

The E42 Imperial Square and the Incessant Architectural Research of Ludovico Quaroni.

Classical in its largeness, Roman in its conception (Marcello Piacentini)

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Abstract: In 1938 the competition for the Imperial Square E42 signs the end the Scuola Romana's "Other Modernism" – an experimental period most sensitive to the values of the organic city. The design of the square, although eventually distorted by many compromises, became a cornerstone in the architectural research of Ludovico Quaroni. After the War, in spite of the ideological barrage of his opponents (particularly those within the School of Architecture) Quaroni continued his enquiry which eventually led him, forty years later, to conceive the extraordinary design of the Opera House in Rome.

Keywords: continuity, other modernism, urban organism, architectural order.

The incipit about the Rock of Orvieto with which Ludovico Quaroni opens *L'Architettura della città* – a book he wrote "in the printing press" in 1939 to receive his habilitation – not only demonstrates he was a writer of extraordinary verve, but also that he truly empathized with the intangible qualities of Lazio's landscapes. The same can be found later in the chapter titled "Porpora e oro" in the book *Immagine di Roma* that he wrote thirty years later. *L'Architettura della città* is an atlas with lengthy captions, in which LQ reveals that, when it came to urban design, he had a penchant for material architecture, robust and masonry-based, softened by pictorial Baroque illusionism. That same year, with fellow students Francesco Fariello and Saverio Muratori, he was wearily pulling forward the design project for the Imperial Square of the EUR in Rome, signing off yet another version, though aware of having been defeated by the persuasive charm of Marcello Piacentini,

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the cunningness and wisdom of Giuseppe Moretti. He felt the pressure of the contemporary cultural climate established by the bleak regime, which had enacted racial laws would shortly after collapse like a house of cards. His despair, I think, was also exacerbated by the acknowledgement that LQ and his two fellow students being so young, had missed the opportunity to create a monument in his hometown. Quaroni always had controversial feelings about this project, as if it were a child injured by a problematic delivery by forceps. He rarely and reluctantly spoke about it. The square – nowadays split in two by a major thoroughfare connecting Rome's city center to the seashore – with the two museums of Ancient and Modern Art at opposite sides, is the first important step in LQ's path, a never-ending research process, though interspersed with sprints, stops and drastic changes of direction, apparently void of consistency in the eyes of those who have been disregarding LQ's two natures of architect and teacher. At school he loved to sit around a table and chat amiably as if engaged in a banquet with his students and one of his assistants. He rarely reviewed design projects, but more than once, I remember, he suggested sketching on a piece of paper, a structural composition comprised of a several variants of a column without capital topped by a steel double-T beam. It was almost an obsession of his... As far as I know, none of the students ever took on his suggestion.

In 1937 the town plan for the E42, dominated by the influence and ideas of Marcello Piacentini, was determined: a monumental and rather rhetorical plan, rigidly based on the matrix of a Roman *castrum* with a wide *cardo* and several *decumani*. In opposition to the ideas of the German Modern Movement – very popular among young architects in Italy – that conceived the city as the combination of cells, Piacentini thought of the modern city as an organism, composed of unitary and architecturally accomplished parts. Similarly, when designing open spaces, in opposition to the concept of landscape as made of residual areas “to be filled in with something pretty”, he promoted a unitary concept of building and urban scales complemented by plantings. The plan was transmuted in several 3D models, according to the habit of the time and the methods of the principal designer. While the Western areas toward the artificial lake have a flexible layout, closer to the urban design of the Modern Movement, the central complex – composed of

a sequence of the square, acting as monumental entrance, the Imperial square and the Church of Foschini – were designed as a single organism. The cross-shaped plan, that has the Urban Imperial avenue (today via Cristoforo Colombo) and the monumental telescope connecting *Palazzo della Civiltà del Lavoro* with *Palazzo dei Congressi* as axes, create a hiatus between the two squares. Plain proportions between the volumes of the individual architectures hold this space together. The two side scenes – the Square and the Imperial Theatre – are already in their final architectural form. The chronicles on the time report that Piacentini was always present, persuasive and generous with advice (and sketches) throughout all the project's stages and the E42 Technical Office, under the orders of Piacentini and led by Gaetano Minnucci, responded efficiently.

