

Sport and Leisure in Rome from the Fascist Years to the Olympic Games

In the summer of 1960, Rome hosted the seventeenth Olympic Games. It was an event of paramount importance both for the image of the eternal city and for its future development. Under the pressure of the Olympics, the national government and the municipality of Rome launched major programs for building new infrastructure and sports facilities, which drastically changed the trajectories along which the city had been slowly but constantly growing. The total budget for the Olympics amounted to almost 64 billion lire; about a half of that was used to modernize the Leonardo da Vinci airport, while the remainder was spent for roads, sports facilities, residential quarters for athletes, and urban furniture.

Looking back, we realize that those projects, whose internal logic at the time seemed dictated by temporary needs and whose planning looked disorderly, were in reality intended to stake out an urban planning strategy, imposing it roughly on the debate over the new master plan then awaiting approval.

As it turned out, the works built in the years immediately preceding the Olympics became the backbone of that long-awaited plan, which was finally approved in 1962, almost two decades after the fall of the fascist regime and more than fifty years after the previous plan, dated 1911. Rome's boom in the 1960s was heavily influenced by the Olympics' impact on the existing urban structure.

This was not the first time that the eternal city had been transformed without a plan. Rome became the capital of unified Italy in September 1870. The two master plans that followed, 1873 and 1883, were approved only after the development of new districts was already concluded and the construction of new infrastructure was well under way. The plans served simply as tardy tools for reinforcing the status quo – a footprint of what was already done – rather than as programs for channeling growth, as had happened with successful foreign models.

It is worth recalling that Baron Haussmann, having recently completed his transformation of Paris, was consulted on the Italian capital's adaptation for its new role. But neither his ideas nor his suggestions found fruitful application in Rome.

Foro Italico and Eur: two sites for the Olympic Games

This essay examines the strong and wholly unsuspected continuity in the planning of sports facilities in the course of the twentieth century. I shall also discuss how this continuity has affected the destiny of the buildings and influenced present conservation policy concerning them.

When the politicians and planners responsible for the Olympics had to decide on the location of the new sports facilities, their choice revitalized a tradition that had seemed obsolete. They indicated three sites: the Foro Italico and the via Flaminia in the northeastern section of the city, and Eur southwest. Two of these sites – Foro Italico and Eur – had served to embody the power of the Fascist state.

In the late 1920s, Mussolini had envisioned the first of these as a "Mussolini Forum," later to become the Foro Italico, his "cittadella dello sport." This "sports city" was to be a unique complex of athletic facilities where young Italians would be educated in the ideology of "mens sana in corpore sano," and in the related myth of race. The name chosen – Foro Italico – was intended to evoke both the grandeur of the ancient forums and the timeless essence of Italy.

The second choice, Eur, originated as the site of the world exposition of 1942. E.42, the acronym of the event, had been dubbed the "Olimpiade della Civiltà" – the Olympics of Civilization. Fascist ideology of the early 1940s saw Rome's role as that of the lighthouse of Mediterranean culture; the world fair was to restore the Greek tradition of the Olympics as the cradle of western civilization.

Both sites went through a process of transformation and innovation in connection with the 1960 Olympic Games.

Before illustrating the architectural features of the Olympic stadium at the Foro Italico, the Sports palace at Eur, the "Palazzetto dello sport" and the Flaminio stadium along via Flaminia, it is worth recalling why and when these sites became the centers of athletic activities in Rome.

The Olympic stadium, which in the summer of 1960 hosted the Olympics inauguration ceremonies and athletic contests, resulted from the transformation of an arena built in 1938 as part of the Foro Italico. The Flaminio stadium occupied the site of the Stadio Nazionale (National Stadium), which had been erected in 1911. The two sports palaces, on the other hand, were constructed ex-novo for the Olympics.

As far as sports grounds and their locations within the city are concerned, I need to recall some facts of Rome's early twentieth-century town-planning history.

Celebrating the capital city

Rome's first twentieth-century master plan dated from 1909. Ernesto Nathan was the new mayor, elected with the support of a democratic coalition in 1907. Drawn up by the new left-wing municipal administration, with the supervision of Edmondo Sanjust di Teulada, the plan was intended to prefigure a structural system of development, which would allow the city to accommodate the 1911 celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the unification of Italy.

