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CONTINUITY OF THE OLD AND THE NEW. GIOVANNI MUZIO. A NEW SEAT FOR THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF MILAN

CIĄGŁOŚĆ MIĘDZY DAWNOŚCIĄ I NOWOŚCIĄ. GIOVANNI MUZIO. NOWA SIEDZIBA KATOLICKIEGO UNIWERSYTETU W MEDIOLANIE

Abstract

An architectural project developed in tune with the old (with old building projects), allows that work of architecture to be measured against its history starting from a general experience, “from the things that surround man.”

The new-old continuity in Giovanni Muzio’s intervention for the Catholic University of Milan derives from the fact that the project took possession of the pre-existing architecture and, in grasping certain aspects which governed the work, Muzio decided not to betray its construction tradition.

New and old buildings confront one another without any falsifications, seated firmly within a tradition which Muzio sought to bind the threads of continuity to.

Keywords: city architecture, continuity, new and old, restoration

Streszczenie

Opracowanie projektu architektonicznego w zgodzie z przeszłością (z dawnymi projektami budowlanymi) daje możliwość ocenienia tego dzieła architektonicznego na tle jego historii, poczynając od ogólnego doświadczenia, „od spraw, które otaczają człowieka”.

Ciągłość między dawnością i nowością w przedsięwzięciu podjętym przez Giovanniego Muzio na rzecz Katolickiego Uniwersytetu w Mediolanie bierze się z faktu, że jego projekt zawłaszczył sobie wcześniej istniejącą architekturę, lecz, uchwyciwszy pewne aspekty rządzące tamtym dziełem, Muzio nie zdradził jego tradycji budowlanej.

Osadzone mocno w tradycji, z którą Muzio starał się związać wątki ciągłości, nowe i stare budynki stają naprzeciw siebie bez żadnych przekłamań.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura miejska, ciągłość, nowość i dawność, renowacja

Building within a historical city, and especially in a close correlation with its monuments, brings to the fore all the theoretical and practical difficulties of today’s architectural culture in dealing with this issue, especially when it comes to the contrast between new and old.

A project that does not accept this idea of juxtaposition, this ‘contrast’ (in reality derived from other disciplines), will endure a succession of criticisms with accusations of purported ‘historicism’, while drawing attention to supposed issues of ‘falsification’.

Instead, an architectural project that is developed in tune with the old (with old building projects), allows that work of architecture to be measured against its history, not out of nostalgia or a superficial stylistic reprise, but because it is built upon a general experience, or rather, from a general experience: “from the very things that surround man.”

The new-old continuity in Giovanni Muzio’s intervention for the Catholic University of Milan derives from the fact that the design took possession of the pre-existing architecture and, in grasping certain aspects which governed the work, Muzio decided not to betray a construction tradition which dissuaded any copying or acquiescence but to work on continuing it.

New and old buildings confront one another without any falsifications, seated firmly within a tradition which Muzio sought to bind the threads of continuity to.

The new seat of the Catholic University in the old cloisters designed by Bramante for the Church of Sant’Ambrogio was begun in 1927 and by 1932 the first part had already been completed. In 1938, the fundamental parts of the complex could be said to be concluded; the finishing touches being added in 1949.¹ Muzio’s project included a restoration of the late 15th-century cloisters, as well as the gardens of the former Cistercian monastery of Sant’Ambrogio, by then abandoned, and the construction of new buildings to create a sort of ‘university town’. Several reasons prompt us to consider this intervention of great importance in Muzio’s design research, since it includes many themes that were dear to him, such as the relationship with tradition, the essential idea of architecture as a part of the city and, in this particular case, the relationship with the old.

