THE SCHOOL OF MATHEMATICS AT ROME'S UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

GIO PONTI,1935

Edited by Simona Salvo I Sapienza University of Rome
The Getty Foundation I Keeping It Modern Project

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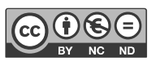

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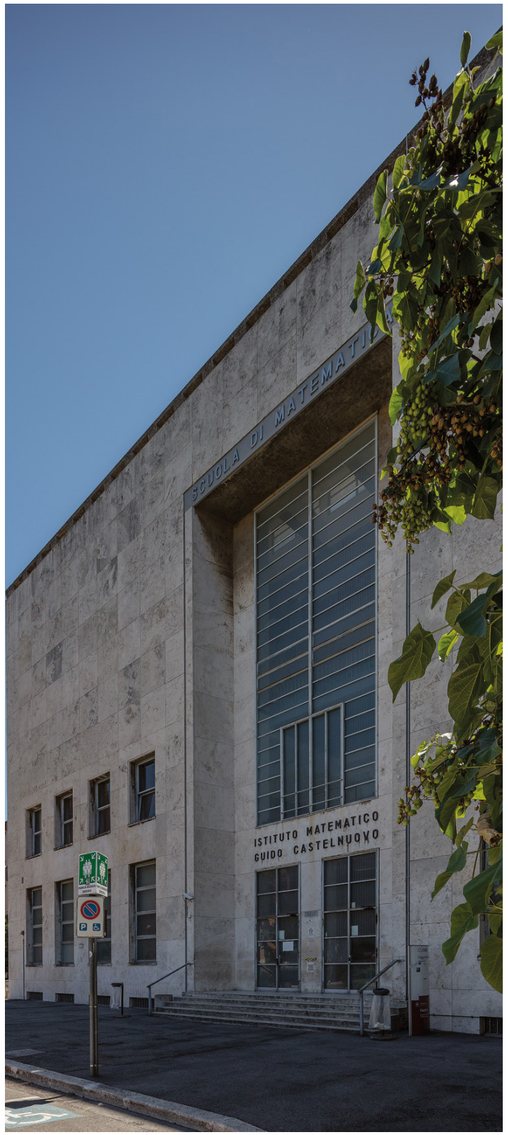

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INDEX

FURNITURE AND INTERIORS, A NEVER-ENDING STORY

Flaminia Bardati *

In a letter to Mussolini of October 10, 1933, relating about the works at the university campus, Rector Alfredo Rocco expresses his concern about the delays and the very high costs of such a huge project. Beside expropriations and foundations, both much more expensive than expected, a main reason of the increase of the construction costs is furniture. Deans and professors ask for more and more interior equipment, especially for the scientific institutes. «The problem of the furniture, perhaps not sufficiently evaluated when the estimate was made, deserves the greatest attention», states Rector Rocco (ACS_dcm_16). Yet, ten days later, the University Board of Governors approves an estimate that does not include expenses for furnishings (ASS_dcm_46).

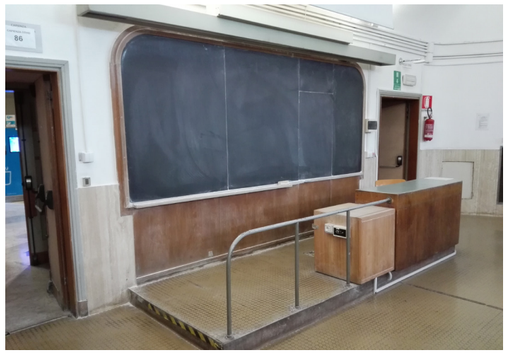
Within this context, the construction of the School of Mathematics seems to start without any explicit mention of furniture, until May 1935 when the sum allocated for the furnishings amounts to 730.000 lire, of which 250.000 lire for students' desks- which had already been ordered- 280.000 lire for the library, 52.000 lire for the drawing tables and 148.000 for 'common furnishings', not yet commissioned. This list is followed by a short note about the delay in the construction of the building and the promise to end by October, if the furniture will be ordered by the month of July (ASS_dcm_53).