The program of celebrations was divided into two main sections, one dedicated to a regional and ethnographic exhibition and the other to an international fine arts exhibition. What interests us is that these two sections were planned as initial steps in the development of the city northward, beyond piazza del Popolo along both banks of the Tiber and the ancient Roman via Flaminia. On the occasion of these celebrations, Rome's first reinforced concrete bridge – Hennebique system – was built across the river at the end of the viale delle Belle Arti.

As a consequence of the 1911 exhibitions, this whole sector of the city received special attention in the plan. Sanjust was very much in favor of a development that would accommodate important infrastructures and facilities for collective use. His ideas provoked a debate with international resonance. Participants in this included the German town-planner Joseph Stübben, who made a proposal, which eventually became the point of reference for the later projects.

The exhibitions ended, and the development proceeded with results quite different from those expected. The area on the right side of the river was mainly developed for residential use, with large housing blocks around inner courtyards, wide tree-lined streets, and few office buildings. The area within the bend of the Tiber on the left bank, on the other hand, kept its original landscape, which was reinforced by the presence of the Villa Glori public park and the many private villas on the green slopes of the Parioli district.

Here along the via Flaminia, which comes out of piazza del Popolo and forms the backbone of the new development, two sports facilities were built. A horse racecourse was constructed of wood next to Villa Glori; after a few years it was relocated outside the city. The Stadio Nazionale, which had been designed by Marcello Piacentini at age thirty, was no longer in use by the mid 1930s, because of the construction of the nearby Foro Italico. In the mid 1950s, the Italian committee for the Olympic Games decided on its transformation. Pier Luigi Nervi was responsible for the new design, and between 1957 and 1959 he built the Stadio Flaminio, which occupies exactly the same site as Piacentini's Stadio Nazionale.

We will return to this area later; here my objective is to underline the continuity between plans developed in the early 1920s and the choices made half a century later for the Olympics.

Mussolini's "cittadella dello sport" and the design of the sports facilities at Foro Italico

October 28, 1922 marks the very beginning of the political changes in Italy that ended in the consolidation of the Fascist regime. The role of Rome, as the center of power, was to represent the changes Fascism intended to produce within Italian society. For several reasons analyzed by historians and architectural historians, architecture was one of the major tools for making the new regime visible and acceptable. In addition to some major competitions and relatively few new buildings, many important town-planning projects were carried out in Rome under the Fascist regime.

Three new poles were to transform the functional structure of the city. Toward the east, the new university – the "città universitaria" – was to represent education; southwest the E.42 exhibition was to embody culture; and northward the "cittadella dello sport" was to become the center for leisure activities.

Mussolini's vision of a "cittadella dello sport" dated from 1926. The Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB), a political organization for the education of Fascist youth, took charge of the whole project, and by early 1928 the commission for the design had gone to architect Enrico Del Debbio. Credit must be given to Del Debbio for the selection of the site: an area within the bend of the Tiber impressively framed by the slopes of Monte Mario between Raphael's Villa Madama and the ancient Roman bridge Ponte Milvio. The lush vegetation forming the background of

the new "sports city" was to remain intact.

This important project was intended to bring both architectural criteria and landscape issues into play. The buildings planned were to achieve a kind of Fascist Gesamtkunstwerk, combining architecture, art, and decoration.

The whole design is framed geometrically. Two longitudinal roads, one at the base of the hill and the other parallel to the river, form the distributive matrix for the plan. This layout remained more or less unchanged during the construction of the buildings, and it still provides a strong continuity between the recent transformation and the original design. Two bridges, on the northern and southern edges of the complex, served as thoroughfares to the adjacent Flaminio district.

The first building to be realized was the Fascist academy of gymnastics, soon mirrored by a symmetrical edifice. But the main features of the Foro Italico remained the large practice fields. Areas for volleyball, tennis, and rugby were laid out around the "Stadio dei Marmi" – Marble stadium –, which was shaped as a classical stadium to be used for outdoor physical training. Sixty colossal marble statues of athletes crown the uninterrupted marble seats of the Stadio dei Marmi, and give it its special appearance. They are gifts of the Italian provinces.