Amid the chaos in the aftermath of World War I, Muzio brought together some young architects under the banner of a ‘return to order’ and the ‘craft’, with the goal of building a national identity in architecture, but also to be ready for the major urban transformations that had already begun in the early years of the twentieth century. After the period of historicism, of the turn-of-the-century eclecticism, and in the wake of the various avant-garde movements, architecture dug deep into its ‘own’ classical tradition to find continuity with civil architecture, hitherto interrupted in Milan during the first half of the nineteenth century.²

It appeared necessary to replace the exasperated and arbitrary individualism, in which the singularity of the finds defined the skill and fame of a designer, with a rule; only through discipline and commonality of feeling would a new architecture gradually take shape. A new stylistic era could not be created from an anarchic collection of disparate heterogeneous buildings; it was necessary to take care of the complex of buildings, as well as each individual building.³

¹ The main texts from which information on the work have been drawn are: V. Cardarelli, F. Reggiori, *Architetture di Giovanni Muzio*, from the series “I grandi architetti”, Milano, Geneva 1936, pp. 29–44; F. Reggiori, *I ‘collegi’ dell’Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore a Milano*, Architettura, 1935, vol. 6, no. 13, pp. 321–330; G. Mezzanotte, *Giovanni Muzio. Architetture francescane*, Milan, Eris 1974, pp. 15–49 and in particular the introductory essay, *Le architetture francescane di Muzio* [in:] *ibidem*, pp. 9–14.

² For a closer look at the theme, see G. Muzio, *L’architettura a Milano intorno all’Ottocento*, Emporium, 1921, vol. 53, pp. 241–258.

³ G. Muzio, *Alcuni architetti d’oggi in Lombardia*, Dedalo, 1931, no. 15. Quote in G. Gambirasio. B. Minardi (a cura di), *Giovanni Muzio. Opere Scritti*, Franco Angeli, Milano 1987, p. 254

His studies were aimed at the ‘art of building cities’, and both urban planning and architecture: “[...] a return to classicism was imposed [...] the necessary universal elements of the classical periods always hold true, and the proof is their continued survival in stylistic expressions, at times varying, from Ancient Rome to ourselves.”⁴

In these words of Muzio, arguably rather enigmatic, we can grasp the reasons for this attempt to re-establish a principle of order in architecture, in a manner similar to that which occurred in the years immediately following World War I in the figurative arts and in literature⁵ (from Carrà to De Chirico, and from Cardarelli to Ungaretti, for example), according to a desire to identify one’s work with the history and tradition of one’s own country, in open contrast with the exacerbated individualism of earlier eras. In the ‘architectural disorder’ of that period, Muzio attempted to find the ‘ordering principles’ of his craft and it was in this sense that he intended architecture as a problem of tradition and longevity: he rediscovered in the past certain objective facts and some immutable values, recognizable in important works in which the strength of tradition shines forth; in the works of Palladio or Serlio, in other late 16th-century works of architecture, and in the rigour and simplicity of late-Roman and neoclassical Milanese and Lombard architecture.

The return to classicism, which for Muzio meant recognizing a tradition in his own work, was not identified with the uncritical recovery of forms of the past, nor did it resolve itself in a simplistic adherence to a classicism of fashion and textbooks; it became instead a mental habit through which to operate with rules, clarity, order, and harmony. As Sir John Summerson pointed out, the purpose of classical architecture is to achieve a demonstrable harmony of the parts. Classical architecture coincides with those:

[...] texts that can be considered bearers of objective realities – not associated with individual destiny and easily communicated, a result of the intuitions and experiences deemed successful of the best spirits of the past – in which the authority of tradition is configured.⁶

Work on architectural types, the restoration of figures, quotes from the ancient world, are nothing more than attempts to make the work as intelligible as possible. The use of the quote through the archaeological recovery of forms – such as the portal of the Catholic University’s entrance building, set into the brick façade and taken from the types of Alessi – is a ready-made operation which extends the meanings of the work and refers to the coeval experiences of the metaphysical painting of those years. In fact, certain descriptions of De Chirico present analogies with the works of Muzio: “Nothing equals the enigma of the arcades, which were invented by the Romans” and “the arcade is here to stay”; moreover, it is good to remember that in the rationality and geometric nature of city plans it is possible to identify the “topographical provisions” conceived as “laws of the earth.”

Through the “evocative value of elementary figures” and the use of “narrative fragments,” Muzio also expressed all the difficulty of proposing symbolic figures that would be intelligible in modern architecture. Over time, these references to classical figures would become increasingly rarefied and allusive and “[...] the classicist attitude would ‘transmute’ into a distributive perfection, a balance and proportion of the parts, a love for

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ On the *Novecento Italiano* movement in Milan, its links with the other arts, and Muzio’s relations with writers and painters, see G. Mezzanotte, *Le architetture francescane di Muzio* [in:] G. Mezzanotte, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–14 and A. Burg, *Novecento Milanese*, Federico Motta, Milan 1991, pp. 9–45.

