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The Italian urban landscape tradition.
Sapienza University Campus and the shape of the green

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Abstract: *Between 1932 and 1935, Marcello Piacentini (1881-1960) was in charge of coordinating the project of the new University Campus of Rome. The modern Studium Urbis would have grouped the colleges located in the city center, creating dedicated buildings, and reducing together people's pressure on historical neighborhoods. Such an opportunity affected the design, suggesting the architect imagine an autonomous citadel inspired by American and European successful experiments: particularly, the campus of Madrid and the University of Virginia. Each building was entrusted to a professional. Piacentini managed the construction of the Rectorate, assigning the surrounding faculties and the access propylaea to his trusted studio collaborators to guarantee uniformity. In addition, Piacentini developed Sapienza's master plan by referring to the Renaissance tradition, proposing a rigorous layout dominated by voids and greenery. He adopted a basilica plan, proportioning the transversal axis using the width of Piazza Navona as a model, and manipulated the orography to align the monumental university gate with the ground floor of the Rectorate. Finally, he took advantage of the expressive properties of the perspective methods, using both the trees and traditional visual devices to generate a controlled, linear, and monumental urban space.*

Keywords: *Rome, Sapienza, Marcello Piacentini, cultural landscape, garden design*

The construction of the Sapienza University campus in Rome represented one of the most difficult Italian architectural projects carried out during the first half of the twentieth century. Apart from the political reasons that prompted the Fascist regime to support the foundation of the campus, the huge building site represented a formidable challenge. The chief architect Marcello Piacentini (1881-1960) coordinated professionals and workers. He also planned an organic urban environment, en-

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hancing the singular design activity and preserving the monumentality as well. This was an ambitious goal that was pursued through both carefully mediating the various project drawings with the designers and thoroughly preparing the general masterplan, to whose definition contributed Piacentini's personal experience as a designer, the local urban fabric of Rome, the Italian perspective tradition, and the attentive selection of the arboreal essences to be planted[3].

The city-making mechanics involved in the project

The plan for the new *Studium Urbis* provoked mixed reactions when it was presented in 1933 (*fig.* 1). Ugo Ojetti (1871-1946) opened a debate on the pages of the newspaper "La Tribuna", blaming the chief architect for removing the «arches and columns» from the general elaboration to give way to anonymous compositional methods descending from the European contemporary trends[4]. He was in stark contrast with Piacentini for the support he previously offered to the proposal for the Florentine train station of Santa Maria Novella presented by the young architect Giovanni Michelucci (1891-1990) in association with some other exponents of the so-called rationalist "Tuscan Group"[5]. Particularly, Piacentini's hypothesis of a «centrist progressive party»[6] opened to rationalist fashions could be neither beneficial nor healthy. According to Ojetti's opinion, the tradition was «the starting point, not the arrival one; it is a laboratory of experiments, not a dormitory»[7].

On the other hand, the renewed columnist Renato Pacini had immediately grasped the political essence and the effects of Piacentini's cultural initiative, cautioning the detractors of the project of the university campus. The intellectual claimed that «the most serious mistake committed by some too hasty critics» consisted of considering the faculty buildings independently and not together. According to his experience, the campus had to be examined as a modern «monumen-

3. Azzaro 2020.
4. Muntoni 2010, p. 100. Cfr. *Gli archi, le colonne e la modernità di oggi, risposta a Ugo Ojetti per la polemica su Le Colonne e gli archi*, «La Tribuna» (2 February 1933), in Mitrano 2008, p. 53.
5. Lupano 1991, p. 79. Cfr. Ojetti 1933, p. 257.
6. Danesi 1976, p. 21.
7. R. Papini, "Architettura razionale", *La Rivista Illustrata del Popolo d'Italia* (4 April 1928), in Cennamo 1973, p. 198.

tal quarter because the architects' efforts aimed precisely to create this typology of urban complex, so that the idea of isolating a building from the whole project would be the same as isolating a wing from a building, and considering it independently from the design of the whole building»[8].

Indeed, the reporter exactly understood the intentions of the three-dimensional model presented. Eschewing any complexity for its own sake, Piacentini promoted a severe composition and the establishment of fixed parameters as basic guidelines: two win-win design cornerstones. Using elementary geometric components and pursuing an expressive program of reduced decorativeness, he could reduce time and costs for the proper completion of the project. However, this solution allowed to obtain an impression of majestic assertiveness through insistent research on a monumental scale. In addition, by establishing common compositional criteria, which were shared with the other designers involved, a homogeneous development was ensured regardless of the individual personalities. Accepting common formal characteristics, such as the adoption of a similar size for all the windows or the use of travertine and local yellowish bricks to embellish the façades, the masterplan created an underlying kinship between the buildings, irrelevant for the observers but useful to convey a uniform feeling of unity. The idea had been suggested to the architect by the historic districts of Rome, where the architectural products of different historical periods perfectly fit together thanks to both a common architectural vocabulary and syntax.