A large stadium for athletics was located on the northern side of the complex. This was the structure later renovated for the Olympics.

The Foro Italico layout was included in the 1931 master plan of Rome as one of the city areas set aside for recreational purposes. The plan listed the Foro as a public park with sports fields.

On November 4, 1932, in a celebration of Italy's victory in WWI and the tenth anniversary of the Fascist regime, Mussolini inaugurated the first lot of buildings: the gymnastics academy, the "Stadio dei Marmi", the "Stadio dei Cipressi" (Cypress stadium, designed by Angelo Frisa under the supervision of Del Debbio), and Mussolini's Monolith.

In the course of 1935, the overall management of the Foro underwent radical changes. Del Debbio, earlier absolute protagonist of the plan, was slowly deprived of his authority. Luigi Moretti joined the technical office of the Foro and supervised some modifications.

In 1936, after a design competition, Vincenzo Fasolo was awarded the project of a bridge in line with the center of gravity of the complex, clearly marking the Foro Italico's main entrance. Two distinctive features defined this: the obelisk, and an esplanade – the so called "Piazzale dell'Impero" – ending with the circular "Fontana della Sfera," designed by Luigi Moretti himself. The Piazzale dell'Impero, completed in 1937, provided continuity with the bridge and gave a ceremonial entrance to the Foro Italico.

Moretti's name is also directly linked to the idea of a large arena within the Foro Italico complex, known for its planned capacity as the "stadium for a hundred thousand." This was to become the Olympic stadium when the possibility of hosting the Games in Rome in 1944 arose. Moretti, in collaboration with Frisa and Achille Pintonello, designed an interesting asymmetrical structure with four orders of seats, of which the lowest one was organized as a loop, while the others, against the hillside, progressively decreased in number toward the bottom. Moretti also included an order of seats on the Tiber side.

The construction proceeded quickly; in 1938, during Hitler's visit to Rome, the stadium was officially inaugurated, though only the sports field and two orders of seats were completed. For

