibition 'Italia'61', displaying the economic, social, political and cultural development and results of the one hundred years. Well, that specific April morning I shared with Italian and foreign colleagues the unforgettable experience of having the chance to stand in the middle of the *Palazzo del Lavoro*, the Labour Hall, (*Fig. 1*) just before completion, and to listen to the wise and patient answers of Professor PIER LUIGI NERVI to questions not always benevolent. A wanton 'forest of columns?' He answered with a slightly wry smile of the scholar forced to give explanations: 'No, signori... No gentlemen, but if you see it as such, let it be a 'forest', but a 'forest of umbrellas'.

And with that he opened his umbrella until used as a cane, asking the ones standing beside him to do likewise, and I was instantly reminded of an ex-professor of mine — very much like him as to his strictness in profession and to his lanky figure — who on occasions was also delighted

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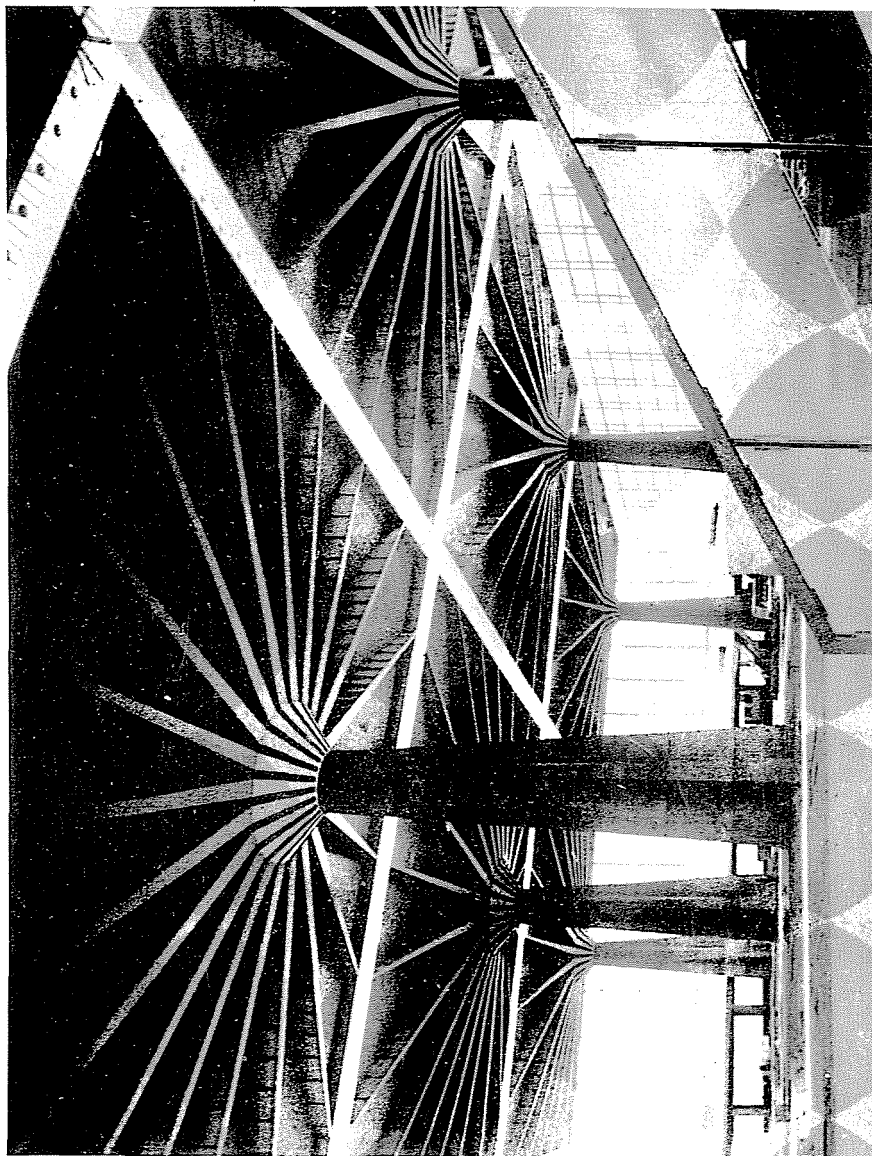


Fig. 1. PIER LUIGI NERVI: *Palazzo del Lavoro*, (the Labour Hall), national exhibition 'Italia '61', Turin, 1961.

to make us understand seemingly complicated problems with such 'every-day' examples. Then, a few hours later, a colleague from Turin told me at the dinner table that such a large hall was in fact needed only for the duration of the centenary exhibition, lasting a couple of months, and, to tell the truth, a cheaper, temporary solution would have done. But the *Professore* had wished to see his long cherished idea realized, and therefore the opportunity was there now, the patron FIAT 'stooped' to the experimenting spirit and talent of the great architect-designer. On the one hand, a grandiose thought, on the other, a noble gesture, which required nothing 'but' a NERVI and a FIAT. This episode, the fact that I was an eye and ear witness to the realization of a great work, of a 'potential monument', that I became aware of the atmosphere so characteristic of this people and of this country, which makes possible the creation of significant works of art, and furthermore of the same Turin, which is an organic entity of new and newer tendencies quite discernible one from the other in their phases as well, all based on historic continuity, well, all this together gave me the last impulse to undertake a thorough study of the architecture of these one hundred years.

For sake of avoiding misunderstandings I must say that at the beginning of my first stay in Italy as Director of the Hungarian Academy in Rome — which lasted seven years — almost all of my free time was absorbed by the deepening of my notions on historical architecture I had gathered in the course of my studies and then of teaching. Mesmerized by the 'in situ' sight of the works known and longed for from literature, a certain time had to elapse before I was able to reach the conclusion that Italy's architecture of today and of yesterday is not identical with the 19th-20th century resultant of the historical architecture of the day before yesterday in the various parts of the country, in the regions, provinces and city-states. Here and now I wish to limit myself to the stating and emphasizing of the fact that although the inspiring fascination and seminal force of Italy's historical architecture is, even after 1861, still unchanged for the architect on pilgrimage from any part of the world, for the Italian architects it was actually a consequence of the creation of an independent and unified Italy that the world opened up and widened. The concepts and tendencies streaming in found a fertile ground and the Italian architecture, which had been practically stagnant in the first half of the 19th century, in a couple of years — at the turn of the century to be sure — caught up with the European standards, so as to rise to the avantgarde, together with its virtues and vices, in the period following the First and particularly the Second World War.