In his introduction to the special issue dedicated to the inauguration of the campus (1935)[9], Piacentini proudly stated that «the architecture of the University City of Rome, in its absolute simplicity, does not renounce any postulate of modernity, but its general conception has always been conceived in a classic Mediterranean climate». Having said that, he peremptorily affirmed that the appearance of each building had been intended to be appropriate to the specific function performed: «all the buildings had been harmonized to be part of the general complex», while each building expressed autonomously its «aesthetic and functional reason through the distribution of the mass-

8. Pacini 1933, p. 4756.
9. Piacentini 1935.

es and the sincere application of the external materials: even the color of all the buildings had been plastered in the typical brown-red of Rome, with slight variations due to the diverse qualities of the bricks or the travertine»[10].

This concordance was not the only arrangement pursued by Piacentini. The mere careful selection of materials and geometric combination of the elements were insufficient to achieve the solid image of an effective national university campus requested by the promoters. The Fascist government intended to give a strong Roman look to the campus, suitable for political reasons. It was appropriate to lay down deeper ties, which could guarantee a strong cohesion inside the new *Studium Urbis*, providing however a clear connection to Rome's traditional image. This link could not be based just on the rhetoric of classical language since – as Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) declared – the Duce was in favor «of modern architecture, which is the architecture of our time», considering absurd any aversion to the rational and functional architecture[11]. It was, therefore, necessary to find a balance between the architectural style grown after the unification of Italy – that is, the Eclecticism that the esteemed architect Pio Piacentini (1846-1928) exceptionally taught to his son Marcello – and the renewal movements of the Thirties, which embodied for Renato Pacini «what is now the sentiment not only of the majority of Italian architects, but also of the public, of that public in which the lovers of traditionalism believed they would find the most faithful allies, and which instead proves to be anything but then in favor of the anti-modernism flatteries»[12].

Such mediation was not an easy architectural task, but it could be possible by recognizing the common origins of both fashions, namely what Piacentini called the «classic Mediterranean climate». Paraphrasing the words of Joseph Hoffman (1870-1956), in 1921 Piacentini already stated that the Austrian architect found out «in the mighty buildings of our Renaissance the eternal beauty of a smooth wall, [and] the sufficiency of a simple stringcourse of real stone to underline the division of two floors»[13]. The root of the modernity of the «Latin spirit» was

10. *Ibidem*, p. 6.
11. Sapienza Historical Archive (ASUR), C.E.R.U.R., b. 2, n. 27: *Per l'architettura del nostro tempo: Sabaudia e la nuova Stazione di Firenze. Resoconto di una udienza con S.E. il Capo del Governo*. [Report on the construction of Sabaudia and the new train station of Florence].
12. Pacini 1933, p. 178.
13. Piacentini 1921, p. 50.

there. Piacentini had already figured it out, and in fact, he would repeat in 1941: «No Romanticism, no Baroque. Classicism in spirit, very modern in construction»[14].

In this sense, the severe aggregation represented the main characteristic of this common cultural root. Consequently, it appears to be possible to develop a proportional rule on which to arrange the architectural framework of the campus. Inspired by what was produced in Rome during its thousand-year history and taking advantage of the possibility of testing live the effects of certain spatial relationships, the project leader assumed the width of Piazza Navona as a reference for designing the transversal axis of the campus layout[15], stretching the longitudinal axis to reproduce the traditional Latin cross plan (*fig.* 2). As a result, the empty space assumed the same value of the filled one, establishing a successful harmonic combinatorial rule, in which the general design fitted the singular projects improving the expressive qualities according to the Renaissance *modus operandi* suggested by the humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) and largely appreciated by Piacentini[16].

Such a contrived design has been recently pointed out by Franco Purini, who discovered specific altimetric relationships in the layout of the University City of Rome, based on the Renaissance legacy. The most interesting is the monumental gate, which is marked by the propylaea entrusted to Arnaldo Foschini (1884-1968). The gate was located at the same height as the floor level of the entrance of the Rectorate[17]. Not surprisingly, this building was designed by Piacentini, who oversaw the two lateral wings. Committed to his trusted collaborators Gaetano Rapisardi (1893-1988) and Foschini, these faculty buildings configured a graduated connection between the main building of the campus and the others, offering a controlled vision to the visitors who descended the perpendicular main road in front of them.

To make it work correctly, however, such a design also required a deep knowledge and control of the perspective, that Piacentini learned again from the tradition. First of all, he refined his masterplan by giving a clear hierarchy to the heights of the buildings, as confirmed by the expected prominence of the Rectorate which was later disregarded lowering the Bib-

14. Piacentini 1941, p. 265.
15. Melograni 2008, p. 106.
16. Baratelli 2020, p. 70.
17. Purini 2012, p. 247.

liotheca Alexandrina (*fig*. 3). Secondly, the architect planned an independent urban system concerning the new nearby neighborhoods, to give to the campus a proper architectural identity. According to this general intention, Piacentini encouraged the adoption of refined quotations from the most representative Renaissance monuments of Rome, as certified by the drawings representing a loggia flanked by stairs that were similar to that one ideated by Michelangelo (1475-1564) over the Capitoline Hill[18] (*fig*. 4).