⁶ G. Mezzanotte, *Le architetture...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–12.

care over detail and the clarity of the overall system.”⁷ As in the residences of this same project, in his Palazzo dell’Arte, the Angelicum, and later on in his work on the Palazzo della Provincia of Milan.

This latter project, which was essentially the redefinition of a part of the city, also involved the transformation of a monument and its enlargement. Muzio understood the subject of restoration as an architectural project where the monument, now devoid of sense and meaning but filled with the value of its architectural elements and full of potential with respect to a possible completion of its form, becomes material available for a project. This attitude was close to the theories of Ambrogio Annoni on the question of restoring monuments, developed in those same years. In particular, Annoni introduced the concept of ‘toning’ and his ‘case-by-case’ theory: when in practice a building needs to be preserved and “once again frequented”, and for reasons of use “completion is inevitable,” then it is advisable to stick to the “most daring, but most sincere and modern and serious concept of toning [...] And where completion is imposed by construction needs, these must be affirmed with rational simplicity, limiting toning to the material used and to its structural disposition, with unadorned simplicity.”⁸

The project is a constant questioning of the monument “[...] firstly as a historical document and an expression of art, as a construction fact [...] Before the monument this is the teacher...”⁹ and shows all his interest in architecture understood as a textbook from which to learn the laws of its own continuity. His ‘case by case’ theory was a precise condemnation of every form of embalming a work which instead became the text and material of the project, the source of the principles and elements of the composition. A better teacher could not be found: Bramante’s cloisters for Sant’Ambrogio.

And Bramante would tell us that the architecture *non facit saltus* and that it is an illusion to want to create it from one day to the next, arbitrarily; that, precisely because of their relatively stable character over time, its manifestations almost bridge the past and the future, and cannot be a topic of ephemeral fashion, suitable for transient things [...] that individualistic research must be governed by a steady faith, by a firm guiding criterion that links it with the collective sentiment.¹⁰

This was how Gustavo Giovannoni expressed himself at a conference in Milan in 1927 for the inauguration of the *Associazione Artistica fra i Cultori d’Architettura* of Milan, of which Muzio was one of the founders. The ‘new-old’ continuity lay quite simply in the fact that Muzio took possession of this ‘text’ of Bramante, accepted some questions which governed the work, by now in the groove of this tradition and decided to avoid betraying it; on the other hand he had no need to copy or acquiesce to it: he simply worked to continue it.

Another important theme for Muzio was the city and its destiny: there is no design in his production that was not seen as an urban project, according to an idea of a ‘therapeutic

⁷ R. Airoidi, *L’idea di architettura nelle opere di Giovanni Muzio (1922–1940)*, Casabella, 1980, no. 454, p. 58.

⁸ A. Annoni, *Criteri e saggi per la conservazione e il restauro degli antichi edifici nel moderno rinnovamento della città* [in:] A. Annoni, *Scienza ed arte del restauro architettonico, idee ed esempi*, Artistiche Framar, Milano 1946, pp. 73–77.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ G. Giovannoni, *Bramante e l’architettura italiana* [in:] G. Giovannoni, *Saggi sulla architettura del Rinascimento*, Milano 1935, p. 94.

intervention' on the body of the city followed by successive "reattachments to the fabric."¹¹ It was precisely this attention to the architecture of the city that linked his work to an idea of architectural decorum, a principle of order taken from the Milanese neoclassic Enlightenment architecture of the early 19th century.

For Muzio, it was also necessary to recompose the form of the city "through individual works of art, narrative fragments of various relatively autonomous authors, in which however there is the principle of 'proportioning' the work to the context."¹² We can verify these same ideas about the city in the project called *Forma Urbis Mediolani*,¹³ drafted during the 1926 competition for the G.R.P. in Milan; Muzio recalled: "Running against the engineers' tendency to reduce the urban problem to a pure organization of the road network, the ring-roads, etc., we shook up its renewal from the point of view of architectural construction..."¹⁴

The architectural project becomes or goes back to being the ordering tool in the construction and transformation of the city, and at the same time a laboratory to experiment with new types of building.