A constant, gradual development, and finally a leading position: to put it like that is too summary and general. Nevertheless, here and now, within the limits of time and space at my disposal, I can set myself no

other aim than to support my statement alluding to a few milestones of the accelerating progress, to a few masters and works of art.

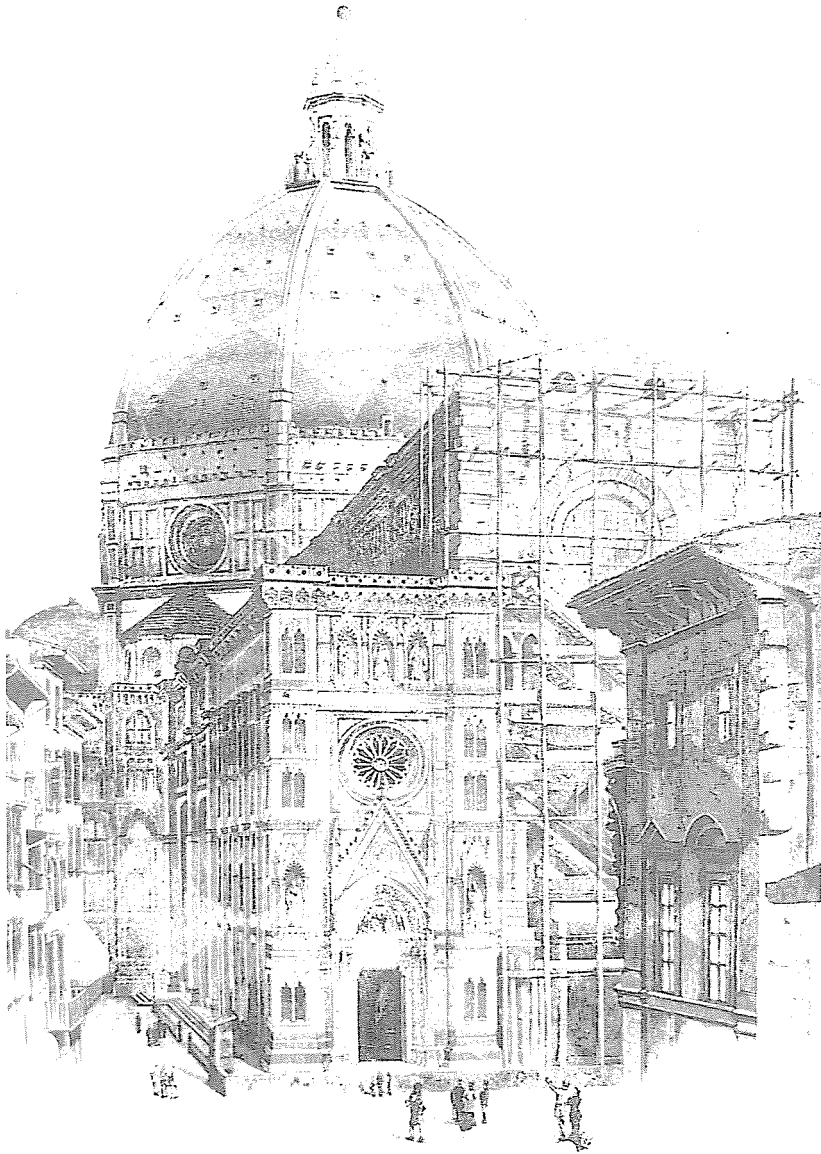
I would like to state in advance that as far as I am concerned, in the development of architecture, or at least of the architecture of the 19th and 20th century, I believe the most important factor besides the personality of the creative architect is the commissioner equipped with the necessary economic and intellectual means, and if so, it is the more valid in the case of the better half of Italy's architecture.

I admit that in the course of studying a specific work of art or tendency I have always been deeply interested in the opinion of the contemporary audience too, whether lay or professional, which of course is not the same as that of the succeeding generations, whose evaluation, by the way, is also muted by the passing of time.

A short, hidden little piece of news on page 10 of the 7th July, 1883 issue of *The Builder*, renowned English biweekly professional magazine: 'Mr. DE FABRIS, designer of the new facade of the Cathedral (Duomo) of Florence, passed away in Florence on the 28th of last month, on the eve of the unveiling of his great work.' A few weeks later, the same magazine carries a three-column article with a full page illustration on the vicissitudes of the main facade of Santa Maria del Fiore, (*Fig. 2*) and on the 'happy' solution.<sup>1</sup> Let us not consider now the flood of newspaper articles, reviews and scholarly papers which, already following the previous competition, but especially after the realization criticized and still criticize the solution to this very day with a vitriolic pen.

