

The Missing Piece. Luigi Moretti's Shrine to the Martyrs of the Fascist Revolution at the Foro Mussolini, Rome



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Abstract The September–October 1943 double-issue of the bulletin of the National Fascist Union of Italian architects presented an account of the shrine dedicated to the martyrs of the fascist revolution, Luigi Moretti's last work at the Foro Mussolini, Rome. Soon destroyed, in the decades after the war its short existence is forgotten or even questioned. Despite several attempts, only a decade ago Vittorio Vidotto has identified the actual collocation of the shrine into some rooms on the ground floor of the North guesthouse building. An analysis of either unpublished or almost unknown reports and descriptions of the construction stages, performed in the light of digital drawing, allows to reconstruct both the historical events and the architectural form of what can be considered as the missing piece of Moretti's outstanding artistic trajectory in the Foro Mussolini.

Keywords Luigi Moretti · Foro Mussolini · Fascism architecture · Architecture reconstruction

1 Introduction

The shrine dedicated to the martyrs of the fascist revolution is a small interior architecture built in 1940 in the Foro Mussolini and destroyed in the summer of 1944, after the liberation of Rome from the Nazi-fascist occupation. A minor work in the production of the Roman architect Luigi Moretti (1906–1973), the shrine was as neglected as the memory of its actual location till a few years ago. Anyway, it presents elements of interest at various levels. It is part of a very complex historical-political scenario, which presents the clash of strong personalities against the background of the cultural evolution of fascism and the events that will lead Italy into the war.

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Furthermore, the shrine, maybe the only fascist monument destroyed in the whole Foro, constitutes a significant piece of a large-scale project developed by Moretti for the northern area of Rome. Finally, it was a sophisticated spatial mechanism that demonstrated Moretti's design skills in distilling his research on Baroque spatiality, in elaborating the authentic values of Fascism and in controlling the image and media reception of the work itself. To investigate these latter issues, a survey of the existing structures and the information provided by the few primary and secondary sources still existing have been used for a reconstruction of the lost architecture. In particular, the preliminary results of a digital model of the shrine are here presented to describe the initial context, the design choices, the development of the construction stage and the geometric solutions adopted to alter the perception of space, as evidenced by the photographs of the time.

2 Historical-Political Frame: Moretti, Muti and the Foro Mussolini

On the eve of June 10th, 1940, the date of Italy's entry into the Second World War, the Foro Mussolini was a sort of modern "media" square designed to stage the representation of Fascism and the Third Rome (Fig. 1). The Carrara-born hierarch Renato Ricci, president of the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB), had formerly conceived the Foro as a citadel dedicated to the training of managers deputed to framing of the new generation of the party.

The ouster of Ricci from the presidency of ONB took place in 1937 according to the practice of the *promoveatur ut amoveatur*. It appeared as a symbolic operation, marked by the change of name of the youth organization in the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* (GIL), in order to metabolize it in the body of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF). It also had the consequence of stopping the Foro's revision process, originally aimed at celebrating the new colonial Italy and the figure of its leader.

The operation involved Luigi Moretti, whose role in the development of the Foro has been largely investigated [1–12]. Moretti was able to catch and shape the dream of the Tuscan leader better than anyone else. Enrico Del Debbio (1891–1973), the former architect of the Foro, had left him the Academy of physical education and the Academy of music, with the swimming pools; the fields for athletics and the tennis court, whose upper limit was suggestively crowded with the marble simulacra offered by the Italian provinces; the guest rooms; the archetypical sphere and monolith at the ends of the dirt square where the reviews of young fascists' wards took place. Moretti stitched up these buildings arranged on the slopes of Monte Mario within an interstitial connective fabric made of barely perceptible pavement marks and areas covered with black-and-white tiles. In particular, he developed an iconographic repertoire that exalted the exploits of fascist Italy born under the aegis of the constellation of Leo, the Duce's natal astrological theme.

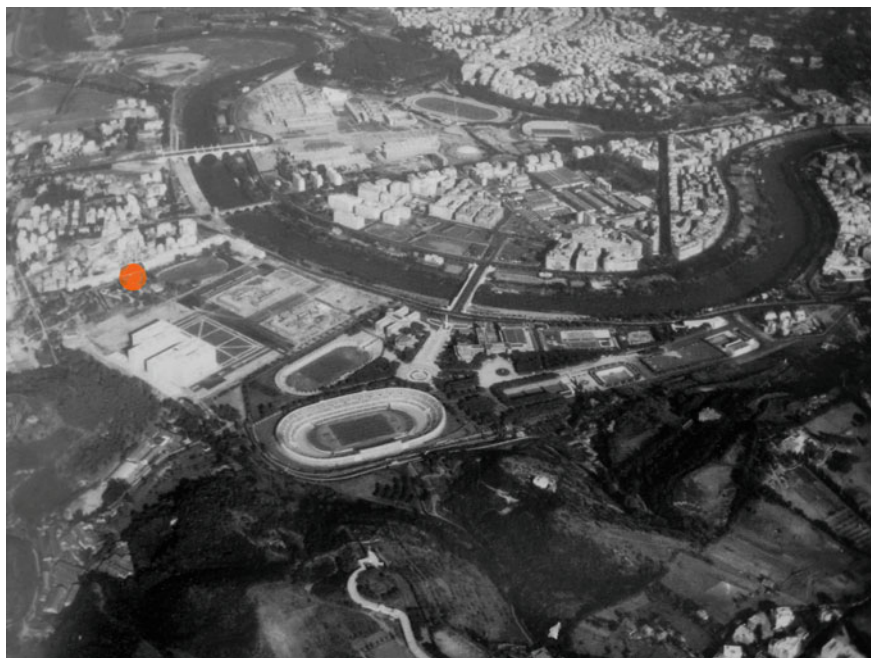


Fig. 1 Bird's eye view of the Foro Mussolini, early 1940s. The orange dot indicates the position of Moretti's shrine. Private collection

Only a few years earlier, the regime's policy had experienced the epos evoked by Olympic Games wins and big engineering achievements. The Atlantic flight crossings, the double consecutive victory at the Football World Cup and Primo Carnera's Boxing World titles had been assumed as a sort of social glue and effective propaganda vehicle for exporting the political brand. In the wake of the prominence and media success of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, the regime promptly had nominated Rome for the following edition. The architectural space of the Foro Mussolini had then undergone a sudden change of speed and perspective that would have resulted in the *Stadio dei centomila* already planned by Del Debbio, with the concentric lines of the steps sculpted into the hill slope around it.

The Italian candidacy for 1940 Olympic Games was soon sacrificed on the altar of the political convenience in favor of the Japanese ally and postponed to the 1944 edition, which was never celebrated. Anyway, Mussolini's interests turned suddenly towards another opportunity of celebration, applying Rome to organize the Universal Exposition scheduled for 1942. To a man extremely sensitive to the suggestion of symbols and their propaganda use, that date, coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the March on Rome, constituted the element that determined the deviation of economic and constructive efforts away from the Foro.

Meanwhile, the Foro program continued in the wake of the celebration of fascism as a perpetual revolution and of the figure of Mussolini as a modern emperor.