The project presented by Fariello, Muratori and Quaroni, that won ex-aequo with G. Moretti, agrees fully with the vision of heroic scale imposed by Piacentini. The curtain of columns, three storeys high, repeated in four rows in the loggias of between the theater and the museums, represent a monumental scheme used in the Forum of Augustus, which was take for inspiration also for the exedra closing the opposite side. To get an idea of the impact of this continuous façade we must look at the propylaea of the same square as they exist today on the Northeast, that filters the monumental avenue leading to the *Museo della Romanità*. Actually, a single row of columns was not sufficiently imposing for such an immense square, measuring 300x130 mt and divided by a boulevard approximately 100 mt wide.² The four volumes of the museums, lacked depth at that stage, consisting of a double row of cells arranged in quintuple body, along a tree-lined courtyard. The high-speed road is buried 8 meters below the level of the square along the middle axis, irreparably compromising the unit. To overcome the large trench, Quaroni's group included two pedestrian bridges. The project by Moretti instead gave much emphasis to the great theater – memory of the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus – and indulged in quoting Bernini by making the wings of the museum slightly flared.

2. Difficult for people like Quaroni trained at the school of Giovannoni and believing in the organism and in the project as an architectural integrated process. He was not willing to give up the unity of the object divided into autonomous parts and independent of context – the antithesis of the architecture promoted by the so-called “starchitects”.

In the 1938 version, designed by the two groups together, the great trench disappears, the two sloping squares converging toward an obelisk in the center were filled with greenery, and staircases positioned at the corners negotiated the height difference. The architectural order in elevation appears decomposed into a stylobate, a portico with too-short square pillars surmounted by a double-height colonnaded loggia. This solution, inspired by the Temple of Castor and Pollux in the Roman Forum, not only transfers the public space to the upper loggia and separates it from the square below, but also squashes the porch, making it difficult to use.³ From this overburdened design benefitted the theater of Moretti, whose triple-height porch topped by an equally tall loggia remained unchanged until the final version of the project, published in the magazine *Architettura*.⁴ In a model created in between 1939 and the early months of 1940, a continuous base accessible by monumental staircases and decorated with statuary groups at the corners functions as stylobate for the museums. In this version, the monumentality of the museums, constructed in “autarchic-like” materials,⁵ is stressed by their protruding just over one meter in front of the porches and the twin columns at the corners – this feature will remain into the final design version. The nodality of the museums’ four entrances is underlined by twin columns at their sides – a solution eventually discarded. At that point the museums had developed in depth according to a floor plan reminiscent of the Italic *domus*, in which the *tablinum* becomes an open circular courtyard in the Museum of Ancient Art and a roofed exhibition hall lit from above in the Museum of Modern Art. The inscribed circular space, used frequently in the history of Italian architecture – from the Palace of Federico II in Lucera to the Palazzo Farnese in Caprarola –

3. Where Anthony Hopkins is seen hovering in a brief scene of the film *Titus* (1999) by Julie Taymor.

4. “L’Esposizione Universale di Roma” in *Architettura*, 1938, n. XVII, dicembre, numero speciale.

5. “Mixed building structures, built in traditional materials and techniques: masonry made entirely of solid bricks of the “zoccolo romano” type, with thickness up to 90 cm; opus caementicium-type walls on top of concrete foundations; reinforced tuff and conglomerate concrete employed only in the ceilings and the staircases. The floors (as shown in the calculations) are hollow-core concrete with longitudinal ribbing, made of L-shaped training walls, 3 cm hollow tiles and slabs measuring between 3 and 5 cm according to design”. From A. Greco and A. Del Fante in *Guida alle architetture romane di Ludovico Quaroni*, edited by GRECO and REMIDDI, Palombi, 2003. Fun fact: the group’s total compensation after the war amounted to the ludicrous sum of 16,000 lire.

