

Gustavo Giovannoni: The Complete Architect

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Abstract. Gustavo Giovannoni (1873–1947) was a key figure in the fields of architecture, urbanism, and conservation during the first half of the twentieth century in Italy. Neglected after the Second World War, when advocates for modernist architecture preferred to highlight members of the Rationalist movement that Giovannoni opposed, his work and ideas are now being re-evaluated for their timely insights on contested questions related to architecture, urbanism, and heritage conservation. This paper examines his theory and practice, including key passages from his writings translated into English for the first time, and descriptions of some of his professional contributions. Apart from the inherent interest of his work, it is a remarkable exemplification of his own ideal of *l'architetto integrale*—“the complete architect”—which he, more than anyone, seems to have realized.

Keywords: Architectural and urban conservation · Restoration · New buildings in historic settings · Respect for context

1 Introduction

One of the most important and influential figures in Italian architecture and urbanism during the first half of the twentieth century was Gustavo Giovannoni (1873–1947). In his address inaugurating the Faculty of Architecture, which he founded at the University of Rome “La Sapienza” in 1920, he called for the training of *l'architetto integrale*—the complete architect—as a professional capable of designing new buildings and caring for old ones; guiding the growth and conservation of cities and landscapes; undertaking scholarly study of historical architecture, urbanism, and traditional construction; advising public policy and government programs to conserve the architectural heritage; and teaching students all of this to promote a built environment embodying humanistic principles. In a career that is astonishing in its breadth of activity and variety of interests, Giovannoni himself seems to have fulfilled this model more than anyone else [1].

2 Architectural Design

Giovannoni completed relatively few substantial projects for new buildings. The bulk of his practice was restoration work, mostly for Church and private clients, and he often used his position as a national roving consultant to create opportunities for others, and

participated actively in collaborative work [2]. While Giovannoni's architectural production was limited and largely ignored after his death, it is now the subject of new scholarship as historians consider twentieth-century architects working outside the Modern Movement [3, 4].

Among his early completed projects is the Peroni Brewery complex from 1908 to 1912, an important work of early industrial architecture. (Fig. 1) Occupying two large city blocks, the complex is not just a factory but an urban neighborhood, like a centuries-old village with a little piazza and tower. The buildings recall the vernacular architecture of central Italy, but this impression of picturesqueness is belied by the advanced technology of reinforced concrete construction that was employed and the industrial process it housed. The Peroni complex is skillfully woven into both its physical context of a dense urban residential neighborhood and its temporal context of a city with a distinct architectural identity. Recent remodeling of the complex for mixed uses proves the wisdom of an approach that lends itself to adaptation and repurposing [5].



Fig. 1. Stabilimento Birra Peroni, Rome, by Gustavo Giovannoni. Author photo.

Perhaps Giovanni's most accomplished completed work is the church of the Angeli Custodi (Guardian Angels) (Fig. 2) on Piazza Sempione in the Città-Giardino Aniene, a planned suburban "new town" on the northeastern outskirts of Rome for which Giovanni also designed the master plan (see below). The piazza is the heart of the new town and the church acts as a visual terminus of the ancient Via Nomentana, which connects the new neighborhood with the city center. The façade offers a large-scale gesture to the distant view, and sculptural and ornamental richness to reward the near view. The distinctive baldacchino-like entry portal is flanked by an idiosyncratic, Borromini-inspired Corinthian order. Also Borromini-inspired is the delicate plasterwork in the originally rather plain interior. The crossing is crowned by a complex dome that, in his original design, was a complex exercise in space, structure, and light. While modifications to the church in the 1970s have considerably altered the initial conception, the church still demonstrates the architect's grasp of ancient Roman, Renaissance, and Baroque structures, rendering too simplistic any assignment of his work to the often pejorative category of "historicist eclecticism" [6–8].



Fig. 2. Church of Angeli Custodi, Piazza Sempione, Rome. Author photo.