Another element of great interest in this project is the fact that the theme of university architecture was a relatively new task and did not have a unique typological approach. The relationship with tradition could only mean the relationship with one's own craft and with the history of architecture, in a reference to formal types which evoked a way to satisfy a need and carry out an act, and to places for teaching and community life in a more general sense.

The project is the composition of autonomous parts which follow a building programme in tune with an idea of the city. The university building thus becomes the organization of spatially defined parts and elements chosen from somewhere between memory and imagination, which we might deem 'typological elements'; the geometry of the pre-existing buildings represents order and rule; the goal is the realization of a work of architecture which presents new construction and symbolic programmes, the means is the compositional process of addition by parts which endows the architecture with meaning; and this meaning, in fact, as Aldo Rossi indicated, lay "in the operation, use, and character." This procedure recalls some of the principles which can be identified in the experiments of the Enlightenment architects: the sureness of the typological elements and the research into the spaces of relationship that allow them to become coordinated.¹⁵

The footpaths regulate the composition; the footpath is the pattern, the element of continuity of a narrative which seeks to bring a system of fragments back to unity. In the composition, individual volumes, architectural parts, materials, decorative apparati, quotes from the ancient world, rationalist language and "the abandonment of worn-out design conventions," are all attempts to open the 'story' up to several interpretations, to represent a reality that

¹¹ G. Canella, V. Gregotti, *Il Novecento e la città*, Edilizia Moderna, 1963, no. 81, special monographic issue: *Il Novecento e l'architettura*, p. 100.

¹² F. Buzzi Ceriani, *Rileggendo alcune opere di Muzio*, Portaluppi, Ponti, Lancia, Gigliotti Zanini, Phalaris, 1990, no. 10, p. 22.

¹³ *Forma Urbis Mediolani* was the motto of the project drafted by Alpago Novello, Buzzi, De Finetti, Lancia, Muzio, Ponti, Reggiori and others, and awarded second prize at the 1927 GRP competition in Milan.

¹⁴ *Incontro con Giovanni Muzio. Struttura e tradizione architettonica*, Hinterland, 1980, no. 13–14, p. 39.

¹⁵ Reference should be made to the definition given by E. Kaufmann of the "Pavilion D. System" as a composition by autonomous parts in *L'architettura dell'Illuminismo*, Turin, 1966, and in *Tre architetti rivoluzionari*, Milan, 1979 (2nd ed.).

can no longer be grasped in its entirety. The relationships between the new architecture and the old were sought without Muzio having to abandon the characteristics of his poetics and therefore without slavishly copying the forms of the existing one. New and old buildings confront one another without falsehoods, seated firmly within a tradition which he was trying to bind the threads of continuity to.

The architectural parts so dear to Muzio's poetics are all to be found in this project: the arch, the jack arches, the string courses, the column, the porticoes and their combinations, the masonry of the bricks. "These," he stated in an interview, "I see as values and elements inherent to the architecture, independently from the location; as objective facts."¹⁶ Most of the newly constructed design elements were made of brick (clinker); this material was used as both infill and cladding, while the supporting structure was of reinforced concrete; this design approach was maintained without any purist apprehensions: the metaphorical allusion of the building, carried out with a decorum which structures the façade, is the construction of a language; this brings his work, by analogy, closer to that of other Rationalist architects "outside the avant-garde."

The cladding material featured a wide range of specially made pieces and the use of these types of brick would become one of the constants of his future projects. The use of the materials and the construction methods tied to local tradition but at the same time so close to the use that other European architects were making of them at that time, from Berlage to Dudok at the Hamburg school, the vaguely Expressionist figurative influences that refer to the German architecture of Fahrenkamp, Böhm and Bonatz, all place Muzio's architecture within a European dimension; in this migration of ideas invention can be found, while the impressions that recall German architecture overlaid on the classical stamp of Muzio's architecture create unexpected effects.

The hierarchical dependence that previously existed for the cloisters with respect to the church is in the new layout redefined with respect to the new entrance (and administrative) building, which is arguably the architectural part which most clearly reveals certain suggestions and influences.