was a feature regularly used by the group ever since their graduation.⁶ In the floor plans of both museums, a transversal axis marks the path connecting the vestibule to the Hall of Honor (*Sala d'Onore*): the layout of the rooms in the MAA follows a classic and syncopated sequence of a rectangular vestibule (geometrically constructed by two squares) and the square hall – its base being the module for the three figures – functioning as a cross-axis that leads to the great circular open court. The exhibition galleries, on the other hand, are arranged to follow an antinodal and circular path. In the MAM there is the same axial and stretched arrangement of the main halls, which follows the same axis of movement through a circular yet smaller room, to end up in the rear garden. There, the exhibition galleries are parallel to the main axis and are accessible through the vestibule. Both museums have a C-shaped plan, walls on three sides, and are three storeys high. On their sides are attached the porches open onto via Cristoforo Colombo aligned with piazza delle Nazioni Unite designed by Muzio, Paniconi and Pediconi, or L-shaped wings that connected to Moretti's theater and ended with a toothed edge to suggest their unfinished nature – as to anticipate the theme of the *continuum* that, starting from the second half of the 1970s, LQ will explore more deeply starting from the Piranesi's representation of archaeological structures in the Campus Martius. All these open-ended works and urban suggestions were eventually replaced after the war with banal office blocks with a layout often in disagreement with the surrounding street grid.⁷ Most unfortunate of all, the MAA was hereafter closed off by a plain building block on viale della Civiltà del Lavoro – where Federico Fellini will show a giant Anita Ekberg from hypertrophic breasts;⁸ the MAM by the barracks of the *Carabinieri*.

6. Shortly after graduating in 1934, they participated to the competition for the Auditorium in the 1935 *Passeggiata Archeologica* project. In this project, nearest to the poetic rationalist, the pure volumes of the portico, the vestibule, and the cylindrical room are in bare Bauhaus style. The later *Mostra della Bonifica Integrale* (Rome, 1938) recalls the Museum of Modern Art in proportions and sequence of spaces along the axes. Similarly, see the *Padiglione dell'alluminio* at the *Mostra Autarchica del Minerale Italiano* in the same year and the competition for the *Palazzo dei Congressi E42* where the theme of the recessed “transparent porch” appears for the first time.

7. See for example the completion of via Chopin, via Liszt, via Bizet, and via Tolstoy behind the square. The only happy exception is the building in Piazza Don Luigi Sturzo designed by Saverio Muratori for the *Democrazia Cristiana*.

8. See the episode “Mr. Antonio Night Temptations” in *Boccaccio '70* (1962), with Peppino de Filippo



Fig.1. E42 model of 1937. The architectural design of the volumes of the main buildings is predetermined.

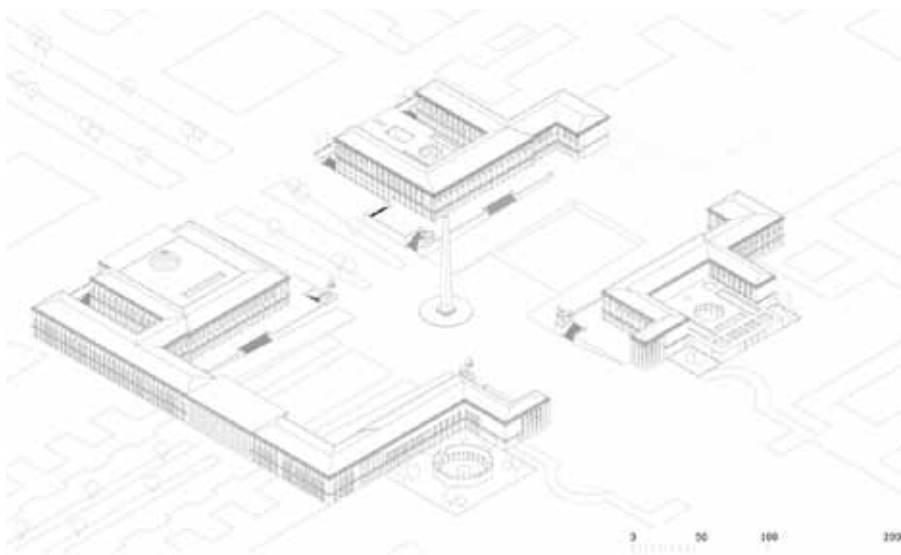


Fig.2. Isometric drawing of the Imperial square. 1939 version.



