

Revealing the Structures and Forms of Propaganda. Patterns and Symbols in the Colonial Architectures of the Mostra d'Oltremare

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Abstract

In architecture, the relationship between form and structure often constitutes a central interpretative node for understanding the meaning of a work. In particular, in Italian Rationalist architecture produced between the two World Wars, this relationship assumes an ideological value of complementarity: form becomes a symbolic expression of power and tradition, supported by a structure –sometimes displayed, sometimes hidden– that acts as a cultural medium in shaping the spaces of propaganda. This interdependent relationship is evident in the narrative-ideological trajectories of exhibition complexes.

A prominent example is the Mostra d'Oltremare complex in Naples, with particular attention to the pavilions of the Geographic Sector –most of which have been lost– where the interaction between structure and form creates a rhetorical device aimed at sustaining an image of order and power. This image refers to the rich repertoire of overseas imitation models and classical references, often not immediately recognizable and interpretable only through a careful reading of the underlying formal codes. From this perspective, design assumes a hermeneutic function, aimed at rendering intelligible the original configurative matrices. These are reconstructed through a process of surveying and analyzing historiographical sources and translated into a digital model capable of revealing and reflecting on the relationship between form, constructive logic, spatial organization, and symbolic-functional matrices.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, integrated survey, digital model, formal re-interpretation, geometric-spatial matrices.

Introduction

In architecture, the relationship between structure and form is a fundamental principle, in which constructive reasoning and formal expression contribute to the definition of space and its symbolic value. This relationship takes on particular significance in Italian architecture during the twenty years of Fascism, where the coexistence of classicist and rationalist demands links formal configuration to the supporting structure through geometric rules that orient the design towards an image in continuity with the tradition and rhetoric of the regime. A privileged area of experimentation was exhibition buildings, conceived as rhetorical devices in which the structure was configured as an organizing framework capable of modulating spaces and forms according to the political ideology of the time.

A significant example is the complex of the Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare in Naples [Aveta et al. 2021] (fig. 1), inaugurated on May 9, 1940 [AA.VV. 1940b], as a *Universal Thematic Exhibition* [AA.VV. 1940a, p. 9] and organized “like city districts” [Biancale 1940, p. 55]. The exhibition area was in fact divided into four sectors (Geographic, Production, Historical, and Various Exhibitions, Theatre, and Attractions) and described by “ideological axes” that constituted the framework of the “green park” [Siola 1990, p. 2], within which a ‘measured’ design of the pavilions was promoted, consistent with nationalist objectives [Antuono, Elefante 2024, p. 722]. The Geographic Sector is a particularly significant exhibition space, in which the architectural form and

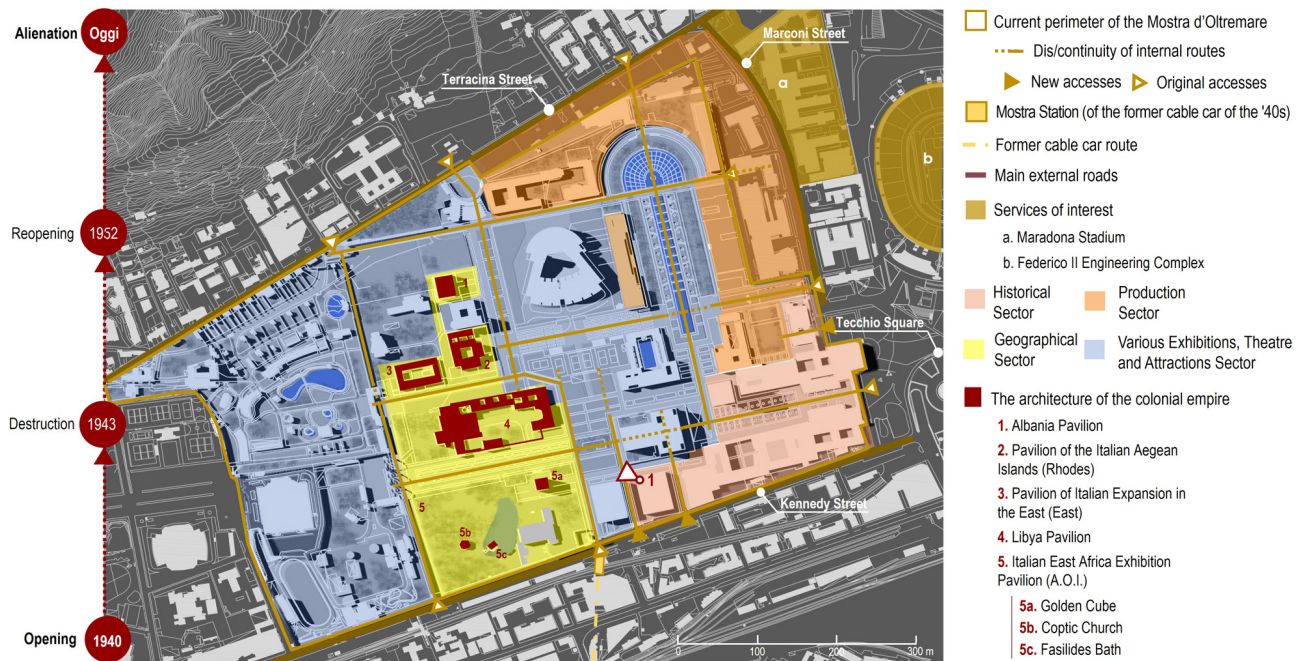


Fig. 1. Overview of the Mostra d'Oltremare Complex, highlighting the original Sectors and the architectures that comprised the Geographic Sector (graphic elaboration by the author).

structure reflect a language steeped in symbolic references, expressing the propaganda imagery of the era and the narrative of identity and celebration of Italianness [Dore 1992, p. 50], aimed at representing the Italian colonial empire.

Today, only a few of the original structures of the Sectors –designed as part of a unified artistic approach by some of the leading figures of Italian architectural culture of the period [Arena 2012, pp. 13, 14]– remain recognizable (fig. 2), albeit in compromised condition. Among these are the Pavilion of the Italian Islands of the Aegean (commonly known as the Rhodes Pavilion) by Giovanni Battista Ceas [AA.VV. 1939a; AA.VV. 1941, pp. 49, 50] and the Pavilion dedicated to Albania, designed by Gherardo Bosio and Pier Niccolò Berardi [AA.VV. 1939b; AA.VV. 1941, p. 54; Penta 1940, pp. 18-24].

Other buildings, however, have been altered by subsequent interventions that have compromised their original layout and meaning, such as the Pavilion of Italian Expansion in the East (commonly the Oriente Pavilion) by Giorgio Calza

Bini [AA.VV. 1941, pp. 55-57] and the Libya Pavilion by Florestano Di Fausto [AA.VV. 1941, p. 46]. Very little remains of the original installations in the vast southern area once occupied by the Pavilion of Exhibitions of Italian East Africa (A.O.I., Africa Orientale Italiana) by Mario Zanetti, Luigi Racheli and Paolo Zella Millillo [AA.VV. 1940b, pp. 65, 66]: only the sculptural architecture of the Golden Cube and a few ruins in the adjacent Indigenous Villages Park, which no longer convey the formal and symbolic expressiveness of the original design.

In this context, understanding the residual structures requires a multi-level methodological approach (fig. 3), in which historiographical sources, compared with digital survey data, provide essential metadata for interpreting the metric-formal composition of the artifacts –based on the “ordering” and “sequentiality” of elements [Moretti 1957, pp. 21-30]– and for carrying out a reliable digital philological reconstruction of their original appearance [Trizio et al. 2021].