Let us instead be indulgent with the hundreds of thousands of unsuspecting tourists, who, thanks to the progress of photography industry, have been taking their 'obligatory' pictures of the facade for decades, including naturally, Giotto's Campanile. Let us be indulgent, I say, for who can tell whether our restorations, carried out under the aegis of the Venice Charter, will meet such an approval of and photographed with such enthusiasm by the future generations? Here I would prefer to quote the last lines of the above mentioned article: '... the regeneration of Italy was to bring a remedy also in the case of the Cathedral. In April, 1860. King Victor Emmanuel laid the foundation stone of a new facade ...'<sup>2</sup>

And although the work itself was started only in the autumn of 1875, the ruler's initiative proved to be exemplary. Numerous facades of significant churches and cathedrals of the new Italy were 'dressed up', more or less stylistically accurately, but at any rate with noble materials, at great cost, executed accurate and professional. That is how a brand new facade was given, in the last third of the century to — let me cite only the best known ones — 'the Santa Croce in *Florence* (1857–1863, NICOLA MATAS); in *Milan* the Sant'Eustorgio (1863–1865, GIOVANNI BROCCA), the San Simpliciano



*Fig. 2. EMILIO DE FABRIS: 'Florence Cathedral and its New Facade' (The Builder, 18th August, 1883, pp. 230-231.)*

(1870, CARLO MACIACHINI), the San Marco, (1871, same architect), the Santa Maria del Carmine (1880, same architect), the San Sepolcro (1894, GAETANO MORETTI and CESARE RAVA), the San Lorenzo (1894, Cesare

Nava), the San Babila (1905–1906, PAOLO CESARE BIANCHI), the cathedral of *Arezzo* (1901–1914, DANTE VIVIANI), of *Naples* (1877–1905, ERICO ALVINO), and of *Amalfi* (1891, same architect)<sup>3</sup>. Let us now forgive for a minute these architects for not having solved their tasks in the spirit of the Athens (1931), or Rome (1931), or, if you like, the Venice (1964) Charters. To do so they would have had to be born half a century later. After all what they did was nothing but was being committed by their colleagues at the time all over Europe. For us the phenomenon itself is far more important: almost everywhere in the newly created country, from the North down to the South, the unfolding wave of construction fever is initiated with such or similar projects, only to be enriched later on by new challenges, and this wave, apart from short stagnations and the hiatus imposed by the two world wars, can be said to be continuing today. Italy was and still is, a country that builds.

I have promised to cite only milestones. In the period of historicism, I regard as such the work of ALESSANDRO ANTONELLI (1798–1888), specifically his 121 m tall, daringly constructed *cupola* rising above the crossing the late Renaissance church of San Gaudenzio in Novara (from 1841 onwards), and, in particular, the structural bravura of the 165 m of the tower of the *Mole Antonelliana* (Fig. 3) in *Turin* (designed in 1863, construction from 1876 onwards). With these works, ANTONELLI serves as the connecting link, in the historical continuity of Italian architecture, between the great Baroque structural innovators and the builder-architects of the Twentieth Century. Although the creature dynamism of ANTONIO SANT'ELIA (1888–1916) who perished at the age of 28 in the First World War, are preserved only by his *drawings* (Fig. 4) reflecting his quest for new structural solutions, now preserved at the Villa Olmo in Como, less than a decade later by PIER LUIGI NERVI's (1891–1979) *Augusteo cinema* (1926–1927) marks starting out of a builder-architect European scale, just like RICCARDO MORANDI's (born in 1902), *garage* in Rome, 1932–1933).

Here and now I do not wish to deal with the errors and sins of 19th–20th century historicism in Italy. The exaggeratedly large triumphal-arch-motif main gate of GIUSEPPE MENGONI's (1829–1877) *Gallery* in Milan (1865–1878), GIUSEPPE SACCONI's (1853–1905) *Victor Emmanuel Monument* in Rome (1884–1911), GUGLIELMO CALDERINI's (1837–1916) neo-manerist, Berninian and Garnierian *Palace of Justice* (1888–1910), the whole oeuvre of the father, PIO (1846–1928) and of the son, MARCELLO PIACENTINI (1881–1960) and of the others as well, have been reduced to powder by criticism before me, so that there is little I could add. However, in the equalizing perspective of time — *sine ira et studio* — I might have a few things to say in their defense.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 3. ALESSANDRO ANTONELLI: *Mole Antonelliana*, originally synagogue, now Risorgimento Museum, Turin, from 1876 onwards.

Let us stick to milestones. I consider to be such the representatives of the rationalist tendency between the two world wars, whether they were active as members of the *Italian group of CIAM* or of *Gruppo 7*, or as free-lance artists. Among these GIUSEPPE TERRAGNI's (1904–1942) *Novocomum* tenement house in Como (1927–1928), but even more, his *Casa*

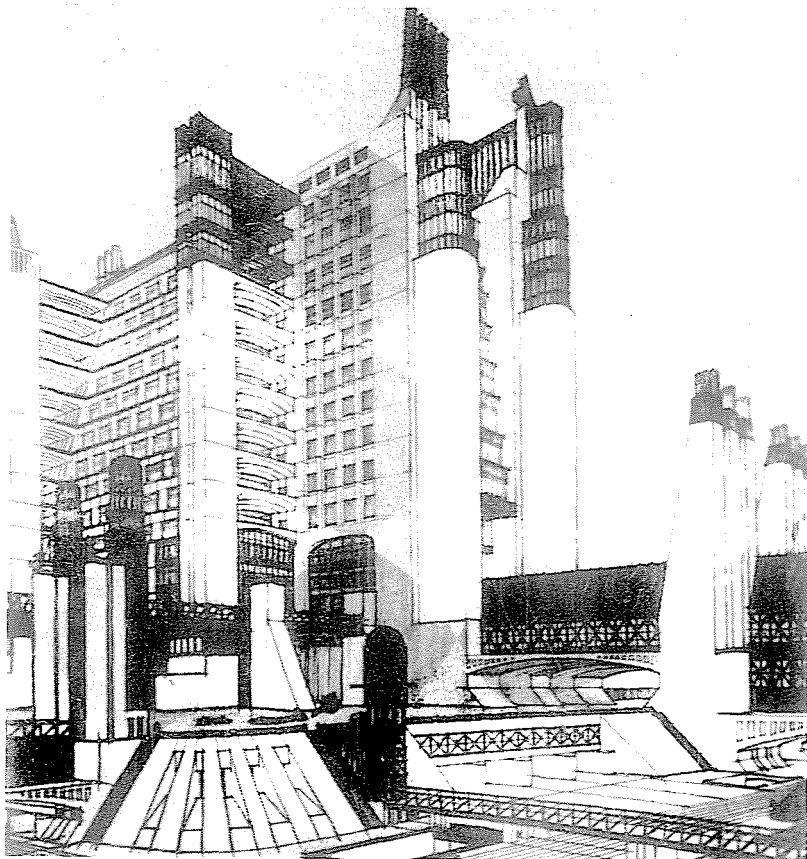


Fig. 4. ANTONIO SANT'ELIA: *Città Futurista*. block flats, drawing, 1914.