Nevertheless, Piacentini's decision to tighten the layout of the campus could be interpreted as a step backward in the cultural debate on the urban development of Rome, since he rejected the open scheme previously prompted by Gustavo Giovannoni (1873-1947)[19]. Extrapolating from the Renaissance lesson the image of a rational and functional urban space, whose quality did not rely on the ornaments but was the result of the complex volumetric combination of buildings and paths[20], Piacentini attempted to achieve a regular symmetry that would dignify the campus, providing magnificence to create an autonomous center leading the contemporary Rome, separated from the consolidated fabric but close to it. As Giorgio Ciucci sharply highlighted, it was the same desired objective that Piacentini indicated in his *pamphlet* published in 1916[21], but with different design purposes[22]. After all, as the architect claimed in 1944, the «most subtle and singular characteristic that presides [...] over the composition of the Italian cities' squares, especially those of Rome, is this: the variety and individualities set on an orderly and symmetrical base. It is essentially a smart way of using this order and, above all, this blessed symmetry, which is the substantial core of our classical mentality»[23].

The role of vegetation

As well as the regularity of the planimetry promoted a respectable official image of the new University City of Rome, and the geometric purity of the buildings globally conveyed an idea of power, also the

18. Regni-Sennato 1984, p. 18.
19. Di Marco 2016, p. 307.
20. Portoghesi 2012, p. 149.
21. Piacentini 1916.
22. Ciucci 2012, p. 225.
23. Piacentini 1944, p. 40.

reasoned placement of trees contributed to this celebratory purpose. The famous critic and designer Agnoldomenico Pica (1907-1990) explained in an article published in the magazine "Casabella" in 1936 that a good well-arranged "city of studies" needed a large green open space between the buildings. Such an arrangement could mitigate students' condition of isolation, favoring the creation of meaningful relationships with the outside urban contest[24].

An anonymous plan on a scale of 1:500, currently kept in the deposit of the Historical Archive of the University of Rome 'Sapienza', attested to the complementary role played by greenery, providing a precise indication of the typologies and their location (*fig.* 5). The trees to be purchased were carefully thought, according to precise figurative intentions. The distance and the distribution, that emerges by observing the representation, confirm this interest. It seems that the unknown designer – probably an employee of the technical office whose activity was under Piacentini's supervision – tried to achieve a well-balanced mix of Mediterranean plants, highlighting the perspective along the main axes and enriching picturesque views whenever possible. The avenue in front of the Rectorate should have alternated pines (*Pinus pinea*) and holm oaks (*Quercus ilex*), as proposed in earlier times for the archaeological walk of the Imperial Fora[25], while minor routes would have been flanked by rows of oleanders (*Nerium oleander*) and medium shrubs, such as the Acacia Baileyana.

In the south head of the 'transept', the School of Mathematics designed by Gio Ponti (1891-1979) should have been framed by two rows of holm oaks, and flanked by limes and Japanese lime trees. This is the effective current situation, partially replicated on the opposite side, where the Institute for Mineralogy and Geology entrusted to Giovanni Michelucci doesn't profit from the perspective, showing at the center of the façade a compact masonry covered with travertine. The gates lined up with driveways, where cedars of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*), pines, and oleanders would liven up the neighboring areas. Behind the Rectorate, in correspondence with the lawn located in front of the Aula Magna, the edges of the walkways would have been marked by pine trees. Instead, two rows of American elms (*Ulmus americana*) would

24. Baratelli 2019, p. 139.
25. De Vico Fallani 2017, p. 22.

have enhanced on both sides the faculty of Botanic commissioned to Giuseppe Capponi (1893-1936) and Michelucci's building designed to host Environmental Physiology. Lastly, as the legend of the drawing explained, the image of the campus would have been enriched by magnolias (*Magnolia grandiflora*), Himalayan cedars (*Cedrus deodara*), oaks (*Quercus rubra*), eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus globulus*), chestnut of India (*Aesculus Hippocastanum*), laurel trees (*Laurus nobilis*), hornbeam and white cedars (*Carpinus betulus, Thuja occidentalis*)[26].

As revealed by the photos published to celebrate the inauguration of the *Studium Urbis* in the rest of the peninsula and abroad, the hypothesis of a well-thought-out organization of green areas represented in the project changed during the execution, including other tree species like palm trees and less bulky flower essences (*figs*. 6-7). However, the layout shown by this historical plan dated back to January 13, 1934, remains an extraordinary proof of the impressive natural variety that was foreseen from the very beginning of the construction of the campus, according to the most important and modern American and European campuses, characterized by a strong landscape component.