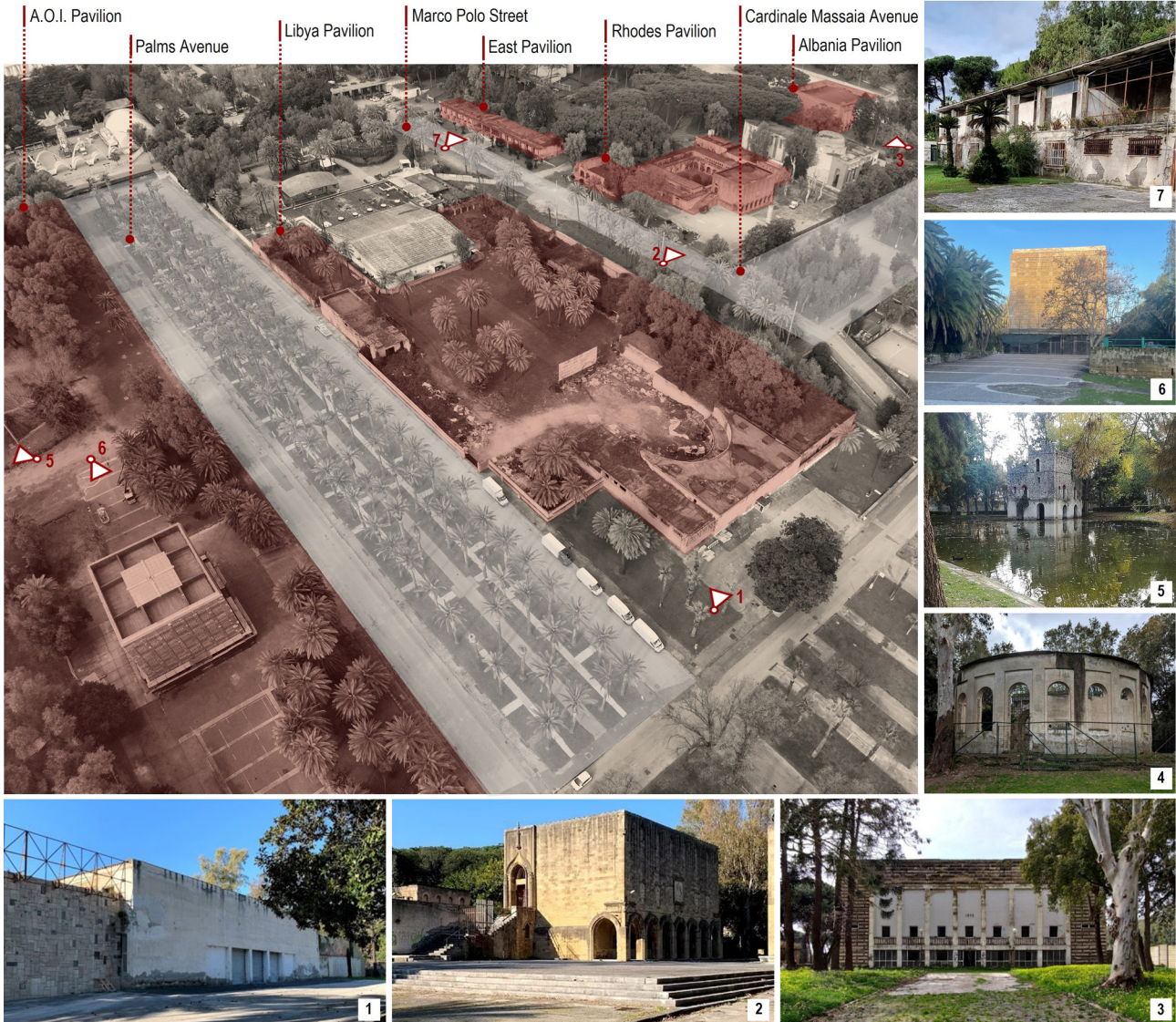


Fig. 2. Aerial view of the Geographic Sector, highlighting the residual configurations of the original pavilions arranged according to the grid of internal pathways of the Mostra d'Oltremare complex (graphic elaboration by the author).

In this regard, representational tools make it possible to retrace the “forms of spatial and design thinking” [Ugo 1994, p. 78] of the pavilions, starting from the analysis of design drawings and the reverse-perspective reconstruction of historical photographic documentation [Agnello 2023], allowing the virtual recreation of volumetric configurations and interior spaces that are poorly documented [Poulopoulos, Wallace 2022].

This process of retro-design [Verdiani 2017] finds in parametric-informative modeling a critical tool useful for validating the coherence between the collected evidence and reconstructive hypotheses [Pietroni, Ferdani 2021], restoring conceptual depth to the original architectural choices, and revealing the hidden order that structures the visible within the dialectic between formal, structural, and ideological dimensions.

The Geographic Sector. From survey to digital reconstruction through historical sources

While largely maintaining its original urban layout, the Geographic Sector has today lost the celebratory aura characteristic of its 1940s configuration, marked by pavilions conceived as an evocative representation of the “synthetic panorama of our modern imperial possessions” [AA.VV. 1941, p. 4] and accessible via four main pathways, defined by rich vegetation serving as a unifying *leitmotif* of the exhibition route [Piccinato 1977] (fig. 2).

In this context, the analysis of the Sector required an integrated approach, combining digital survey data of the residual configurations with information drawn from historiographic documentation, thus building a solid information base [Di Luggo, Campi 2021, p. 252] to understand the rationale behind the current forms and the original compositional and formal choices, as well as to grasp the symbolic and ideological motivations that guided the design of the architectures under study.

In particular, each transformation leaves signs of discontinuity, evidence of more or less consistent restoration or adaptation to new uses, which can be detected from the early stages of reality-based inspection and measurement (fig. 4), conducted using integrated range and image-based digital surveying techniques [Hassan, Fritsch 2019; Barba et al. 2020]. Specifically, aerial photogrammetry (using a *Mavic 3 Enterprise RTK* drone to document elevations and roofs) was complemented by laser scanning acquisition (using the

BLK360 for interior spaces and the *Faro Focus S350* for exterior spaces and pathways), allowing a comprehensive documentation of the Sector’s plan-volumetric organization and the residual traces of the structures. Setting aside the well-established procedural aspects of data acquisition and processing, the collected multi-sensor data-integrated into a georeferenced and structured dataset-enabled an initial comparison with the available graphic and documentary sources, supporting the interpretation of the recorded evidence and the reassessment of the transformations affecting each structure, up to the evaluation of configurations that are now lost.

The most significant evidence consists of the design drawings for the exhibition area preserved in the Luigi Piccinato Archive [1], together with descriptions and drawings published in magazines of the time or preserved in the Mostra d’Oltremare Archive [2].

This is complemented by the rich iconographic heritage of the Federico Patellani Archive [Capano 2014; Belli 2016], as well as by materials disseminated through the extensive editorial production promoted between 1938 and 1941, and the numerous cinematic recordings of newsreels [*Giornale Luce* 1940; *La Settimana INCOM* 1952]; together forming an essential documentary corpus for the figurative reconstruction of the original layouts.

