



THE SCHOOL OF MATHEMATICS AT ROME'S UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

GIO PONTI, 1935

Edited by Simona Salvo | Sapienza University of Rome



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University Press



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SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ EDITRICE
2022

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Sapienza Università Editrice
Piazzale Aldo Moro 5 – 00185 Roma

www.editricesapienza.it
editrice.sapienza@uniroma1.it

*Registry of Communication Workers
registration n. 11420*

ISBN 978-88-9377-233-4
DOI 10.13133/9788893772334

Published in September 2022



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Layout by: Yara Rizk

Cover image: Nicolò Sardo



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Photographic Documentation

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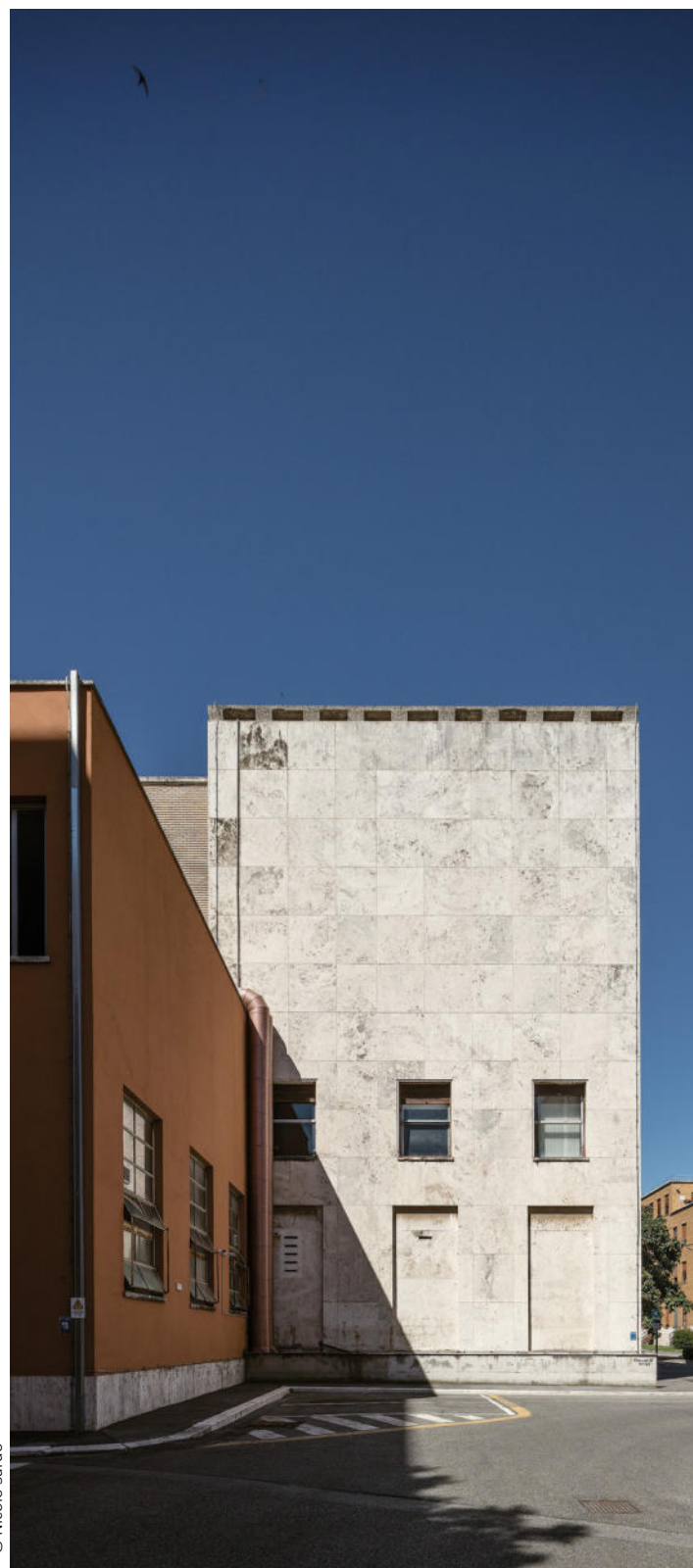
Graphic Editing

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Silvana Abeasis

Mathematician, academic, alumna of the Department of Mathematics, Sapienza University of Rome