However, the ornamental character must have been the main concern of Marcello Piacentini and his collaborators. This can be seen from the request that the architect submitted on January 16, 1934, to the presidency of the Consortium for the Construction of the Royal University of Rome, urging the board to immediately approve the relative tender to «plant the tall trees during the period February-March, obtaining large and impressive trees in time for the opening ceremony»[27].

It is evident from reading the "Special tender specifications - Gardening works". The document pointed out both the economic aspects of the purchase and sale procedure and the services demanded from the contractor. It was also stated the quality of the trees to be planted, which would have been «exclusively of the type with immediate effect and, for the central areas, with immediate and great effect». In addition, it was explained that the main trees would have been surrounded by rose bushes, myrtles, jasmines, and hedges[28].

26. ASUR, C.E.R.U.R., b. 8, n. 72: Anonymous, *Planimetria del Parco* (13 January 1934).
27. *Ibidem*: letter sent by Marcello Piacentini to the president of the Consortium for the construction of the Royal University of Rome (16 January 1934).
28. *Ibidem*: *Capitolato Speciale di appalto – Opere di giardinaggio* [Special Tender Specifications].

The care with which the selection of the trees was carried out also emerges from some historical photos stored in the Sapienza archive (*fig*. 8). This collection of pictures was assembled during the decision-making phase, after visiting *de visu* the nurseries which applied to the public tendering procedure opened at the beginning of 1933. As is evident from a report titled *Revisione dell'offerta dell'appalto delle opere di giardinaggio* (i.e., "Review of the gardening works' tender") a delegation visited in Pistoia the two main contractors gathered from the public consultation. The document – signed by Piacentini and dated March 12, 1934 – explains that the companies of «Mr. Martino Bianchi» and «Capecchi & sons» both offered guarantees in terms of reliability and training. Both nurseries might have completed the work quickly, having at their disposal a large number of plants, which were enough to achieve the project goals. Consequently, considering the construction site delays determined by the laying of the foundations[29], the chief architect believed that the best solution was to split the contract into two different commissions, maximizing the execution speed: «Capecchi & sons – observed Piacentini – made a slightly better economic offer, but it is difficult to evaluate small price differences. Mr. Bianchi, instead, can supply more effective plants, if required». Thus, it was convenient «to arrange a different distribution of work, entrusting to the Capecchi the area between Viale della Regina and the central square, while Bianchi would intervene in the area bordered by the central square and Viale del Policlinico, according to the approved planimetry. In this way, there would be a fair distribution of the duties with the possibility of adorning the large avenue with the best plants. The solution also offers some advantages, stimulating the emulation between these two very important companies and allowing Sapienza administration to complete the works even if one of the two contractors was to leave the construction site, for any reason»[30].

In front of his son Massimiliano, Torello Capecchi signed the contract on May 30, 1934. Martino Bianchi did the same on June 19. The works should have been finished before March 31, 1935, since the campus had to be inaugurated twenty days later.

29. Ciranna 2017, p. 151.
30. ASUR, C.E.R.U.R., b. 43, n. 347: *Revisione dell'offerta dell'appalto delle opere di giardinaggio* (12 March 1934), pp. 8-9 [Garden tender revision].

By carefully balancing costs and benefits, Piacentini ensured the excellent result that is still partially visible today. Placed in competition, the two companies opted for the best species of trees they had to make a good impression on the Fascist officials, while the presence of both companies ensured a rapid completion of the work despite the technological setbacks and political uncertainties that affected the construction of the majority of the buildings. For example, the Institute of Botany became a source of disputes between Elia Federici's construction firm and the technical office of the consortium at the end of 1933[31].

However, the long lead times had a positive impact on the decisions originally taken. Compared to the rigidity of the «park plan» approved by the management, the old photos suggested a widespread complementary function of the greenery, which only in certain circumstances was forced to satisfy purely technical tasks. The rows of holm oaks along the transversal axis were effectively planted at a very short distance to facilitate the rapid development of a dense and compact canopy, useful for reinforcing the optical telescope converging on the entrance to the School of Mathematics: a situation that has remained unchanged until today. On the other hand, a deliberate exoticism characterized the lawn behind the Rectorate, where the palms (*Phoenix canariensis*) became, since then, prevalent. The concept, therefore, was reduced to a clear interpretation of the dignity of the vegetation, which was called upon to face the buildings' pure shapes, actively improving their architectural public facades. According to the analyses provided by Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928), which were very popular and highly regarded in those years by urban planners, Piacentini imagined making the «greenery collaborating with in general design, to form – as he will postulate in 1953 – an attractive and silent framework»[32]. The only exception was the experimental botanical garden, whose opulence quickly emerged. Of the more than eighty tree species present within the campus, about fifty percent found a place there, for a total of 734 individuals that made (and still make) this space one of the lushest areas of the University City of Sapienza[33].