*del Popolo* (Fascist Party Headquarters) in the same city (1932–1936) are avant-garde creations making a precedent. (Fig. 5) TERRAGNI could not live to see Italy's economic, social and cultural ascension following the Second World War, and neither did GIUSEPPE PAGANO (1896–1945), who perished even in a concentration camp, as GIAN LUIGI BANFI (1910–1945), one time member of the STUDIO BBPR (BANFI, BELGIOJOSO, PERES-SUTTI, ROGERS), active even after the liberation of the country, or the militant champion of modern architecture, the critic EDOARDO PERSICO (1900–1936).

The year 1933 actually marks the entry on stage of a great generation of architects. A group of architects led by GIOVANNI MICHELUCCI (born in 1891) wins the competition for the building of the *Railway Station* in Florence behind the apse of the Santa Maria Novella, and the completion



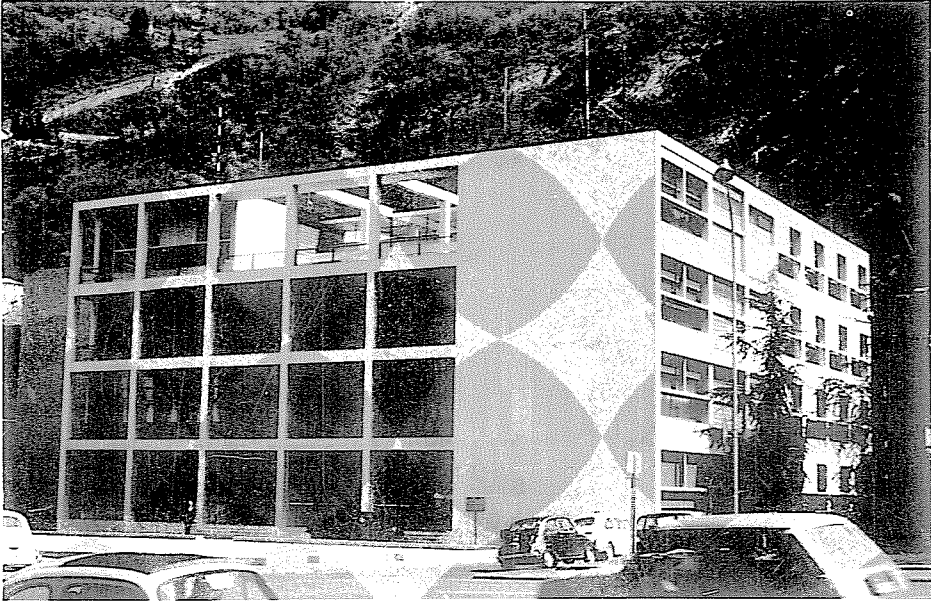


Fig. 5. GIUSEPPE TERRAGNI: *Casa del Popolo* (Fascist Party Headquarters), now Finance Guard's Office, *Como*, 1932–36

of the building opens a new chapter in the history of the problematic issue of building into a historical environment. ANNIBALE VITELLOZZI's (1903–1990) and his colleagues' *Termini Railway Station* in Rome (1948–1950) is an organic continuation of that idea. Signalling the breakthrough is the fact that in the same year three of the four competitions for the design of *post-office buildings* in Rome, the center of conservative architecture, were won by representatives of the new architecture such as ADALBERTO LIBERA (1903–1963), GIUSEPPE SAMONA (1898–1983), and MARIO RIDOLFI (1904–1984).

This is not the time to detail the reasons but let me bring to your attention a peculiarly Italian phenomenon. Through Europe, and even in the United States of America, the mid-to-end of the 1930's is dominated by conservative tendencies. That is, not only in dictatorial regimes, but also in democratic countries. In Italy there is an 'official' tendency, operating with the simplification of classical forms. Its leading figure is MARCELLO PIACENTINI, referred to above. His is the last word in every important government commission. (Fig. 6) What is exceptional, particular and a positive feature characteristic exclusively of the Italian mentality, is that PIACENTINI, in addition to the representatives of the conservative tendency, also