Following these lines, the residual space located between the slopes of the hill and the Tiber, which housed the skeet shooting field, was imagined by Moretti as a vast square. Mindful of Nuremberg's *Zeppelinfeld*, the square would have accommodated the oceanic crowds described by the speakers of the LUCE Institute. Channeling the vibrant energy produced in the esplanade, a bronze colossus, a sort of Mussolini-Hercules, was designed to dominate the northern skyline of the Third Rome. The base of the colossus would have permanently housed the Revolution Exhibition, organized on the occasion of the first ten-year anniversary of the March on Rome in place of the Palazzo del Littorio, whose competition had been announced in 1934 and which was finally being built near the Forum (the current seat of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

2.1 *Ettore Muti's Presidency and the Sacratio*

Achille Starace's consolidation at the PNF secretariat was announced by his appointment to the presidency of the "renewed" organization of the GIL. This interim appointment is linked to the undigested autonomy of Ricci. He belonged to the group of leaders of early Fascism and had often come into conflict with the Duce for his rhetorical and choreographic address, which had eventually alienated many of the acclaim enjoyed by the regime. The diary of Galeazzo Ciano [13], one of the tragic protagonists of the epilogue of Fascism in July 1943, is a robust source to understand the sequence of events. In particular, it documents the convulsive events between the late 1939 and the 1940, especially concerning with the secretariat of Ettore Muti, who will commission the commemorative cell from Luigi Moretti. In early October 1939, Ciano wrote about Mussolini's growing feeling of distrust towards Starace. Ciano himself, in line with the wishes of the Duce, proposed the candidacy of Ettore Muti, a Ravenna-born hierarch who had particularly distinguished himself during the Spanish Civil War three years before. He was a man inclined more to action than to organizational tasks, believed to be faithful to the cause and easily manageable. Mussolini hoped—but he will soon have reasons to change his mind—that Muti could "dynamize and strengthen the organization" [13] in view of Italy's close entry into the war.

Muti incepted a new season of the Foro Mussolini as the party's headquarters. The choice was linked to the decision, taken since 1937, to lay the first stone of the Palazzo del Littorio in the area of the skeet shooting field. Muti decided to anticipate the transfer of the offices by putting his hand to the transformation of the long body of the building Costantino Costantini had designed as guesthouses, which was housing the National Center for Political Preparation at the time (Fig. 2).

The works, decided in 1940, began only the following year as a sign of urgency, with intensified and even night shifts. Initially, they consisted of a series of quick adaptations and splits by means of partition walls in faesite and masonlite. Such a multiplication of the offices would allow to continue the activities even during the



Fig. 2 The current condition of the former entrance to the shrine of the fascist martyrs (Photo by Giunta 2018)

transformation of the Foro Mussolini into the administrative and political headquarter of the National Fascist Party.

A bond existed between Muti and Moretti even before their paths crossed on the scene of the Foro. It dates back at least to the years of the adaptation for residential use of the Porta S. Sebastiano (1936) and continues with a house designed for Muti on the largest island of the Brijuni archipelago, in front of the Istrian city of Pola (1939–43).

What interest could a character as controversial as Ettore Muti awaken in the eyes of the cultivated Moretti? He appears to be antithetic to the circle of former fascists from Rijeka (Fiume) that the architect, and perhaps also the Ravenna-born hierarch, used to meet in the 1930s. Such a circle, which included Renato Ricci himself and the journalists Ermanno Amicucci, Nino D'Arma and Aldo Borelli—some of them clients of Moretti—was attended by the aristocratic cultural nomenclature lateral to the grotesque theatricality of the regime.

Muti is the main promoter of the construction of the *Sacrario* at the Foro Mussolini [2, 5, 8, 11, 14–17] in the rooms of the kitchen of the political preparation center. Here Moretti imagined an evocative space with a central plan dominated by the presence of an altar raised on a stepped podium. The access at the ground floor was mediated by a narthex arranged in the structural spans of the front of the original guesthouses. This classicistic entrance mediated the relationship with the avenue through a short staircase and a travertine paved platform to mark the entry point to the shrine with respect to the uniformity of the long front of the building (Fig. 3).

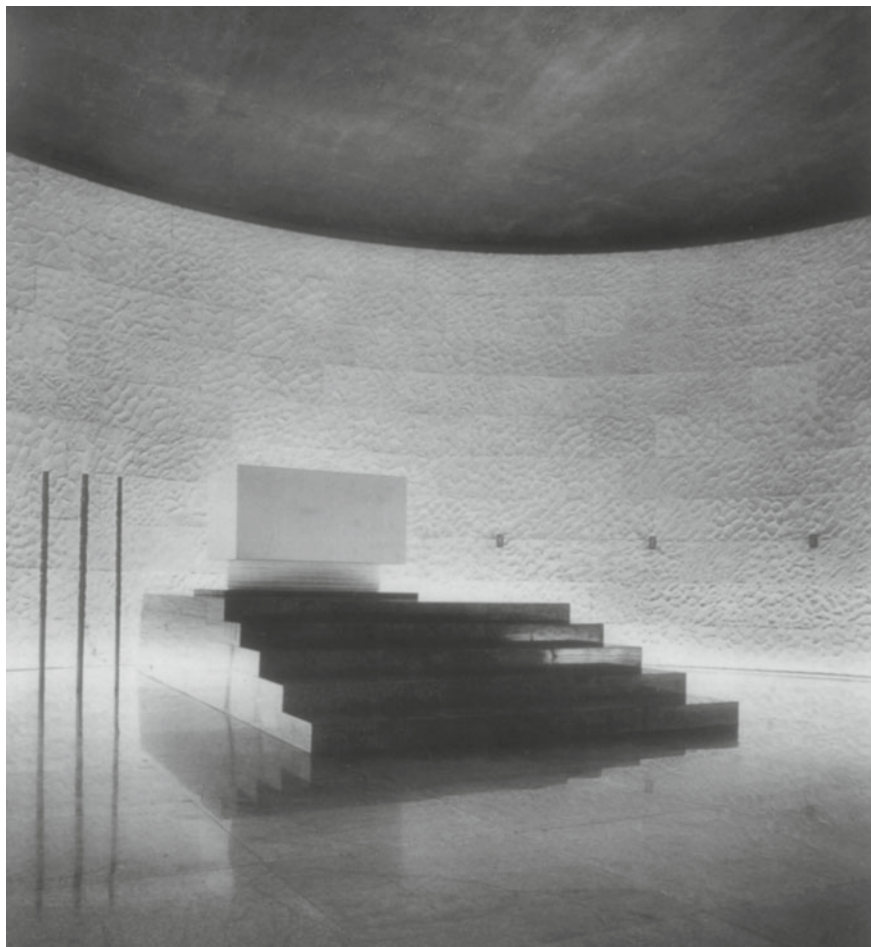


Fig. 3 L. Moretti, Shrine of the fascists martyrs, 1943. View of the oval hall. Private collection

2.2 The War and Destruction

According to Ciano, in early 1940 Muti was already losing Mussolini's confidence. Despite his advent at the national secretariat having doubled the number of registrations, the uncompromising policy he had adopted caused discontent among the leaders of the party. His restlessness and impatience were coupled with the acknowledgment by Ciano that Muti was not as "shapeable" as he believed. Anyway, Mussolini needed to keep up appearances by not disavowing the choices made only a few months before and this kept the situation stalled.