31. ASUR, C.E.R.U.R., b. 13 n. 121: *Relazione sui lavori eseguiti dall'Impresa Federici Elia per la costruzione di alcuni fabbricati nella Città Universitaria redatta dal dott. Ing. Salvatore Farinetti* (31 December 1933) [Report on the works carried out by the Federici Elia and his company].
32. Piacentini 1953, p. 53.
33. Gratani *et alii* 2017, p. 16.

Conclusions

The approach that Marcello Piacentini had with drawing the spaces that had to be used as green areas in the *Studium Urbis* put into practice what the architect proposed in 1916 when he published a pamphlet about the future development of Rome. Thinking about the global effects of the transformation of the old papal *Urbe* into a modern capital city, Piacentini intended to establish a ring made of the parks that survived the real estate speculation, converting this 'green' system into an architectural component of contemporary Rome.

This natural path would have included the historic noble villas outside the Aurelian walls and part of the landscape of the so-called *Agro Romano* (Roman countryside)[34]. After returning from a trip to the United States[35], at that time the architect advanced the suggestion of a symbiotic relationship between man and Nature, following the example of the South Park in Chicago but without forgetting the tradition as a reference. One of the goals of his proposal would have been the inclusion into the network of the ancient Roman Fora archeological park[36]. Twenty years after those first evaluations, Piacentini elaborated a more conscious program. Punctuated by a series of autonomous "lungs", the inhabitants of Rome would have found relief from the metropolitan chaos in places specifically designated for peace and serenity: oases where people could have spent their time lazing or studying. The University City of Sapienza would have been one of these places and, as the columnist Renato Caniglia correctly quoted, «the tumult of metropolitan life will press in vain on the court of this "city"», since it was created «to keep off the noise of the streets, allowing to each Institute to carry out its activities without interfering with the others. The free space will therefore be arranged as roads, parks, and gardens, with wide driveways which, through secondary entrances, will lead onto the adjacent streets»[37].

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34. Turco 2017, p. 52.
35. Nicoloso 2018, p. 29.
36. Piacentini 1916, p. 26.
37. Canaglia 1934, p. 5.

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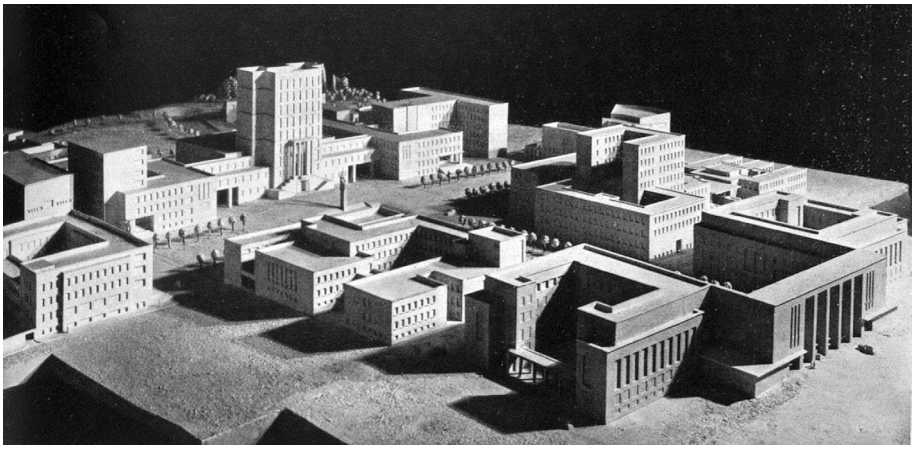