Among his unbuilt designs, perhaps the most impressive is another church, Sacro Cuore, designed for a constricted urban site near the central train station in Salerno. (Fig. 3) A full explanation of this project's development and history has yet to be published, but judging by the surviving drawings, this is a remarkable exercise that unites the urban, architectural, and ornamental scales. The centralized domed volume,

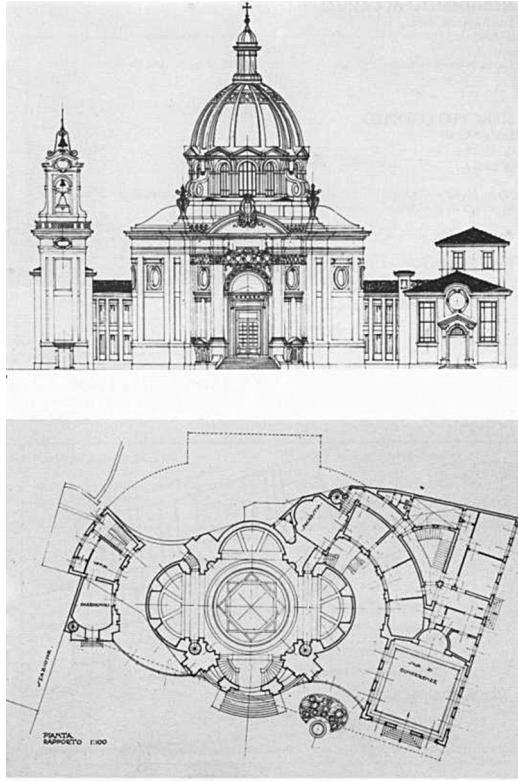


Fig. 3. Church of the Sacro Cuore, Salerno, project. Drawing by Gustavo Giovannoni, from Del Bufalo, A. Gustavo Giovannoni: Note e osservazioni integrate dalla consultazione dell'archivio presso del Centro di Studi di Storia dell'architettura. Rome, Italy: Kappa Edizioni, 1982.

buttressed by curved transepts in a Greek cross configuration, is embraced by the curving arms of the lower lateral wings. It is not coincidental that the designer's scholarly study of Antonio da Sangallo the Younger remains a standard reference today [9].

3 Restoration Theory and Practice

Giovannoni is principally remembered today as an important figure in the history of restoration [10, 11]. Giovannoni, following the line suggested earlier by Camillo Boito, established the Italian School as a “middle way” between the pure conservation views of the Englishmen John Ruskin and William Morris and the stylistic restoration of Frenchman Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc [12] ([10], pp. 219–228). Giovannoni articulated his views in a seminal 1913 article, later republished in his 1925 book *Questioni di architettura nella storia e nella vita* (Architectural Issues in History and

Life). There he defines six different approaches, arranging them according to increasing impact on the site:

- The first are *restorations of consolidation* or stabilization, whose aim is to preserve in place the historic construction without significantly altering its appearance, the only treatment supported by the strict conservationists.
- Second is *restoration of recomposition*, in which dispersed parts of a structure are put back together with minimal introduction of new material. This is the approach of *anastylosis*, as when fallen columns are re-erected, or fragments of a wall are put back in their original configuration.
- *Restorations of liberation* are intended to remove “inorganic” additions to reveal the historic fabric, as when columns that had been walled-in or windows that had been blocked are freed from later construction. This can only be done when the material removed is of lesser value than what is revealed. It is a necessary but easily abused practice and must be tightly controlled.
- *Restorations of isolation* involving the removal of later construction, even entire buildings or neighborhoods to reveal an earlier fabric concealed by them, is to be used only in special circumstances. Clearing away whatever conceals earlier fabric changes the setting within which monuments can be understood and, as Giovannoni writes, can be tantamount to destruction of the monument itself. This nexus between a monument and its setting was critical for Giovannoni—the demand for respect for context and our concept of the historic district stem directly from it.
- *Restorations of completion*, giving a monument a complete form by adding whatever features it lacks or have gone missing, is seen in the restoration by Raffaele Stern and Giuseppe Valadier of the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum. Original materials are subtly distinguished from added work without sacrificing our perception of the whole monument.
- Finally, *restorations of innovation* may add completely new elements to the historic fabric, in order to complete missing parts for which little or no documentation exists, to add space to the building, or to reconstruct portions of it in the face of some necessity. Here the restorer is also a designer, introducing changes or new features designed to harmonize with the historic condition. This treatment carries the greatest risk and is forbidden by a strict conservation approach, but was one that Giovannoni himself would undertake [13, 14].