As the interior doors were closely related to the construction, their order was slightly advanced: most of them were commissioned to the company Curti (metallic doors of the corridors) on June 4, 1935 and to the company Cantieri Milanesi before August 2, 1935 (wooden doors) .

Despite what written in May, the first specific mention of furniture dates September 9, 1935 and concerns the rows of curved desks for the Tower of classrooms (Figure 1) and bookshelves on the balconies in the library (ASS_dcm_72). The desks, completed with seats, were ordered to the company Liporesi, that had already provided a similar model for the buildings of Letters and Law, where the desks were however are not curved. Even if the bowed shape required more work, the Administration obtained the same price, but Ponti asked to further modify the height of the backrest, from 27 to 34 centimetres; consequently, the company increased the cost of each item of 143 lire[33]. Similarly, the architect proposed further variations concerning the bookshelves and the balconies' handrails, commissioned to the company Parma. Not surprisingly, these are fixed furnishings, strongly integrated with the architectural design and Ponti intended to maintain complete control on each detail.

On October 1, 1935 the company Santi was committed with the production of the well-known system of teachers' desks, which integrated footboards and blackboards, destined to the classrooms of the front building and to the tiered lecture halls of the Tower of classrooms (Figure 2). Santi also provided the footboards for the drawing classrooms, the huge tables of the library reading room and several other minor woodworks (ASS_dcm_84). At the same date, the company Gaggiottini obtained the order for pieces in Anticorodal, an autarchic light alloy based on aluminium, silicon, manganese, and magnesium, characterised by good resistance to atmospheric agents. These were doorframes and noticeboards, handrails for the staircase in the front building, and the letters to compose the writing "Scuola di Matematica" on the main façade (ASS_dcm_82). Nine days later the company Palazzo della Luce was committed with the supply of lighting fixture for several building of the campus, including the School of Mathematics, yet without specific details (ASS_dcm_85), while the company Parma offered a supplementary estimate for library balconies and shelves, which included the modifications required by Ponti (ASS_dcm_91). In November the lighting fixtures specifically conceived for the library, fixed on the reading tables and on the shelves, and those for the Tower of classrooms were ordered to the company S.A.A.R., which also assured much of the electrical works in the building (ASS_dcm_95).

Notwithstanding, the furniture of the School of Mathematics was not complete on the day of the inauguration, October 31, 1935, as the main supplies of furnishings date back to 1936 (Nicoloso 2018a, p. 182)[34]. On January 20, 1936 the company Beltrami obtained a new important order concerning the desks for the



** Chiara Turco has also contributed to this part of the research*

Figure 1 - The rows of curved desks in the tiered lecture hall at the second floor of the Tower of classrooms (© Salvo 2021)

Figure 2 - The system that assembles teacher's desk / railing / footboard / blackboard and wooden wall covering of the right tiered lecture hall at the ground floor of the tower (© Bardati 2020).

Figure 3 - Two-seater desks of the model "Milano" in one of the classrooms at the ground floor of the front building (© Bardati 2020)

Figure 4 - Armchair originally supplied for the Council Hall, currently in a professor studio of the east wing; the "Marocchino" red original covering has been modified (© Bardati 2020)

three classrooms located at the ground floor of the Front building, the drawing tables and two types of stools for the classrooms of the curved wings and the complete furnishing for thirteen professors' offices (ASS_dcm_112). The desks were similar to those supplied for the buildings of Physics, Hygiene and Orthopaedics, ordered on catalogue: the model "Milano", in chromed steel tube, polished oak and Linoleum, for two people, complete of seats. With the exception of the last rows, each table served as the front seat backrest (Figure 3). Of the 72 desks ordered to Beltrami on this occasion, only 31 items survive today in the teaching rooms where they were originally located. 112 drawing boards, complete of stools and 24 high stools for the plaster models were not as lucky, as they have all gone lost during the transformations suffered by the curved wings, fragmented into offices, and classrooms.

The furniture for the professors' offices located at the first floor of the front building included one desk, a small wooden armchair, a rack, a small, squared table and an office cabinet, with closets and open bookshelves. But, as witnessed by further documents, four professors – namely Bompiani, Enriquez, Levi Civita and Picone- requested bigger office cabinets, long as the longer wall in the room (ASS_drw_97, 98, 125 and 126); of these only three small tables and three racks have survived.