The declaration of war, on June 10th, 1940, gave Muti the opportunity to free himself from bureaucratic constraints by resigning as party secretary to participate in

the conflict personally. "El padron", as the fellow from Ravenna familiarly appealed to the fellow Mussolini, accepted his decision with the reservation of making it official after a few months, on the occasion of the celebrations of October 28th.

Despite Muti's endorsement of Renato Ricci to the presidency of the PNF, his place was taken by Adelchi Serena, who will lead to a progressive marginalization of the projects for the Foro Mussolini. This circumstance was probably due to the difficulty of predicting the end of the works for the Palazzo del Littorio and to the sudden worsening of the war that will lead to the transfer of the party headquarters to Palazzo Wedekind in Piazza Colonna.

The dream of a monumental Foro, conceived also as a northern gateway to Rome, survived the short breath of one year. On October 29th, 1941, on the occasion of the Florentine exhibition on the achievements of the GIL, a model that fixed the latest Moretti's project of development of the area was shown to the Duce. It included the peripheric area of Tor di Quinto, a deviation of the Tiber course that would have formed an artificial island and the canalization of the via Cassia and via Flaminia upstream of Ponte Milvio at the Armando Brasini's Revolution (or 28th October) Bridge.

Only a few years pass and a report by Carl Mydans, a photographer of *Life* magazine, provides the image of an "interrupted" Foro as the background for improvised baseball games between the soldiers of the US Fifth Army who have settled in its buildings [18]. The skeleton of the *Stadio dei centomila* hosts the wagons and vehicles supplied to the Rest Camp. The white box of the *Palazzo del Littorio* contrasts with the arboreal scrub of the hill behind it, sharing the vast unpaved square with the structures not yet demolished of the old Tire Flight.

Despite the excesses that followed the liberation and occupation of American soldiers, most of the structures of the Foro were preserved. The troops of the Fifth Army lived those days with detachment and disorientation. We can still read them in the eyes of the young Yankees who pose next to the statues or against a background made of icons of Fascism. This circumstance prevented the fury that invested the symbols of the fallen regime in the rest of Rome from raging on the structures of the former Foro Mussolini. In this scenario, the destruction of the *Sacrario* is an exception that is hard to justify.

One of Mydans' shots, centered on the entrance portal to the Foro from the north, on the side of Ponte Milvio, provides a clue to justify the disappearance of Moretti's jewel. The architrave of the building hosting the shrine shows an inscription traced in varnish on the Apuan marble cladding. As uncertain as it is lapidary, it notifies that the building houses the Ponte Milvio section of the reconstituted Italian Communist Party. Angrily canceled for its strong symbolic charge, incompatible with the new, albeit transitory, assignment, the shrine represents the main, may be the only, victim of the *damnatio memoriae* of the marble dream of the Duce.

3 “Presente!” or the Typology of the Fascist Memorial

Almost like a secular religion, since the beginning Fascism resorted to the cult of martyrs as a lever of proselytism. This tradition developed from the funeral ceremonies of the first fallen during the clashes that followed the assaults on the *Case del Popolo* and the headquarters of socialist syndicalism, even before 1922. This type of celebration was grafted onto the tradition, almost parallel, of the national memory of the generation lost between 1915 and 1918, in which the fallen in war were commemorated by taking as a symbol the body of an unknown soldier dead on the Karst Plateau [19]. The choice was in response to a 1920 legislative proposal that was inspired by some similar carried out in Europe. On November 4th, 1921, it culminated with the burial of the soldier body in the monument to the King Vittorio Emanuele II, the “architect” of the national unity. On February 13, 1923, the Undersecretary for Public Education, Dario Lupi, extended the cult of the fallen of the Great War to the martyrs of Fascism, and in 1926 the Governorate, in its first year of existence, arranged an altar dedicated to them at the Campidoglio.

In 1930, at the apex of the consensus for the regime, the body was transferred to a crypt transformed into a shrine using the stones extracted from the quarries of the conflict places. This “leap in quality” can be symbolically associated with the choice of the Sala del Mappamondo in Palazzo Venezia as the seat of the Duce’s activity and as an *arengo* for communicating with the Italian people in 1929.

The affirmation of fascism promoted the consolidation of a system of rites and celebrations of the proto-martyrs, those who had lost their lives in the approach to the goal, whose blood had been poured to renew the pact between the adepts and the inextinguishable revolutionary impetus. The Catholic-inspired cult drew on the characteristics of the Counter-Reformation communication code. It involved the public display of the bodies and the gloomy insistence on the violence the fallen suffered to exalt their virtues of vocation and sacrifice, eventually reviving aspects of the ceremonials that had characterized the years of the Republic of Rijeka. A crowd of skulls and decussed bones, next to the blades of the *arditi*’s bayonets, decorated the pennants and banners on which the oath of fidelity took place. Around them, the rite of proclamation through the evocation of the deceased and the osmotic collective response: “Presente!” (“Here I’m!”).

The 1932 was solemnly celebrated through the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome [20]. It had a central didactic role, turning soon into a mass event. The revolution was told by directly associating the fascist Italy with the Italy battling in Vittorio Veneto. This symbolic appropriation was pursued through a highly evocative setting that involved the unfolding of a sequence of rooms. Each of them dedicated to a specific event, the rooms were converging towards two suggestive spaces. On one side, visitors could visit a full-size reconstruction of Mussolini’s “lair” in via Paolo da Cannobio, Milan. On the other side, they could thank the Fascist martyrs into a Memorial dedicated to their memory, a successful scenographic invention. Conceived and set up by Adalberto Libera, with the collaboration of the scenic designer Antonio Valente, it consisted of a circular

room in the center of which a seven-meters tall metal cross stands onto a blood red pedestal. The seven-meters large circular base was inscribed with the phrase “for the immortal homeland”. The walls featured the word *Presente!* obsessively repeated on six lines as the assembly’s response to the evocation of the martyr (Fig. 4). The three-dimensional letters were forged in metal and fixed slightly off the wall and their effect was enhanced by the grazing light coming from a perimeter light source from below. The immersive setting was enriched by a musical soundtrack featuring the goliardic and mocking anthems of the first groups of the *fasci di combattimento*.