Prominent among applications of these theories is the medieval church of Sant’Andrea in Orvieto, restored 1926–30. (Fig. 4) The church had been previously altered and its tower truncated. Giovannoni restored the façade and tower based on documents and physical evidence at the building. He also added the loggia on the left flank, a new element which Giovannoni designed based on his knowledge of the style and in conformance with the principles of maximum simplicity and minimum contrast between new and old features. The project is a restoration of completion and innovation ([2], pp 197–198) [7, 15].

The medieval basilica of Santo Stefano degli Abissini behind Saint Peter’s at the Vatican had almost completely disappeared in later rebuilding. (Fig. 5) The original plan of nave and two aisles had been reduced to a portion of the nave alone, the aisles disappearing into adjacent monastic buildings, the transepts and apse forming an open



Fig. 4. Church of Sant'Andrea, Orvieto. Author photo.



Fig. 5. Church of Santo Stefano degli Abissini, Vatican City. Author photo.

courtyard, with a late baroque façade added in the eighteenth century. From 1931–33 Giovannoni removed nearly all the post-medieval work except the façade and revealed most of the original fabric, including the nave columns embedded in the later walls. While he believed sufficient information was available to support reconstructing the entire basilica, Giovannoni followed his principle of “minimum work,” keeping the nave, transept, and apse, adding a roof, and returning the floor to its original level. Inside and out, original masonry is left exposed while new masonry is covered in stucco. The result is a hybrid structure that had never existed before but which represents a compromise between providing a functional church building and a complete (and more conjectural) reconstruction. It is a restoration that entails elements of consolidation, liberation, isolation, completion, and innovation, all at once [16, 17].

4 Urban Conservation

Giovannoni extended his view of conservation from individual buildings to the city as a whole. In his 1931 book, *Vecchie Città ed Edilizia Nuova (New Building in Old Cities)* [18], Giovannoni sets out his theories of urbanism and urban conservation, greatly influenced by the Viennese urbanist Camillo Sitte and the English Garden City Movement. The international scope of his inquiry belies later criticism that he was nationalistic in his promotion of the Italian tradition, and the temporal scope of the book negates the characterization of him, like Sitte, as a medievalist. Instead, he represents a leading voice in what Francoise Choay categorized as the *culturalist* approach to city planning [19, 20].

Giovannoni tirelessly defended traditional European cities and the necessity of preserving them not as museum settings, but as living centers of social, economic, political, and cultural life. He saw historic centers as ripe for a thorough but gentle cleansing, reducing overcrowding and returning them to their former beauty. He thus found himself opposing the urban policies of the fascist government, then engaged in a campaign of widespread demolition intended to “liberate” and isolate ancient monuments. In a 1925 speech, Benito Mussolini proclaimed that the monuments of Imperial Rome must be freed from the “mediocre construction” that obscured them so that they might “loom gigantic in the grandeur of their solitude”. [21] To Giovannoni, the treasures of medieval Rome were of no less value than the antiquities that interested the government propagandists, and he chaired a Commission to study the medieval churches of the city and promote their restoration [22]. He also knew that monuments derive significance as much from their surrounding contexts as from their own forms, a view Giovannoni argued under the term *ambientismo*, or respect for the setting. He insisted that the indiscriminate clearance or removal of all post-antique fabric from the ancient sites was tantamount to the loss of the monuments themselves [18].

Giovannoni thought historic centers could be adapted to modern needs without wholesale demolitions like those undertaken in Paris under Napoleon III. Only selective pruning and thinning-out (*diradamento*) was required. He wrote:

“All this transformation is done with patience and love...by means of small changes derived from the local conditions and not with grand means, freeing without adding, improving without transforming radically. In other words, the method is carried out with demolition in small

increments, leaving areas free and reconstructing little or nothing, with the minimum introduction of new elements—almost always inharmonious with the old—and carried out with sensitivity to the resulting perspective views framing the major monuments or characteristic groups of small houses. All this work should be done by means of restorations and adaptations—and not radical ones!—for modern needs and obtained through the pruning and opening of the interiors of the blocks with the same sense of measure applied to the urban context of the street”. ([18], pp 248–253)

When it came to adding new buildings in the historic settings, Giovannoni asked that architects strive for visual consonance between new and old, rather than contrast. He writes:

