

Public Buildings of 1920-1940s in Rome: Restoration, Reconstruction, and Contemporary Use

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ABSTRACT

By now, in Rome, public buildings realized in the 1920-1940s, according to Italian heritage legislation, are becoming protected monuments and require conservation and restoration. The implementation of that, however, leads to a number of problems of very diverse nature; be both technical, social and cultural. This paper describes the basic features of protection and restoration of interwar heritage and analyses how they have been assessed and used both by the professional community and the general public.

Keywords: 20th century architecture restoration, Modern architecture in Italy, 20th century heritage, Conservation, Rome.

1. INTRODUCTION

Looking at the history of Rome's contemporary urban development, it is evident that the interwar period of the XX century was hugely important for the growth of the city [1], [2]. Comparing the first approved masterplan of the Italian capital of 1883

("Figure 1") and the masterplan of 1931 ("Figure 2"), it is easy to notice the extremely rapid growth (more than six times) of the urbanized area. The interventions, provided for by the 1931 masterplan, involved not only the city periphery but also the historical centre, including archaeological areas and single monuments [3].



Figure 1 Rome City Masterplan, 1883. Archivio Capitolino Cart. XIII, 119, Rome.

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Figure 2 Rome City Masterplan, 1931. Archivio Capitolino, Stagr. 680 (10), Rome.

This fact is an important peculiarity in Rome's history: the transformations that had taken place in other European historical capitals since the early Industrial revolution, including in London and Paris, only happened in Rome in the late XIX Century. Moreover, these changes were very slowly implemented. The city periphery and new modern districts in Rome were created only in the late 1800s. It was not until the 1930s that the city growth achieved considerable scope; partly because of population increase and but also because growth was pushed through for ideological reasons by the Fascist regime established by Benito Mussolini after he obtained power in 1922. The buildings and districts constructed during the Fascist 'Ventennio' (ital. – '20 years') from 1922 till 1943, are numerous and easily distinguishable because their very specific architectural language – between Roman building tradition and modernity. Today, the historical value of these buildings has been recognised, however, the process of recognition is compromised by a controversial ideological background which makes us define them as 'difficult heritage', using a term introduced by Sh. Macdonald in 2007 [4]. With his terminology, Macdonald gave heritage studies [5] and in particular the history and conservation of the 20th century architecture, a new perspective¹. This paper attempts to analyse the most resonant examples

1. E.g. the conference "A Difficult Heritage: The Afterlife of Fascist-Era Architecture, Monuments, and Works of Art in Italy", 11–12 March 2019, Bibliotheca Hertziana, American Academy in Rome, organized by C.Belmonte

of restoration and re-use of Rome interwar architectural monuments and reveal the main tools of Italian legislation and conservatory practices.

2. ITALIAN HERITAGE LEGISLATION: THE PRESUMPTION OF HISTORICAL AND ARTISTIC VALUE

Italian heritage legislation in general is strong, moreover, in Rome it is further strengthened by the UNESCO world heritage status assigned to the entire historic city centre in 1980. In fact, by now, the early XX c. heritage is 'preventively' protected by law. The main Italian heritage legislation document, the *Codice dei beni culturali e Paesaggio* (2004) – The Codex of cultural heritage and landscape, [6] recognises the presumption of historical interest of all objects, including real estate, created more than 70 years ago (art. 11. 1. D). In practice, that means that at the present moment, any action taken with a building constructed before 1950, needs a permission from a special local office within the Ministry of Culture in Rome, the *Soprintendenza speciale per archeologia, belle arti e paesaggio*, or the Special Authority for Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape. This office is obliged to verify the artistic and historic value of the building and, if this value is confirmed, include the building in the general catalogue of cultural values and send its owner a notification of this. The owner then needs to coordinate any action taken with his property with the *Soprintendenza*,

which approves restoration projects and provides the owner with a guideline on how to carry out such projects and how to ensure its proper conservation condition.