Fig.3. Portico of the basement of the Museum of Modern Art (photo Guido Petruccioli).

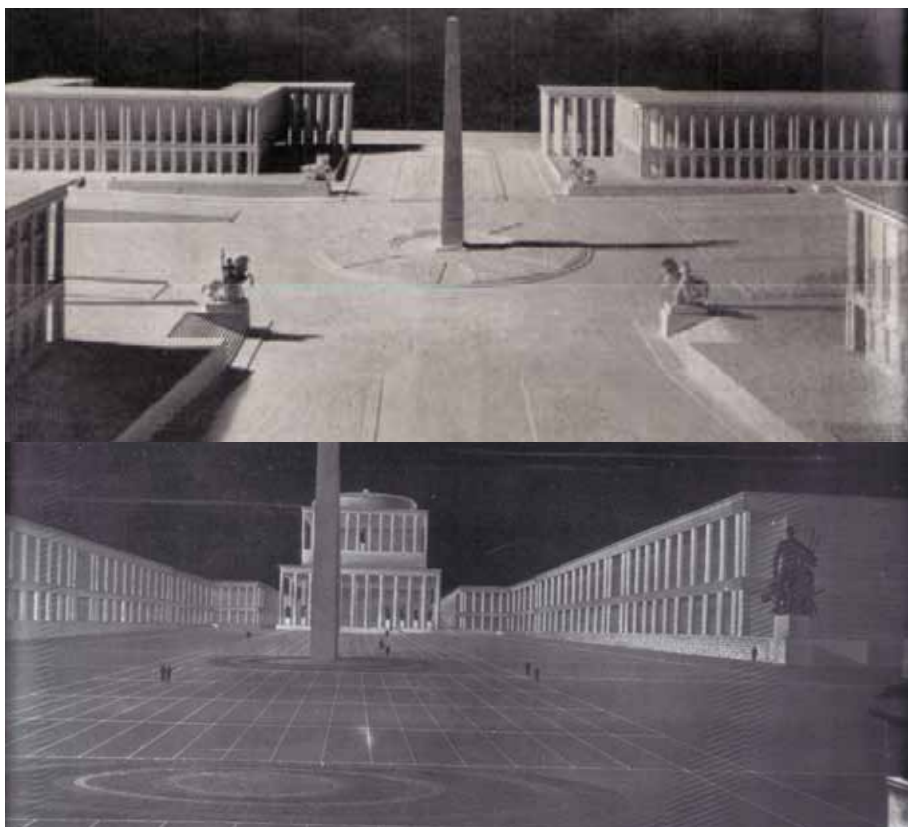


Fig.4. Model of the square dated 1938 with sculptures and museum entrances remarked by double columns.

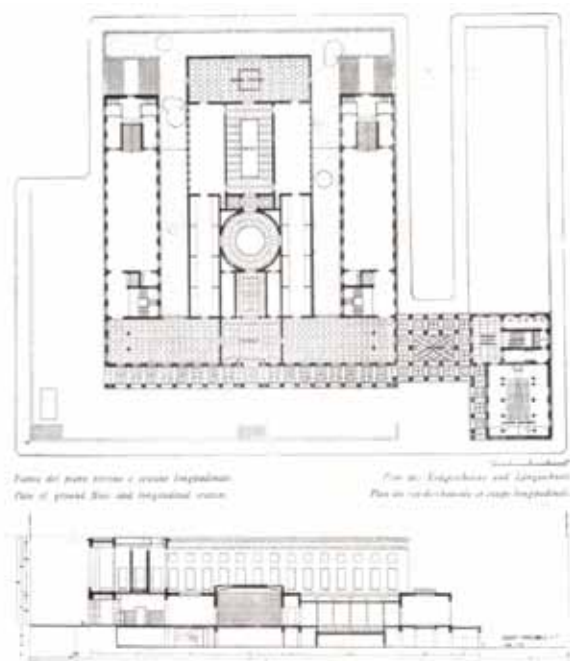


Fig.5. The Museum of Modern Art, ground floor plan and section (from *Architecture*, 1938, special issue).

