The definition of an urban and global icon. Public-private strategies for the regeneration of the Museum “Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, Rome”

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The role that historically played certain institutions as effective creators of the cultural city presents a new variant with the configuration of important international business conglomerates. These groups, capable of articulating different socio-economic structures, also produce an architectural reality linked to their needs, from a strictly functional horizon or as representative iconic values. The case of the Palazzo de la Civiltà Italiana, projected by Giovanni Guerrini, Ernesto Lapadula and Mario Romano, and started in 1938, is revealing of this contemporary business paradigm. It was conceived as the emblematic museum of the failed Universal Exposition of Rome, 1942 and has been in a continuous process of programmatic redefinition since those years that saw it stand up and that augured a destination for it as Museo della Civiltà. Different cultural approaches have been filling it but in no case with a relevant repercussion neither for its immediate environment nor for the effective construction of the public city. Currently, after the agreement reached in 2013 between the management company of the property and the FENDI house, its exhibition spaces have been reduced significantly, but it has a new program that has regenerated it as a headquarters building program and as a global icon.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE BUILDING REALITY OF THE CORPORATIONS

The definition of the corporate architecture is a complex process and presents different headlines. Some of these are defined by certain functional scales, others for questions of company policy or historical reality. In 2017, Foster + Partners carried out the project of the flagship store of the Apple company on Michigan Avenue in the city of Chicago. This small pavilion is covered by a carbon fiber sheet that evokes the Macbook pro and while transferring to urban scale those symbols of lightness and elegance typical of such electronic equipment.

If we make a brief study of the above topics, among the European magnates of the luxury sector, we can verify the relevance of certain architectural events within their development, business and personal plans. The three large groups of this segment, led by the Pinault family (Kering), Miuccia Prada and Bernard Arnault (LVMH), have significant headquarters due to their position in the city and the historical values of that buildings. El 40th of the Rue des Sevres in Paris, from where Pinault runs his emporium, is a relevant example. It is a place very close to the Eiffel Tower. The Invalides and the Luxembourg Gardens, in the District VII of Paris. The building, cataloged as a Historical Monument by the French administration, is the old Lannec Hospital, a very interesting piece built in the 17th century that is now used as a business headquarters. We can study the personal and cultural project of its founder: the Pinault Foundation with branches in Venice, Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana. In 2019, this institution will inaugurate its new venue, the Paris Stock Exchange, also monument which has been rehabilitated according to Tadao Ando’s project after having reached an agreement with the municipal government of Anne Hidalgo.

The Prada Epicenter of Tokyo, by Herzog and De Meuron, New York, by OMA and the headquarters of its foundation also according to the project of the Dutch Rem Koolhaas, are remarkable data of this architecture-Prada connection. Its new Productive Headquarters, in Arezzo, developed by Canali associa-ti, is a finalist of the Mies van der Rohe Awards 2019. LVMH, the largest global luxury conglomerate is no stranger to these actions. Its president, Bernard Arnault, commissioned the construction of the headquarters of the Louis Vuitton Foundation to Frank Gehry, which was opened in 2014 in Paris. This building rises in the public forest of the Bois de Boulogne after having reached an agreement with the different administrations involved in the management of this site, after having overcome certain neighborhood opposition. Outside of different specialized sectors, these quality works do not achieve recognition by the general public as it happens with mythical Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.

THE INVOLVEMENT OF COMPANIES IN CULTURAL POLICIES

Private capital, from different sources has been an agent capable of promoting cultural policies at different levels. Important private headquarters, with vocation for public service, have been formalized under the umbrella of the benefits achieved by certain entrepreneurs. This situation has led to a transfer of knowledge and human resources from the canonical museum institutions, cultural references of governments, to the corporate structures. Here are two examples to focus on: Richard Calvocoressi, former Director of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, migrated as director and senior curator to the Gagosian Gallery in London. This situation has led to a transfer of knowledge and human resources from the canonical Suzzane Pagé, director of the Museum of Modern Art, migrated as director and senior curator to the Gagosian Gallery in London. This situation has led to a transfer of knowledge and human resources from the canonical Suzanne Pagé, director of the Museum of Modern Art of the Villa de Paris, has been the artistic director of the Louis Vuitton Foundation since 2006. The economic strength of these new centers makes possible the configuration of museum projects that use to replicate standard formulas that public institutions had built through extensive experience. These policies have been accompanied by arrangements of public-private collaboration, as exemplified by different sponsorships. At this point, stand out the 25 M euros contributed by Tod’s for the restoration of the Colosseum. These dynamics also generate different conflicts during the execution of the works. The covering of monuments generates different conflicts such as the disappointment of those who travel miles away just to see a hidden monument. This was evident during the restoration works of the Fontana della Barcaccia, in the Roman Piazza di Spagna. Later experiences with methacrylate fences, for example, have improved this situation. The conserva-tion of heritage, the exhibition programs have been significantly promoted by this collaborative way.
THE NEW REALITY OF PALAZZO DELLA CIVILTÀ ITALIANA