On the eastern side of the square and behind the apse of the Basilica, the Catholic University stands next to a small tower, which lies in turn on the axis of the church's drum, thus forming an angle with the lantern of the Monument to the Fallen,¹⁷ at the top of which is the drum itself.¹⁸

It is not only this triangulation which shows the building's obedience to the spatial discipline of the monument: its entrance is located on the axis of the Doric cloister of the monastery and, in addition, the heights of the floors, the lines of the guttering and other measures and proportions borrowed 'from the old' give this fusion the greatest coherence for the new. The entrance is characterized by a granite portal, which repeats the 'sloppy' Tuscan order adopted by Serlio, leaning against a stone wall which emulates Alessi's portal for the Palazzo Comunale of Bologna. Higher up, to conclude his composition, a stepped

¹⁶ *Intervista a G. Muzio* [in:] G. Gambirasio, B. Minardi (eds.), *Giovanni Muzio. Opere e scritti*, Franco Angeli, Milano 1982, p. 35.

¹⁷ "Monumento ai milanesi caduti in guerra", 1927–1929, project by G. Muzio together with A. Alpagò Novello, T. Buzzi, O. Cabiati, and G. Ponti.

¹⁸ P. Torriano, *Giovanni Muzio*, in *Maestri dell'architettura*, "Maestri dell'architettura", Ginevra 1931, p. XVIII.

gable ending in a belfry recalls a tower, and, as in other Muzio projects, formalizes the public nature of the building. The portal is set into a brick façade which reiterates flights of arches and pilasters. To the right, the asymmetrical façade makes room for the apse of the Church of Sant’Ambrogio; after the portal we enter the atrium, equally characterized by its own formal autonomy, beyond which we can glimpse the arcade centred on the Doric cloister. The arcade – conceived as an *architectural promenade* whose rhythm is marked by imposing dividing walls – gives access to further spaces and opens onto the cloisters. Walking along the arcade is a continuous visual delight in its succession of solids and voids, light and shade, interior and exterior. Beyond the atrium are some offices, then the apse of the church which becomes part of the project by being open to view. Carrying on, we reach the ‘block’ of the chapel (another independent building) whose façade, besides overlooking the arcade, is placed on an axis with a secondary entrance and a small courtyard. The late 16th-century themes referring to the brick architecture of Mantua, Parma and Ferrara are even more evident in the arcade, surmounted on the first floor by a loggia reminiscent of the Galleria degli Antichi in Sabbioneta.

When the Benedictine monastery was suppressed at the end of the 18th century, the cloisters were adapted repeatedly to end up becoming a military hospital. They would eventually be restored in 1931–1932, when the entrance building was constructed. The various interventions profoundly changed the character of the complex and compromised the statics of the buildings.

The cloisters were renovated and adapted to the needs imposed by their use as a university. Demolition works were necessary for incongruous parts that had made them unrecognizable; for example, the arches of the porticoes had been closed off to bear the excessive loads of the added structures: in this regard Muzio himself recalled “[...] the porticoes of Bramante, whose arches, too slender, revealed that they would not stand being crushed, I had to demolish, and put a piece of granite on top of the dossierets of each capital...”¹⁹ The cloisters were restored preserving the original appearance of the porticoes and arcades. Vertical communications were improved by restoring the old staircases and inserting four new ones, so that new facilities could be located inside the cloisters. The classrooms accessed from the arcades were obtained by joining two or more rooms together. The old structure with its long corridors flanked by cells was brought back to light and improved upon. The library was arranged in the block between the two cloisters. The central double-height corridor, illuminated from above, along with the lateral cells became reading rooms and distribution spaces; on the ground floor the space coinciding with the sole central corridor became a book repository. The Great Hall was obtained from the Benedictine refectory after removing the added partitions and floors and restoring it to its original state, including the decorations on the vaults and the openings. To afford access, an arcade was built along one side of the building, whose glazed arches overlook the garden and whose architectural character enshrines its utilitarian function. On the end wall, towards the cloisters, three arches open onto a first-floor room, beyond which lies terraced seating. On Via Necchi – the street of the project which runs alongside the Doric cloister where the convent’s gardens lie and on the (ideal) longitudinal axis²⁰ which crosses the cloisters – were built the male residences between 1933 and 1934.