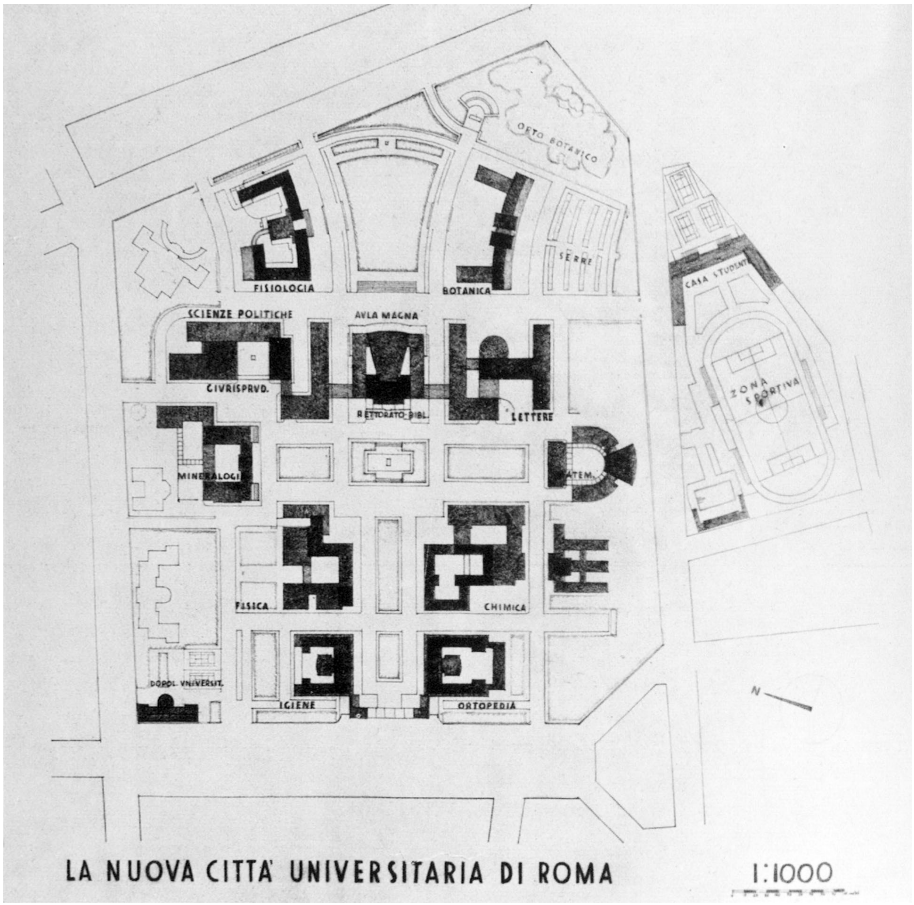
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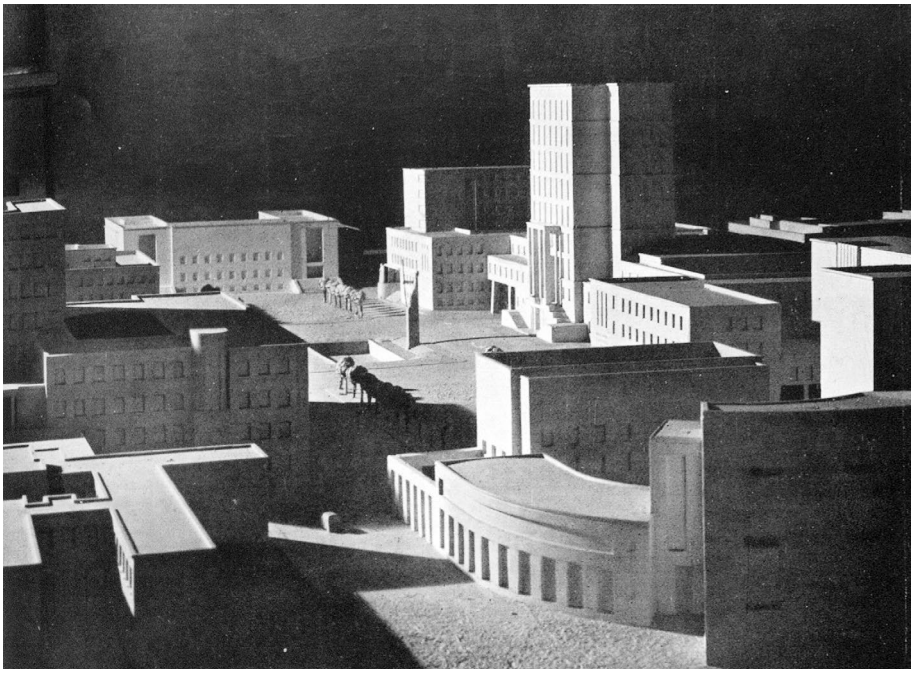

