



THE SCHOOL OF MATHEMATICS AT ROME'S UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

GIO PONTI, 1935

Edited by Simona Salvo | Sapienza University of Rome

The Getty Foundation | Keeping It Modern Project

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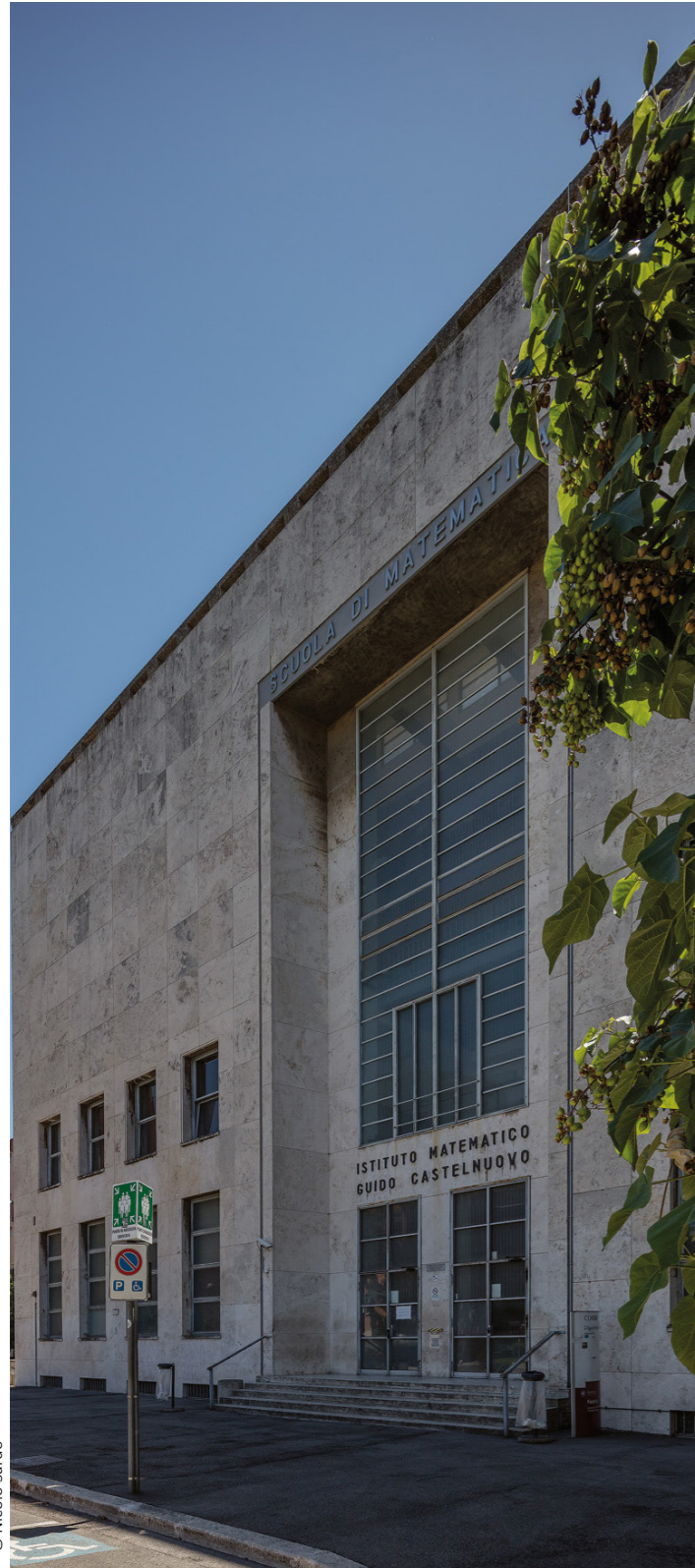
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LOVE YOUR CHAIR AND IT WILL LAST FOREVER!