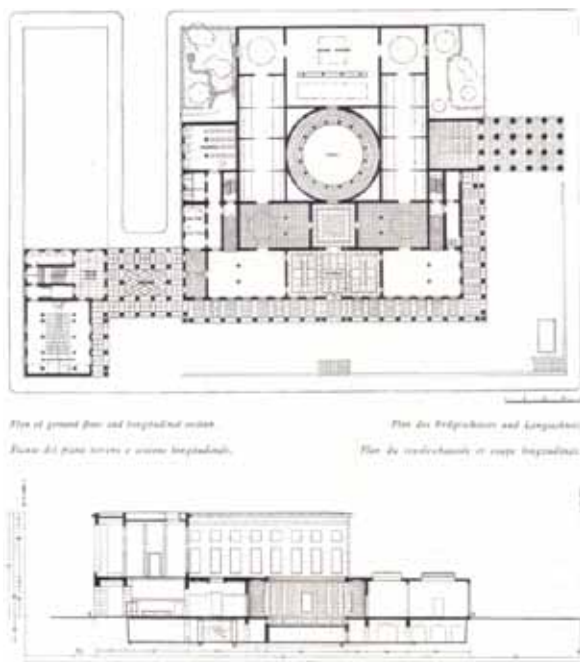


Fig.6. The Museum of Ancient Art. Ground floor plan . and section (from *Architecture*, ibidem).

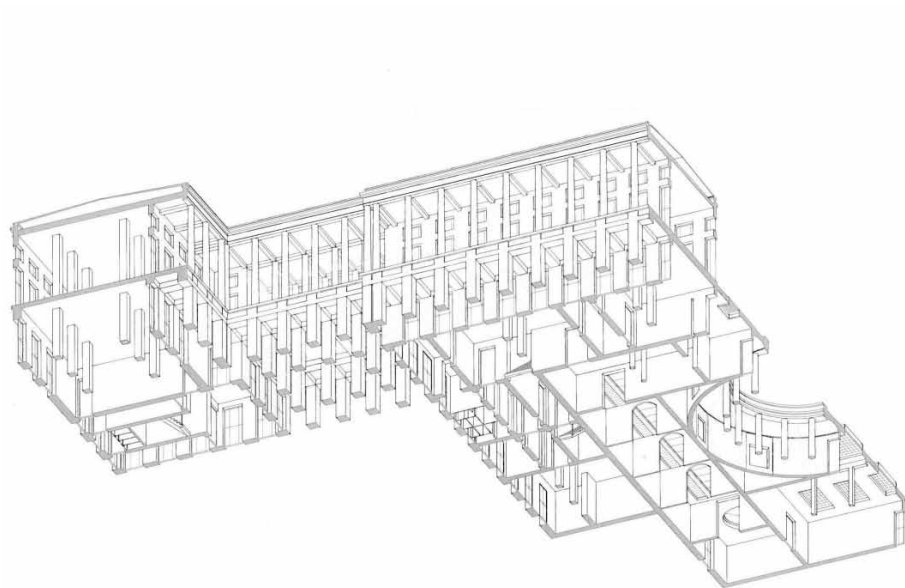


Fig.7. Isometric drawing sectioned along the transverse axis of the Museum of Ancient Art.