Laura Armiero

Director of the Central Library, Faculty of Architecture, Sapienza University of Rome

Luigi Balis-Crema

Aerospace engineer, academic, alumnus of the Department of Mathematics, Sapienza University of Rome

Massimo Babudri

Engineer, Director of the Technical Management Office, Sapienza University of Rome

Fernando Bardati

Electronic engineer, academic, alumnus of the Department of Mathematics, Sapienza University of Rome

Giorgio Bazzucchi

Poleis Cooperativa Archeologica

Manuela Bazzarelli

Spaziofare, Rome

Elena Bernardi

Archivist, Istituto Centrale Catalogazione e Documentazione, Gabinetto Fotografico Nazionale

Marco Bonaventura

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Sergio Bozzetti

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Renata Codello

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Roberto Dallago

Master woodworker

Maria Rosaria Del Ciello

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Roberto De Rose

Central State Archive, Rome

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Architect, HBIM expert

Roberto Dulio

Architecture historian, academic, Polytechnic of Milan

Michele Emmer

Mathematician, academic, alumnus of the Department of Mathematics, Sapienza University of Rome

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Architecture historian, academic, emeritus, Polytechnic of Milan

Lamberto Lamberti

Mathematician, academic, alumnus of the Department of Mathematics, Sapienza University Sapienza University of Rome

Alessandro Lanzetta

Architect, Department of Architecture, Sapienza University of Rome

Salvatore Licitra

Gio Ponti Archives, Milan

Giovanni Longo

Cartography, Faculty of Architecture, Sapienza University of Rome

Daniela Loyola

Archivist, Central State Archive, Rome

Massimo Mantovani

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Former Executive Officer for Culture Regione Lombardia, responsible for the restoration of the Pirelli Tower in Milan

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Architect, Auction House "Il Ponte"

Annalisa Pomante

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Laboratorio Modelli di Architettura, Rome

Chiara Porrovecchio

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Mathematician, academic, former Director of the Department of Mathematics, Sapienza University of Rome

Michele Restaino

Archivist, State Archive of Rome

Simona Riva

Archivist, Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione, University of Parma

Antonio Rodi

GEOTER s.r.l., Geotechnics and Geological Engineering

Enrico Rogora

Mathematician, academic, Department of Mathematics, Sapienza University of Rome

Francesco Romeo

Engineer, academic, Department of Structural and Geotechnical Engineering, Sapienza University of Rome

Paolo Rosselli

Gio Ponti Archives, Milan

Cecilia Rostagni

Architecture historian, academic, University of Sassari

Ascanio Sciolari

Archivist, former Director of the Palazzo della Luce

Carlo Severati

Architecture historian, academic, University Roma Tre

Elizabeth Shepherd

Archivist, Istituto Centrale Catalogazione e Documentazione, Aerofoteca Nazionale

Silvano Silvani

Department of Structural and Geotechnical Engineering, Sapienza University of Rome