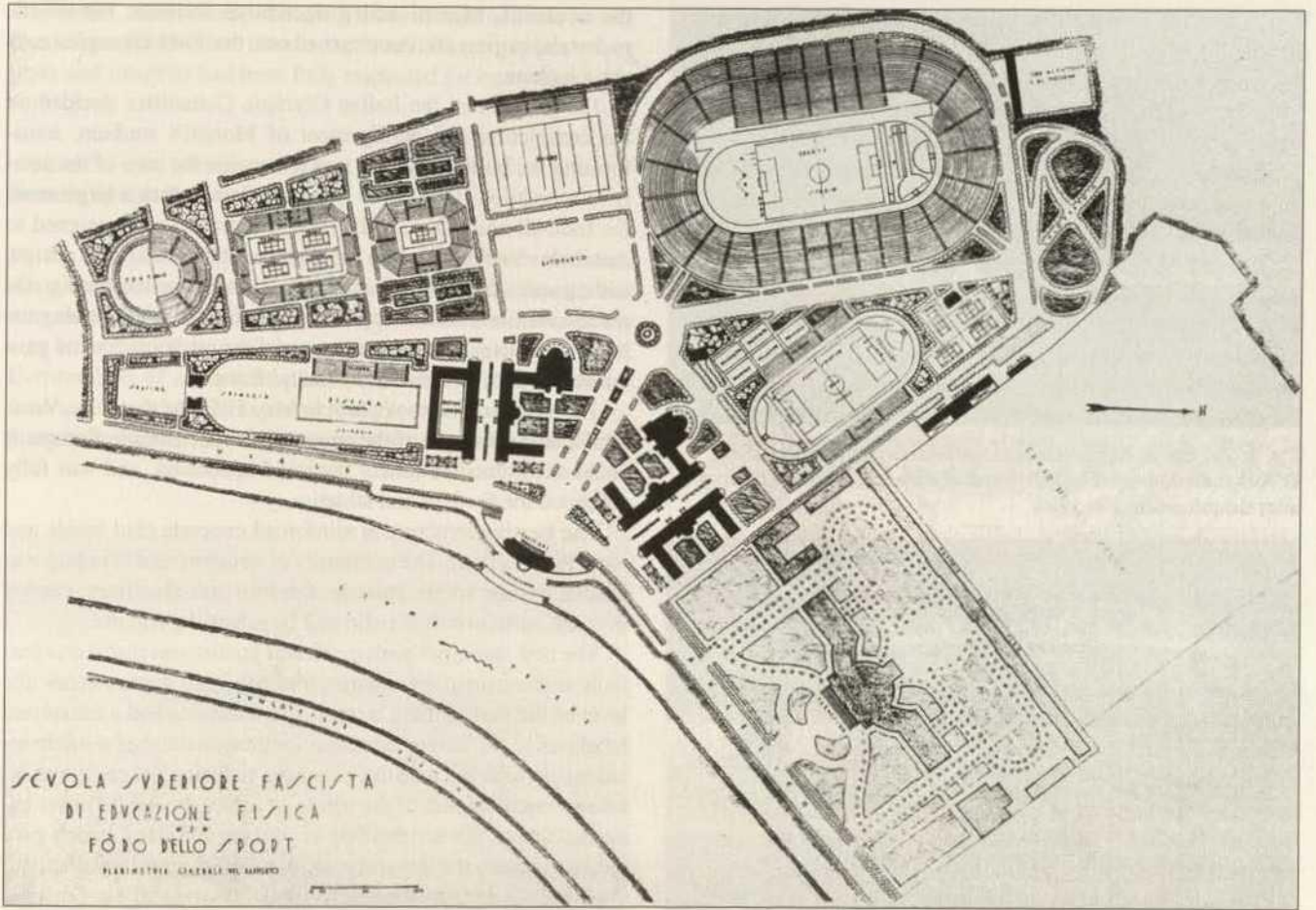


Fig. 1: Enrico Del Debbio, Master Plan of the Foro Mussolini, 1928

Fig. 2: Aerial view of the Foro Mussolini, around 1932. The Marble stadium is in the foreground; the symmetrical buildings of the fascist academy of gymnastics form the river front