True testimonies of history and stories, these documentary sources –through comparative reading and in relation to survey data– have allowed for the interpretation of marks and discontinuities left by transformations, such as wall openings later closed, misalignments between building blocks, and the juxtaposition of different construction technologies, as well as clarifying some aesthetic, functional, and structural aspects of the structures in their original configurations, including volume organization, elevation composition, circulation connections, and spatial relationships among the various building units. A process of interpretation, also supported by the identification of geometric codes underlying the composition of residual parts, enabled the reconstruction of planimetric and altimetric layouts and the rigorous geometric-compositional framework at the base of the pavilions’ design; a project showing clear references to overseas colonies architectural models and local construction traditions, reinterpreted in a classicist key to support the regime’s rhetoric.

This first re-compositional investigation allowed the structuring of a federated parametric-informative model of the study area, based on a topographic coordination model linked to the architectural models of the individual struc-

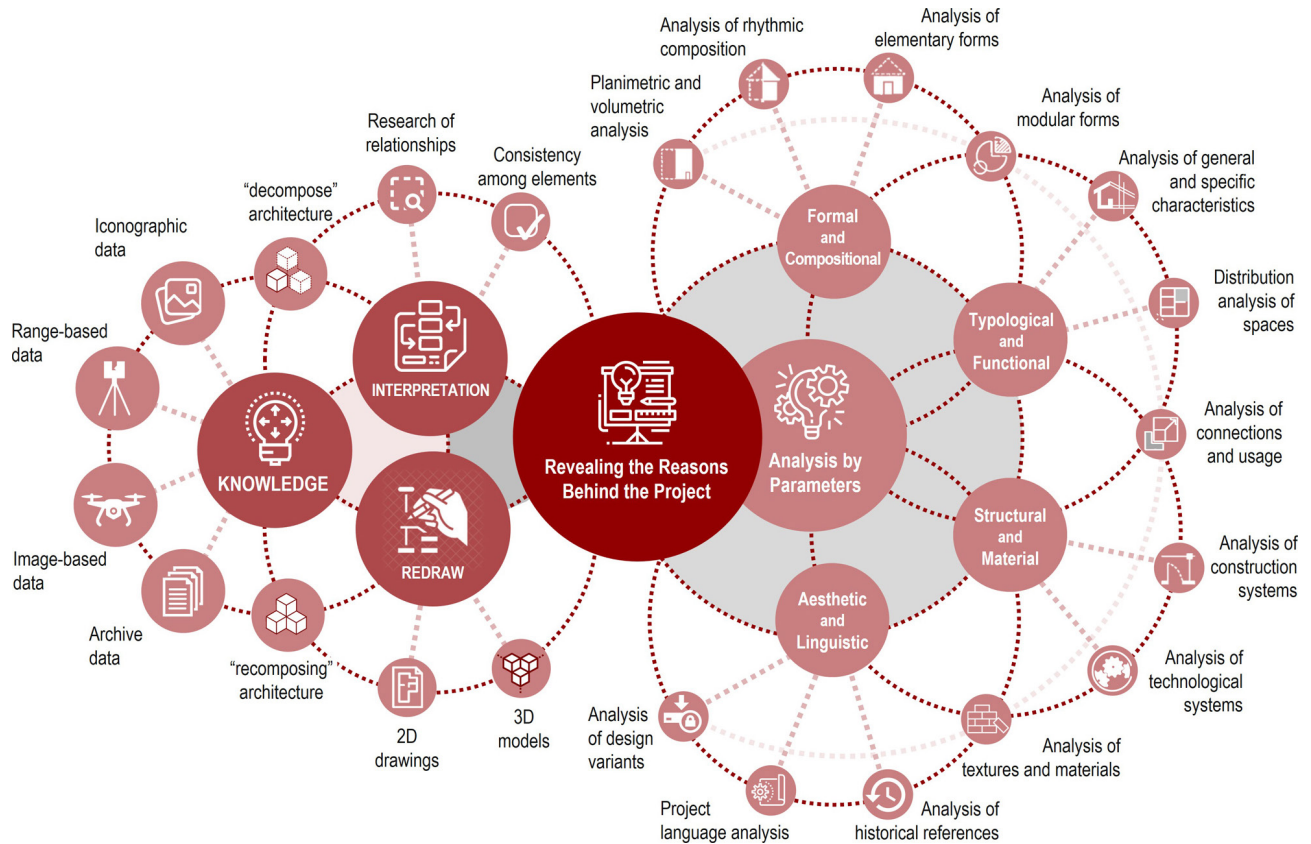


Fig. 3. Methodological framework for understanding and interpreting the visible, reconstructing the graphic model of transformations, and revealing the original layouts, choices, and configurative logics (graphic elaboration by the author).

tures, organized in an aggregative framework that facilitates their reading within the spatial context of reference. Furthermore, to each architectural model describing the current state of the site, the available graphic and design documentation was associated, allowing the reconstruction of the pavilions' original spatial configuration through digital elements enriched with informative parameters describing technological and material characteristics derived from archival documents. A model that, also integrating the iconographic component –through an interoperable digital workflow of reverse-perspective reconstruction between parametric platforms– provides a coherent, multi-layered

system of knowledge, combining documented data, drawings, and digital surveys, useful both for the comprehensive interpretation of the original design dimension [Russo, Guidi 2011] and for the critical verification of preliminary hypotheses regarding the original configuration of individual structures [D'Agostino et al. 2023]. In this way, digital modeling was tasked with reconstructing the evolution of lost architectural and figurative elements in phases, integrating historiographic, graphic, and iconographic components, thus preserving an intangible legacy of the regime's ideological forms and providing a comprehensive understanding of the founding principles of the project.

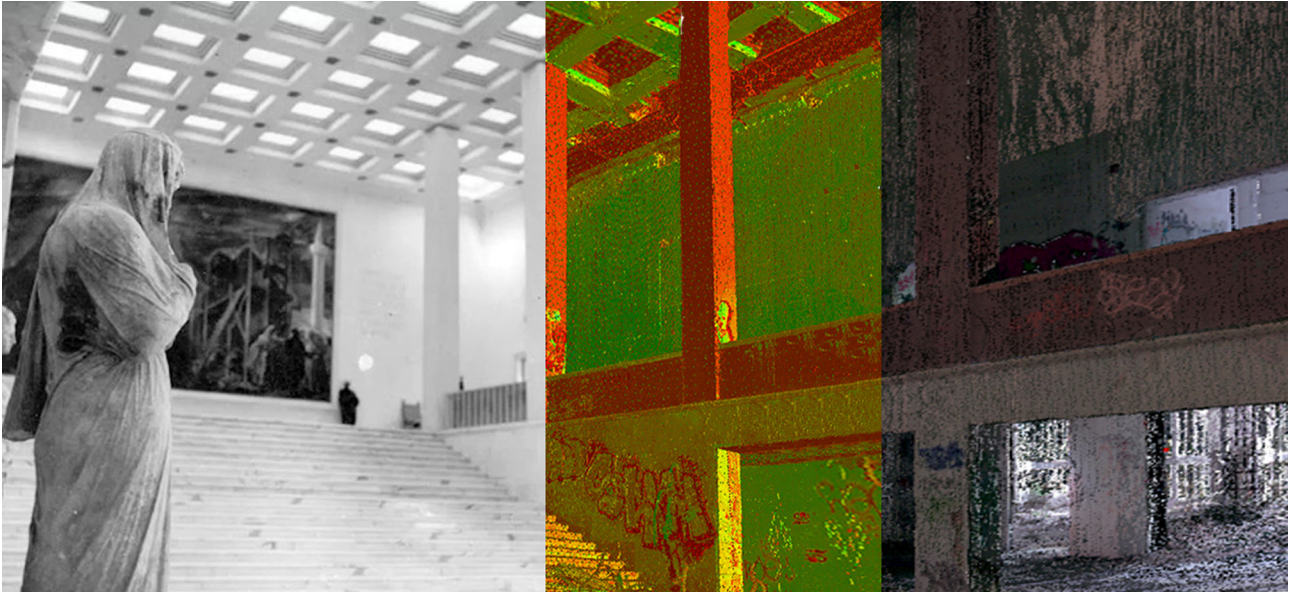


Fig. 4. Interior view of the Libya Pavilion, created as an integrated composition of historical sources [Dillon, 1940, p. 6] and range-based data, to compare current conditions with the original design intentions (graphic elaboration by the author).