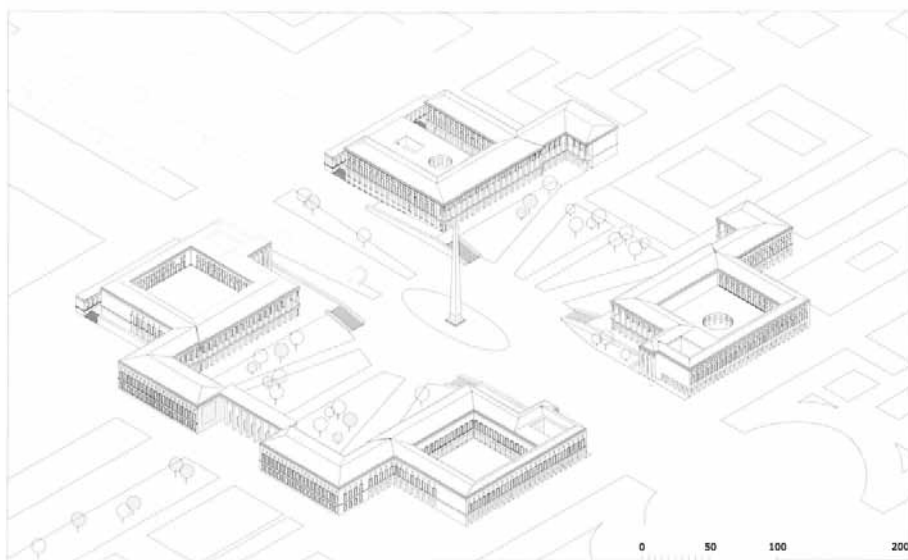


Fig.8. Final version of the Imperial square in the postwar period.

The Moretti's theater, of which only the enormous foundations were laid by the outbreak of WW2, was entirely replaced by the insipid *Italia* skyscraper in curtain wall. In 1939 Mussolini had clearly understood the communicative power of academic and archaeological architecture, and as the philosophy of Niccolò Giani, director of the Institute of Fascist Mysticism, began influencing contemporary politics, the revisions of Piacentini, favoring a more rhetorical and classical architecture, became more imposing.⁹ To LQ language was the last resort: behind superficial abidance to the rules imposed by the regime lied the subtle distinction between the obsequious and vulgar architectures of the bards of the 'Romanità casareccia' (homemade Romanness). Here one finds, on one hand, attention being paid to architects such as Sanmicheli, marginal to the official world of his time, with his "functionalist" purity in the Lazzaretto of Verona and a vague but extraordinary similarity to the corner of *Porta del Palio* (also in Verona) with three columns on the corners of the museums of the Imperial Square. On the other hand, here one can also find attention being paid to a distant traditionalism – hence less alluring – imitating a proven literary *trompe* that locates the action in an unlikely or exotic place. Thus, floors and window frames are inspired by the dry romance of the Art Museum in Basel by R. Christ and P. Bonatz, while the arrangement of the orders and tectonic nodes come from the serene Grace of Scandinavian traditionalists as Ivar Tengbom (the front of the Royal Philharmonic of Stockholm) and then Gunnar Asplund, whose design Stockholm's Library reappears obsessively in many projects by the group during this period.¹⁰ All was treated with veiled irony all the way to the *velarium* that parts to reveal a colonnade – a Baroque caprice. The discourse was too sophisticated and aristocratic to be understood at that time, and even more so after the War, when arches and columns always evoked the thought of civil war. Then there was the famous image of the Church in Piazza Euclide by

and Anita Ekberg.

9. View G. Terragni's report on the second-degree competition for the Palazzo della Civiltà del Lavoro against general opportunism.

10. The Fariello–Muratori–Quaroni group knew the Theater of the Educational Institution for Rhythmic Gymnastics in the Garden City of Hellerau by Heinrich Tessenow, but I think that this German master was mostly influential because of his moral rigor to detail and essentiality.

Armando Brasini, published by Robert Venturi in his book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* ...