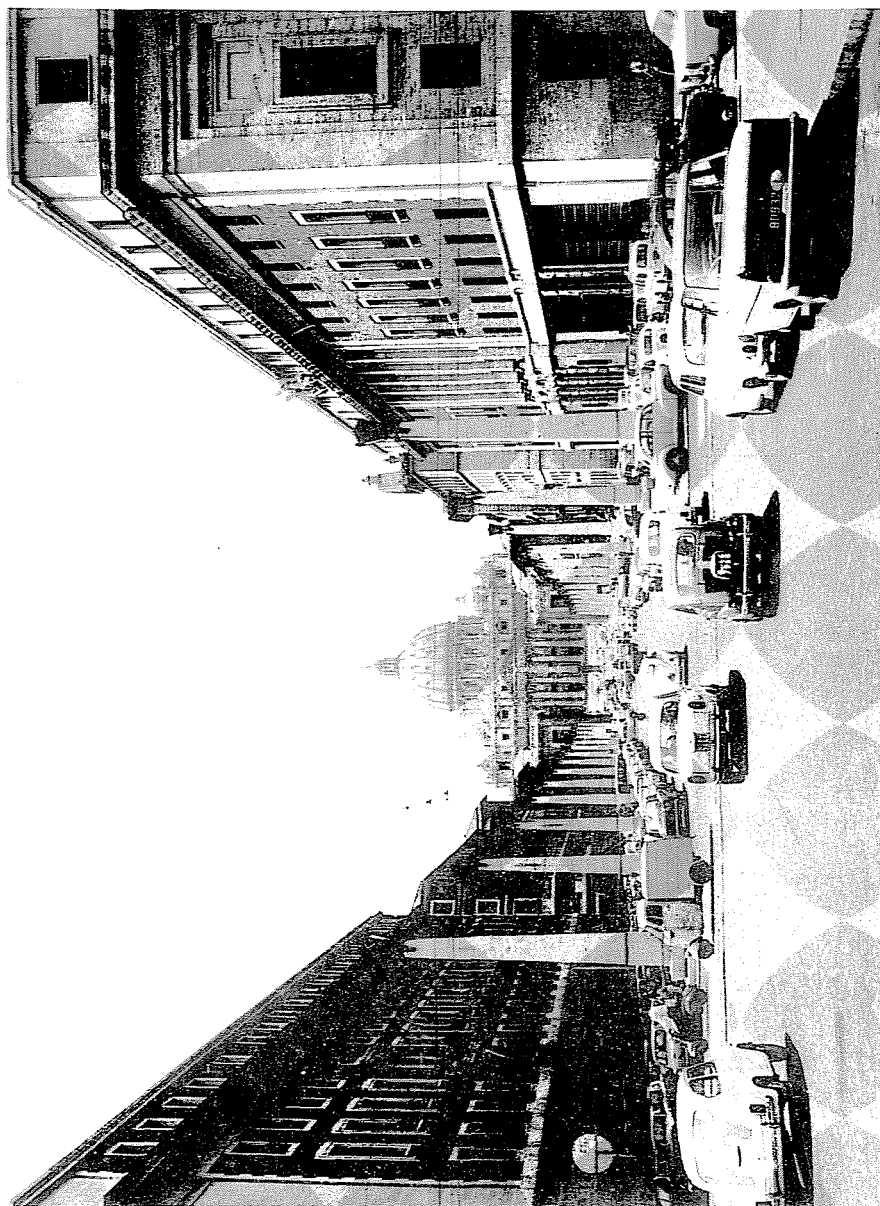


Fig. 6. MARCELLO PIACENTINI and ATTILIO SPACCARELLI: the new *Via della Conciliazione*, Rome, 1932-1950.

allowed the most significant personages of the rationalist movement to contribute to the two most important public building complexes at the time in Rome. Among the designers of the *department-institut buildings* of the *Rome University City* (built from 1932 onwards) we can find, each of them represented by one building, GIUSEPPE CAPPONI (1893–1936), GIO PONTI (1891–1979), GIOVANNI MICHELUCCI and GIUSEPPE PAGANO. Moreover, the planning of one most visible building at the time in the *new city complex* in the outskirts of Rome, then *E/42*, today *EUR* which was projected for the world exhibition of 1942, never held because of World War II, was awarded to ADALBERTO LIBERA.

Not too much good could be said about the most significant, or at least remarkable from the point of view of dimensions, *townbuilding activity* of the period, i.e. about the new towns of *Pomesia*, *Littoria* (today *Latina*) *Guidonia*, *Pontinia*, created by the draining of the Pontine Marshes, beyond the fact of their mere foundation, had two outstanding architects, representing modern architectural principles not been granted commissions in these projects. The town of *Sabaudia* was planned (1933–1934) by LUIGI PICCINATO (1899–1983) associated with E. MONTUORI, A. SCALPELLI, and G. CANCELOTTI, and this was the first modern solution for a major urban planning project in Italy. Similar in spirit is LODOVICO QUARONI's (born in 1911) plan for *Aprilia*, (1936, in collaboration with F. FARIELLO and S. MURATORI).

An example of optimal relations between a patron and an architect is the fructual collaboration lasting several decades between the architects LUIGI FIGINI (born in 1903) and GINO POLLINI (1903–1991) and the *Olivetti works*. It so happened that the two talented young architects' plans for a villa-studio presented at the Vth. Triennale in Milan, (1933) and a number of other smaller works of theirs caught the attention of ADRIANO OLIVETTI (1901–1960), the owner of the office machine factories named after him — or to be specific, after his father, CAMILLO — a broad minded, dynamic Maecenas of modern Italian architecture and industrial design, and thus their long lasting collaboration proved to be beneficial for the world-famous Company as well as for modern Italian architecture. From 1934 to the end of the 1950's, it was they who enlarged continuously the establishments in Ivrea, and especially in the *factory units* built between 1947–1949, they demonstrated their ability to solve at a high level both the functional and aesthetic requirements of modern industrial building. However, their activity in Ivrea was not limited strictly to factory building. It was part of Olivetti's business policy to provide its workers and employers with as many facilities as possible, such as housing and up-to-date recreation centers. FIGINI and POLLINI built entire *residential districts* in Ivrea (1936–37, 1940). This is where their *kindergarten* (1939–1941) built on a