Flaminia Bardati

The furnishings and doors of the School of Mathematics represent a heritage of great historical and artistic interest, which deserves to be preserved and enhanced. The abacus and the inventory mapped on each plan of the building constitute a first tool to monitor the consistency of this heritage and gain the attention of the public, with the aim of urging Sapienza to provide each item with an inventory number and plan the restoration of some of the pieces.

As in the case of the building, some furnishings- at least those dating back to the 1930s- should be officially protected, so to monitor and orient any intervention planned on these objects, perhaps also with the supervision of a special committee including experts in the field of furniture conservation and the Governance of the School of Mathematics. This would oversee the planning interventions and initiatives, providing precise instructions about materials, colours and work processes to be delivered to upholsterers and carpenters in charge of repairs and restoration works. In addition, technological upgrading of the classrooms - which has been and will be necessary in future - will be correctly approached, especially in view of applying microphones, digital devices and wiring to fixed furnishings, in order to reduce the visual impact and the material damage produced by cables and technical boxes, notwithstanding the major costs that this implies.

Still, this heritage risks every day to be further modified and damaged due to lack of consciousness of its value. Therefore, one of the main objectives consists in reviving the daily users' awareness of the historical

Figure 1 - A chair 'Model 14' by Parma and a stool by Beltrami, abandoned in the basement albeit in perfect conditions (© Bardati 2021)



and artistic importance of these 'old', 'uncomfortable', 'odd' furnishings.

Almost all professors, scholars, students and staff that work (or 'live') in the School of Mathematics know that a famous architect named Gio Ponti designed the building, but few of them know that he also designed the furniture and the doors, and even fewer are able to discern original items from copies or others; probably none are aware of the fact that they are personally responsible for the conservation of such a heritage. To raise the daily users' awareness of the importance and uniqueness of the "chair left in the darkest corner of their offices", usually covered by piles of paper and books, it is essential to trigger off a virtuous process of appreciation, conservation, enhancement, and correct use.

A brochure with short descriptions of each item, describing their history and indication their correct use, would definitely help to render the academic community a "heritage community" (As in the Faro Convention of 2005), and encourage their personal involvement in maintaining the furniture properly. Such scope could be also reached by enhancing some specific sets of original furnishings, which appear most interesting: panels with short descriptions of the room and its furniture in the original display and condition, completed with historical pictures, could be placed in the atrium and in the classrooms of the front building, in the main hall of the library and in the classrooms of the rear Tower, in order to offer a general historical overview of the rooms and the basic information concerning seats and desks of current use.

When possible, and with slight effort, the objects that pertain to a specific room could be put back in their original location, as in the case of the Parma chairs that could be gathered in the main hall of the library, while other chairs today in the room could be moved elsewhere. The reading room of the library- which today is stacked with non-original furniture of all kinds - could take great advantage from a similar 'clean up'.

Figure 2 - A teacher's desk supplied by the firm Santi and a students' desks 'Model Milano' supplied by Beltrami (© Bardati).



Furniture of the Tower of classrooms also deserves much attention and care, as it participates to the general concept that structures one of Ponti's most interesting parts of the project. The rows of curved desks for the students, with integrated seats, represent a characteristic ensemble of the original design of the fan-shaped tiered lecture halls. They are similar to other desks supplied by the firm Liporesi for other buildings of the campus, but their curved shape renders them unique, such that the drawing of every row with its own dimensions and number of seats had to be provided for production. These have been heavily damaged in two occasions: in 1960 due to the subdivision of the tiered lecture hall at the third floor, and more recently due to regulatory compliance of the smaller classrooms at the ground floor where the fire escape paths have been adjusted in dimension. Furthermore, several seats of the tiered lecture halls have disappeared after breakage of small parts. The original supply provided by Liporesi consisted of 96 rows of variable lengths, for 1296 seats, but at present there are only 132 rows (72 'half-rows' and 60 normal rows) for 1086 seats: this must be preserved from further loss.