On October 28, 1932, the same day the exhibition opened, a chapel of the martyrs was inaugurated in the Roman seat of the party. The same year, the creation of a chapel inside every Italian Casa del Fascio, even only in the form of a cenotaph, was prescribed through a modification of the PNF statute. From a typological point of view, apart from a series of designs made by Libera and the responses of the various participants to the requirements of the first-degree competition for the Palazzo del Littorio, the prototype of the monumental shrine inaugurated in Via Nazionale did not have many replicas. One of these replicas, an oval-plan hall equipped with a black marble altar on a podium, was built in 1936 by Giuseppe Vaccaro, professionally

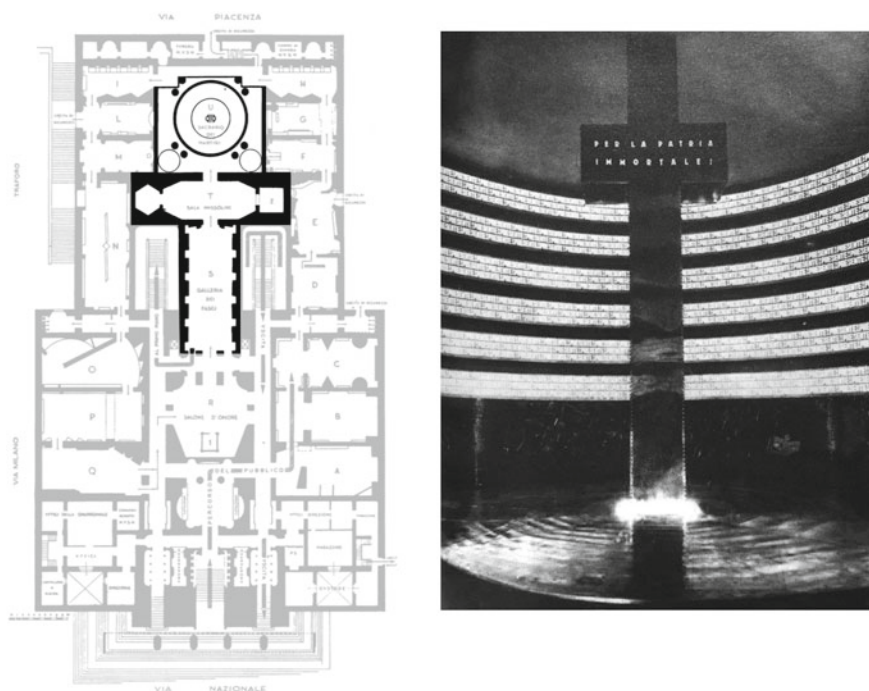


Fig. 4 A. Libera and A. Valente, Shrine of the fascists martyrs, 1932. The main sequence in the ground floor plan of the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, and a view of the oval hall. Private collection

linked to Libera and De Renzi, within the Roman headquarters of the Voluntary Militia for National Security.

Moretti himself respected the regulatory precepts in his activity as a designer for the ONB, providing for shrines integrated into the spaces of the Casa del Popolo he designed for Piacenza, Trecate and Trastevere, Roma. These elements were generally placed by the junctions and vertical communication; sometimes, they were superimposed on the ONB meeting rooms, often traced starting from circular lines or dynamically transforming them into ovals and ellipsoids. Moretti himself designed the last of the shrines dedicated to the Fascism in the Foro, which should have inspired the new generations in the sign of emulation and passing the baton through the synchronous scream of the Balilla and the Avant-gardists: “Presente!”.

4 The Last Shrine

In the multitude of events that were about to bring the world at war, the 1938 represented an important year for the regime. Fascist Italy had an urgent need to create a political climate favorable to the likely involvement in the war scenario. Once again, Mussolini started an intense propaganda travel to emphasizing the regime’s ancestry directly from the First World War. Among the themes dusted off is the national re-enactment of the cult of the fallen, made syncretic with that of the martyrs of fascism. Waiting for the construction of the new Palace of Littorio, Ettore Muti thought that the Foro Mussolini, where the organizational heart of the regime joined with the Italian Youth of the Littorio, was the best place to arrange a shrine to the martyrs of the new secular religion of Fascism.

The architectural and constructive aspects of Moretti’s shrine are documented primarily by some pictures, the technical specifications and the article published in the journal [4, 14, 21, 22]. The papers of the Duce’s Private Secretariat [23] dates back to 1941 but certainly consider a building process started the previous year. They describe the rapid, uninterrupted progress of the adaptation of the wing of the north guest house building, an existing structure hosting the Political Preparation Center. In particular, this choice is said to be “forced by the speed of execution for the immediate use of the rooms and the fact that all the works had to be completed without preventing the regular functioning of the offices”. In this key, the transformation of the pre-existing offices is the prerogative of the technical office of the Party.

The shrine designed by Moretti by the end of 1939 was entrusted to the Giuseppe Ciochetti’s company, which was very active in those years, especially for works in mosaic and stone cladding. An item on the list informs us about the involvement, with regard to “the masonry of the shrine” [23], also of the Impresa Cooperativa Muratori coming from Ravenna, Muti’s hometown.

Although concealed in the former kitchen of a conventional building, as discovered by Vidotto [4], Moretti’s architectural ambition was not limited at all. Conceived in a direct relationship with the forthcoming Palazzo Littorio, the shrine was accessible from the external square, through a *crepidine* of two steps in Carrara statuary marble.

The access to the internal cell was designed by isolating six bays of the main corridor on the ground floor and enlarging four of them to highlight the presence of the shrine. The original windows, corresponding to the spans placed at the ends of the six bays, were also closed with marble slabs (“window closures made of polished marble, installed including scaffolding m. 2.15×2.00 ”) [23] and were apse-shaped. Moretti designed this atrium (Fig. 5) by both recalling examples from Late Antiquity and quoting directly Libera and Valente's shrine. In particular, he designed the access to the chapel through two symmetrical passages, in the manner of the church of S. Vitale in Ravenna, since the existing support on the axis could not be removed.

Finally, Moretti shaped an oval hall in the rectangle resulting from the unification of two structural spans. Since the half of 16th century, the oval had been adopted as a geometrical simplification of the ellipse [24]. This figure was common in the Roman Baroque architecture and familiar to him. From the early years of his academic formation to his collaboration with the chair of History and Styles of Architecture held by Vincenzo Fasolo and that of Restoration of Monuments held by Gustavo Giovannoni, Moretti had “breathed”, drafted and discussed Roman architecture masterworks from 16th and 17th-centuries almost daily.

Besides the geometric shape and the spatial relationships inspired by late-ancient processional schemes, Moretti entrusted most of the quality of his project to the material aspect of the surfaces and details, which played a fundamental role in defining the formal hierarchies and the effects of light and reflection.

The opposing apses of the vestibule housed two flower-holder marble blocks with a concave upper face (“monolithic flower blocks made in marble with the upper part arched, including base in pantheon red [...] m $1.48 \times 0.77 \times 0.72$ shelves $0.65 \times 0.25 \times 0.16$ ”) [23]. The supports that delimited the four spans of the narthex are still clad with slabs of Apuan marble. Their surface is treated as a *spuntato gigante*, an effect produced by sharp and determined blows of a pneumatic chisel with highly suggestive luminous and chiaroscuro results. The same process was repeated on the walls of both the atrium and the central cylindrical hall. On August 24, 1942, we read: “Following the changes made by the architect Luigi Moretti to the project of the shrine in question, the cladding of the walls instead of travertine will be made of 6 cm thick Apuan marble” [23]. Here, the grazing lights housed in a perimeter recess of the floor animated the infinity of facets of the marble surface—actually made of two different sizes slabs, the former 6 cm thick (167.64 m^2 total), the latter 8 cm thick (39.02 m^2 total)—and made the atmosphere more dramatic (Fig. 6).