Elena Svalduz

Architecture historian, academic, University of Padua

Federica Tosini

Archivist, Historical Archive, University of Padua

Lucilla Vespucci

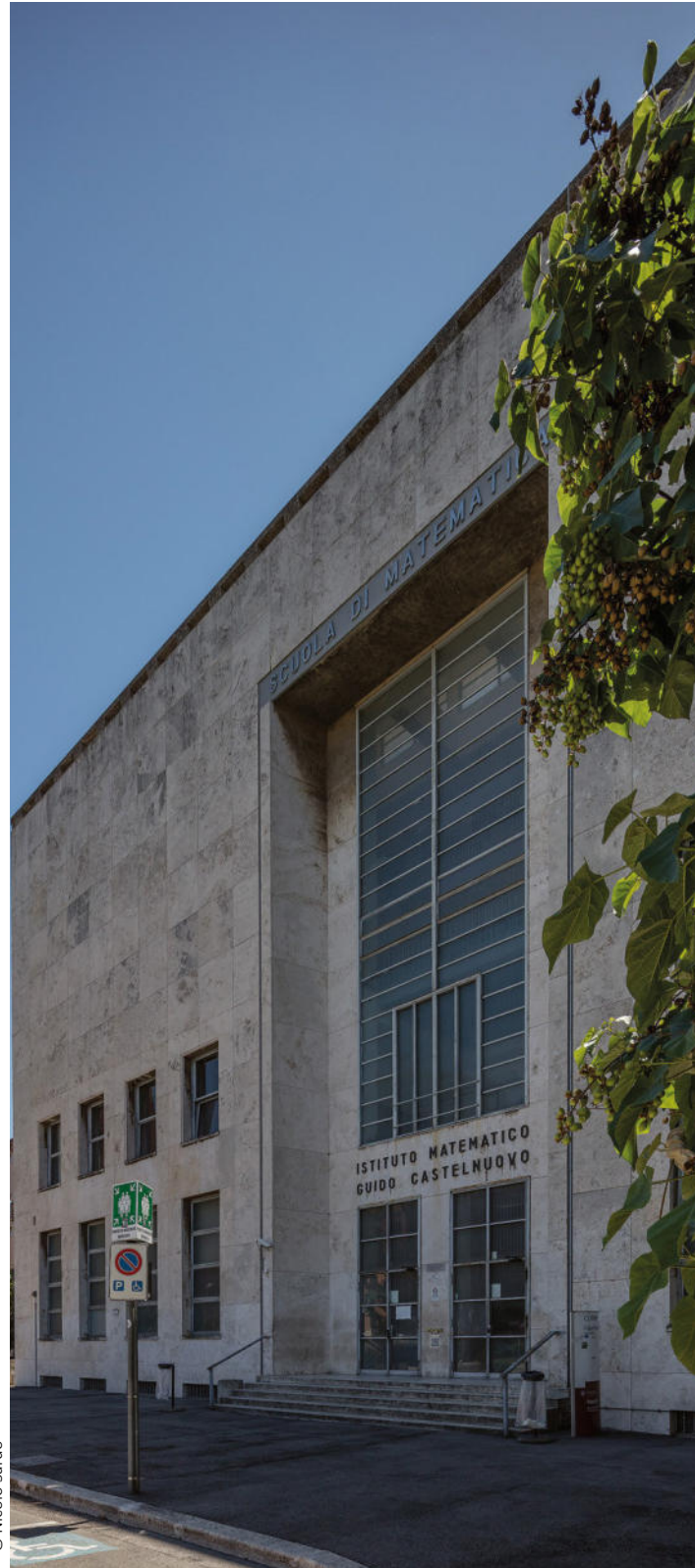
Former Director of Library of the Department of Mathematics, Sapienza University of Rome

Stefano Zaggia

Architecture historian, academic, University of Padua

Francesca Zanella

Architecture historian, Former Director of the Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione, University of Parma



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CONCEPTION AND CONSTRUCTION
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ROME'S NEW UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

Alberto Coppo, Simona Salvo

“As we all know, this district was earmarked for greater development compared to others. It envisaged the construction of the spacious via Nomentana and establishment of the Polyclinic, as well as the project for the future university campus. This ensures the exceptional development of the whole area, which must be carefully regulated” (Sanjust di Teulada 1908, pp. 32-33)⁵.

These three interesting reasons are provided at the beginning of the observations contained in the report about Rome's new Masterplan (1908) (Figure 1). Firstly, they illustrate the key role of the area between via Nomentana and via Tiburtina that was included in the development plan of the Capital as part of the expansion of the city to the east and towards the hills; in the decades to come, this area was the one that grew the most, both in terms of town planning and urbanization⁶. Secondly, they reflect the nature and function immediately assigned to the area, i.e., a “city of knowledge and science” that included medical sciences (Polyclinic) and scientific-humanistic knowledge (university campus); these functions are still acknowledged today (Spano 1935, pp. 135-141). Finally, the idea that “the development (ought to be) carefully regulated” reveals the legislator's awareness that several stakeholders, such as the university, the army, and real estate speculators, all had their eye on the land in question.

The total land area where the university campus was to be built between 1932 and 1935 amounted to roughly 210,000 square meters, situated between viale del Policlino, viale Università, viale della Regina, via dei Ramni, viale dei Battaglioni Universitari and Piazzale di San Lorenzo. It was an extremely coveted lot

destined to be used in many different ways between 1908 and 1930 when Mussolini chose it as the site of Rome's new university campus. The land in question was traditionally considered a site for military maneuvers, but in the space of twenty-five years its use was to change to accommodate the university (Di Marco 2012, Di Marco 2016) and residential housing units (mainly terraced houses)⁷.