The fashion house FENDI was placed in the Largo Carlo Goldoni, 420, Rome, a bourgeois palace of the sixteenth century that closes at one end the Via Condotti, a world reference for this commercial sector. This was the representative building of the brand in the city; today, inside, we could find a shop, a hotel and one restaurant. The building has been transformed into a complex of functional programs that could help eventual customers and that can be complementary to each other. This was possible after the transfer to a new headquarters of the staff from this place. In front of the main façade, Fendi commissioned the artist Giuseppe Penone to carry out a work, Foglie di Pietra, which now boasts the honor of being the first permanent, contemporary sculpture in the Roman public space that was given to the city, in the year 2017 by Italian Company. This item shows us a new way of culture, administration and business triangle.

THE FAILED PROCESS FROM THE PALAZZO TO THE MUSEO DELLA CIVILTÀ

In 1922, Benito Mussolini ordered the March on Rome to his acolytes to carry out a demonstration of strength that led him, in October, to the appointment as Prime Minister of Italy. This year was sanctified in the fascist myths and that is why around it a program of commemorations was articulated, among which the X Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista (1932) and the Universal Exhibition Rome (1942) which never never celebrated. The first one was inspired by Dino Alfieri, president of the Fascist Institute of Culture of Milan. It was held at the Exhibition Center of the Via Nazionale in Rome and had the project of Adalberto Libera. The architect worked with Mario de Renzi and Antonio Valente and we could emphasize the construction of a façade attached to the main one that created a new urban scenography dominated by four monumental refined fasces. The second one, and failed, had already been a victory for the regime to have obtained the permission, on the part of the competent international organism, to change the date of 1941, officially foreseen for the celebration, by the one of 1942, coinciding with the twentieth anniversary of the arrival to the power of the Duca. EUR / 42 universal fair should have been the turning point for the national character of the Mussolini movement to reach an international diffusion and to be understood from a universalist perspective. The exhibition of 1932 had established the message that, a decade before, not only the renaissance of Italy had developed, but also that of the whole of Europe and that of the whole of civilization. The project of 42 should present the primacy of the country and the ideology that governed it in a global framework. The exhibition aim was defined by a singular political vision.

After the “first Rome”, the Imperial one. After the “second Rome”, that of the Popes one, the “third Rome”, the fascist one, would be built. An idea that involved the restructuring of a new capital. This plan was based on different strategies, one of the most important being that which made “demolitions” an extraordinary creative act. This phenomenon protected the elimination of historical additions in order to edit a true and unique urban environment linked to the imposed fascist values. The primo colpo di piccone activated an architectural and ideological machinery. The planning-demolition-recreation sequence is what leads to “cosmicization” as Mircea Eliade points out. A process designed to formalize the prevailing ideology in the city. Different restoration programs, such as those set up in the EUR, Siena or San Gimignano, also showed how the urban project can be put at the service of a determined ideological rhetoric.

For the truncated event of 1942, this dynamic was not followed and a new construction was projected that would suppose the prolongation of the city according to the urban plans emanating between 1925 and 1926, which anticipated the dialogue between the operations developed in the historic centre together with new and modern extensions of the capital. Urban planning for EUR / 42 started in 1936 and would be led by Marcello Piacentini, one of the most relevant architects of that moment and inside the history of the discipline in Italy. It would be a true model of fascist city that connects with the ancient city and also with the Mare Nostrum through Ostia. It was meant to reflect the environmental and scenographic values of this new ideology. It would be located in the southern periphery, with an area of about 400 ha. This and new place was design to have a pentagonal perimeter, organized by clearly defined axes, with relevant aquatic areas along with a large group of buildings.