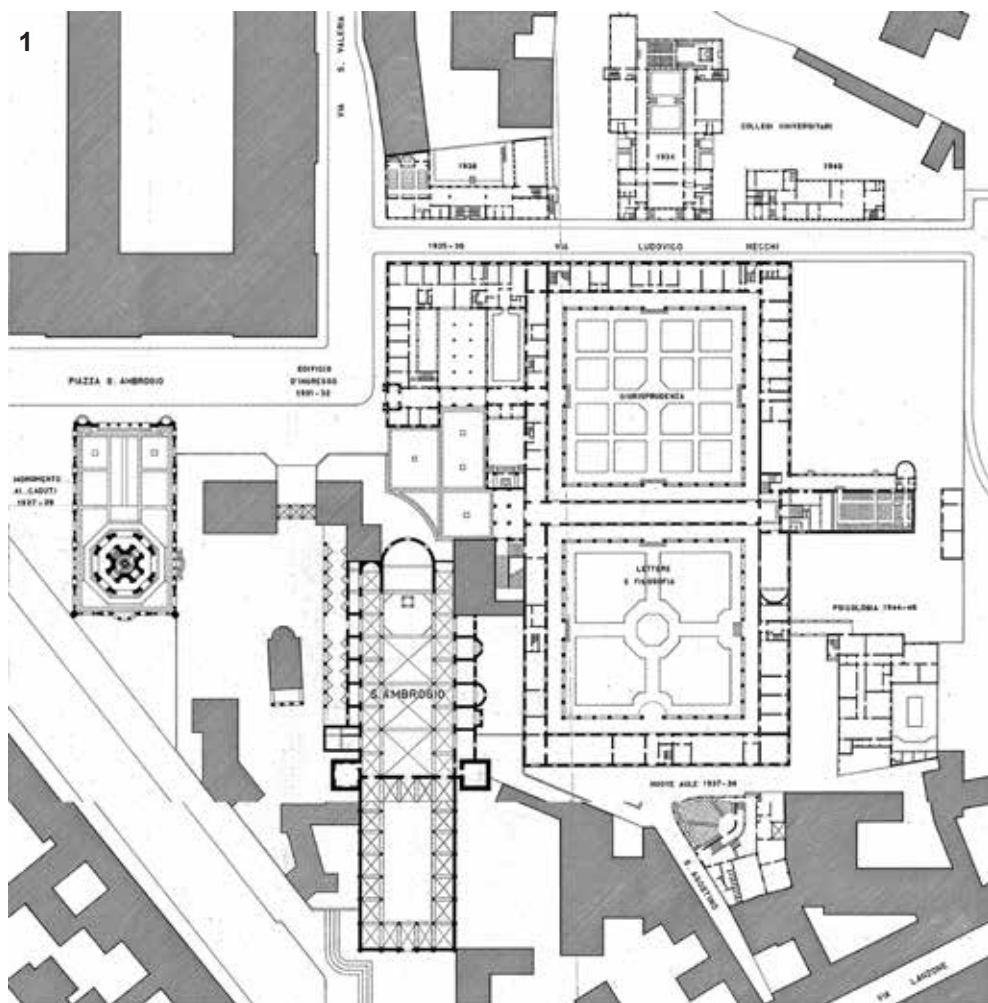
¹⁹ *Incontro con Giovanni Muzio, op. cit.*, p. 39.

²⁰ In the residences, they were slightly displaced from this alignment.