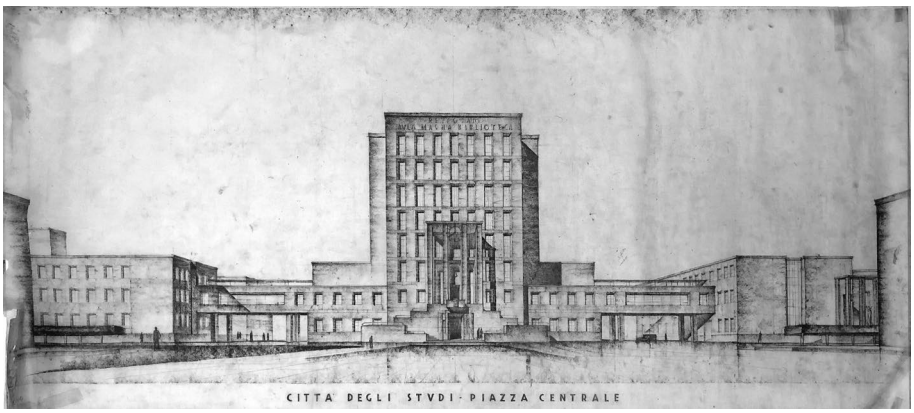

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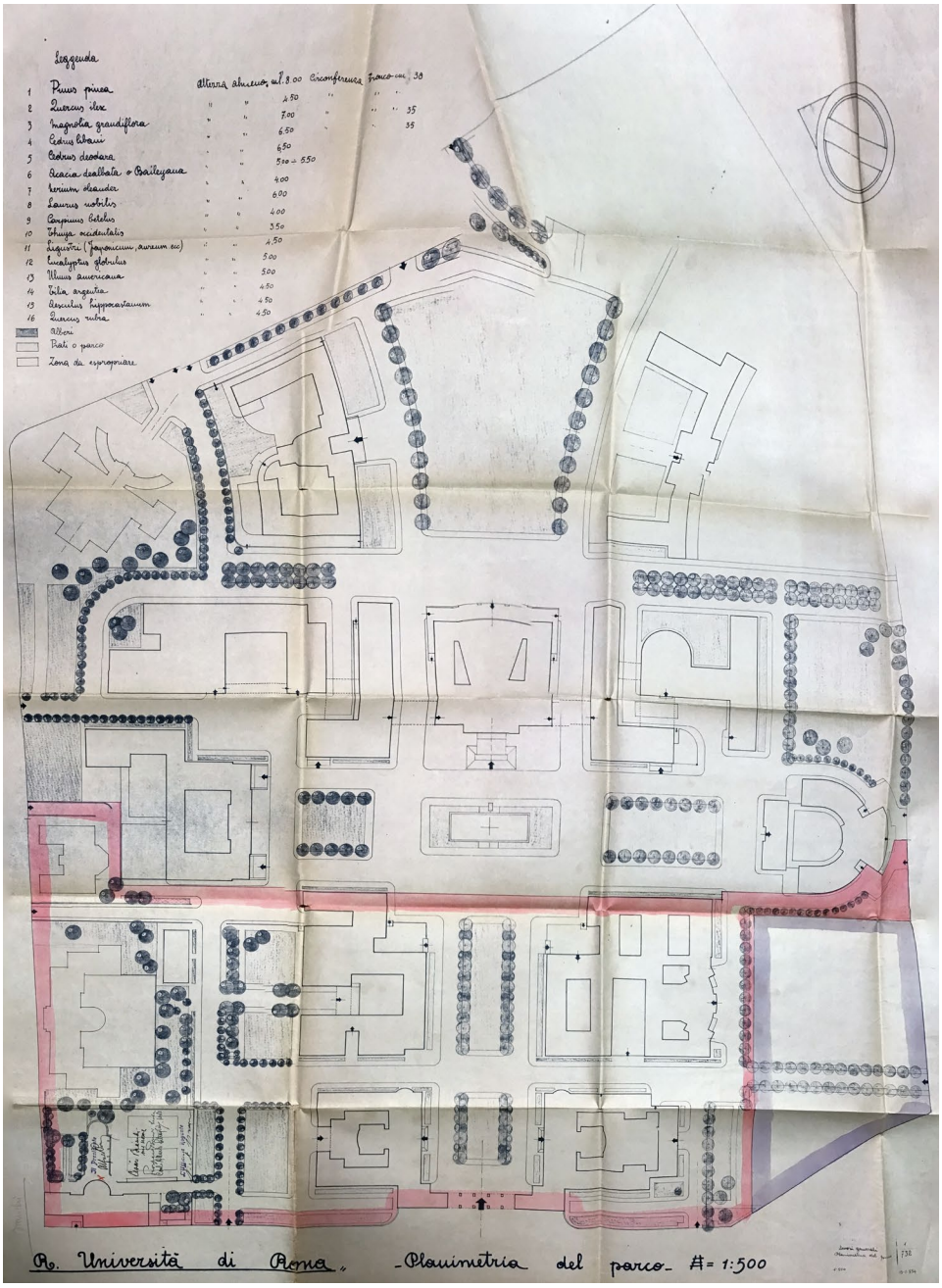

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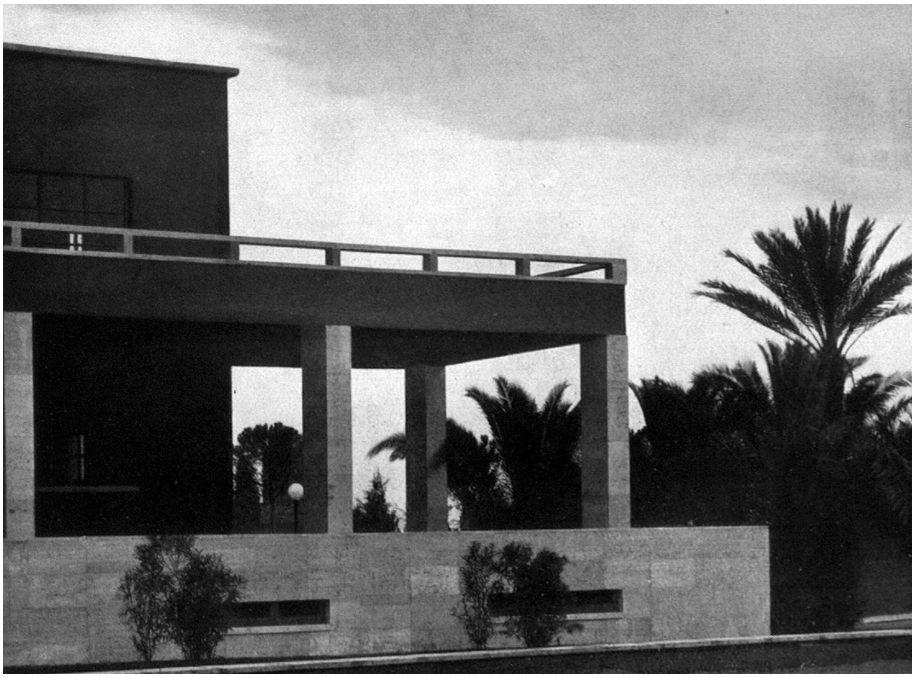