In fact, several projects that were part of the numerous Master Plans of Rome- the 1909 Master Plan, the General Variation to the 1925-1926 Master Plan, and the 1931 Master Plan- as well as several exponents of the Roman architectural scene concentrated on the development of this part of the city for quite some time. The reason for their interest is the strategic role that this area played in the development of the city: its proximity to the Termini Railway Station, the Polyclinic, the area of Castro Pretorio with its military barracks, and the Verano cemetery, not to mention the fact that it represented the key to the future urban expansion of the Capital⁸.

The completion of viale della Regina in 1926 was meant to connect the Verano cemetery area to the residential district of San Lorenzo, built between 1870 and 1930, and to the new “Nomentano” and “Salario” districts built along the consular roads. This new link between via Nomentana and via Tiburtina shaped the north-east edge of the area earmarked for the university campus, further increasing its importance and urban value. In the plan designed by Marcello Piacentini in 1916 and again in 1925 (Ciucci 2010), this new avenue also served as a border, a wide green belt acting as a “green lung” between the old city centre and the urban expansion eastwards.

The land in question was considered a link between the barracks in Castro Pretorio, the pavilions of the Polyclinic to the north, and the residential settlements in the S. Lorenzo district to the south. It was a sprawling uncultivated field used for military exercises⁹, and a true urban void with irregular borders. The aforementioned viale della Regina to the north-east was one of the very representative avenues in the city and a sym-