Adalberto Libera, architect, must be pointed out: the symbolic Arch would have been his and his is the built one, Congress Hall. This urban operation, over historical and ideological distances, could be read from a “patriotic colossalism” similar to the Mail of Washington. After Italian participation in World War II, the project collapsed, as an ephemeral and as a new neighborhood. After this dramatic crisis, only a few buildings had been erected and the urbanization was partially executed. The place recovered gradually and in 1953, the Esposizione Internazionale dell’Agricoltura would be held there. In 1960 part of the Olympic venues will be arranged in the EUR and is currently considered to be the financial complex of the city with different established companies headquarters. The area is governed by the public company EUR spa, which has been transforming its legal structure over the years until in 2000 it acquired its current shareholding where 90% is owned by the Ministry of Economy and Finance and the 10% remaining is in the hands of the municipality of Rome.

The emblematic building, the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, which was the keypoint to the program of the Universal Exhibition of 1942, was built, accidentally, between 1938 and 1942 with an intermediate open ceremony in 1940. It is the magnum opus of Ernesto Labadula, Giovanni Guerini and Mario Romano after having been winners in an open competition versus other names of great relevance and capacity of that times as Mario Ridolfi, who was recognized with the third prize in the call.

It is a 51 X 51 m block in plan and, an approximate, height of 68 m that rises on a great podium with ceremonial staircases. There is an area under the body of stairs and six levels of floor, plus terrace, above this ceremonial access. This volume has a repetitive façade system on all four sides. This is configured by a series of perimeter galleries, with 216 identical half-point arches. These arches articulate a setback of the effective closing glazing of the internal spaces of this building. The space housed in the stylobate and the access plant do occupy the entirety of its perimeter and in the other levels is located a central courtyard, 10 X 15 m² that perforates them vertically together with the communications kit. If we add surfaces of central patio and galleries we could check that these ones reduce, remarkably, available surface of each level. This image of refined arches connects with the idea, “(...) essential of the Roman and Italian architectural art”, demanded by competition general rules. It is obvious the connection with the Flavian Amphitheater but also presents the debate to discern what was the fascist architectural style, if the rationalist, led by the editor of the magazine Quadrante, Pietro Maria Bardi or another more historical and “metaphysical”. It is true that arcades are one of the most characteristic architectural structures of the cities built during this political regime régimen.

The Palazzo would house the main exhibition to be held during this 1942 universal exhibition and it should show the influence of the Italian civilization in different events and epochs, being understandable both for people of refined culture and for general citizenship. It would establish a sequential track capable of explaining the Italian civilization from its origins to our days, keeping in mind that this proposed museography should be configured with a goal of durability over time. The dialogue with the building would be complex. The Palazzo had been conceived as a symbol above any other functional program and the spatial configuration that we have
previously indicated involved a deep reflection on how to effectively articulate the different elements that would make up the exhibition. Groundfloor, according dimensions and structure, was the level that could offer better conditions as a museum. In the upper floors, dimensions and orientations, to mention some points of relevance, we could not find same options. This situation, in a certain sense, links it to some problems that we would locate in the New National Gallery of Berlin of Mies van der Rohe, but in any case, the building does not verify the solutions that modernity would understand as necessary in these kind of buildings: flexible grid isotropic (flexibility), glazing (exterior interior continuity) and white cube (neutrality).

We could consider that lack of modernity and functionality has conditioned its consideration as an adequate space for art but has helped to build its iconic condition from other parameters.

In 1938, expert panels of the general program began its activities under the presidency of Pietro De Francisci, rector of Sapienza.

This very previous year, certifies a relevant interest of this operation and this time of reflection that would take this project. Exhibition program had an important challenge: to condense hundred of events derived from a history of thousands of years. It must also be able to educate while activating the sensibility of the visitor, local and foreign. It is here where the instruments proposed to build this visual essay became transcendental: maps, dioramas, schemas and pictorial figurations, among others were studied. A list of exhibition tools, in line with those used in other modern universal fairs, and that could lead these challenges by synthesis and clarity through this museographic discourse.

Ernesto Lapadula had been one of the designers most involved in the Mostra autarchica del Minerale Italiano at Circo Massimo between 1938-1939. This event, focused on dualities: science-technique, art-culture, can be considered one of the exhibition antecedents closest to what the museographic system to be developed in the Palazzo should have been. In the sketches of the project that had to be produced, we see how all those didactic elements dialogue with original and emblematic pieces for the specific message that each room would transmit. We must emphasize that, in most of them, we do not locate any trace that places us in the Palazzo-museum; a fact that reveals the difficulties of the dialogue between container and content.