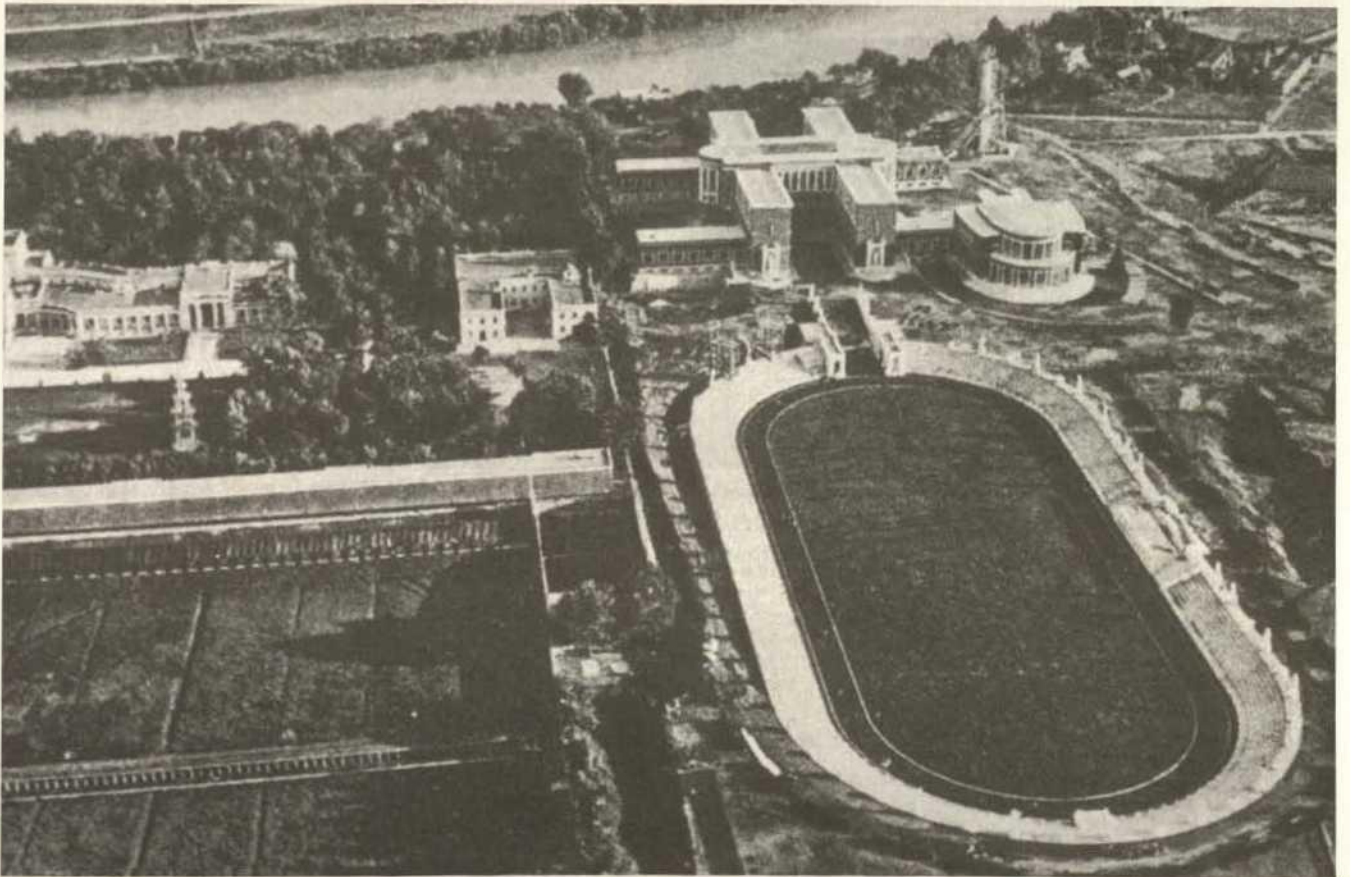




Fig. 3: The ceremonial entrance to the Foro from the bridge Duca D'Aosta: the Mussolini's obelisk and, at distance, the Stadio Olimpico after the refurbishing in 1990.



Fig. 4: The mosaics of the esplanade, called "Piazzale dell'Impero", ending with the circular "Fontana della Sfera". In the background the external ring of the reticular trusses of the Stadio Olimpico.



Fig. 5: The oval shape of the Stadio dei Marmi overshadowed by the new silhouette of the Stadio Olimpico.

Fig. 6: The silent dialogue between the marble statues of the Stadio dei Marmi and the imposing silhouette of the Stadio Olimpico.



the occasion, Moretti added decorative features: bas-reliefs, pedestals, eagles, etc. As it turned out, the 1944 Olympics never took place.

Ten years later, the Italian Olympic Committee decided on the completion and enlargement of Moretti's stadium, transforming the building, which was to become the core of the newly re-scheduled 1960 Rome Olympic Games, into a large arena for football and athletics. In 1950 the project was assigned to Annibale Vitellozzi, who re-elaborated the original design, adding some functional features for a modern sports facility. He put the cantilevered canopy over the radio and broadcasting tribune. He also extensively reorganized the inner spaces and gave the stadium its external architectural features.

The inauguration took place in May 1953. At that time, Vitellozzi's arena was one of the largest sports facilities in Europe. It could accommodate ninety thousand spectators, and was fully equipped for football and athletics.

The bearing structure is reinforced concrete clad inside and out with travertine. The continuity of structure and cladding was broken by one single episode: the iron and aluminum canopy over the curtain-walled radio and broadcasting tribune.

The new stadium's most particular feature was that it was partially underground; the sports field was 4.50 meters below the level of the surrounding terrain. The seats reached a maximum height of 12.40 meters. The stadium thus established a subtle relationship with the existing hillscape, reducing the environmental and visual impact of the whole structure. Its height never exceeded that of the surrounding vegetation and trees, which gave the Foro Italico the integral park-like aspect originally planned.

A radical and truly negative transformation of the Olympic stadium happened in 1990, when the world football championship took place in Rome and other Italian cities. While new stadiums were built on the outskirts of Turin, Milan and Bari, the city of Rome came up with nothing better but to intervene, once again, on the Moretti-Vitellozzi Olympic stadium.