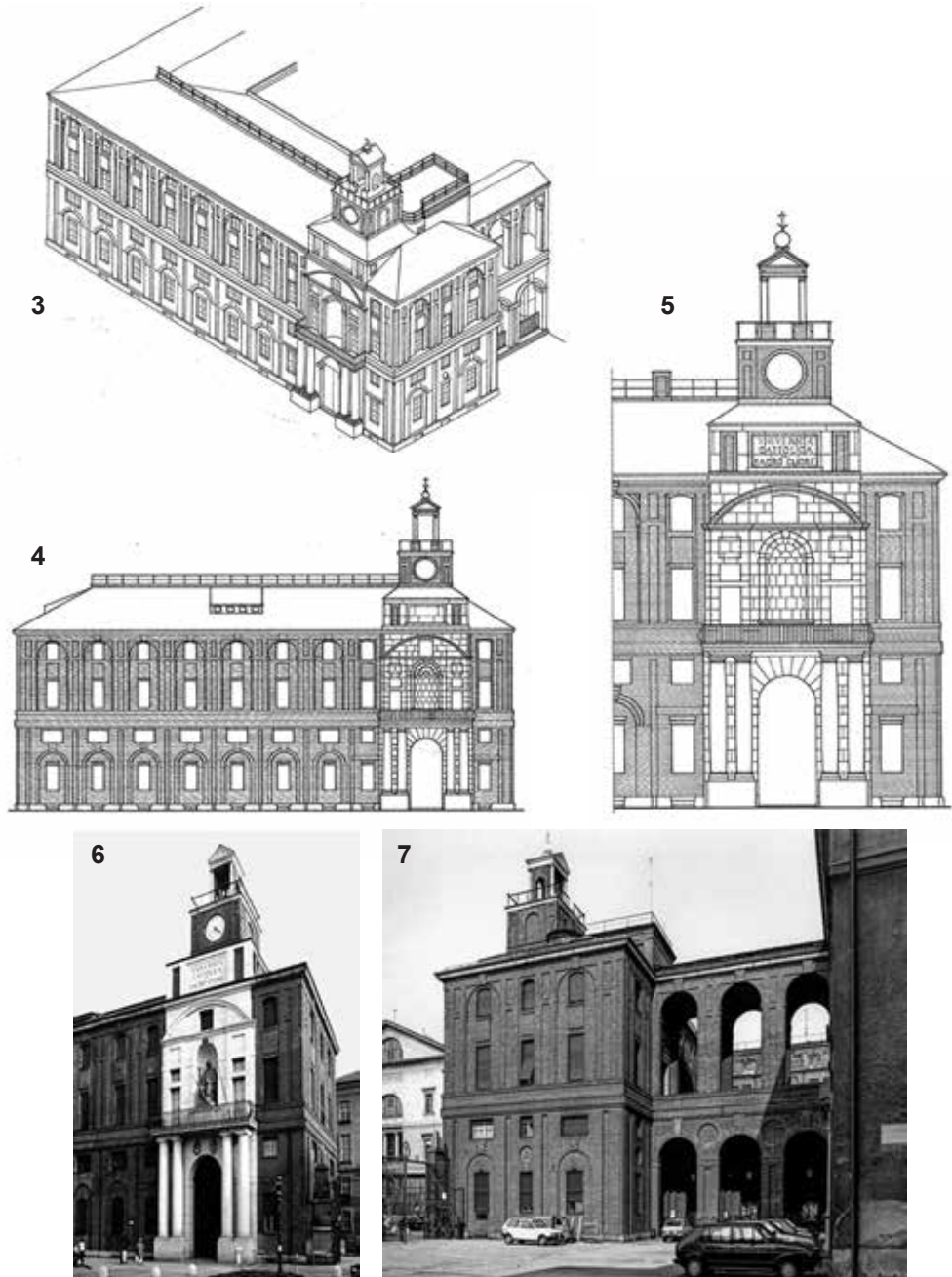
The residences are a composition of formally autonomous architectural parts which, in following a building programme that respects the peculiarities of the lot, match the idea of a public building. An in-line porticoed building was located on Via Necchi and here the portico is an element which defines the space of the street. From the portico, two separate entrances enter two arcades which lead to all the public spaces arranged around a central courtyard and to the two conspicuously vertical blocks of the residences: the arcades end at the chapel. The residence blocks respond to a Rationalist principle in that they follow a precise functional programme and the slope of the lot. The smaller one, Ludovicianum, is intended for religious students, while the larger, Augustinianum, houses the more numerous secular students. The autonomy of the elements that make up the residences is also underlined by the materials used: brick cladding highlights the public spaces, while plaster indicates the residential buildings. On Vicolo S. Agostino, in an area with a roughly triangular shape and delimited by the alley itself and by the south-western wing of the Ionian cloister, two large new classrooms were built in 1937–1938 connected to the cloisters' arcades by means of an overhead passageway. The hyperbolic shape of the building was suggested by the shape of the area but is also particularly suitable for public distribution and acoustics. A continuous window crowns the building and shows, with the bare façade and the use of plaster, a 'certain' adhesion to a Rationalist language, considered by Muzio the most suitable "[...] to mean practical efficiency, pure utility."²¹ Later on, two other buildings were erected on Via Necchi to complete the urban construction of the street: the female Marianum residence in 1938, and the university canteens in 1949. Although minor works, these buildings meet two important requirements: to contribute to the construction of the street and to highlight their hierarchical value through the use of certain architectural and material components. Bare, essential, and simply plastered, the Marianum is associated with the other residential buildings, while the canteen's brick cladding displays its public function.