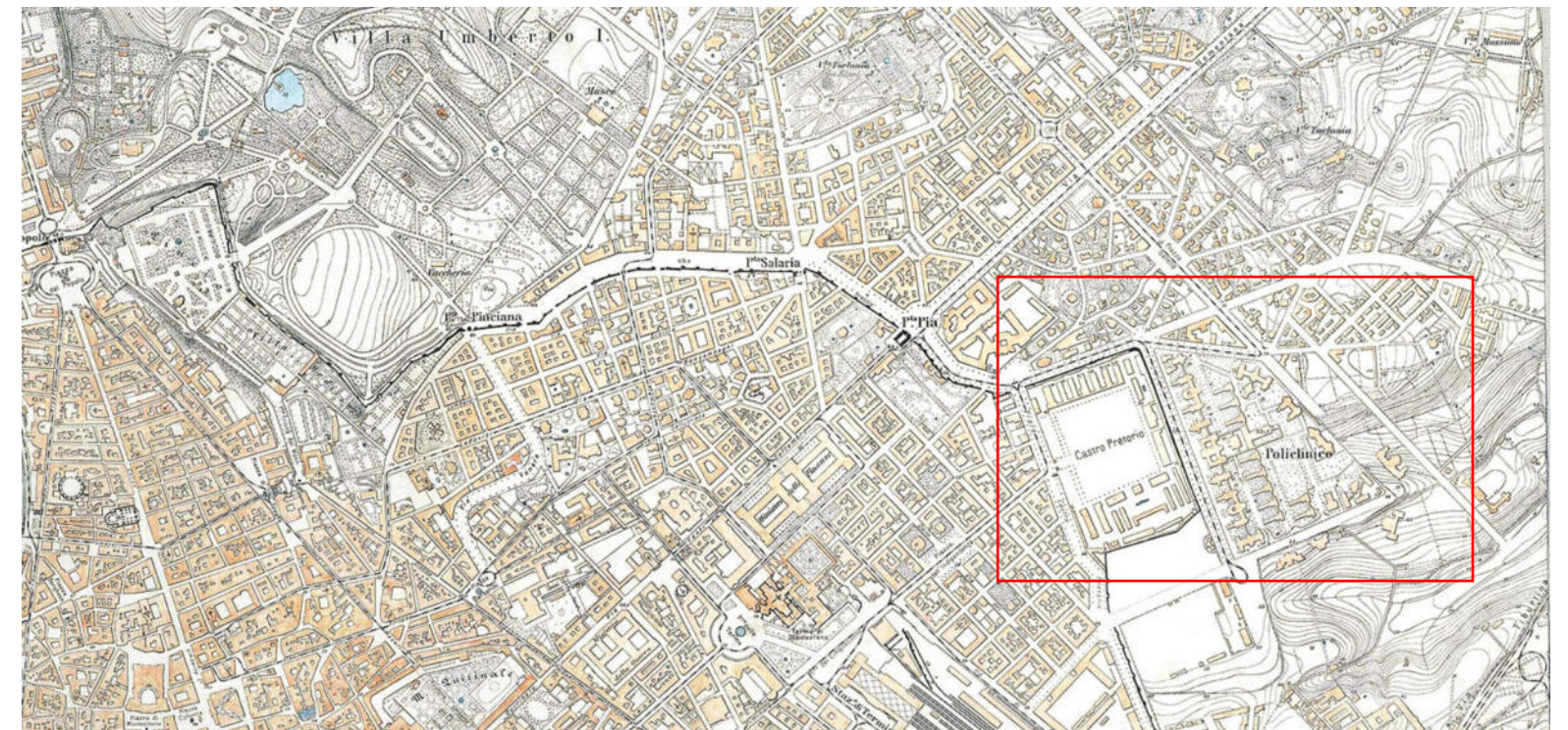


Figure 1 - Map of Rome and the suburbs issued by the Military Geographical Institute, 1907-1924; the rectangle highlights the area where the university campus will be built about ten years later, in 1924

bol of modernity in the Twenties; in the decades that followed many medical institutes were built along this road. Viale dell'Università to the north-west was the only direct link to the old city. The area to the south-east had a less distinct boundary: on one side an artificial hill hid the view of the Verano Cemetery, on the other the newly-built via dei Battaglioni Universitari, completed with great difficulty due to the complicated expropriation of the lots and the construction of unauthorized residential buildings. Finally, the south-west border was the most important: it represented the main monumental entrance to the campus, at that time well represented by the propylaea designed by Arnaldo Foschini.

The final urban plan was a huge compromise. In the first project (1907), the lot was much wider and extended for a considerable stretch in this direction; the university buildings were to be built in this area, all the way to Castro Pretorio. However, the temporary suspension of the first urban plan, and the construction of the Ministry of Aeronautics in 1930, significantly reduced the size of the area. This new area was subsequently adopted by Piacentini for his plan dated 1932. Furthermore, the failure to establish exactly how this area was to be used, and the fact it lay empty for twenty-five years (between the first plan in 1907 and the final one in 1932) led to the construction of informal (and unauthorized) residential buildings for about two hundred families.

In addition, the ground between via della Regina, via dell'Università, via del Policlinico and via dei Ramni, varied enormously in its level, rising in the middle and then rapidly decreasing; the deep hollow in the area later became Via Cesare de Lollis. The soil was partly volcanic and partly crossed by strata affected by underground water courses, i.e., a network of cavities and tunnels (Dell'Aglio, Emmer, Meneghini 2001, p. 63).

All the buildings, except for several temporary ones, were to be built in the central part of the lot. Several

buildings were already present along via dell'Università; they had been built as an addition to the plan of the adjacent Polyclinic, i.e., the buildings housing the Forensic Medicine department, the Psychiatric Clinic, and the Anatomy and General Pathology departments. The residential buildings along via dei Ramni, again built without respecting the Master Plan, were also present in the area where the School of Mathematics was to be built.

Therefore, after Mussolini's request, Piacentini began to design the urban plan for Rome's new university campus. Although the area was strategic from an urban point of view, it had unresolved relationships with the neighboring districts, being a more-or-less residual space in rather consolidated, built portions of the city.

Furthermore, the fact so many stakeholders fought over the redesign of this area was because it represented the fast track to becoming leaders of the cultural and political environment in Rome between 1910 and 1930. It is not surprising that Gustavo Giovannoni and Marcello Piacentini invested all their energy in this struggle¹⁰. Piacentini's 'unitary solution' - to design a city within a city, closed but not separate - consecrated him as the most skilled architect capable of designing and qualifying such a vast area. Yet from an urban standpoint the project was not connected to the Central Railway Station (Termini), something that was later emphasized in Angiolo Mazzoni's project. Piacentini was forced to drop the idea of building an entrance road that would have boosted the urban plan and flawlessly connected the Rector's Office and the whole campus to the station and the rest of the Capital, reflecting the modernity and development of the new-born Italian Nation (Figures 2-3).



Figure 2 - Detail of the university campus site around 1924, with contour lines and pre-existing structures the location of the Mathematics building is shown in red (© Cortesi 2021)

Figure 3 - Aerial view of the university campus site during construction in 1934 (ICCD_pht_08)