In addition to the supply obtained for the library, 8 reading tables and 196 chairs "Model 14" were asked to the company Parma on January 28, 1936 (ASS_dcm_115). On February 24, 1936 a report of the Technical Office underlines the delays suffered by the supply of furnishing for the Institute of Mathematics, pointing out the numerous requests raised by the professors and the necessity to order new items (ASS_dcm_125). Therefore, at the same date, the companies Santi and Beltrami were solicited for several other supplies: Santi for closets and shelves for the drawing classrooms, the professors' lobby and for some offices; Beltrami for the furnishing of the council hall, originally located at the first floor of the front building (ASS_dcm_126). Two huge tables and a small one, 19 armchairs, a canapé and a bookshelf were the main items that furnished the room, but at present only six armchairs survive, modified (Figure 4).

By the end of 1936 most of the rooms were furnished, including the lighting fixtures and some detail elements, such as curtains and doormats. Nevertheless, some supplies were delivered- or paid- during 1937 when other orders had been completed, concerning closets for the professors' offices near the drawing classrooms and the mentioned modified closets for professors Enriquez, Levi Civita and Picone. Furthermore, some a specific treatment was needed after delivery, as in the case of the Linoleum footboards of the single systems "footboard + blackboard + teachers' desk" in the classrooms of the front building and of the tower (ASS_dcm_182).

In April 1938, the entire furnishing is delivered, and all companies fully paid, but the story has not yet come to an end. As the Royal National Institute of Higher Mathematics, IndAM, is founded on July 13, 1939, the need to supply offices and study spaces is again raised. The upper drawing classroom of the west curved wing was chosen as the headquarter of the Institute, fragmented into several little rooms. On this occasion 15 new doors were purchased, made on the original models "B2", "C", "D" and "E" supplied by the company Cantieri Milanesi, as specified in the contract. No news is given nor of the original furnishings, probably moved in the other drawing classrooms, neither of the new items ordered for the IndAM, which today conserves nothing of the facies datable to 1939-1940, except for a big blackboard that belonged to the pre-existing drawing classroom. However, it is possible that some of the existing chairs and armchairs located in other parts of the building, and whose shape, materials and manufacture could date to the end of the 1930s, had been ordered for this Institute.

When Mussolini visited the IndAM on April 15, 1940, his official speech was given in the tiered lecture halls at the first floor of the Tower of classroom, the only hat could offer a seat to a large audience. The railing and desk were removed from the footboard and substituted by a large rectangular table, which probably belonged to IndAM (ASL_vdo_17).

Unfortunately, the air raid on San Lorenzo on July 19, 1943 that hit the campus and damaged thoroughly the stained glass-window on the front façade, and all glazing of the windows of the building, probably also left traces on the furniture.

A report concerning the campus estimates the damages to around 2.631.000 lire (ASS_dcm_228), while Vincenzo Fasolo, Director of the Institute of Drawing, reported that 100 drawing tables and 50 stools with their plaster models were also damaged (ASS_dcm_227). He also noted that it was impossible to give any other clarification but his personal deposition because the furniture was not inventoried. Francesco Severi, director of IndAM, had in fact previously presented a complaint related to the disappearance of several objects after the allied troops had occupied the seat, among which an important typewriter Olivetti. He wrote that some furnishings had been damaged and needed repair, for the sum of 20.000 lire, but without offering further details (ACS_dcm_35). It must be said that during the occupation of the allied troops within the premises of the campus, furniture - especially chairs, armchairs, and tables- may have been moved from the School of Mathematics to other Institutes and vice-versa and it is possible that other pieces entered the building in the post-war years. Yet, at this stage of our research no document allows to identify them .

Further uncertainty regards information concerning furniture gained (and lost) during the second half of the twentieth century. The leitmotiv of this period is a chronic lack of space for teaching, research (especially concerning the laboratory for the huge data processing machines) and professors' offices. As well known, the need of space determined a series of dramatic transformations that modified the building, which has lost its original shape and important functions. These transformations entrained the shift of furnishings and doors, sometimes their loss, and the insertion of new items.