The vibrant white surface of the Apuan marble contrasted with the intense floor covered with large square tiles of Pantheon-like red granite. Moretti's choice to pave the shrine using “pantheon red” granite was a very expensive variation taken during the construction and involved a series of difficulties concerning both the procurement and the cutting into the required format—mostly 85×85 cm square tiles, according to the authors' reconstruction. Moretti had opted for a granite from the Ditta Remuzzi, a quarry near Bergamo which was the only one in Italy to have the required material. The comparison with the offer made by the Ciocchetti company will favor the choice of the latter company. In reality, the size of the panels meant that the initial thickness, expected to be only 2 cm, had to be increased to 3 cm. This caused an increase in



Fig. 5 L. Moretti, Shrine of the fascists martyrs, 1943. View of the atrium toward the right apse. Private collection

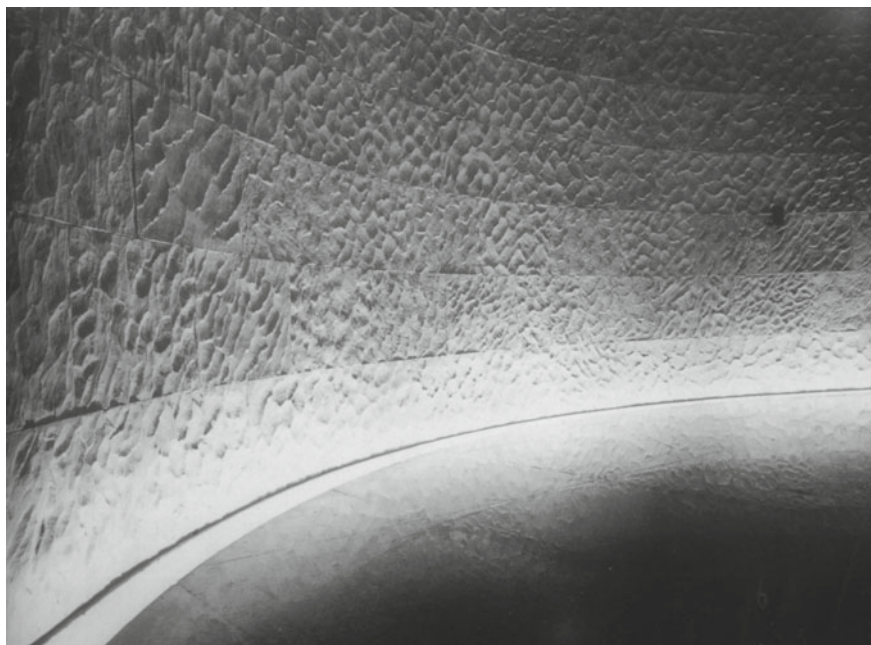


Fig. 6 L. Moretti, Shrine of the fascists martyrs, 1943. Detail of the internal cladding in roughly sculpted *Statuario* marble slabs. Private collection

cost and the cancellation of the supply which returned to the Remuzzi company. The same document also reveals the passage from the travertine to the more expensive Carrara marble for other stone elements.

As Moretti had already tested within the precious Duce's gym, the tiles, which were as polished as a mirror, had the task of dematerializing the floor and setting up a sophisticated game of reflections. The floor was contrasted also by the flat ceiling, whose opaque surface had been arranged, through a bush hammering of the plaster, to accommodate a layer of purplish and a burnishing. This was extended also to the two eagles in bas-relief that marked the intrados of the apses in the atrium.

The mirroring floor housed, at the invisible line of its major axis, the ascending path deputed to the celebrant. Five steps were leading to the top of the low podium and to the white parallelepiped in Apuan marble. This was supported by an oval-shaped cylindrical molded base, carved out by a horizontal sequence of alternating scotia and listels. Required by the cult of the martyrs of the new secular religion, it looked symbolically half-way between an altar and a sarcophagus. Its total height, which is deduced to be about 160 cm, was likely designed to have the upper face as high as the eye of a standing beholder. This stratagem was quite common in the post-perspective church altars and was used to give the face the sense of a divine (and theatrical) plane to access through the prayer.

Many of Moretti's decisions were intended to control the perception and experience of the cell. Its limited size suggested him the use of the principles of accelerated perspective. This is another element that Moretti had inherited from the Baroque architecture and applied in many of his projects, from small exhibitions to the vast open spaces of Foro Mussolini [9]. Small corrections according to the principles of accelerated perspective would allow a guided experience of the interconnected volumes of the podium and altar, primarily to increase their monumental character and make the space incommensurable. These hypotheses seem to be confirmed not only by some details of the project but also by the photographic shots that survived the demolition of the work, which are the main evidence of its actual realization. The photographers, certainly guided by Moretti himself, pursued diagonal shots of the interior centered on the visual focus constituted by the marble altar. Several pictures aim at emphasizing the material qualities of the various components, focusing above all on the reflective properties of the marble floor. Only one axial shot can be counted while those of the entrance are missing, to the point of instilling doubt about the location of the shrine and its actual construction for decades.

Most of the photographs are devoid of any reference to actual size. In this sense, the absolute absence of human figures or other measurable elements conveys the effect of larger-than-real hall. Only a photo kept in the Moretti Archive immortalizes a couple of avant-gardists of the squad of the honor guard lined up alongside the podium, drastically "resizing" the work. It is quite impressive to see the monumental suggestions induced by all of the other pictures collapsing. The fictitious image constructed by the architect is revealed by the appearance of the human figure that invades the geometric space, a circumstance found in certain illusory architectural devices in the 17th century. Think of Francesco Borromini's perspective gallery set up in Palazzo Spada-Capodiferro, Rome, and compare photographs without and with visitors inside. In the specific case of the shrine, this search for a fictitious vision suggests possible parallels with the false rhetoric of the regime, aimed at emphasizing its messages, only to see them resized under the scrutiny of history.

5 Reconstructing the Shrine

Reordering the historical data and considerations in the political and artistic context of the 1940s has highlighted the exceptional nature of Moretti's shrine at the Foro Mussolini and showed the lack of knowledge about it. At the same time, the amount of suggestions raised by the few documents survived require a verification of the actual form of the shrine built and photographed. In this sense, a graphic reconstruction of the shrine itself has been produced by using different sources: primarily, the surviving documents, archive images and the real size of the rooms that housed it (now only partially accessible); secondarily, the comparison with other coeval works by Moretti.

With the exception of a floor plan and a section, there are no project drawings of the cell. The few images come from the LUCE Institute newsreels and from the photographic documentation that merged into the collection kept today at the Central State

Archives. These documents, generally produced by Moretti before the war, have left posterity with an image strongly connoted by the celebratory tone. In particular, the work with the optical bench and post-production effects carried out by the photographers Cartoni and Vasari have the consequence of occasionally deceiving the architectural consistence. The retouches present in many photographs, combined with the oval shape of the room, have thus discouraged the use of perspective restitution as a procedure for obtaining the measurement of the elements photographed.