Meta-design interpretation of the documentary heritage

The correlation of the acquired sources has made it possible to structure a digital, multiscale, and multidimensional system for the integrated management of the acquired spatial and thematic information, aimed at analyzing the original configurations reinterpreted in the subsequent layout adaptations of the Sector, defined only after the Italian occupation of Albania in 1939 [Belli et al. 2017].

Comparative analysis of historical cartographic documents, conducted through polynomial adaptation, allowed the reconstruction of the temporal invariants of the building complex and the plan-architectural layout of the Sector, organized along two main north-south axes: the first, Cardinale Massaia Avenue, connected the northern access system of the production sector [Antuono et al. 2024] to the Albania and Rhodes Pavilions, passing by the eastern entrance of the Libya Pavilion and continuing toward the A.O.I. Pavilion; the second (today

A. Usodimare street), from the entrance to the Various Exhibitions, Theatre and Attractions Sector, ran alongside the Oriente Pavilion and the western entrance of the Libya Pavilion, reaching the A.O.I. Pavilion. The Sector was also served by two east-west axes crossing the Libya Pavilion: the first to the north, Marco Polo street, which provided access to the Oriente and Rhodes Pavilions, and the second, Palms Avenue, which led to the A.O.I. Pavilion, located along the southern boundary of the exhibition complex at the elevated route of the Posillipo Alto-Mostra cable car (fig. 1).

The multi-temporal analysis of the area made it possible to understand the connectivity and accessibility systems and to investigate the original morpho-topological characteristics of the structures that made up the exhibition project.

The pavilions played a central role in the imperial narrative, guiding visitors through “multiple and sudden space-time shifts” [Mangone 2014, p. 210], as evidenced today by the Rhodes and Albania Pavilions, which, despite war damage, retain substantial integrity thanks to

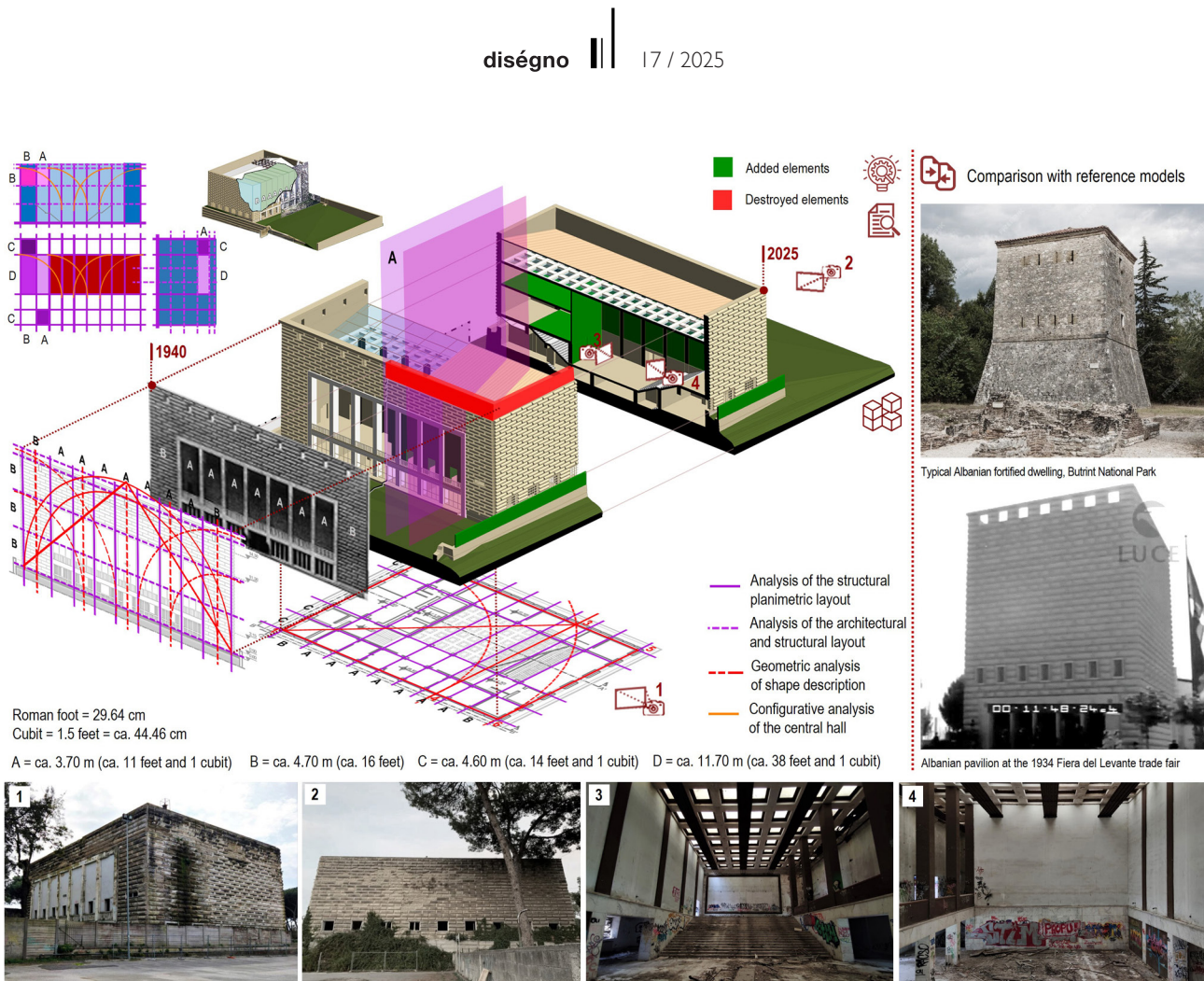


Fig. 5. Digital reconstruction and geometric-proportional analysis of the Albanian Pavilion, carried out through the integration into the model of archival documents - including the orthorectified perspective view of the main façade [AA.VV. 1941, p. 54] - which guided the modular design of the building. On the right: the project reference models; at the bottom: selected images of the current conditions (graphic elaboration by the author).