Two doors inspired on the original type "C" by Cantieri Milanesi are datable to 1954, when the professors' lobby in the front building was transformed into two offices (Salvo 2015). It was certainly necessary to purchase furnishings for these studios, but there are no traces of supplies, as in the case of the original furniture of the lobby and the wall lighting fixtures of the same type and dimensions of those still existing in the library (Figure 5).

During the students' protests of 1968, chairs and armchairs similar to those that in the School of Mathematics were photographed by Rodrigo Pais in the entrance of the Institute of Letters (BUB_pht_10, BUB_pht_11), while several desks of the "Milano" model (BUB_pht_03) are portrayed in the same place or perhaps in

Figure 5 - Four of the original six wall lights of the library, supplied by the firm Bianchi in 1935 (© Sardo 2021)

that of the Institute of Law (which is semisymmetric). Again, thanks to Pais's documentation, we have evidence of a table similar to those of the library reading room, used to build barricades in the corridor connecting the building of Law and that of Political Sciences (BUB_pht_08, BUB_pht_ 09). Since same companies had been employed to furnish most of the Institutes, it is very difficult to determine if the furnishing portrayed in these pictures belonged to Mathematics, or if it was shifted to the building once order has been restored.
However, the works to enlarge the building of Mathematics and the renting of some rooms in the seat in via Vicenza undoubtedly mark the beginning of a new phase of furniture supplies. Six offices were obtained in the new additions flanking the front building, which needed new furnishings, but no document allows to pair them with the present objects in the same rooms. New supplies were necessary also for the classrooms in via Vicenza, where on July 17, 1970 some chairs had been delivered, while most of the furnishings was still to be ordered (ASS_dcm_268). We have no drawing or picture showing shape and materials of these chairs.

Despite the rent of the seat in via Vicenza, in the 1970s the lack of room for teaching and, most of all, for the offices, determined the choice to subdivide the drawing classrooms of the Institute of Drawing in the curved wings. The original furniture of the drawing classrooms went completely lost on this occasion, together with 22 wall lighting fixtures of the ground floor corridor, purchased from the firm Bianchi (ASS_dcm_159). They are visible in the shooting by the Istituto Nazionale Luce during the visit of the Libyan notables in 1936 and in the pictures taken of the newly completed building.

Without going into the details of the bureaucratic slowness that characterised the transformation of the building, neglecting the historical-critical assessment about the legitimacy of such interventions, it is important to fix some reference points regarding the purchase of new furniture and doors in these years.

A decision of the University Board of Governors of May 28, 1976 does not mention furniture (ASS_dcm_283). In June 1978 the first floor of the east wing, divided into professors' and staff's offices, is ready for use, such that doors and furnishings should be in place, while the works at the ground floor of the west wing are over but no furniture has been supplied. Documents offer no detail about type and shape of furniture. The works concerning the ground floor of the east wing, where five classrooms were being set up, were starting and the Works Committee of the School of Mathematics considered the furniture a dramatic problem (ADM_dcm_01). An estimate of the costs dating December 26, 1979 lists several works including the supply of new doors, again copying the models of the original doors originally supplied by the firm Cantieri Milanesi, using only pitch-pine or fir for the doors and oak for the frames (ASS_dcm_288). Only two documents mention a supply of blackboards (ASS_dcm_290) and of lighting fixtures (ASS_dcm_300).

The 1980s began with a message of the Rector Ruberti, announcing that from July 1981 the ordinary upkeep of the campus (buildings and furniture) would have been entrusted to the Consorzio Artigiani Universitari (ASS_dcm_301). Together with the cease of the contract with via Vicenza and the transfer of many professors to new offices, such new modality of upkeep shuffled the cards in the shift of furniture within the buildings: above all, repair and maintenance interventions have profoundly altered the appearance of the pieces.

Finally, compliance to safety rules and the insertion of technological devices are still today perpetuating the undaunted decay of the original and quasi-original furniture pieces. And the story is not yet over, unfortunately.

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