A direct survey of the few surviving parts (Figs. 7, 8, 9, 10)—the floor surface in front of the entrance, the cladding slabs on the pillars and the room that is now occupied by a conference room-library—has highlighted some criticalities with respect to the published graphic representation. While inconsistencies concern the steps, the verification of the data relating to the spans of the entrance areas confirmed a certain congruity with regard to the general plan of the hall. In particular, the oval tracing has been here reconstructed according to a four-center geometric construction and verified with the position of the floor joints visible in the photographs (Fig. 11). Possibly inspired to the fourth scheme proposed by Sebastiano Serlio in his First Book [25], the four centers of Moretti's oval form two equilateral triangles.

After these first partial sizing stage, a critical re-reading of the description of the works provided further data. In particular, some elements necessary for a reconstruction have been deduced out of the original consistency. As the description reports almost exclusively the total quantities of purchased material, the articulation and arrangement of the parts have been conjectured from a generic total area, for each single material mentioned.

This procedure was particularly significant for the size and geometrical definition of both the flower-holding blocks in the apses and the narrowing podium-altar, the element around which the spatial mechanism rotates, and the plates that cover it. In particular, it is possible to conjecture that this deformation from the primitive rectangular plan was not only intended to increase the apparent depth of the podium and, consequently, of the bottom of the chapel, but had also the secret purpose of altering the relationship between the two axes of the pseudo-ellipse, inducing the illusory perception of a perfect circular space.

The comparison with particular compositional characteristics found in other projects by Moretti was useful to the definition of some details: this is the case of the progressive reductions of elements belonging to recurring series; the use of geometric entities mutually combined; of modules and their multiples and submultiples; the use of the golden proportion, which is eventually found both in the altar plan and in the rectangle enveloping the podium itself. At the same time, the reconstruction integrates the documents with some details that do not appear in the drawings but only in the photographs, perhaps the result of design additions developed starting from the precious materials left-overs or variations to the "liturgical" program.

The final reconstruction, whose early results are here presented (Figs. 12, 13), differs slightly from the surviving drawings, but this "little" is an indication of a series of choices made on site, like the small inconsistencies that evidently emerged trying to bring the designed oval back into the available rectangle. The oval itself, on the other hand, emerges as a shape chosen for a number of different goals. It surely

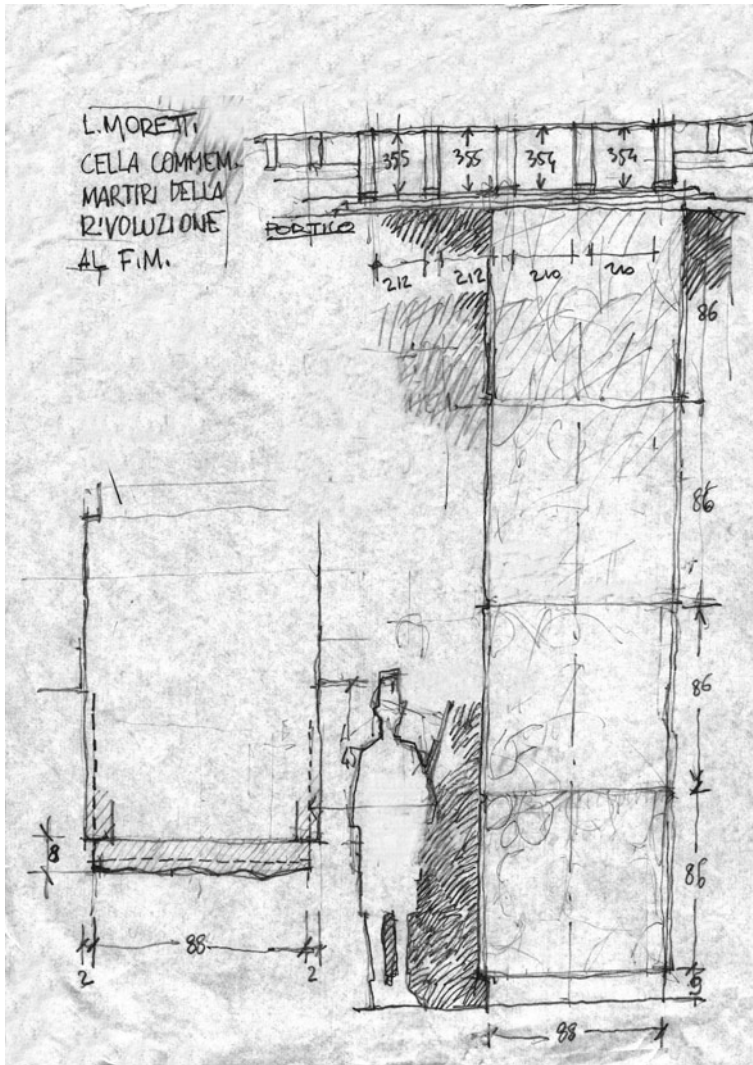


Fig. 7 Direct survey and graphical reconstruction of the shrine of the fascists martyrs. Entrance and atrium elevation (Sketch by Giunta, 2020)

makes the most of the available space; it deceives the actual form and size of the space as well as optical correction according to the accelerated perspective effects; it also adapts to any irregularities without compromising the pure continuity of the interior surfaces as well as the overall image of the shrine. This faculty of the oval is closely linked to its nature as a polycentric curve, capable of imitating the ellipse with extraordinary approximation. In particular, it guarantees, by virtue of the arcs of circumference that compose it, a superior constructive simplicity and adaptability.

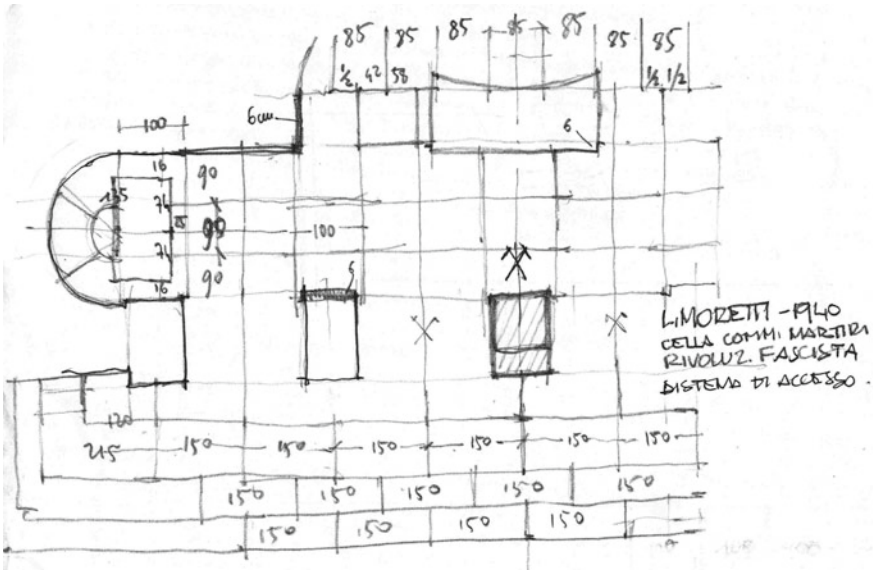


Fig. 8 Direct survey and graphical reconstruction of the shrine of the fascists martyrs. Entrance and atrium elevation (Sketch by Giunta 2020)