Main items would be: culture, art, history and politics. The Palazzo would be a tabernacle where to find values of that civilization, which had been filtered by a fascist ideological tool. This building should be stand up in the post-exhibition district. It would be the core of the future model of the Italian City, that was born in this context and place, and that would be renamed as Museo della Civiltà.

During the Second World War it was partially used by the German occupation troops. After that tragedy, in 1951, the possibility of using it as the headquarters of the National Library was studied. In 1953, after partial restoration works, it was the site on irrigation and transformation of lands within the International Agricultural Exhibition. In 1956 it became the place of the Federazione dei Cavallieri del Lavoro. In 1959 it will also use by the Military Aviation. In 2001 the official competition was published to adapt it as Museo Nazionale dell'Audiovisivo that did not materialize. Between 2006-2008 there is a comprehensive rehabilitation financed by public institutions which were monument managers. In 2013, Armani used this property as a set for an important event. This year will also be a turning point in the biography of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana.

Since its founding, as an icon for EUR-42, its functions had been established within the orbit of cultural programs but with a notable variety of them. We must highlight that in the same area, today we can find museum centers such as the National Museum of Art and Popular Traditions, the National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography “Luigi Pigorini” or the National Museum of Medieval Art that coexist with business headquarters such as Poste Italiane. This neighborhood presents a unique reality defined by the dialogue between heritage, biodiversity and the economic development of the area. A place where we can locate an important inflation of cultural buildings, although, of not very well known by great public that lives and visits the city.

THE LINK BETWEEN CASA FENDI AND ROME

We will not enter into the exegesis of the brand, but in 1918 the FENDI house was founded, focused on the manufacture of leather goods. Its recent history is marked by the loss of its original independence and its integration in the LVMH conglomerate.

This group together with Prada had paid around 1,000 M euros for 51% of the company. In 2001 the French conglomerate buys the 25.5% that was in property of Prada with a disbursement of about 295 M and to be able to control effectively the company.

2013 will be key for the new “romanization” of the company. At this moment, it was designed a brand new logo in which the word Roma appears under the name of the company for the very first time in its history. Same year there was also a decisive event for the immediate future of the company; Fendi agrees with the public company, EUR S.p.A, the exploitation of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana for a period of 15 years, at a rate of around 2.9 M euros per year.

To this new location, emblematic and conflictive as few in the contemporary history of the city, will be where the Italian house moves its central headquarters. Undoubtedly, these are two issues that reinforce the link, the association, between the company and the city.

THE FUNCTIONAL REGENERATION OF THE MUSEUM-ICON AS A NECESSARY STRATEGY FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW GLOBAL IMAGE

Between 2013 - 2015, architect Marco Constanță, functionally rehabilitates the building in order to be able to accommodate new tenants, its administrative and creative departments together with a small exhibition and dissemination activities centre of design made in Italy open to all type of audience. This building is occupied by 450 Fendi employees. These will settle on the six upper levels and the basement. In the intervention, which has involved the articulation of a new program of mixed uses, the typology of the building has been verified as a flexible matrix, as indicated by Carlos Martí, where different strategies end up by configuring it, really, in time.

This situation, derived from a public-private strategy, has meant that the area destined for exhibitions is quite insignificant in the building, although, being on the ground floor, it has a leading feature because it is the place to receive all those who have climbed the monumental stairways. This level shares space with the communication kits allocated to the offices. The podium floor, the one that had a more suitable configuration to support an exhibition program, is destined to other dependencies of the company such as the coffee bar. It is necessary a reflection, still pending to materialize, around how this podium level should build a public plan in continuity with the rest of the EUR. This question would be decisive for the building itself and the whole district.