“And in the new construction, the maximum respect for the context must be exercised, according with the criterion of the maximum simplicity of architectural lines.... If one doesn’t know how to create a new contextual design, one may have recourse to the simple and familiar forms of the Renaissance; the traditional crafts carried out not in architectural camouflage, but in elements like balconies, loggias, railings and balustrades, planting boxes, and so forth”. ([18], p 254)

Giovannoni and his followers applied the practice of *diradamento* in numerous Italian cities, notably in Via dei Coronari in Rome, where selective buildings were removed in order to open up new *piazze* or provide better connections, but maintaining the grain and character of the quarter ([18], pp 268–278). This was in contrast to the schemes of planners who proposed Parisian-style interventions to create straight and broad boulevards connecting the different parts of the city. When Piazza Navona was to be transformed into a major north-south traffic artery, Giovannoni led the opposition, instead proposing the Corso del Rinascimento, which in the 1930s was carved out of the narrow streets just east of Piazza Navona, its pragmatic layout preserving historic monuments and welcoming new buildings by Arnaldo Foschini. Few visitors to Rome realize that this is a twentieth-century street, so harmonious is the mix of new and old structures [23].

In a passage from his 1946 book *The Renaissance Quarter of Rome*, Giovannoni elaborates his conservationist position:

“The persistence of the classical feeling...has typically maintained a unity with the context; that is, with the collective architecture....To these conditions the modern tendencies pose a strident and unhealthy antithesis....With regard to contemporary design, we are still far from finding something that harmonizes with the historic setting; the continuing fluctuations of the architecture...show how far we are from the maturity necessary to have stable forms that represent the architecture of our time and yet could be taken seriously for at least two centuries in the city’s life.... Until this longed-for maturation of local architecture and the feeling for the context come together...it is necessary to remain strictly and intransigently a conservationist in the defense of our beautiful cities.” [24]

While Giovannoni did not object to clearances allowing the excavation of sites of universal importance, such as the Imperial Forums, or to allow the construction of necessary roadways and transportation networks, like the Via del Teatro di Marcello, he opposed projects whose intention represented what he later called a “contrived monumentality” intended only to broadcast the ambitions of the regime and actively opposed the demolition of the *spina* of the Vatican *borghi* to construct the Via della Conciliazione [25]. As a drafter of the Regulating Plan for Rome in 1931, he succeeded

in taking this project off the table; but when it was re-proposed in 1936 by the highest authorities, he protested directly to Mussolini, enraging the dictator. Giovannoni later wrote that he feared imprisonment or internal exile [26] ([25], pp 146–155). While Giovannoni continued to maintain his official positions before and after the liberation of Rome in 1944, his principles, at least in matters of architecture, urbanism, and conservation, remained a minority opinion and his success in persuading either the fascist or the post-war governments was limited [2, 27].

5 Urban Design

Giovannoni saw that the modern city, expanding without effective planning and driven by speculation, threatened the health of the historic centers. Giovannoni found an alternative to sprawl in the Garden City movement led by the English social reformer Ebenezer Howard, founder of the Garden Cities of Letchworth (1903–04) and Welwyn (1920), which were the models for such American places as Forest Hills Gardens in Queens, New York (1905) and Coral Gables, Florida (1924). Howard’s idea was a kind of urban colonization, creating new centers linked to the principal center by public transportation and separated from it and from one another by natural and agricultural reserves [28–30].

Giovannoni introduced these Anglo-Saxon ideas to Italy and became their foremost Italian exponent. He proposed a polycentric urbanism in which growth was directed into “satellite cities” connected to the main center by public transportation and separated by undeveloped land. In the case of Rome, the new centers could be “grafted” onto existing nuclei—small historic villages with their own histories and identities. (Fig. 6) Giovannoni brought to the Garden City ideal the insight that appropriate new development on the periphery of the city was not only good in itself, but essential for the conservation of the historic center ([18], pp 193–197) [31, 32].

In 1920, Giovannoni produced the master plan for Città-Giardino Aniene (Garden City of the Aniene), a new town on an undeveloped site based on Garden City principles to house moderate-income residents. The site plan bears a resemblance to Forest Hills Gardens, its streets similarly fanning out from the piazza and declining in scale from the urban ensemble of the square (with his church of the Angeli Custodi) to smaller multi-unit and single-family houses (*villini*) surrounded by walled gardens. While the Anglo-Saxon examples celebrated English design traditions, here the dominant style is the Baroque-inspired but modestly-scaled vernacular typical of the *architettura minore* of Lazio [33] ([6], pp 101–134).