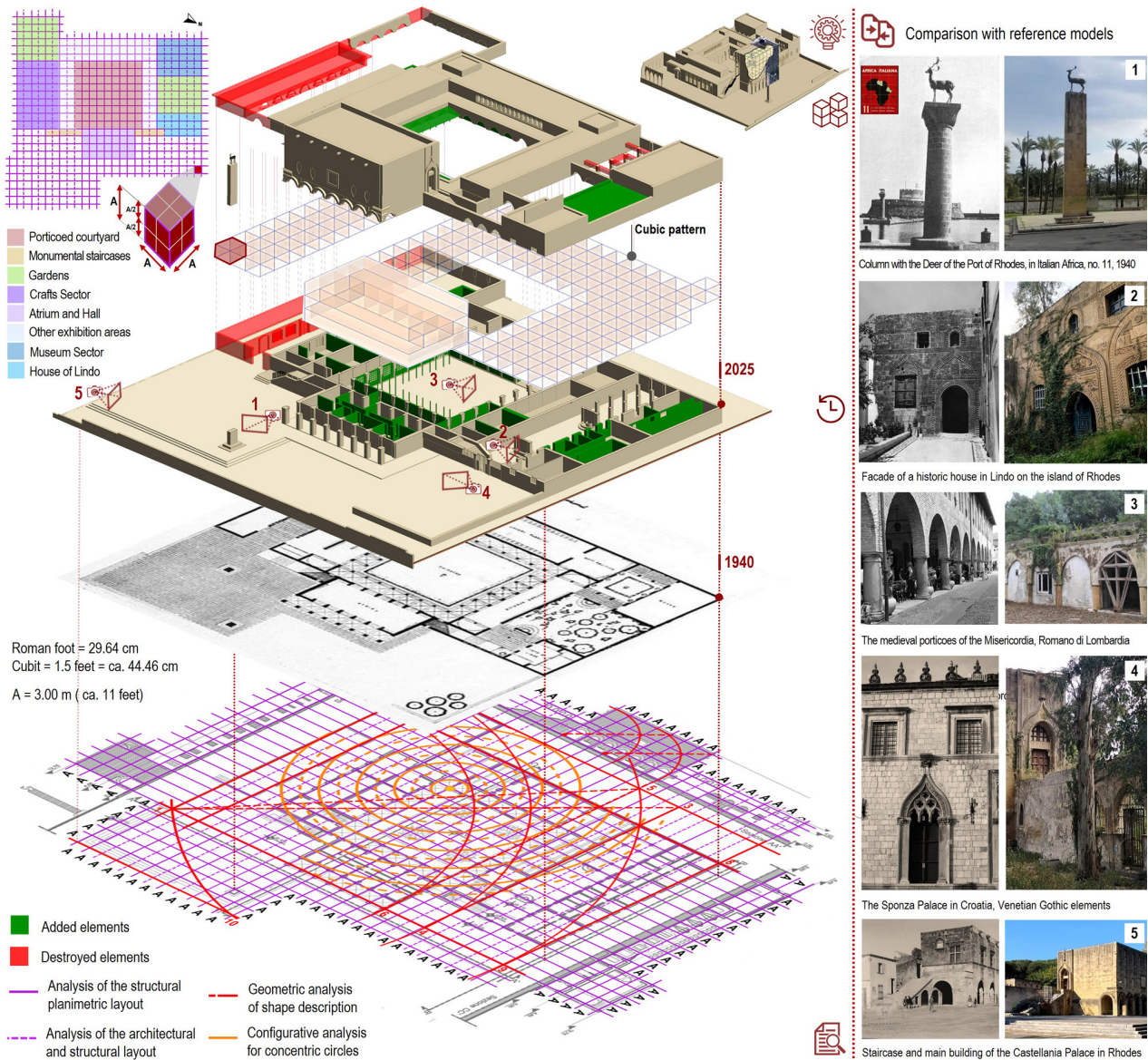


Fig. 6. Digital reconstruction of the Rhodes Pavilion, based on the integration of historical graphic documentation (such as the ground floor plan of the complex, in AA.VV. 1941, p. 50) and the plan-volumetric analysis of the building. On the right, the project reference models, compared with some images of the interior and exterior spaces (graphic elaboration by the author).

coherent restorations carried out during the reopening of the exhibition complex in 1952 as the *Exhibition of Italian Work in the World* [Fiore 1952; AA.VV. 1952].

The discretization of the available metric and documentary information allowed for the analysis of current layouts, the interpretation of the geometric-proportional criteria adopted, and the detection of the units of measurement and modules underlying the composition, typical of the classicist repertoire [Fasolo 1960], facilitating the recognition of design choices and the role of the architectures as models of imitation.

Project drawings alone proved sufficient to reconstruct the formal values of the Rhodes and Albania Pavilions, whose external configurations remain largely original, albeit in a state of neglect and with interior spaces redefined by subsequent interventions, thus providing an essential reference for analyzing their spatial articulation and symbolic content.

In particular, for the Albania Pavilion (fig. 5), decommissioned and in recent years housing the Institute for Economic Development (ISVE), internal modifications have also affected the original monumental external image. The main façade, marked by projecting pillars placed at regular intervals, was originally characterized by a large loggia, now filled in, surmounted by small windows that defined the crowning band of the façade.

The rhythmic dimension of the elements refers to the Roman unit of measurement (feet and its subdivisions). In particular, from the façade, it can be observed, for example, that the interval A between the pillars corresponds to approx. 3.70 m, that is, about 11 Roman feet and one cubit.

The building still retains its classical-inspired rusticated cladding, which, recalling the Albanian fortress-houses Kulla [Mangone 2014, p. 214], describes a compact volume with references also to other Italian exhibition experiences [Pagano 1990, p. 134].

Elevated on a high podium, the building has a rectangular layout determined by a rigorous diagonal ratio [Serlio 1584], which proportionally also governs the plan-altimetric organization of the central hall. This double-height space was originally covered by a ceiling featuring 180 Murano glass coffers and included a pair of staircases leading to the first-floor balconies, on whose walls were placed the paintings *Albania Romana* by Primo Conti and *Albania Fascista* by Gianni Vagnetti [L'Abbate, Moscardin 2017]. However, the subsequent redefinition of the building's functions required the necessary rearticulation

of the interior spaces to create new rooms, including a conference hall on the southern side –which involved infilling one of the two staircases– and the creation of several rooms on the eastern front, obtained by infilling the external loggia; these modifications altered the monumental-exhibition layout, which today is further compromised by structural degradation.

Similarly, despite the neglect and expropriations it suffered at the end of the last century, the Rodi Pavilion (fig. 6) largely retains its original masonry structure, with clear references to regional architecture, except for the section once used for local crafts.

In this case as well, the articulation of the volumes follows a clear geometric (a segment) or metric (a measure) dimension [Gros 1997] of classical inspiration. In particular, the different units composing the building are framed within a geometric grid with a spacing of approx. 3.00 m (about 11 Roman feet), which also governs the elevation of the façades and the height of the interior spaces, today partially reduced. Furthermore, the different sectors of the pavilion are organized according to a planimetric layout governed by diagonal relationships, which determine the composition of the porticoed façades facing the external square. Unfortunately, the subsequent closure of numerous pointed-arch openings compromised the original permeability between the exterior and the internal porticoed courtyard, located between the original Craftsmanship Sector and the northern core, comprising the Museum and the Casa di Lindo inspired by the typical houses of the coastal villages of Rhodes; a courtyard that forms the true heart of the exhibition route, organized according to a concentric pattern that defines the rhythmic spacing of the columns and, at the same time, dictates the dimensions of the main surrounding exhibition rooms.

The architectural language of the pavilion is distinguished by its square, compact surfaces, which recall the historic Rhodes hotels and accentuate the volume of the main body facing the external square. It is divided into two levels and has two symmetrical external staircases –modeled on the Palazzo della Castellania in Rhodes– which, on the first floor, lead to the Hall of Honor, characterized by a rectangular layout and decorated with a fresco attributed to B. Assenza [AA.VV. 1940b]. In the outdoor square, a slender pillar topped with a sculpture of a deer, reminiscent of the statues on the piers of Rhodes, served as a visual reference to overseas models, establishing a



Fig. 7. Geometric and functional analysis of the Libya Pavilion, based on the survey of the current state of the site compared with the historical project plan (published in AA.VV. 1941, p. 46) and period views (photographs by Federico Patellani, June 1940, Museum of Contemporary Photography, Federico Patellani collection, PR. 324/FT. 7) (graphic elaboration by the author).