Thanks to this law it is possible to protect buildings that are still not recognised as heritage and avoid damage to buildings owned by private persons who might be unaware of their potential historical or artistic value.

Nevertheless, this law is not always applied to buildings constructed in the 'border' period, especially residential housing. For example, following the Italian government's 2014 initiative to support the reconstruction of residential buildings to increase living areas, 'Piano Casa', some historical low-story buildings realised between 1920 and 1940s were destroyed or dramatically modified. After numerous protests from foundations for heritage (e.g. "Italia Nostra") and the community, the authorities started to pay more attention to the historical value not only of monumental public buildings of the interwar period, but also to the private residential estate [7].

3. AREA VS MONUMENT.

'The presumption of historical and artistic value', however, is not the only tool available for heritage protection. The primary instrument for the safeguard of the territory is the landscape plan [8], elaborated

by regional authorities. In the case of Rome, that means the *Regione Lazio*, or Lazio Regional Administration, and it is the principles of the landscape plan than determine the masterplan of the city. The Department of Urban Planning of the *Comune di Roma*, the Rome City Administration, is in turn responsible for the elaboration and realisation of the city masterplan.

In the beginning of the 2000s, the Rome City Administration made the 'the presumption of historical and artistic value' principle valid also for the new city masterplan. Started in 2003, this masterplan is currently in force with subsequent amendments, the most recent made in 2016. In 2008, a special supplement to the masterplan introduced the concept of a 'historical city', that replaced the more common perception of a 'historical centre' and included urban areas with a presumption of cultural interest (over 70 years old) in the protection zone ("Figure 3"). While the previous documents recognised the historical and artistic value of the 'city centre', defined traditionally and administratively as within the Aurelian Walls (III century), the new document included large areas outside the historical nucleus, such as residential districts dating from the interwar period and even an area that was never realised, the World Fair E-42, designed in 1937 in southern Rome.

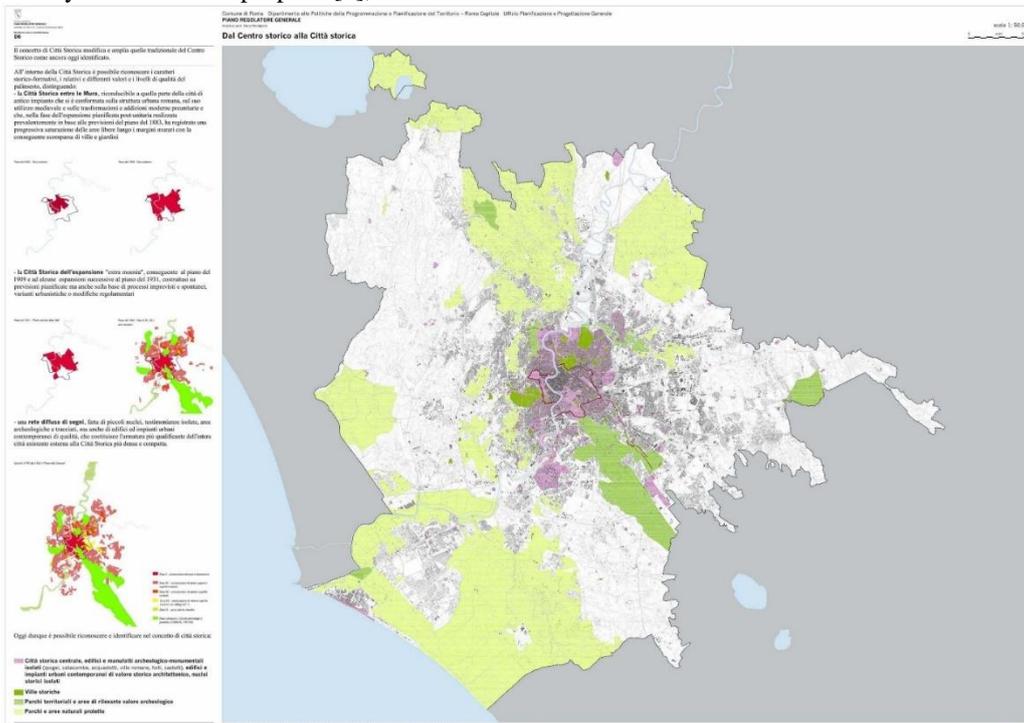


Figure 3 Rome City Masterplan. Part D6 "From Historic Center to Historic City" 1:50 000. Rome City Administration, Urban Planning Department.