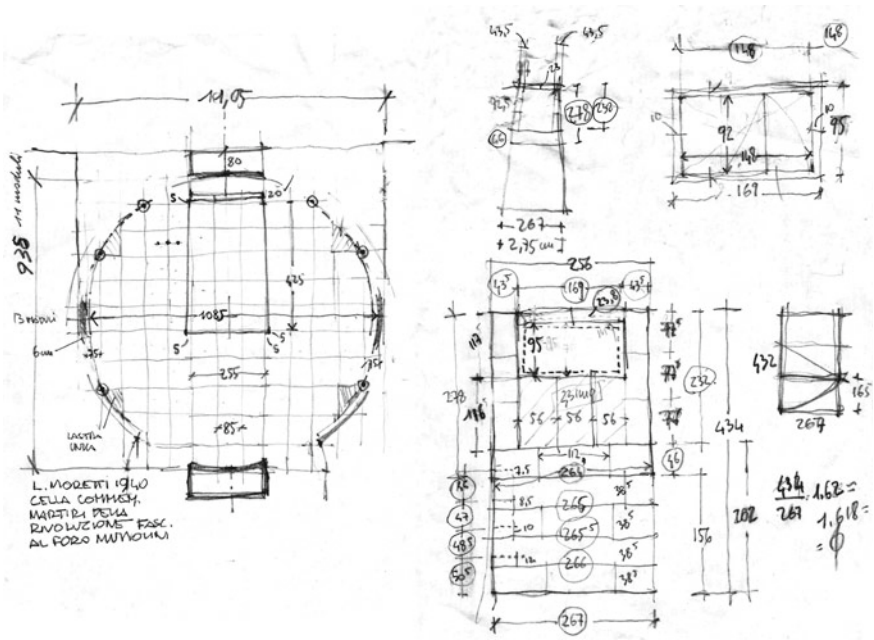


Fig. 9 Graphical reconstruction of the shrine of the fascists martyrs. Oval hall and podium (Sketch by Giunta 2020)

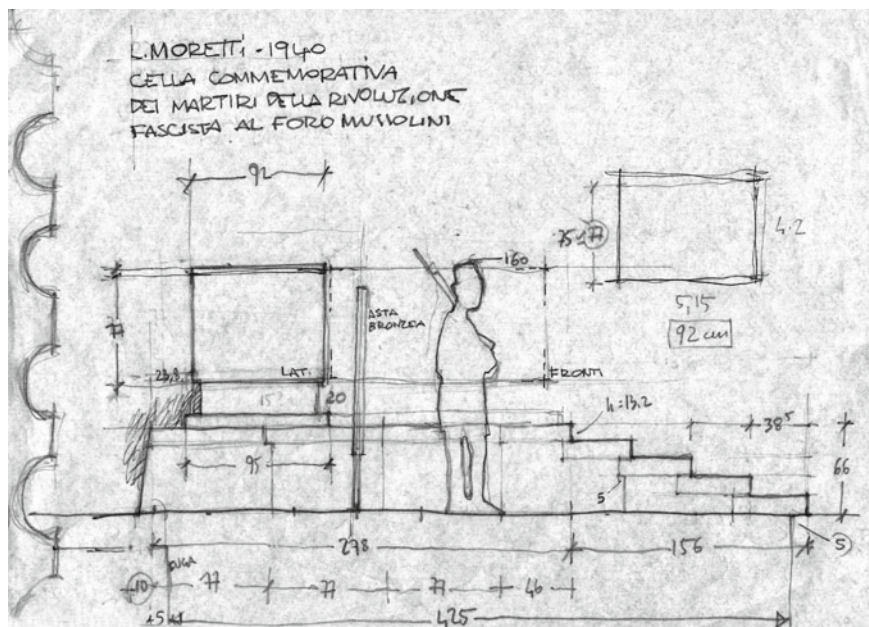


Fig. 10 Graphical reconstruction of the shrine of the fascists martyrs. Podium elevation (Sketch by Giunta 2020)

Just think of the case of the plan of the Auditorium of Rome, which Renzo Piano has wisely deformed to accommodate the remains of a Roman farmhouse, this operation preserving the general result of the radial settlement.

6 Conclusions

The historical and political events that, at the end of the 1930s, lead Italy inexorably into the horrors of the Second World War, were reflected on the formal and functional reworking involving the Foro Mussolini in Rome, often the result of frenetic and contradictory decisions. The events involving the shrine of the fascist martyrs, designed and built by Luigi Moretti at the apex of Ettore Muti's short "political" parenthesis, constitutes an example of this political climate. At the same time, its rapid destruction in a context almost totally preserved, makes it an exceptional case. Moretti was mostly interested in building an iconographic architecture to be communicated through photographs that alters the constructive and dimensional aspects. In this sense, his aptitude as a cinematic director seems to eventually prefigure the impending disaster or taking note of the growing "mediality" of Fascism itself. The reconstruction proposed here, developed by combining direct survey, documented data and personal conjectures, helps to confirm its location in the rooms at the ground

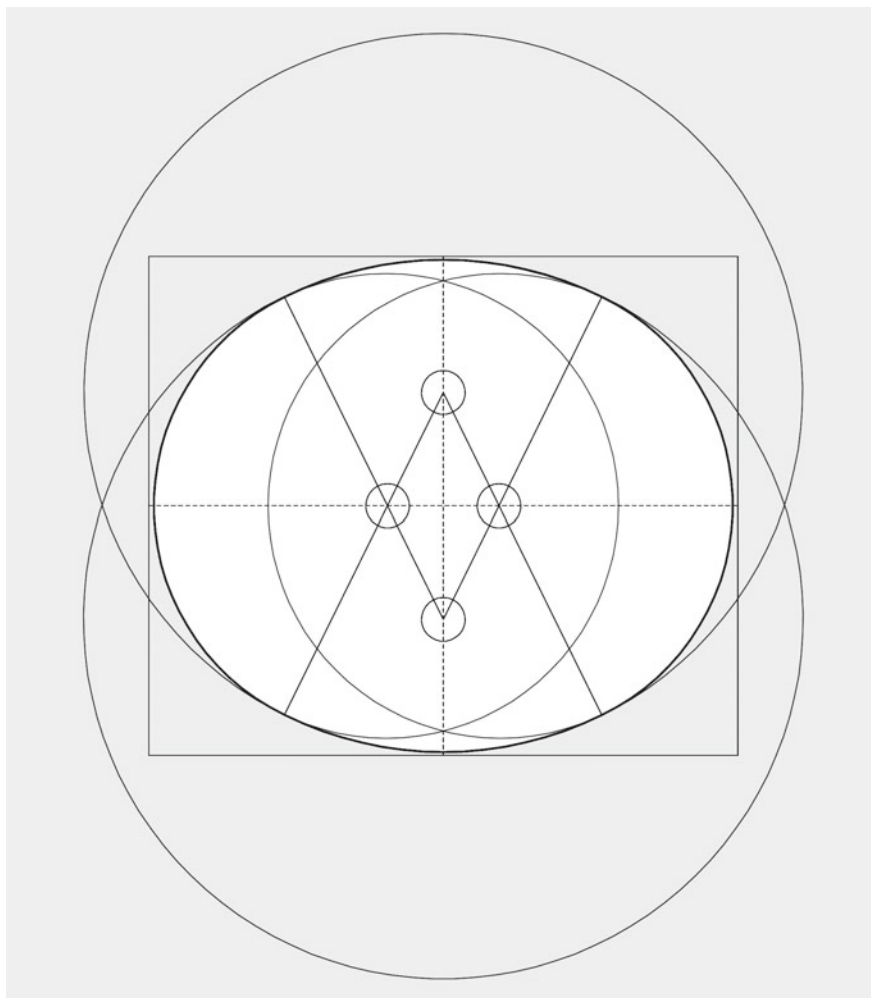


Fig. 11 Geometrical construction of the oval wall after the reconstruction of the shrine of the fascists martyrs. The centers form two equilateral triangles (Diagram by Colonnese, 2020)