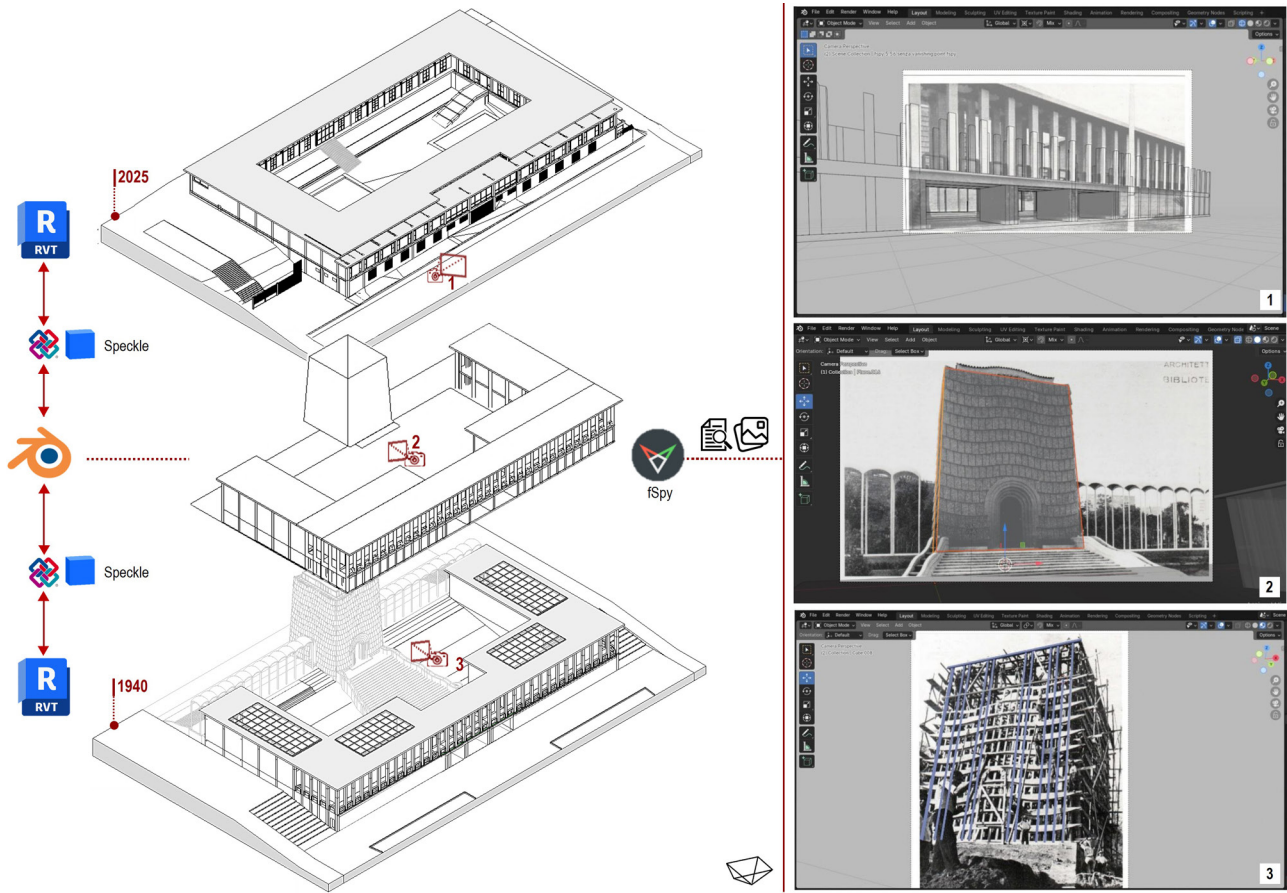


Fig. 8. Operational workflow for the object-oriented reconstruction of the original configurative elements of the Oriente Pavilion, through inverse perspective reconstruction from historical photographs (graphic elaboration by the author).

symbolic link with the nearby Libyan Pavilion (fig. 7). Despite the 1952 renovations, the most representative symbolic structures of the Libya Pavilion were irretrievably lost, further erased by the construction—in the 1960s—of the Centro Bowling Oltremare, built on the most significant area of the complex.

Today, it is no longer easy to perceive the monumentality that characterized the pavilion at the time of its construction, articulated around a large green space and distinguished by symbolic elements such as the white mosque with minaret, the marabout, and the artisan workshops [Amore, Aveta 2021], all of which are now completely lost. However, from the analysis of the drawings and aerial photogrammetric surveys, it is possible to reconstruct the regulating layouts of the pavilion, defined by a rhythm expressed through a module A (approx. 10 Roman feet) that dictates the organization of spaces similarly to what is observed in the Rhodes Pavilion.

However, the planimetric and volumetric composition of the pavilion cannot be reconstructed with certainty based solely on the available design drawings, due to the lack of precise altimetric data. This therefore requires an indirect digital reconstruction approach, based on a critical correlation between iconographic sources and residual elements. In this context, historical images represent invaluable sources for restoring the spatial perception and symbolic significance of the lost volumetric arrangements, which would otherwise remain undocumented, provided they can be referenced to a metric system consistent with the digital model representing the current state of the site.

From iconographic data to digital form: images and visions of lost spaces

To support the digital reconstruction of the historical memory of the sites of “the last and perhaps most effective example of the evolution of Italian colonial representations” [McLaren 2011, p. 28], not fully documented by the original project drawings—which, while constituting the main source on the original layout, are sometimes partial or simplified, with omissions of formal and construction details due to adaptation to the chosen scale of restitution—the tools of digital representation offer modeling procedures capable of deriving information on visible architectural forms and details from period

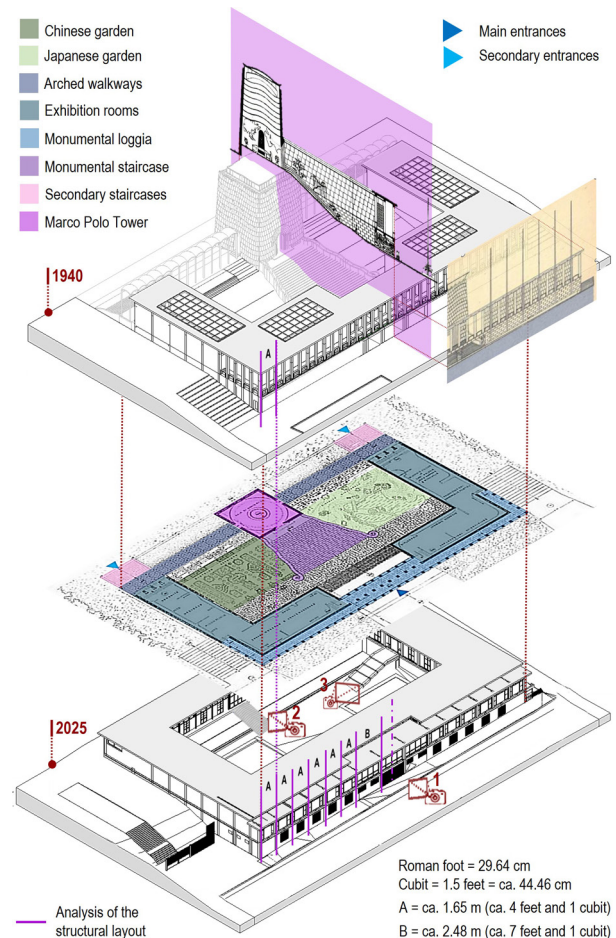


Fig. 9. Digital reconstruction of the Oriente Pavilion, based on the integration of historical documentation [published in AA.VV. 1941, p. 55; Siola 1990, p. 130] and on the spatial and functional analysis of the spaces in their original configuration, compared with the current state of the site (graphic elaboration by the author).