Vitellozzi was initially consulted as member of a committee of experts, who, in 1987, came up with guidelines for the renovation and modernization of the stadium. The main features of the new plan were eight huge pillars in reinforced concrete, conceived to bear a transparent covering. The project chosen, elaborated by Engineering Consulting Services (Zucker office), Italprogetti, and Majowiecki (for the structural sector), proposed four 40-meter high pillars inside the perimeter of the stadium, and four others on the edge with a height of 52 meters.

Political parties, environmentalists, and ordinary citizens roundly denounced this choice, but no public opinion protest was strong enough to stop the project. Only the height of the pillars was reduced in order to diminish the environmental impact of the whole structure, but both the curving seats were demolished as well as the Monte Mario tribune; finally also the Tiber tribune was radically transformed.

Present capacity is eighty five thousand spectators. The new features mainly ameliorate the visibility of sports events and the functionality of the building. The Monte Mario tribune has been reconstructed, while the Tiber tribune has been enlarged. But the most notorious feature is the covering. The project consists of five elements: an external ring of reticular trusses with triangular section, 12.50 meters high; an internal ring of twelve tight ropes; the radial ropes connecting the two rings; the secondary reticular trusses; and the teflon covering membrane.

Today the damage wrought is visible to everyone, with the sixteen colossal pillars almost touching the statues of the Stadio

dei Marmi, substantially changing relationships of scale among the different parts. Hurt most is the Foro Italico complex, whose unity and integrity had been fully respected for more than half a century.

Nervi's Sports Palace at Eur

By the mid 1930s, the development of the Eur district far south along the "via dell'Impero" (which begins in piazza Venezia and runs through the ancient imperial forums) was conceived as the core of a "Third Rome," in accordance with plans for E.42. Eventually E.42 never took place because of WWII, but the infrastructure already built, as well as the presence of some important buildings, had left the area with good potential for

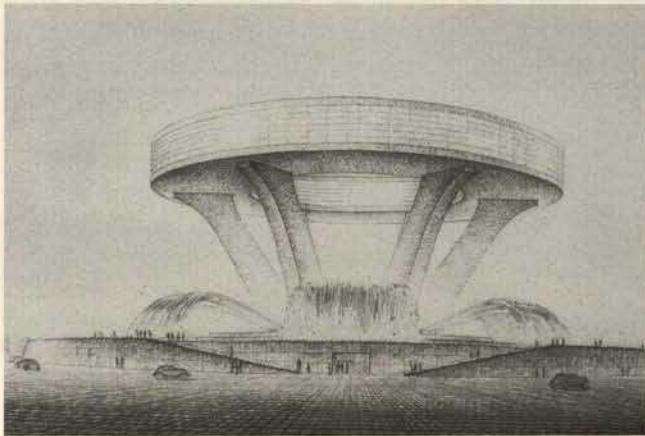


Fig. 7: Pier Luigi Nervi, Design competition for the Palace of Water and Light at E.42, 1938. The building was planned to occupy the site where the Palazzo dello Sport was eventually realized in 1960.



Fig. 8: Pier Luigi Nervi and Marcello Piacentini, Palazzo dello Sport in Rome (1956-60). General view from via del Mare.

Fig. 9: Pier Luigi Nervi and Annibale Vitellozzi, Palazzetto dello Sport in Rome (1956-58). General view.