The first exhibitions held have focused on Italian issues and on the universe and culture of the brand itself, which now, holds the exploitation of the property. The first one, of 2015, honored its location, Una nuova Roma. L’EUR e il Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana. Later, Fendi: the artisans of dreams, arrived in 2016, where some of the most unique creations linked to the artisanal work of the firm were exhibited. Giuseppe Peroone: Matrice, 2017, showed an anthological sample of the work of the last 50 years of the artist and the most transcendent of this series, and Fendi Studios, 2018, developed during Rome Film Festival and which serves to reveal some of the contributions from the company to the world of celluloid. All of them reached an important diffusion in generalist media although they have verified diverse arguments and far from the ambitious...
exhibition that sought to treasure the Palazzo in its genesis. Let us remember Mussolini’s effort to build an exhibition complex in which to showcase the determining values of a civilization. A work developed for a successive years where some of the most relevant personalities of culture, art, architecture and politics of the moment were involved. A proposal that should be perennial in time. From an open approach, these current exhibitions, of a temporary nature, contrast with those existing in museums located in the same district and we could consider that these ones cover a more popular and ephemeral intellectual space. Undoubtedly, this interpretation should be done from our time and where a certain dose of “spectacular” and appearance characterize these proposals that have also reached places like the Ara Pacis in Rome and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

We can study, in both situations, that discourse centered on specific themes of the country, a blurred connecting thread that links, weakly, past and current museum discourses. Rémy Zaugg points out: “Any architectural element that does not respect the right angle will disturb the immediate and direct perceptive relationship. The architecture will interfere...” It will be a place full of subjectivity, where the expression of the work will be violated or distorted. This text also refers to a continuity in time that has not been undermined by the new tenant: the uniqueness of the building has not been dematerialized for better museum or commercial development. The conceptual and aesthetic values of construction have endured, in substance and in form.

The exhibition issue has maintained its presence in the complex but subordinated to the corporate functions. The iconic reality of the building will also be affected by the settlement of the Fendi house in its place. A global image of the building is being projected, free of any political stain, by using different tools, as a key vehicle for the construction of the Fendi brand internationally.

Since its effective installation in this location, this fashion company has begun a systematic incorporation of the Palazzo’s characteristic shapes to all its campaigns and sales center. In that year 2015, it commissioned the architect Emilia Serra and the designer Andrea Mancuso to develop a new project: FENDI and “Analoga Project”, Traces of Palazzo Civiltà Italiana. A work that feeds on the structure of the building to generate some pieces (volumetric variations) of different condition and scale that continue to influence the presentation of the values and paradigms of a global brand. The arcade is the protagonist of this process that will identify shop windows, interiors and spaces of the company in any city in the world.

This project is added to other more kitsch and mass reach strategies where the arches and their developments are not addressed from a refined aesthetic project howse a recognizable hallmark. We could achieve several examples of this situation at FENDI store in the Ginza district of Tokyo and the Pop-Up Store in Dubai. The first one is located in a privileged corner of a generic building. Here, a new vitreous facade, has been arranged as a dihedral arcade in four levels. The second one is based on the construction of a cube, of around six meters on each side, with six levels of arches destined to the exhibition of the company’s products. A kind of simplified replica of the headquarters. This reality is amplified by the publication and distribution of different images and catalogues where the models of the house colonize the Palazzo.

In a way, all this one was already advanced by Federico Fellini in the dream world of Le tentazioni del dottor Antonio 1962, where the historic building had been reproduced to face the scale of the actress Anita Ekberg. The reference to Walter Benjamin is inevitable and the debate between the cultural value of the work and its visibility is crucial to be able to reach a case like the one exposed.

The history of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana has been intense as we can discover in its biography. The different functions planned for its development, mainly museum and exhibitions, had become an architectural body devoid of relevant activity neither for its district nor for the whole city. This situation, critical for a construction conceived as iconic, had been distilled by all the agents involved in its management and by a series of administrative inertia that had marked its evolution over time. The articulation of a new strategy, public-private, respectful of the existing typology and free of political accents, has led to the Palazzo’s functional recovery while re-launching its singular value within global business coordinates. The definition of an expositive, measured and temporary reality, combined with another of a productive nature has meant the effective reactivation of this place.

This reality, under construction, does yield some first positive data for its rehabilitation as a place of work and enjoyment of citizens and as an architectural emblem, rediscovered internationally. This is a case of how the architectural object can overcome its initial premises to participate, decisively, in the construction of a new public and global city.

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Images
01. Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, detail entry façade, EUR, Rome. (Photo: author).
02. Presentation of the rehabilitation project of the Paris Stock Exchange as the new headquarters of the Pinault Foundation, Paris, 2017 (Tadao Ando, architect, Pinault family and Paris Mayor, Anne Hidalgo, appear in this image).