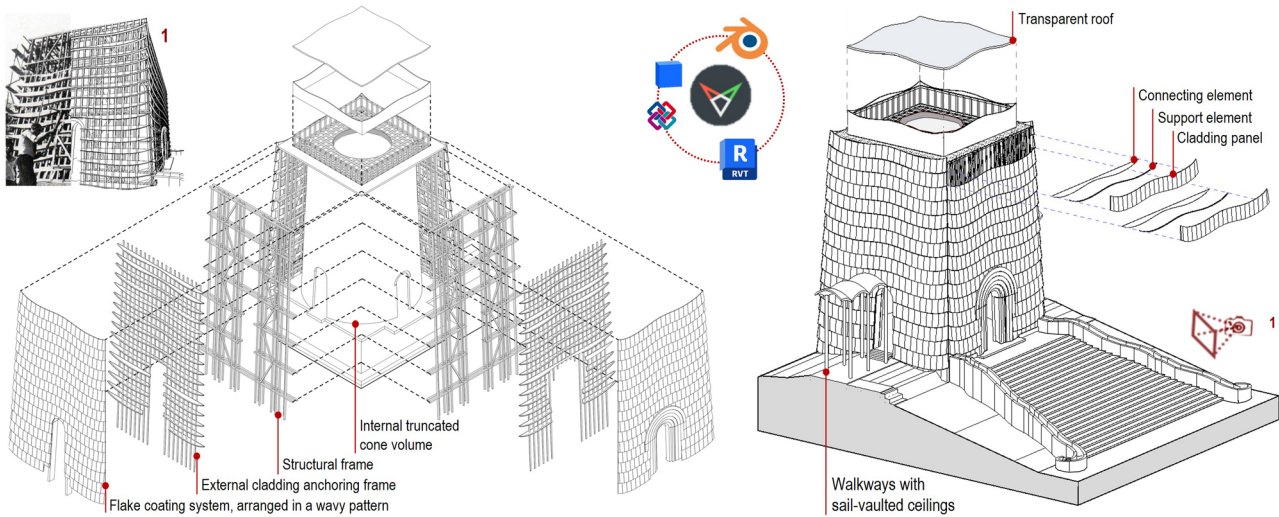


Fig. 10. Exploded digital reconstructions, based on historical images, illustrating the structural and formal components of the Marco Polo Tower (graphic elaboration by the author).

perspective images, depending on the quality of the sources, validating or refusing previous reconstruction hypotheses [Giammusso 2014], and allowing the analysis and reconstruction of the original configurations of those buildings that were deeply transformed and have a limited documentary corpus, such as the Oriente Pavilion and the A.O.I. Pavilion.

In particular, the interoperability between *Blender* and *Revit* (fig. 8), ensured through *Speckle*, allows us to integrate the digital ex ante description of a site not only through conventional graphic-technical documents, but also by exploiting perspectives from period photographs. The latter are analyzed using the freeware tool *fSpY*, which estimates the intrinsic and extrinsic camera parameters, configuring one-, two-, or three-point perspective scenarios, and ensuring accurate geometric alignment between the digital model of the site's current state and historical images. Indeed, for buildings primarily documented through photographic views, often characterized by a lack of information on the internal orientation parameters of the camera, modeling is based on the preliminary analysis of invariant elements, and on those architectural elements that retain their original position, orientation, and proportions relative to the evidence observed in

situ. These elements constitute the supporting structure of the perspective-reconstruction model, allowing the adaptation of drawings to reality, the reconstruction of plan-altimetric relationships and undocumented detail elements, and the provision of a coherent and philologically founded representation of the original configurations.

For the Oriente Pavilion (fig. 9), whose front façade and cross-section do not allow a complete description of the design plan realized in 1940, historical images can be linked to metric tools capable of reconstructing not only the overall form but also the perceptual and compositional qualities, allowing the reconstruction of otherwise undocumented elements. The building, subject to profound transformations –and today closed to the public by an iron fence that also encloses the area of the nearby Rhodes Pavilion– retains only minimally the refined scenography and the suggestion of an oriental microcosm that characterized the original configuration according to a dual stylistic register: severe and solemn on the exterior; delicate and oriental on the interior.

The quadrilateral building retains few traces of its previous structures, including some pillars that formed the main façade on Via Marco Polo, sufficient to restore the rhythmic pattern of the original open loggia on the

second floor, rationally organized according to a module equal to half of the current one *A* of approx. 1.65 m (approx. 4 Roman feet and 1 cubit) and set on a high continuous base interrupted by only three large portals, decorated with bas-reliefs, which constituted the main entrances to the pavilion.

The mapping of markers from aerial and terrestrial views allowed the reconstruction of the elevation rhythm of the façades and the height of the original roof relative to the current state, highlighting the differences introduced with the reorganization of the building as the Pavilion of Credit and Insurance Activities in 1952, and enabled the reconstruction of the articulation of the lost rear building, whose focal point was the Marco Polo Tower.

Built with a wooden frame structure (fig. 10), the Tower was part of a highly axial scenographic layout designed to guide visitors on a perceptual and symbolic journey from the outside to the central courtyard of the pavilion, organized into two gardens –Chinese and Japanese– which served as a place of mediation before ascending the Tower via the wide staircase.

The exhibition path was strongly oriented and emphasized by the monumentality of the staircase, with its flared plan profile and sinuous plastic parapets, accentuating the verticality of a Tower conceived as a compact square-plan volume, clad in overlapping modular panels which, enhanced by the play of light and shadow, evoked materials and ornamental motifs of oriental inspiration, as documented by historical sections and surveys.

The zenithal lighting of the tower accentuated the solemnity of the space, while also conveying a sense of suspension and lightness. From this point, the symbolic path developed in a double circular direction through two slender porticoes on the north side, surmounted by ribbed vaults resting on slender pillars, which led visitors to the side exhibition rooms and the open loggia on the main façade, ensuring continuity between interior and exterior spaces, an expression of the guiding principle of the project, according to which architecture and landscape had to coexist in a single, all-encompassing experience, which can now be perceived once again through the object-oriented model.

The digital model therefore becomes a hermeneutic tool, capable of making intelligible forms and structures charged with propagandistic rhetoric, as evident in the reconstruction of the A.O.I. Pavilion (fig. 11). A “place within a place”, documented as the most important

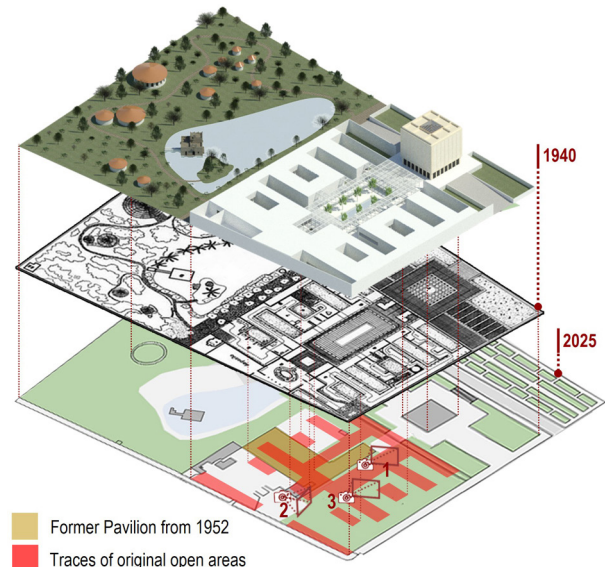


Fig. 11. Digital reconstruction of the A.O.I. Pavilion, based on the original plan [historical documentation published in AA.VV. 1941, p. 41] and on the survey of the evidence still present in situ. Note how the layout of the Pavilion, built in 1952 and organized according to an asymmetrical arrangement with respect to the Golden Cube, adapts to the traces of the original structures of the A.O.I. Pavilion (graphic elaboration by the author).