*Fig. 6 – Rome, The University city, historical photo, 1936 (*Architettura*, XV, special issue).*
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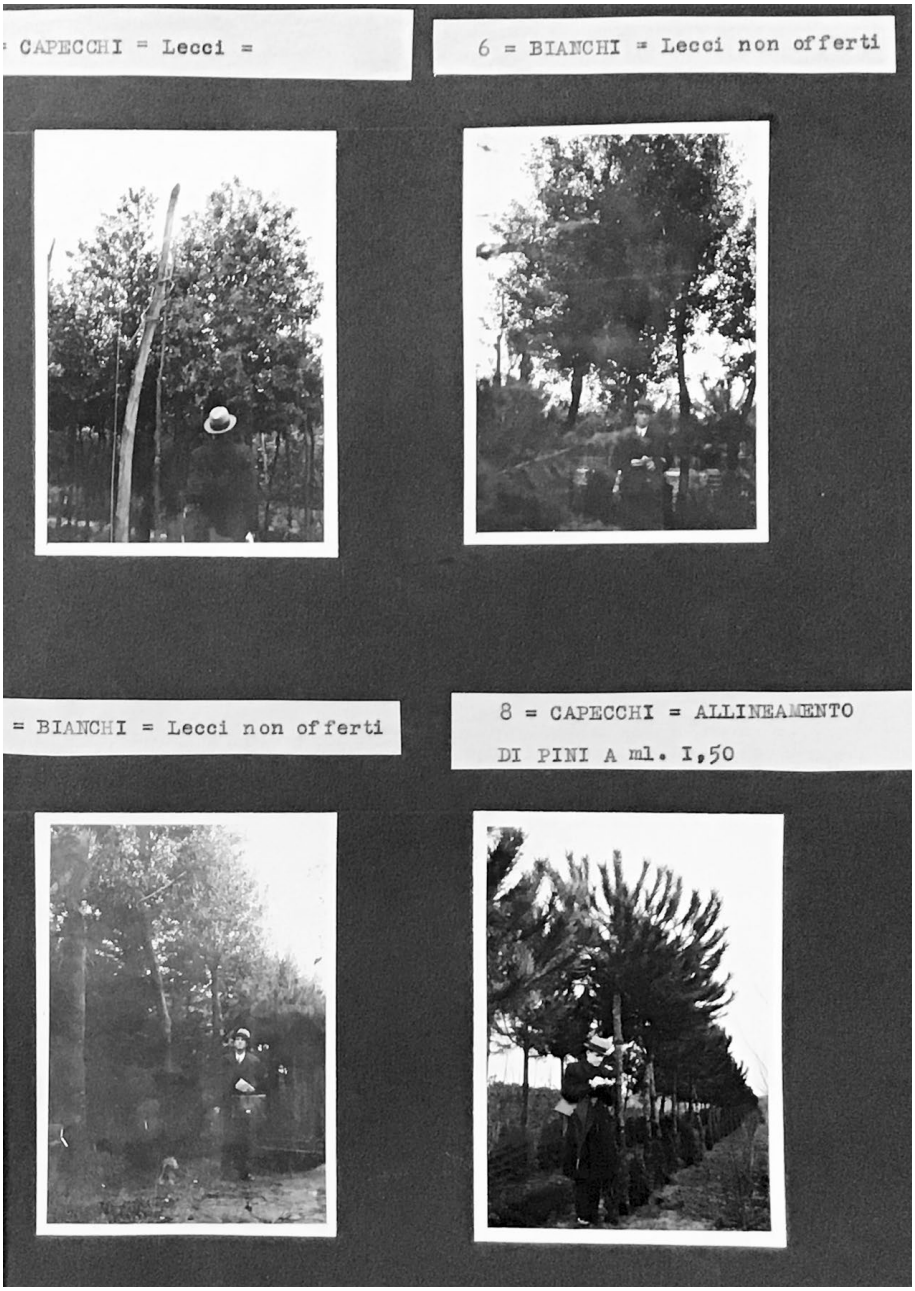

Fig. 8 – ASUR, C.E.R.U.R., b. 43, n. 347: Pistoia, Trees selected for the University City of Rome, 1934.