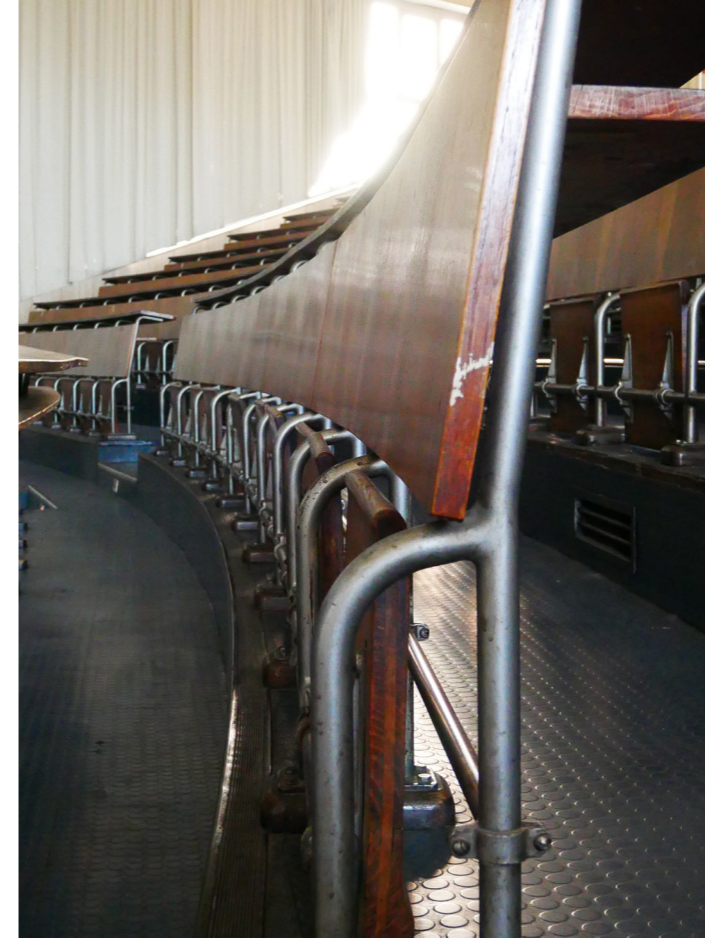


Figure 3a - A row of curved desks and seats by the firm Liporesi in the Tower of the classrooms (© Bardati 2021)

Figure 3b - One of the seats of the tiered lecture halls, dismissed for breakage of a metal part and stacked in the basement for disposal (© Salvo 2021)