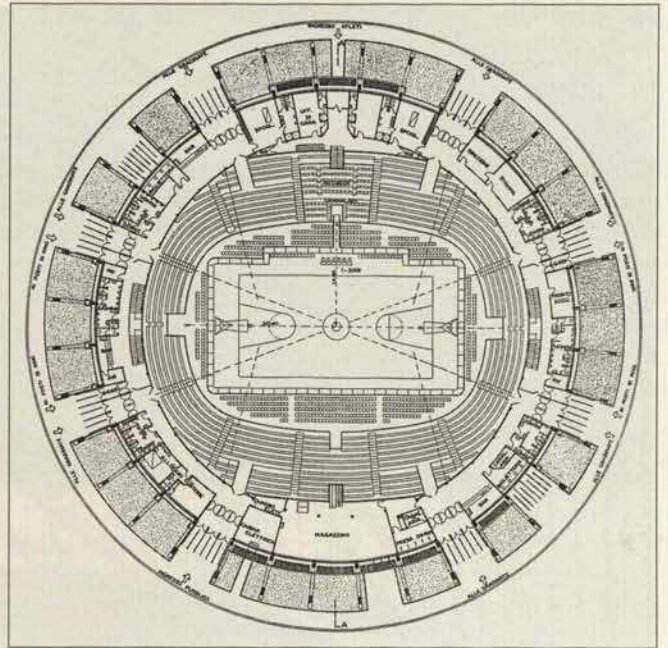


Fig. 10: Pier Luigi Nervi and Annibale Vitellozzi, Palazzetto dello Sport in Rome (1956-58). Plan at entrance level. It shows the seat rows and the field for indoor tennis and basketball.

growth. As noted above, the Italian Olympic Committee in elaborating the overall plan for the 1960 Olympics, indicated Eur as one of the locations for hosting athletic events.

But by the late 1950s, when the plan for the Games urgently needed approval, the distance between the two main sites – Foro Italico and Eur – was an unresolved problem. To create easy access between the sports sites, construction of a new peripheral road, named via Olimpica, was necessary. This road connects the Eur neighborhood to the Foro Italico through the western side of the city, and finally creates a link to via Salaria, one of the ancient Roman "consular roads" which goes toward the Apennine mountains.

Today this whole system has been extended to become part of an inner ring road. Though the via Olimpica was planned for high-speed traffic, its construction was based mainly on the re-configuration of existing roads. It also benefited from two tunnels built in 1931 for a railway ring never put into operation. Generally speaking, these circumstances noticeably reduced the functionality of the new infrastructure system.

At Eur, Pier Luigi Nervi and Marcello Piacentini designed the main sports facility, the Palazzo dello Sport (Sports Palace). Selection of architects for the Olympic sports facilities, in fact, represents another aspect of the continuity between pre and post-Fascist Italy that I have noted.

Located on the main Eur axis, the Palazzo dello Sport reflects the same inspiration that guided Piacentini in his 1932 plan for E.42. In that plan, a theatrical triumphal arch, designed by Adalberto Libera, formed the backdrop of the "decumanus maximus" connecting the center of the city to the sea, so celebrating Rome's Mediterranean origin – an obvious ideological and symbolic project.

The choice of the site was highly academic, but Nervi's solution for the Palazzo dello Sport was quite innovative, redeeming the building from pure formalism. A spherical bowl, supported by reinforced concrete pillars, whose inclination is determined



Fig. 11: Pier Luigi Nervi and Annibale Vitellozzi, Palazzetto dello Sport in Rome (1956-58). Detail of the seat rows and of the „cupola“ which covers the hall. The „cupola“ is composed of 1620 pre-cast reinforced concrete sections with 19 different sets of dimensions.

Fig. 12: Pier Luigi Nervi and Antonio Nervi, Stadio Flaminio in Rome (1957-59). General view with the Palazzetto dello Sport and, in the background, the white volume of the Foreign Affairs Ministry and the Foro Italico.



by the structural calculus of the different thrusts, covers the central space of the Palazzo, almost 100 meters in width. Pre-cast ribs with a V section articulate the spherical bowl. The space shows a great sense of lightness and luminosity.

The Palazzo dello Sport, whose capacity is sixteen thousand spectators, was fully equipped for indoor sports activities, boxing, basketball, and tennis. Thanks to the flexibility of the plan and to excellent acoustics, it was later used for concerts and many other performances as well.

At present Nervi's Palazzo is seriously threatened. It is worth noticing that Eur, a private agency with little national and municipal participation, owns all the buildings realized according to the plan for E.42. Neither these buildings nor the ensemble of Eur are listed as "monuments," despite the monumentality of their original conception. Nor are they protected as modern heritage; officially their value is commercial rather than cultural.