Giovannoni’s other ground-breaking urban design project was the master plan for the Garbatella quarter on the southern edge of the city, also from 1920. The progressive mayor Ernesto Nathan established the Istituto per le Case Popolari (Institute of Social Housing, known as the ICP) in 1905 to provide inexpensive housing for the middle- and working classes. The new quarter was developed by the ICP, whose staff architects designed the buildings raised on Giovannoni’s plan. Like numerous similar state-sponsored projects at the time, it was begun before the rise of the Fascist dictatorship and reflects a progressive social housing policy [34] ([27], pp 94–102). While the initial phase around Piazza Benedetto Brin illustrates Giovannoni’s Garden City

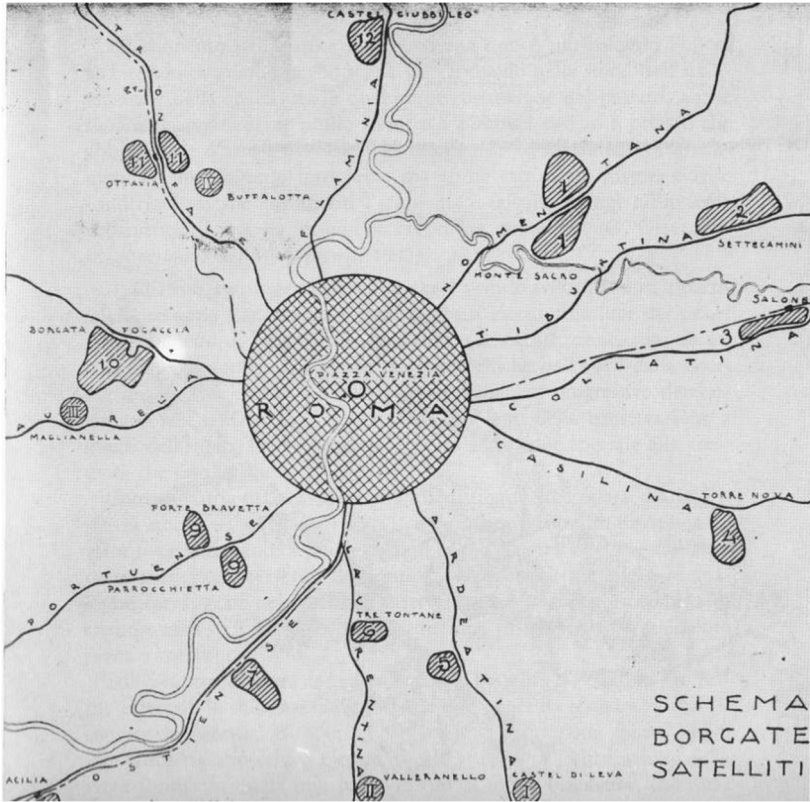


Fig. 6. Plan for satellite towns around Rome. From Giovannoni, Gustavo, *Vecchie Citta ed Edilizia Nuova*, Torino 1931.

ideas, subsequent phases reflect changing objectives as the fascist administration tried to respond to the ever increasing demand for housing [35]. Despite these changes, the original plan and remarkable quality of the ICP-designed buildings are testimony to a modern, humanistic, traditional urbanism with few rivals elsewhere.

6 Conclusion

Giovannoni's professional life unfolded in a time of radical change in architectural culture brought about by the Modern Movement and its Italian representatives, the Rationalists. Giovannoni's opposition to this group led to his being characterized as a reactionary figure. After 1931, Giovannoni found himself increasingly isolated, but felt that his defense of the historic center of Rome justified his staying in the game and, when necessary, making compromises to achieve his aims. He was criticized for this after the War, but as Carlo Ceschi pointed out, Giovannoni was virtually alone in speaking up for conservation and traditional building culture in the face of regime

propaganda [36]. Today, he appears as a model of the humanistic and culturalist approach to architecture and urbanism. He defined the concept of *l'architetto integrale* and was himself a prime example, but perhaps he was also the last. In a field riven by specialization, his vision of the unity of architecture, urbanism, and historic preservation might yet serve as an ideal for our own multi-disciplinary professional and academic activity today.

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