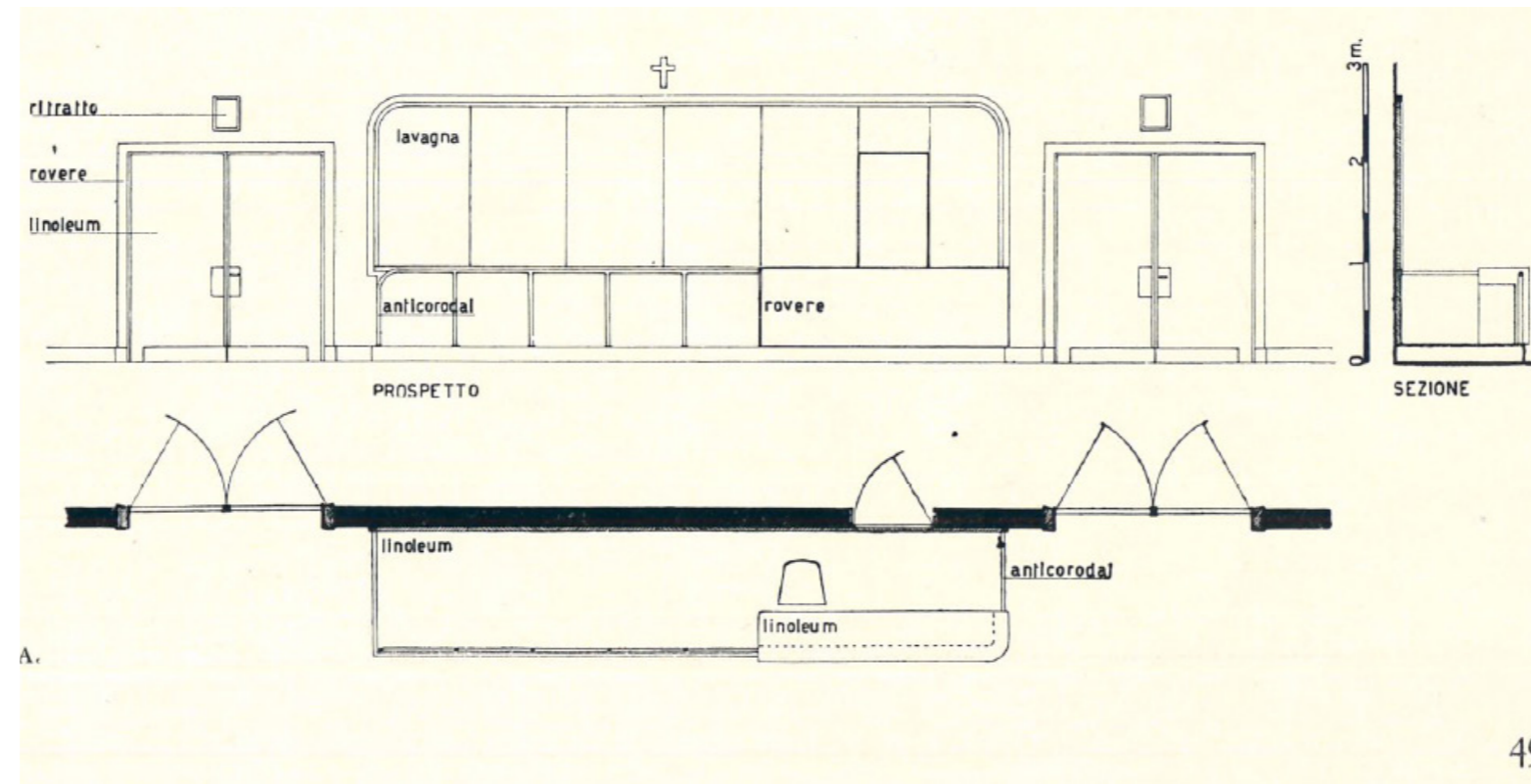


Figure 4 - The 'wall system' including footboard / blackboard / desk / railing and wooden wall veneering, with the door opening leading to the changing room; plan, elevation, section (BBL_drw_10)

Figure 5 - The blackboard on one of the tiered lecture halls with the door opening onto the changing room in the current condition (© Bardati 2021)

In the same classrooms the integrated ensemble composed of footboard / blackboard / desk / railing and wood veneering is also very characteristic of Ponti's design, especially thanks to the door opening in the blackboard, that makes this "wall system" a tridimensional element that also includes the professors' changing room, today obsolete. In 1935 this separate access to the classrooms was the expression of a precise and strong hierarchy between professors and students in their daily life at the campus, but nowadays, considering the experience imposed by the pandemic that has shown the importance of separating pathways, this distinction could turn useful. Therefore, the use of blackboard door and changing room could be easily retrieve, without the need for special safety equipment as they would be used by one person at a time. In any case, the containment of technological equipment for teaching purposes should also be observed.

Finally, the furnishings in chromed steel tube (tables, racks, armchairs), that has survived all odds but is currently dispersed in many rooms of the building, represent a lot with specific stylistic features, although they originally belonged to different rooms. Part of them has been placed in the "Aula Ponti" at the first level of the front building, while other pieces could be placed in the reading room of the library. This room still retains the original fixtures (apart from the addition of emergency exit,) and could be the right space where to recompose an interior the 1930s: such set-up would certainly arouse appreciation, respect, and care for what remains of the original furniture conceived by Gio Ponti for the School of Mathematics.



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