Straight-jacketed by Piacentini's revisions and Moretti's pressures, the project dragged on with great discouragement of the group, that found in details the only way out. Quaroni, as professor at the School of Architecture, who had a fractal vision of architectural design, believed that design details always were the inevitable product of a thinking process that often started from the study of the whole city at a scale of 1:500. As a professional architect, he saw in details a safe haven in any design process that had momentarily stalled. From 1938 onwards, the theme of "architectural order" becomes the opportunity for redemption of a project now completely compromised. Not only the shaft of every column was proportional to its base and the entasis and tapering were designed to perfection, but the effort invested in the design all architectural elements was a contribution to the venerable tradition of reviewing the classical order (which should not be mistaken for the blunt flattening of any overhang, as Adalberto Libera did) that has Brunelleschi, with his *Ospedale degli Innocenti* in Florence, as its founding father. Review that was at heart of a critical step into the birth of the Modern Movement, manifested in façade of the building by Adolf Loos for the Michaeler Platz, in which the columns, freed from their supporting function (the architrave is in fact only attached to the walls of the portal) take only the symbolic function of reassuring; or in the structure designed by Asplund to hold the roof of the Krematorium in Stockholm, in which a tapered column, supported with a square nut with rounded edges, a curved beam of double-T section, separates from the support by a gap of two or three centimeters. Between the beam and the ceiling, was interposed another beam with arches, vaguely resembling a vierendel and creating a feeling of lightness and detachment: the ceiling seems to float... But Ludovico Quaroni's column, with upturned collar is by far more elegant a design and the superimposed lintel, imposing by its weight, testifies to ancient Roman walls constructions: heavy, yet graceful.¹¹ By 1943, the E42 and the square were a "forsaken

11. "The architectural order is simpler than its ancient model, but carefully studied by the designers: from the classical proportions of the entasis and the tapering of the column to the drawing in a 1:1 scale of

place.” Historical photographs show it in a state comparable to that of archaeological ruins, not dissimilar from the Imperial Fora, from which they had originally been inspired.

“Because I’m good in all styles” LQ¹²

In the early ‘80s, close to retirement from teaching, Quaroni got back to the drawing board alone and designs a public space for the city of Rome: the extension of the Opera House – a monumental hypostyle hall with dense columns, colored pink, tapered and arranged in staggered rows, standing on a base of heavy masonry, four meters above the square. The urban layout and the monumental hall is too similar to the 1940 layout of Piazza della Vittoria in Bolzano to be fortuitous. In particular, the basement with a pronounced foot and the mannerism of the stone arches with the lowered keystone are direct quotations from his personal repertoire. In the Opera di Roma, LQ resumes the sophisticated process of revision of architectural orders discontinued in 1940. Unlike the column of the Imperial Square, here the columns, twenty meters high, are much more slender and slightly flared at the end of the shaft, very similar to the more academic version of the *Cappella per la messa al campo* in the *Foro Mussolini* of 1937 and the loggia of the *Palazzo dei Ricevimenti* at E42. The “a cravatta” metal clamping system employed no doubt to reduce the impact of the axial load, weaken the efficacy of the academic reference in the design. Similar function and effect had the entablature made of iron “handlebar” beams covered in bronze sheets. In designing the Opera, LQ not only had to face History, in a way that he never lost, but also to confront his own history.¹³ This was not a maneuver to ably return to the starting point, but the conclusion of a path, coherent and full of contradictions, in celebration of the Oxymoron – his favorite figure of speech.

the capital and its angular deformation. It consists of a supporting skeleton revetted in Carrara marble; the courses of varying heights are composed of six blocks arranged in off-centered joints to create a unique image that blends in the outline of the column with the pattern of the masonry. The columns of the arcades are monolithic drums in cipollino Aprano (verde d’Alpi) “ (from the entry written by A. Greco and A. del Fante, in GRECO, REMIDDI 2003.

12. BARBERA, 1989, p. 16.

13. TERRANOVA, 1985.



Fig.9. Porta del Palio in Verona by Sanmicheli.



Fig.10. Crematorium in the cemetery of Stockholm by Gunnar Asplund



Fig.11. Portico and superimposed loggia of the Museum of Modern Art (photo Guido Petruccioli).

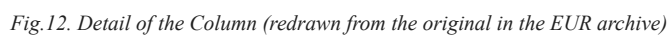




Fig.13. Portico triple-height on Via Cristoforo Colombo (photo Guido Petruccioli)



Fig.14. The upper gallery of the museum building.



Fig.15 The square in the fifties: in the foreground the foundations of the theater of Moretti.