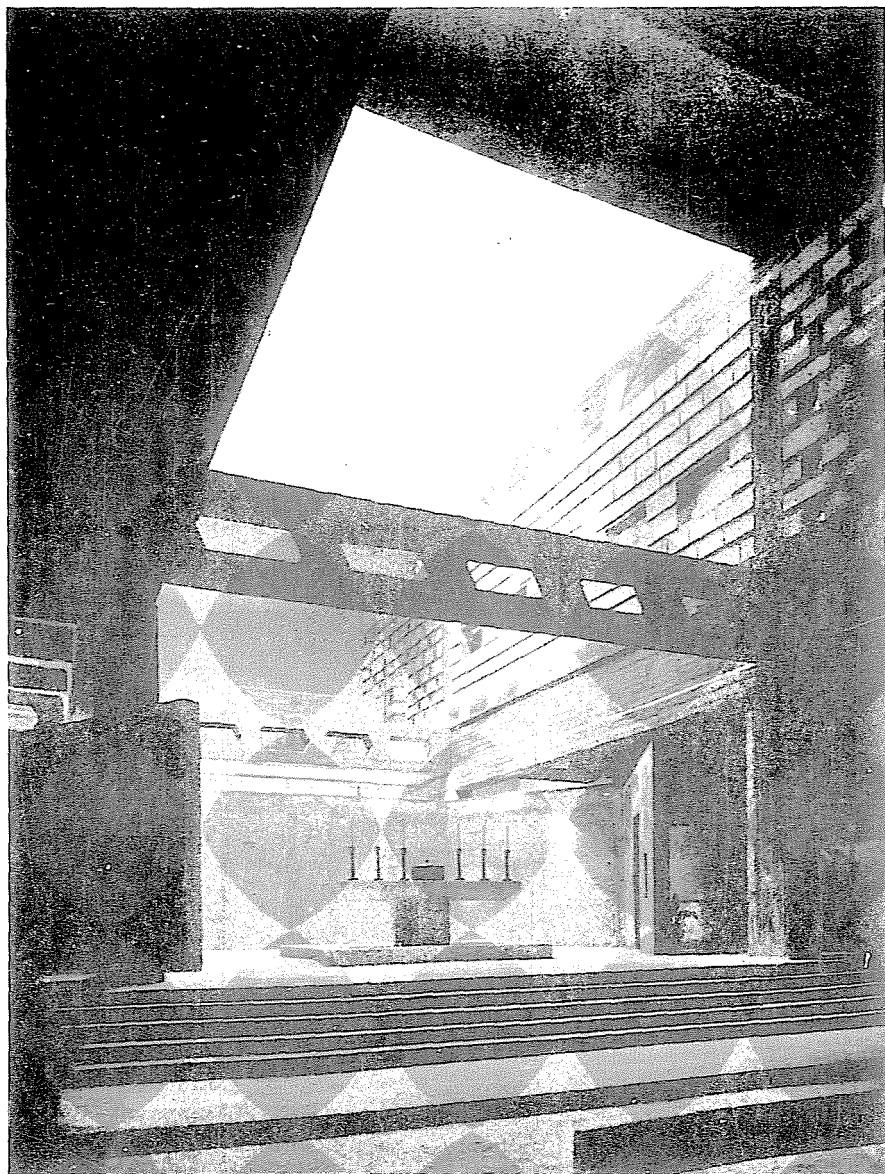


Fig. 7. FIGINI and POLLINI: 'Madonna dei Poveri' (Our Lady of the Poor) Church, Milan (1952-54)

little hill is a masterpiece of perfect integration into the landscape, and also their *recreation centers* constructed for the workers have become integral parts of the town. Nevertheless, FIGINI and POLLINI never did monopolize



Fig. 8. GIOVANNI MICHELUCCI: *San Giovanni Battista Church* at the cross-roads Autostrada del Sole and Autostrada del Mare, Bisenzio, near Firenze, 1962.

the Olivetti Works' building projects, just as OLIVETTI did not monopolize the talent of the two architects.

This is how FIGINI and POLLINI, led by their deep religious convictions, were among the first to take part in the revival of ecclesiology architecture. Their '*Madonna dei Poveri*' (Our Lady of the Poor) Church

in Milan (1952–1954), with its structural purity, with the sincere and objective handling and presenting of the applied materials (mostly reinforced concrete and marble), with the nobly simple elaboration of internal space — not with the aid of formal elements — suggesting an early Christian simplicity and atmosphere, is an epoch-making achievement in the renewal of church architecture. (Fig. 7) The multicolouredness and richness of this process is marked by GIOVANNI MICHELUCCI's *San Giovanni Battista Church* (1962) built barely ten years later, along the Autostrada del Sole, near Florence. (Fig. 8). The tent-like building, beckoning the weary traveller to rest and respite for the body and for the soul, is a masterpiece of the successful use of all the sculptural possibilities of reinforced concrete.

In the course of this account — alluding to one or another work of great importance — we have already mentioned in some way or other the work of, among others, PIER LUIGI NERVI, RICCARDO MORANDI, GIOVANNI MICHELUCCI, ANNIBALE VITELOZZI, ADALBERTO LIBERA, GIUSEPPE SAMONA, MARIO RIDOLFI, LUIGI PICCINATO, LODOVICO QUARONI, LUIGI FIGINI and GINO POLLINI. Without pretending to be comprehensive let us complete this enumeration with LUIGI COSENZA's (born in 1905) *Olivetti industrial complex* (Fig. 9.) in Pozzuoli, near Naples (1955), GIO PONTI's (1891–1979) and his collaborators' *Pirelli skyscraper* in Milan (1961), the BBPR STUDIO's *Torre Velasca Tower building*, (1956–1958) at the same city, used as an office and residential building, FRANCO ALBINI's (1905–1977) *Rinascenza Department Store* in Rome, IGNAZIO GARDELLA's (born in 1905) *residential building* (Fig. 10) integrated into the historic surroundings of the Zattere in Venice (1957), and with CARLO SCARPA's (1906–1978) *Olivetti store* also in Venice (1959).

The list is of course not complete at all, but yet it is probably adequate to demonstrate how many important, and often innovative artists came to force after the Second World War, who had begun their careers in the mid 1930's. (Fig. 11) During the period of the reconstruction and then of economic upswing it was their activity, with the more and more significant collaboration of a new generation, that helped unfold that particular architecture, rich in themes and language and with divergent tendencies, in which the recent, art-historically-oriented criticism discerns an *organic*, a *neorealist*, a *neoliberty*, a *neorationalist* and a *postmodern* phase, and the *Roman*, *Florentine*, *Lombard*, 'schools'-tendencies. Without delving deep into the complexities of this topic we can state confidently that the better half of Italy's architecture of yesterday and of today (I am not mentioning deliberately the drawbacks), worthy of a matchless national heritage, enriches with its best works of art the values of universal architecture and of all mankind.

Quod erat demonstrandum.