floor of the former Guest House and to clarify the construction stages, identifying the elements designed or adapted during the construction itself. Such a reconstruction process also allows to make further conjectures. From an architectural point of view, Moretti seems to be longing for a return to the principles and values of original Fascism, in conflict with an idea of “revolution” reduced to a museum collection in search of a definitive location. Yet, the architecture itself seems to reveal a change in attitude. On the one hand, the image of its oval shrine is symbolically welded to the prototype made by Libera and Valente for the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution; on the other hand, its shape underlines the implicit resilience of the oval. Such a

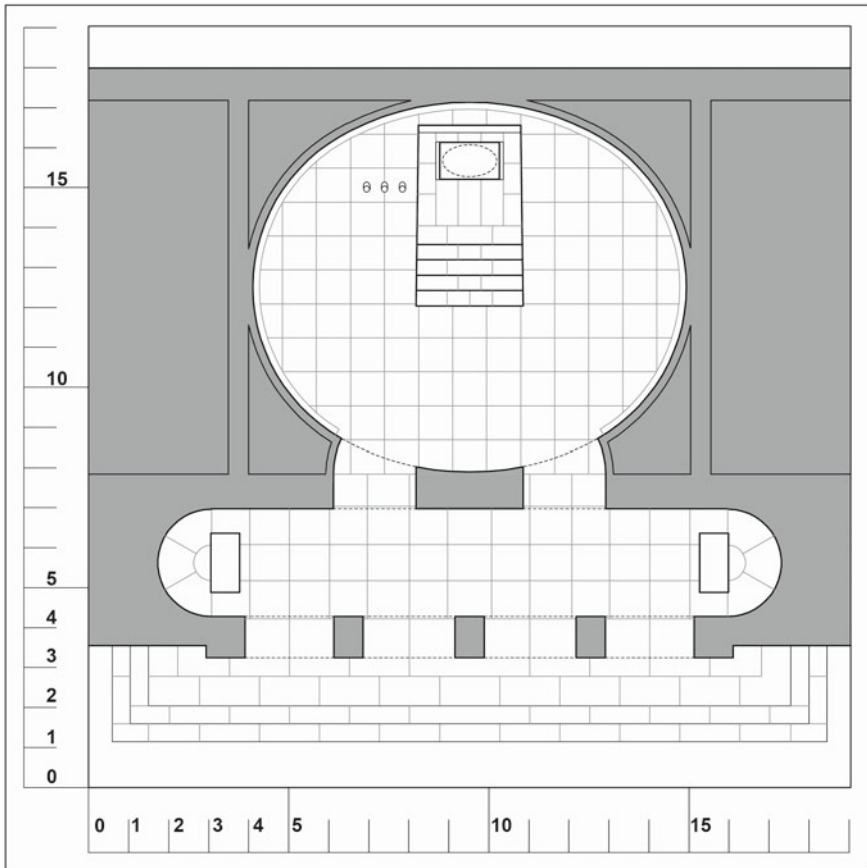


Fig. 12 Reconstructed plan of the shrine of the fascists martyrs (Drawing by Giunta and Colonnese 2020)

“bastard” form, capable of adapting to different (and adverse) geometric conditions, requires implicitly the sacrifice of the ideological (and fascist) purity symbolized by the circle, which was eventually preserved, through refined perceptive deformations, in the visual perception of the empty shrine from the door, as conveyed by the most fascinating pictures.

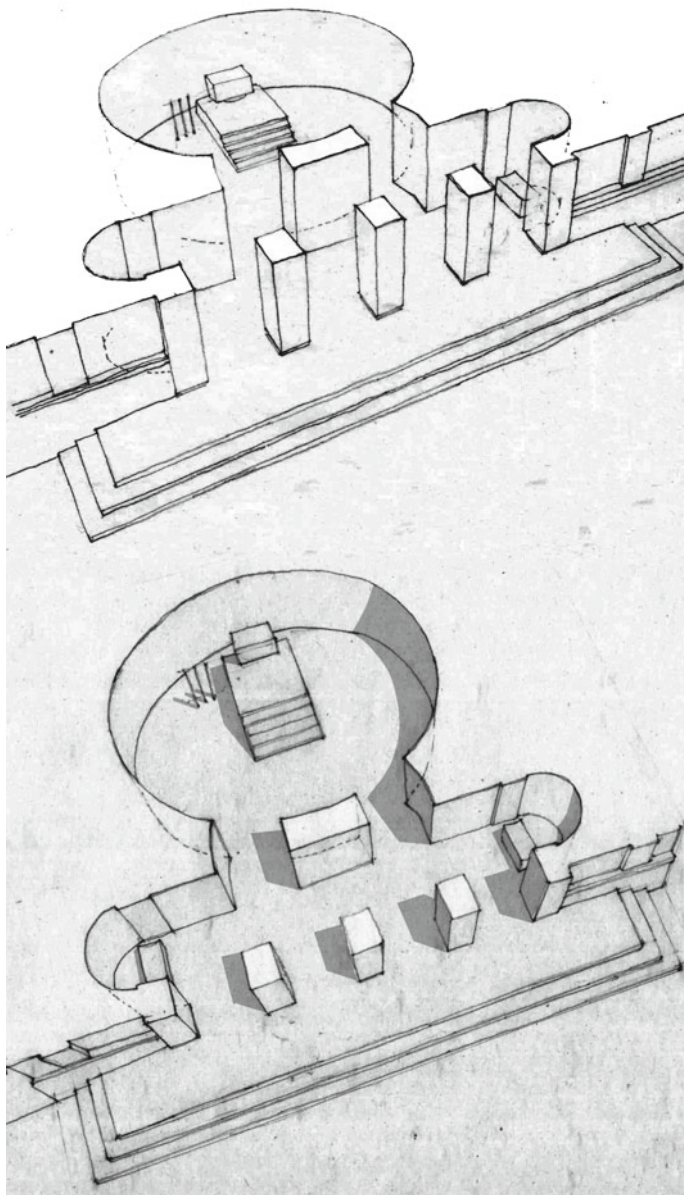


Fig. 13 Sketched views from the reconstructive digital 3d model of the shrine of the fascists martyrs (Drawing by Giunta and Colonnese 2020)

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