This decision, together with the landscape legislation, means that buildings have a kind of double protection: even if the *Soprintendenza* does not recognise the historical and artistic value of a building, it is nevertheless covered by the normative established in the masterplan. Before undertaking any construction work on the building, it is necessary to have the permission and the project approval of the City administration, which will base their decision on the regulations in the masterplan, in order to respect the historical character of the buildings and environment in the district. To help owners, architects and developers to carry out projects that respect the masterplan, the *Comune di Roma* created a *Carta della qualità* ('Quality map'), that serves as a guide to the application of the master plan requirements. All objects located on the map contain information about the construction time and other qualities necessary to understand their value. The mechanisms for applying the provisions of the Quality Map are interpreted in the Quality Manual for Construction Activities [9]. For example, when planning work on a building, the architect in charge determines the location of the building on the master plan map. If it is located in the protected area of the master plan, he must send a request to the *Soprintendenza*. If the status of the artistic value is confirmed, then the architect must have the project approved by the *Soprintendenza*. If it is not, the architect must still follow the instructions in the *Carta della qualità* and have the project approved by the Department of Urban Planning of the Rome City Administration. If a building from the interwar period which is not recognised as having artistic value, is located in the protected zone of the masterplan, on a site that is defined as 'an area with uniform regular development', the architect should respect the original project and where that is not possible, the character of the area, and coordinate the project with the City authorities. Even the colour of the facade requires a special approval.

4. EXAMPLES: RESTAURATION AND RE-USE CASES

4.1 *Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana*

Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana – the 'Palace of the Italian Civilization' ("Figure 4"), which the locals call the 'Square Colosseum', is an iconic building built in 1937 and a landmark project of the Mussolini regime with an architecture emblematic of the 1930s the building was designed by E. La Padula, G. Guerrini and M. Romano for the World Fair of 1942, the 'E42' – a fair that was never actually held [10]. The project

was stopped by WWII and by the fall of the regime, but after the war the area of the Fair became a playing ground for contemporary architecture. The buildings that had been started on in the 1930s, were completed and inserted in the new urban scenery of Rome in the era of so-called economic boom, and housed headquarters of big companies as well as luxury residences. In 2008, the district now called 'EUR' was included in the city masterplan as a part of 'historical centre'.

In spite of its monumental and expressive character, *Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana* has never found a permanent use. Owned by the Administration of EUR-district, which has a special autonomous status, until 2015, the building did not have a permanent function and was periodically used for temporary exhibitions. In 2013, the city authorities started the restoration of the building for it to become the Central Institute of Sound and Video Heritage as well the permanent exhibition location of 'Made in Italy' [11]. However, in 2015, the luxury fashion brand Fendi, rented the building with the intention of relocation their headquarters and exclusive workshop there. At Fendi's expense, the restoration of 'Square Colosseum' was completed and the spaces on the ground floor (inside the monumental staircase) that had not been finished in the 1950s, were refurbished (architect M. Costanzi). The new design of interiors included an office space, a space for fashion shows and sample storage, a conference room, and an exclusive Karl Lagerfeld workshop and archive on the top floor. From 2015 to 2018, the building also had an exhibition space on the ground floor where projects dedicated to the artistic collection of the Fendi Foundation, as well as Fendi's work for art and cinema, were displayed. After the exhibition space was closed, the building, even though it remains public property, is not accessible to visitors. Summarising, the private tenant saved the building from degradation, but the building does not play any role in the public life of the city, something it was originally intended to.



Figure 4 E. La Padula, G. Guerrini and M. Romano. Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana. 1937 ' 1952. Rome. Photo by the Author.