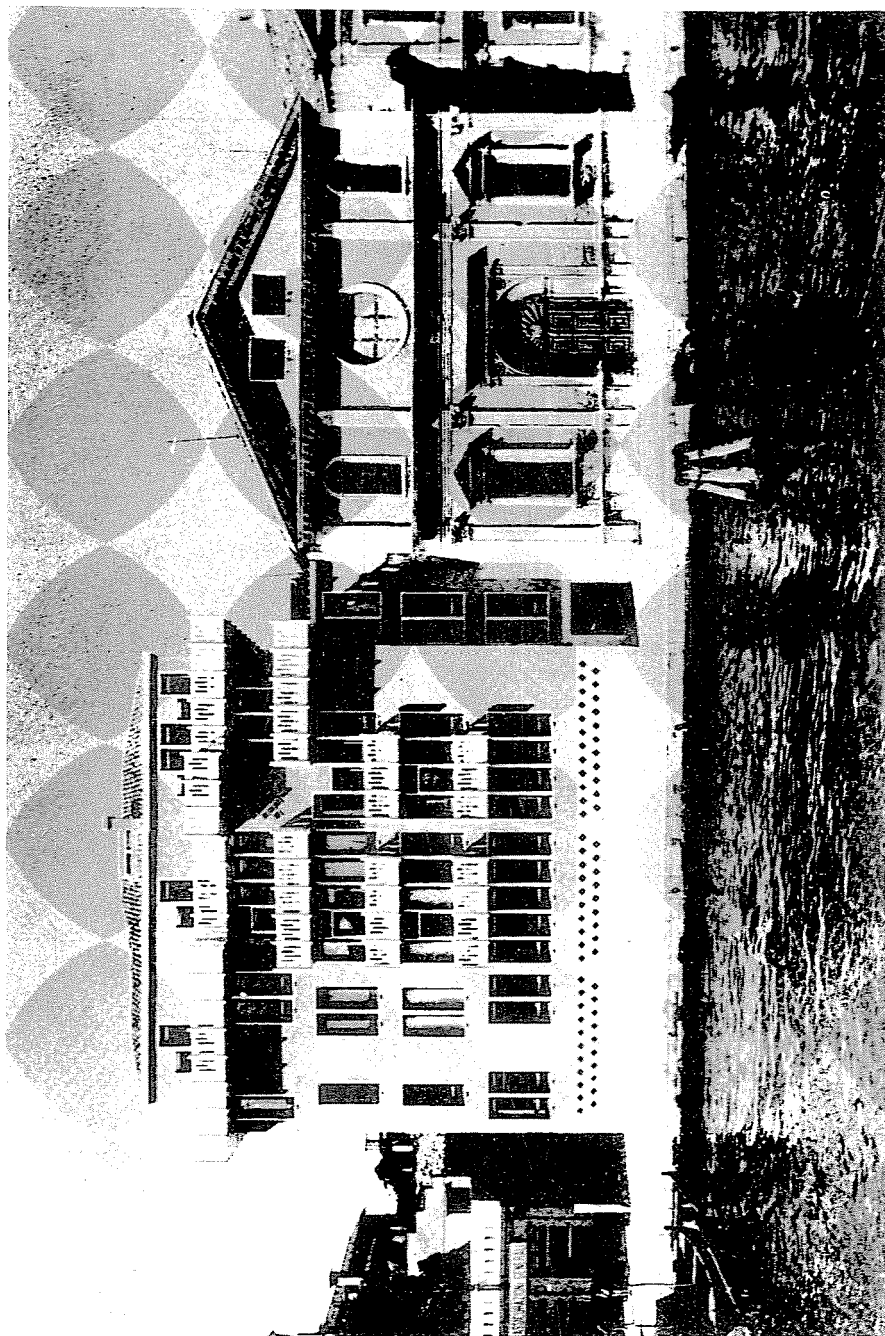
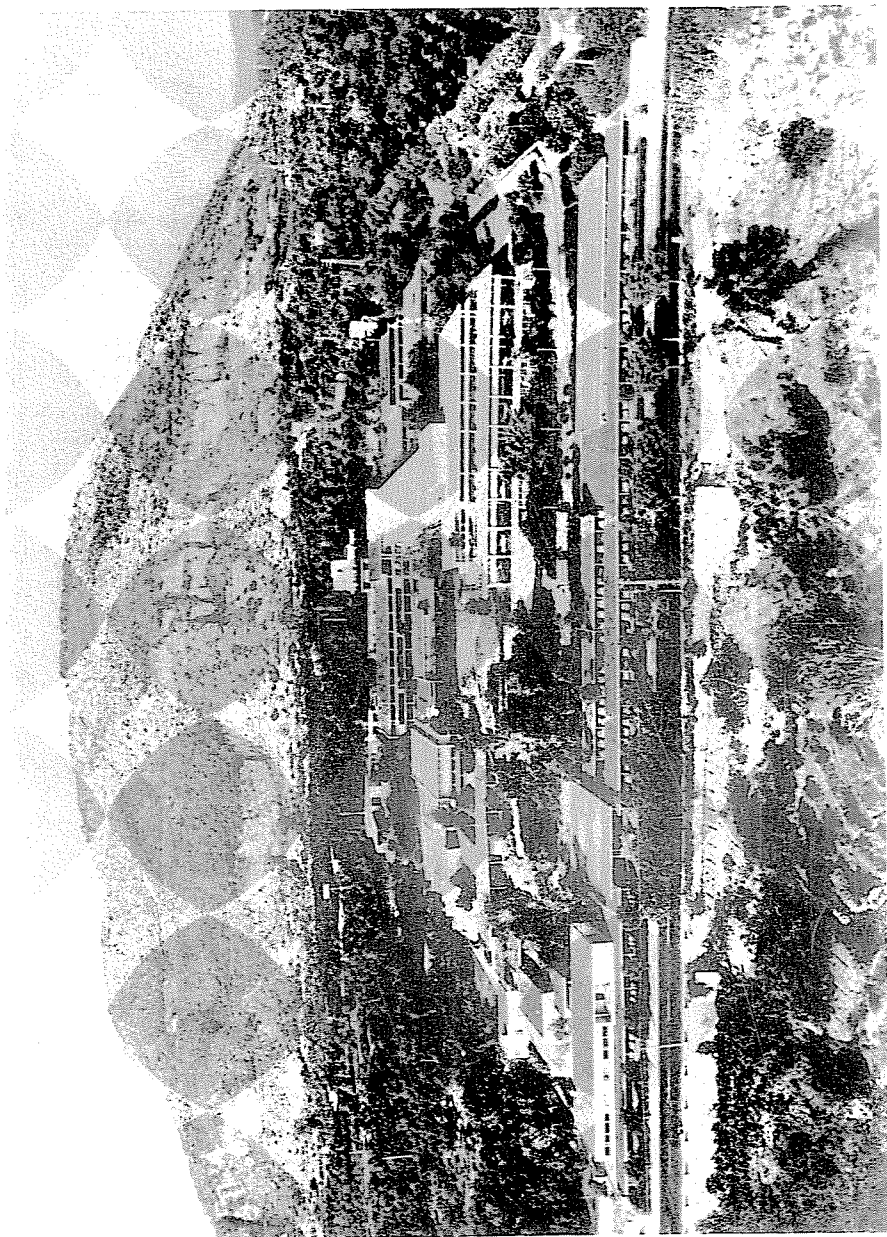