The entrance, the staircase, the Great Hall, the library, the chapel, the loggia, the corridors, the classrooms and then the residences and the canteen, are all defined typological elements which find precedents in the history of architecture and that here, in being assembled and composed, merge into a unity of intent where the meaning is unique. The typological elements, the architectural elements and the materials used propose an image of great civil and religious value consistent with the architecture of Sant'Ambrogio and Milan itself.

²¹ G. Mezzanotte, *Le architetture...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

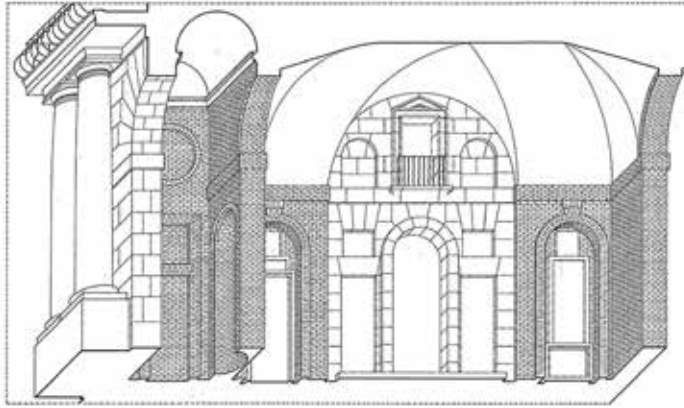


Ill. 1. General planimetry. Ground floor
 Ill. 2. Entrance building



- III. 3. Entrance building. Axonometry
- III. 4. Entrance building. Façade
- III. 5. Entrance portal. Drawing
- III. 6. Entrance building. The *Galleria* and the *Loggia*
- III. 7. Entrance portal

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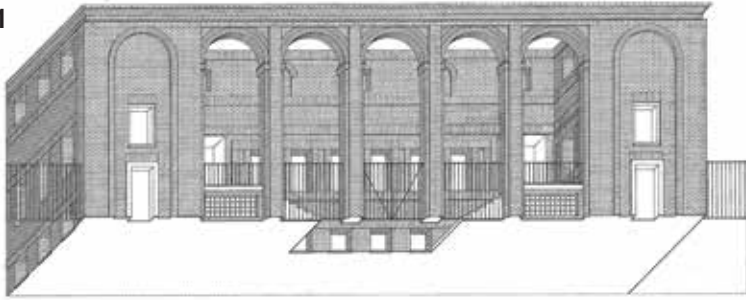
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III. 8. Entrance hall of the University

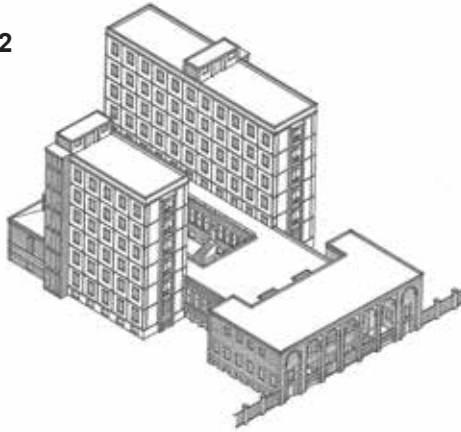
III. 9. Entrance *Galleria*

III. 10. Image of the Doric Cloister

11



12



13



14



- III. 11. Men's college dorm. Entrance building
- III. 12. Men's college dorm. Axonometric drawings
- III. 13. Men's college. Residence
- III. 14. *Aula Magna*

* The drawings were made by Gino Malacarne with Claudia Crepez and Paolo Rosso, the photo shoot is by Umberto Ferro. Some of the drawings are reworkings of Giovanni Muzio's drawings.

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