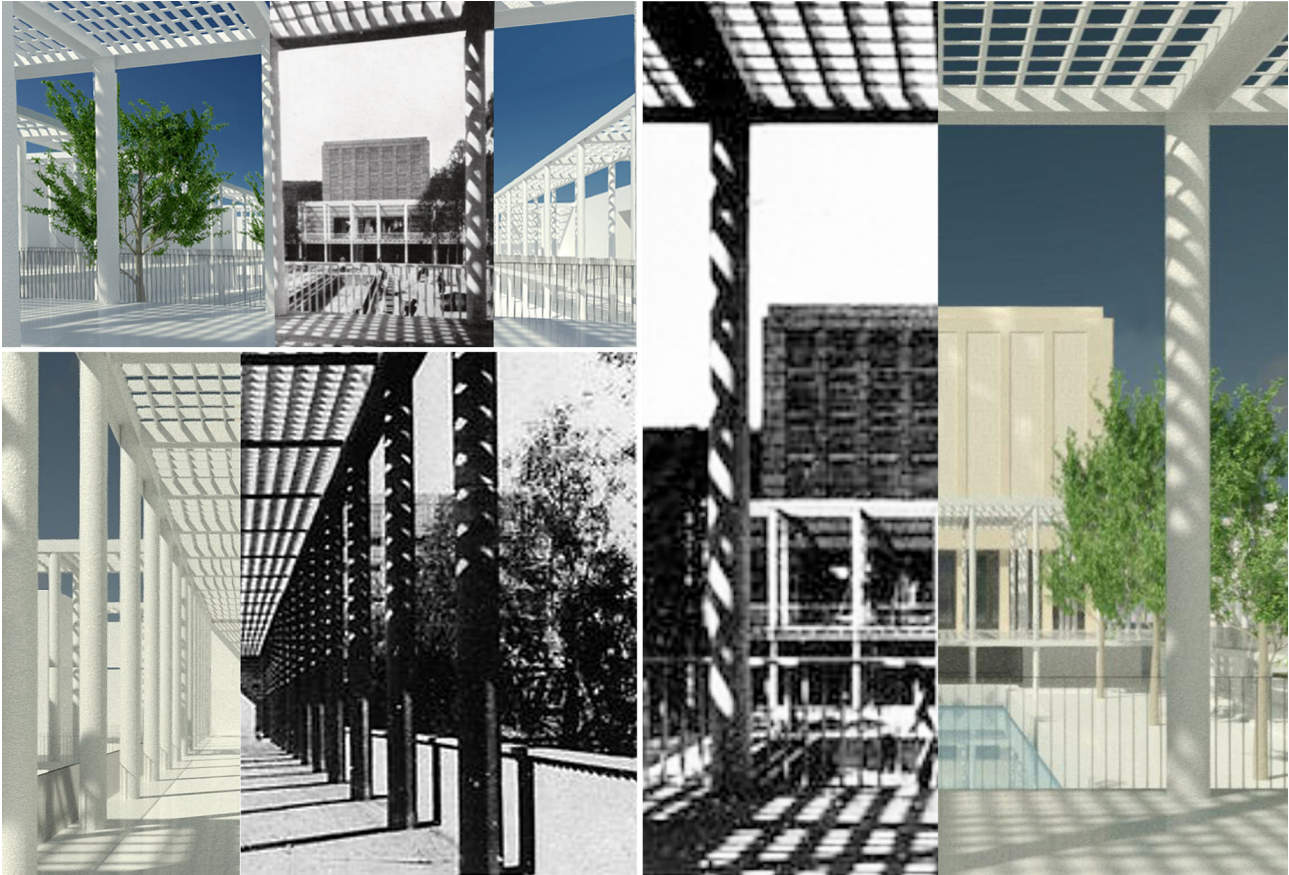


Fig. 12. Views of the evocative pathway along the walkways of the A.O.I. Pavilion, compared with historical views [AA.VV. 1941, p. 42; AA.VV. 1940d] (graphic elaboration by the author).

overseas possession [Pagano 1990, p. 126], built around the Golden Cube that “rose almost mid-air against the background of the Phlegraean hills” [AA.VV. 1940c, p. 54], clad in neo-Egyptian-inspired golden mosaics that evoked the grandeur of great civilizations of the past, ideologically recalling the Roman Empire, which left a significant architectural trace in Africa [Carli 2005]. A series of walkways (fig. 12) extended from the Cube, supported by slender circular pillars and covered by sunshades made of grid panels (fig. 12), leading to the seven pavilions dedicated to the Italian colonies in the Horn of Africa (Eritrea, Somalia, Harar, Hamar, Galla and Sidama, Scioa) [Labanca 2025]. Although these buildings are now completely lost, the surveys (fig. 11) show how the post-war transformation, which led to the construction of the former Italian Labor in Africa Pavilion in 1952, designed by Giulio De Luca [Renzi 2012], was adapted to the original configuration: the layout of the original pavilions is still visible through the arrangement of the greenery, which follows the open areas of the original layout and provides useful elements for the planimetric reconstruction of the buildings. Moreover, the original layout was completed on the western side by the Fasilides Bath, an evocative reproduction of the Ethiopian Castle of Gondar, and a village including a Coptic church, *tucul* [Ascione 2021, p. 154], *hudmò*, and *ghebi* [Palomba 2021, p. 572]. Visitors, traversing these settings, were immersed in shifting atmospheres, now once again perceptible thanks to the digital reconstruction. These models, far from being mere graphic simulations,

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Notes

[1] The archive, which belongs to the PDTA Department of La Sapienza University in Rome, is available in open access at: <https://www.archivioluigipicci.nato.it/> (last accessed September 2025).

[2] The Archive preserves a rich and varied collection of graphic and documentary material, which can be consulted thanks to the

become interpretative tools for critically reading spatial and compositional relationships, the connections between structure and form, and the constructive and formal principles of the original design, and for supporting future activities in the knowledge, transmission, and valorization of significant segments of modern architectural heritage.

Conclusions and future developments

The figurative program analyzed reveals an architectural invention in which structural dimension and formal expression combine to construct a self-celebratory message which, enriched by exotic suggestions typical of overseas references, conceals the regime's obsession with traditional codes of identity. It is an indirect architectural narrative, now difficult to perceive due to the largely lost configurations, which integrates references to classicism and Roman culture that can only be revealed through a digital reinterpretation of the sites. In this context, the integration of heterogeneous analog-digital data into a relational information model, conceived as an 'open knowledge system', represents an opportunity to reveal the order of meaning of residual spaces and elements and, also through new modes of sharing and AR/VR use, to recount many of the lost or inaccessible architectures of the geographical sector of the Exhibition, while at the same time becoming a tool for enhancing the architectural heritage.

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