Fig. 9. IGNAZIO GARDELLA: residential building integrated into the historic surroundings of the Zattere in Venice 1957.





*Fig. 10. LUIGI COSENZA: Olivetti industrial complex, Pozzuoli, near Naples, 1955.*



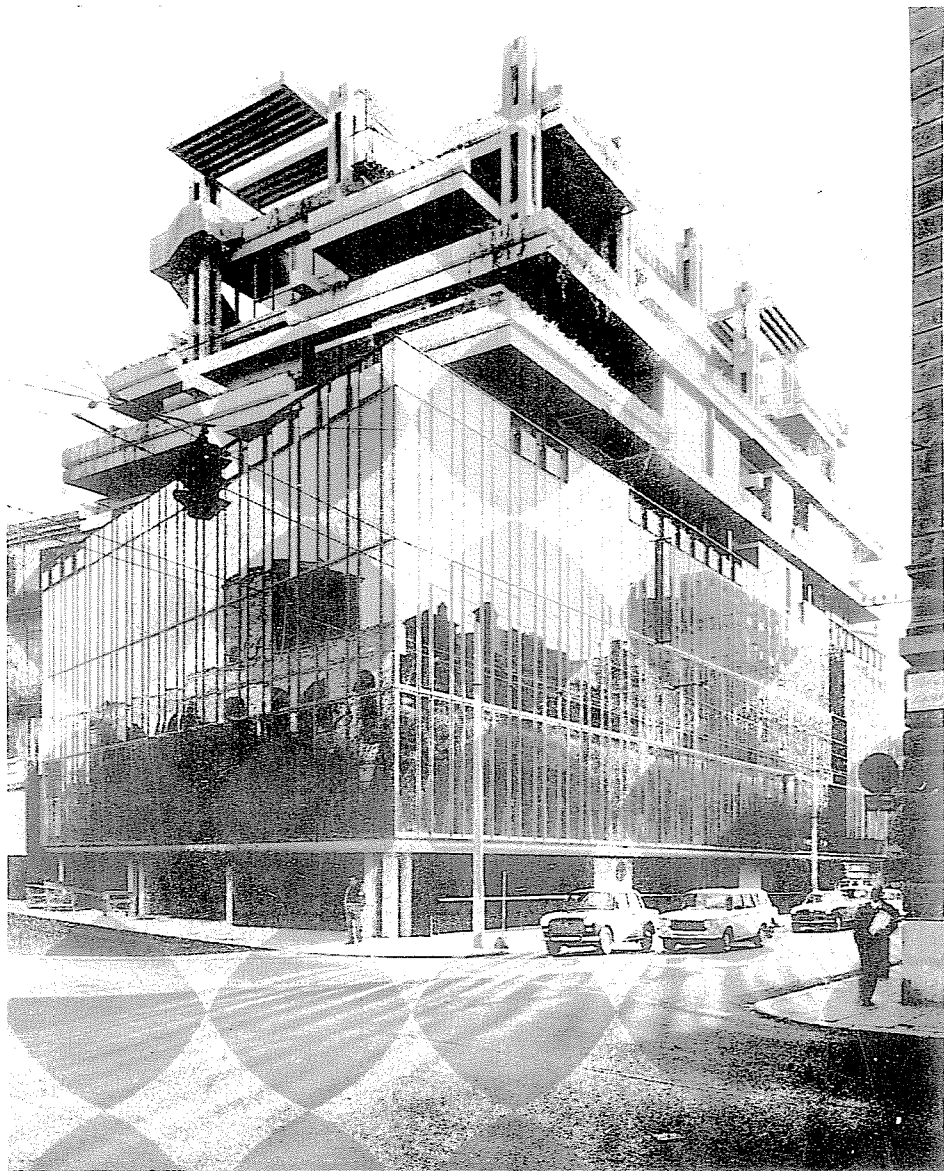


Fig. 11. VINCENZO, FAUSTO and LUCIO PASSARELLI: *polyfunctional building*, Via Campania, Rome, 1964.

## Notes

1. Florence Cathedral and its new Facade, *The Builder*, 18th August 1883, pp. 230–231.
2. Op.cit., p. 231.
3. cf. PEROGALLI, C.: Storia dell'architettura, Görlich ed., Milan, 1964, Vol. II, pp. 883–884.
4. cf. MURATORI, G.: Che rivincita per Piacentini, *Il Messaggero*, 4th December 1991, p.18.

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