4.2 Mausoleum of di Augustus

It might seem odd to include the restoration and new museum design of the Mausoleum of Augustus – one of the biggest monuments of Ancient Rome, built in 27 B.C. – on the list of building with a 'difficult heritage'.

The ruins of the Mausoleum have been put to different uses during its long history. The last was as a concert hall, opened in the early 1900s. Under the fascist regime, however, the Mausoleum ruins obtained special role in the regime propaganda. In the late 1920s, within the framework of Benito Mussolini's intentions for the reconstruction of Rome, it was decided to demolish the concert hall and excavate an ancient Roman monument. The restoration of the Augustus tomb was timed to celebrate the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Emperor in 1937, and was an even with enormous propagandistic value, given the contemporary context – in particular colonial campaigns intended to 'revive the Empire' [12]. The museumification project entailed the demolition of the adjacent historical quarter dating from the XV-XIX centuries and the construction of a new monumental square. The Ara Pacis ('Altar of Peace'), created in the era of Emperor Augustus, new fragments of which were discovered in those years following specially conducted

excavations [13], was placed next to the Mausoleum. The landscaping plan, the temporary pavilion for the Ara Pacis and the new buildings around the square were designed by Vittorio Balio Morpurgo in 'Littorio style', typical of the architecture of the Mussolini regime of late 1930s. The schedule to complete the works before the exhibition was very tight and the ensemble was only completed after World War II. The temporary museumification project of the late 1930s was not replaced by a new one for several decades.

The project of the new museum design of Mausoleum of August of the 1930s, was in fact never fully implemented. The temporary pavilion of the *Ara Pacis* remained in place until the 1990s. In 1995, Richard Meyer designed a new museum building which was completed in 2006 [9]. The Ara Pacis Museum, despite the controversy around its 'too modern' architecture, immediately became very popular among both Romans and tourists.

During the Ara Pacis Museum construction, the *Comune di Roma* launched, in 2001-2003, a project for the restoration and museification of the mausoleum of Augustus.

Since the interior decoration of the mausoleum has not survived, the museum exposition project was a difficult task. Unlike a similar structure, Hadrian's

Mausoleum - Castel Sant'Angelo, a former papal residence with a rich interior decor and many historical artifacts, the mausoleum of Augustus was an empty ruin. Back in the 1930s, after the excavation of the building, various projects were proposed for its use (as a museum, as an art gallery, as a monument to fallen of wars, etc.). In 2005, the city administration carried out the restoration of the monument in accordance with the ordinary procedure for such works, including the use of specialists from the *Sovrintendenza Capitolina per i Beni Culturali*, The Office for Heritage Policy of the City Administration, while and international competition was launched for the for the new museum project.

Among the requirements of the competition there were:

- To take into account not only the nature of the ancient monument, but also all stages of its history, including the restoration of the 1930s.
- To re-qualify the architectural context of the building, rationalise approaches, accentuate the connection with the Pantheon, as it was during Antiquity, as well as restore the connection with the city of the Baroque era
- To re-qualify the public space, to include the monument in the system of public spaces of the district. The architect had to actively

interact with the *Sovrintendenza Capitolina per i Beni Culturali* during the detailed design of the project and the subsequent implementation of the work.

The international competition was organised between 2005 and 2006 and won by architect Francesco Cellini [14]. In 2007, the monument was closed to prepare it for the restoration, improvement and a new museum exposition project in accordance with modern requirements.

With respect to the restoration of the monument, which carried out by a special department of the *Sovrintendenza Capitolina per i Beni Culturali*, a conservative approach was taken in order to preserve not only the original building, but also the subsequent layers including the interventions of 1930s. Work was carried out to clear and strengthen the building, ensure the moisture resistance of surfaces, restore the decor of the floors and strengthen the stairs. The interior spaces are now open to the public. The key concept Francesco Cellini's project ("Figure 5"), on the other side, was to restore the connection between the monument and the city. A square was being created in front of the entrance (for which the cultural layer was removed to the archaeological level), an exit to the embankment was be arranged, an overview of the monument was be opened, and new spaces for the museum's infrastructure were be created.