The future of this whole section of the city is still quite unclear. This is very much the case of the Palazzo dello Sport, which has not been used in the last five years. In the late 1990s, Vittorio Gregotti was asked to submit a project for restoring the building's curtain walls and the reinforced concrete structures. He was also asked to study its functional rehabilitation – air conditioning, safety standards, other facilities, etc., which are mandatory for a building intended for public use. Gregotti's design showed little if any concern for the original building and its authentic spatial and structural value. When I interviewed Eur's president about the many deficiencies of Gregotti's plan, he spoke very frankly about his priority: improvement of the building's capacity for making profit. Eur needs to pay for the building's maintenance, but in present conditions that means only a total loss of money.

The contradictions between conservation and possible uses are evident. I am very much in favor of careful rehabilitation. Aside from other considerations, Rome lacks spaces like the Palazzo dello Sport, useful for a variety of events, including rock concerts.

The Olympic village and the via Flaminia sports facilities

To return to the area around via Flaminia, selected as the third center for Olympic sports facilities; here the Stadio Flaminio replaced the Stadio Nazionale, and the Palazzetto dello Sport, the residential quarter for the athletes, and the headquarters of sports federations were all built close by.

The Villaggio Olimpico – Olympic village – the original residential area for the athletes, was commissioned to a group of architects under the supervision of Adalberto Libera. Three main streets and a hill mark the perimeter of the village, which thus remains an almost isolated cluster within a high-density urban tissue.

Though the village was built under cost constraints and time pressure, the designers were able to apply the principles of modern movement town planning, achieving high quality results. Different housing types, for a total of 1,800 apartments, are in harmony with the environment. All housing units are elevated on pilotis, a solution offering transparency at ground level. In addition, more than half the ground surface is occupied by open green spaces.

The Stadio Flaminio and the Palazzetto dello Sport are located on one side of the village, and the latter serves as hinge between the housing area and the city.

Pier Luigi Nervi designed the Palazzetto as well as the Stadio Flaminio and the elevated viaduct of corso Francia, which crosses the village. Nervi is internationally renowned for his structural sensibility and for his skill in molding reinforced concrete elements into sophisticated forms. The Palazzetto dello Sport, recently restored, is an excellent example of Nervi's talent. The project shows some analogies with the contemporary Palazzo dello Sport at Eur. Here again we see a circular space, 50 meters wide, covered by a spherical bowl. The thin roof is supported by 36 Y-shaped elements in reinforced concrete. An uninterrupted transparent surface separates the roof from the massive wall, which forms the plinth of the building. Nervi offers an almost classical statement!

Epilogue

A few remarks in conclusion. It is clear that the high quality of the buildings discussed demands special care and good conservation expertise. Such care is far from being given. In addition, and independently of concern for conservation of the buildings' architectural value, what really worries me is the total absence of any control of growth in the three areas I have dealt with. They are all under pressure. Two examples. Close to the Palazzo dello Sport, the new convention center designed by Massimiliano Fuksas will soon be under construction; this will radically change the functional and urban structure of Eur. What role will be assigned to the Palazzo dello Sport?

What is happening daily at the Flaminio quarter is very similar. Renzo Piano's new auditorium will be inaugurated in the spring of 2002. The building occupies an interstice between the Villaggio Olimpico and the two sports facilities. The dynamics, which will inevitably transform the surroundings, are under no scrutiny at all: new uses, changed demographics, traffic, diverse rhythms of use during day and by night, pollution, and so forth. Rome's twentieth century fate seems to be to live the same story over and over again, a story of fragmentation of plans and of decisions taken at random. In the year 2002, Rome is still waiting for approval of the new master plan. Forty years have passed, and the city has seen various special laws (the most recent one, "la legge speciale per il Giubileo, 2000" gave big resources for restoration of historic buildings) and many changes of governments. No preservation policy can be truly effective, because the modern heritage can achieve recognition only through public awareness and through a policy of planning at all levels of state and municipal activity.

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Fig. 13: Adalberto Libera (coordinator), Vittorio Cafiero, Luigi Moretti, Vincenzo Monaco, Amedeo Luccichenti, Villaggio Olimpico in Rome (1958-60). Aerial view of the residential clusters. Three bridges cross the Tiber: Ponte Flaminio in continuity with the elevated viaduct of corso Francia, still under construction; the ancient Roman Ponte Milvio, in the middle; and Ponte Duca D'Aosta, which leads to the main axis of the Foro Italico complex.