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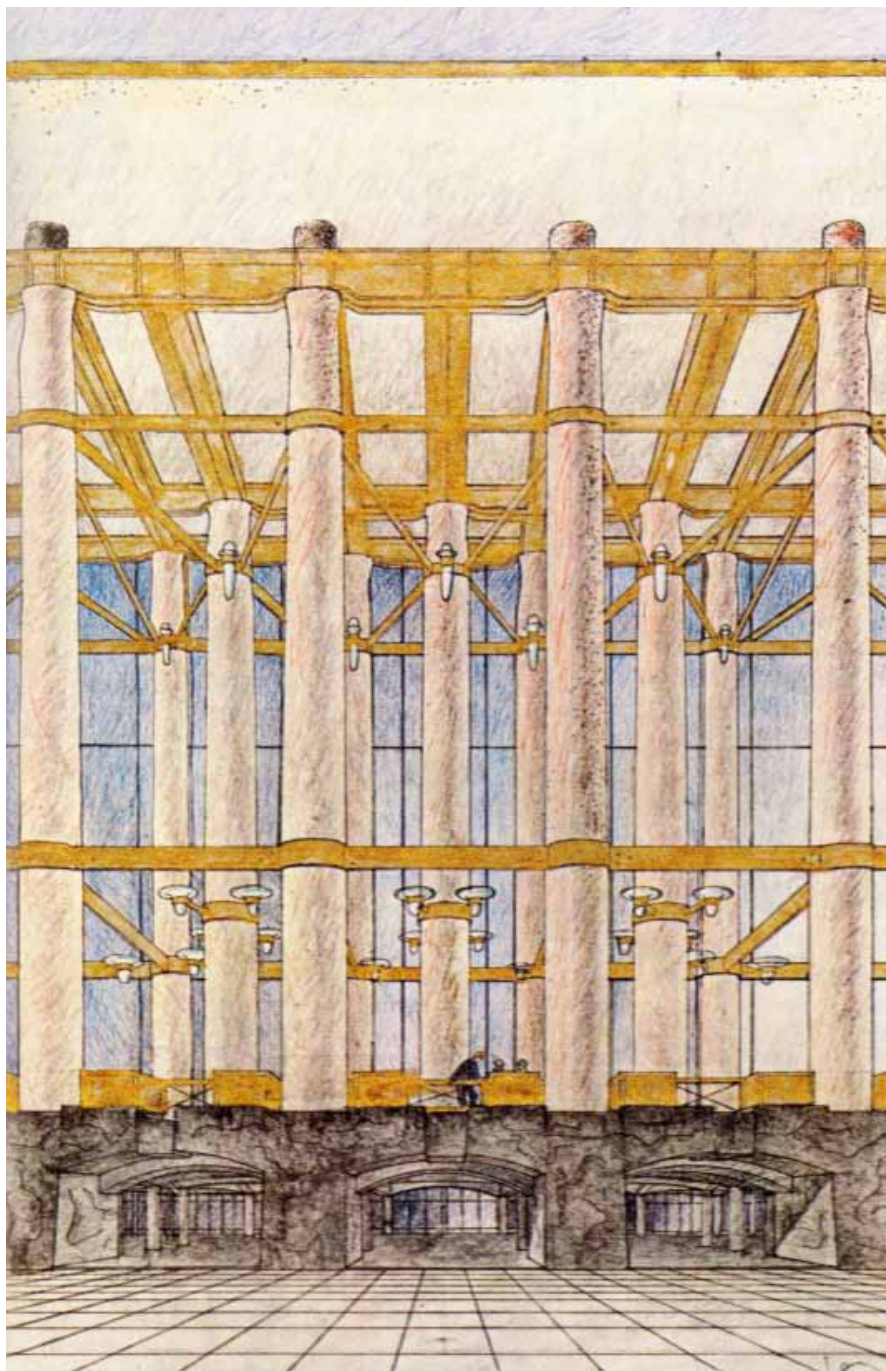


Fig.16. The Opera, signed drawing of LQ.