Figure 5 Francesco Cellini. Mausoleum of Augustus area design. 2007 – 2018. Rome.

The financial expenses for the restoration of the monument itself were borne by the city administration, while the Ministry of Culture and the Rome City Administration financed the work on the implementation of the architectural project of the museum exposition and the reconstruction of the square. Finally, the project of museumification using

multimedia technologies was carried out at the expense of the TIM Mobile Communications Company Foundation. The work was completed in March 2021. The implementation of the project became the key to the complete re-qualification of Piazza Augusto Imperatore, located in the central and prestigious area of the city (next to Piazza di Spagna,

Piazza del Popolo, Academy of Arts), but rarely included in tourist routes. Currently, at the initiative of Bulgari, a luxury jewellery brand, work is underway to reconstruct the adjacent architectural ensemble of the late 1930s, which the company plans to use for offices and a boutique hotel.

At the moment it is difficult to evaluate the impact of both the design projects on the Mausoleum area as well as those of the refurbishment of this district of the city, because the works are still in progress. It is striking, however, that, as in the case of the *Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana*, there is a trend to entrust 'difficult heritage' restoration works to large and internationally renowned fashion houses, that probably are useful in terms of 'peeling' away the negative aspects of these monuments' unflattering past.

4.3 Palazzo Merulana

The Palazzo Merulana, opened in 2018, now is one of the most vivid and popular private museums in Rome. The building, constructed in 1929 as a 'Hygiene Office', was abandoned till 2014, when the works for the restoration started.

Palazzo Merulana is located on one of the key streets of the city, the homonymous Via Merulana. The street was realized in the end of the XVI century as part of the urban planning project for the reconstruction of the city of Pope Sixtus V, carried out by Domenico Fontana. The street connects two of the oldest churches in Rome; Santa Maria Maggiore and San Giovanni in Laterano, both of which are outstanding architectural monuments. The *Via Merulana* was mainly constructed in the XIX century and the area is currently home to a large number of residents. The building which today houses the Palazzo Merulana, was built in the late 1920s as part of the urban infrastructure development program in the neoclassical style characteristic of Roman architecture at the time. During the Second World War, the building was badly damaged during the bombing. After the war, it was abandoned in a ruined state while a new polyclinic office was erected nearby. In 2000, the renovation and restoration of the building was included in a three-year public works project of the Rome City Administration, implemented with the involvement of private investors.

In 2003, a contract was signed for the work with the construction company *Società Appalti Costruzioni*, whose head, Claudio Cerasi, is a renowned collector of Italian paintings of the 1920s-

1940s. Under the terms of the agreement, the investor received the building for management of the building on account of the restoration and reconstruction of its destroyed parts [15]. Another condition was the maintenance of the public access to the building and the creation of socially useful function. Thus, the project for the restoration included the creation of spaces for the collection of the established Elena and Claudio Cerasi Foundation, as well as premises for temporary exhibitions and conferences. The bureaucratic process of commissioning the work to *Società Appalti Costruzioni* took about 10 years, during which the city administration changed several times the actual restoration and reconstruction of Palazzo Merulana, directed by the architect Adriano Draghini, took only three years (from September 2014 to September 2017). Although the building is not recognized as cultural heritage, it is protected under the requirements of the masterplan as part of Rome's historical centre – a UNESCO cultural heritage site, as well as a site protected under the landscape legislation, according to the normative established by the same masterplan. In addition, there are documented archaeological sites on the territory of the building that are protected by Italian law. The quality map of the masterplan defines the area of Via Merulana as 'development according to a single project with a geometrically regular layout'. The regulations restrict preservation of the character of the area, as well as the maximum preservation of the facade and the internal layout of the building but permit to changes that are invisible from the street, such as the construction of a terrace. Therefore, the facade of the building was restored according to the original project with the maximum use of the preserved elements – walls, columns, decorative elements, discovered on the site ("Figure 6"). The layout of the main rooms was retained, and a conference space and a terrace for special receptions were added in the attic floor. The investor, the contractor and the further tenant of the building is the *Società Appalti Costruzioni*, owned by the Cerasi family, who also owns the collection for which the renovation was planned.



Figure 6 Palazzo Merulana – Former Hygiene Office, 1929, restoration 2014 – 2017. Rome. Photo by *Società Appalti Costruzioni*.

The *Società Appalti Costruzioni* is one of the oldest construction companies in Rome. The implementation of this socially important project has had a positive effect on the company's image. The creation and maintenance of a publicly accessible cultural project gave the family tax breaks and made the rental of premises for the owner's private collection possible. The collection of 20th C. art of the Elena and Claudio Cerasi Foundation (90 paintings and sculptures, including works by Giorgio De Chirico and Antonietta Raphael) is located on two floors in the building. On the ground floor, there is a space for a bookstore and a café, which is also used for presentations. The maintenance costs of the building should be partly covered by the rental of conference rooms and a terrace for private events, admission fees and special paid programs.

The project is one of the first major examples of the implementation of the concept of 'sustainable cultural development': the building was restored, not rebuilt, i.e. resources have been saved and the negative impact on the environment has been reduced, the cultural function has a beneficial effect on society and indirectly stimulates the economy of the district and the city as a whole. The cultural cluster of Palazzo Merulana immediately became very popular among the residents of the city and became an important centre for cultural events, and

also had a positive impact on the area of town where it is located. It hosts temporary exhibitions, presentations of books, initiatives of the Rome City Administration in urban improvement, in the summer, it hosts a summer camp for children focusing on the history of the city's cultural heritage of the city. During its first year of operation, Palazzo Merulana was visited by 53,184 people [16].

5. THE ISSUE OF 'DIFFICULT HERITAGE'

The examples from Rome seem to be a part of the international trend of restoration and valorisation of the legacy of the interwar years, which in a number of countries, including Italy, is also faced with problems defined as 'difficult heritage'. The buildings of the 1920s-1940s, especially those in state and public ownership, were implemented in accordance with the programs of the Fascist regime; today, their restoration causes polemics of ideological nature, affecting the process and methodology of restoration on local [17] and on international level [18]. For example, the re-use of the *Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana* as the headquarters of the Fendi brand, was a great success to begin with, as the image of the building was present on the website of the Fendi foundation, the exhibition space of the foundation

located on the ground floor was open to visitors free of charge. However, after a while, the exhibition space was closed and the building's image was also removed from the website, partly because of the criticism in the media related to the ideological image of the building.

In the last 10 years we can, however, notice, a strong interest towards 20th C. architecture in general and to the interwar heritage in particular. Several of exhibitions of art and architecture held in the 2010s all over Italy and internationally, directed the attention to the heritage of that period. Individual buildings and ensembles constructed in Rome between 1920 and 1940, have also become object of specific guided tours and heritage days. Since 2015 even *ABI* – the Italian Banking Association, included in the program of their successive initiative *Invito a Palazzo* ('Invitation to the Palace'), dedicated to the divulgation of architectural wealth of Italian banks, among them the BNL headquarters in via Veneto in Rome, realized in 1936 by Cesare Pascoletti Marcello Piacentini – 'Mussolini's architect'.

6. CONCLUSION

Summarising, we can distinguish following main features of the conservation of interwar architecture in Rome:

- Buildings from the period between 1920 and 1940 are conserved thanks to the 'presumption of cultural value', established by Italian law for heritage older than 70 years.
- The restauration respects the construction history of the monument, including its original materials
- An important point is the re-use of the building, which should also be seen also in light of the principle of sustainable development

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Anna Vyazemtseva. The author's contribution consists in the choice, analysing and comparing of cases, as well as the pointing of 'difficult heritage', which is usually avoided by the architects and developers.

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