

The so-called ‘Palazzetto’ in the Palazzo di Venezia Complex: A small construction history among the huge transformation events of the Rome centre in the early twentieth century

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Introduction

The demolition of the Palazzetto di Venezia and its reconstruction in an area just about a dozen metres from the original one represents an example of those practices which took place in Rome at the beginning of the twentieth century in order to adapt some massive transformations inside the ancient urban fabric to the preservation of buildings regarded as particularly significant [1].

Despite the literature on the transformations that occurred from the last quarter of the nineteenth century in the most ancient area of the city being quite wide, the history of the Palazzetto di Venezia’s ‘relocation’ has remained in the shade. The reason behind this can be recognised in the Palazzetto di Venezia’s history belonging to the much wider context of actions aimed at realising the new colossal monument to celebrate Vittorio Emanuele II, first monarch of Italy and father of the nation, within which the Palazzetto’s events – and the other ones carried out on similar buildings in the same area – represented a modest episode [2].

Nowadays, renowned studies dealing with the fifteenth-century building, the *Viridarium*, are available and refer to its relationship with both the adjacent Pietro Barbo’s cardinalial palace and the surrounding Medieval S. Mark’s quarter, developed near the homonymous Basilica.

What the current literature is missing is the analysis of the procedures which marked out the Palazzetto di Venezia between 1885 and 1912 and, more particularly, the study of both the material and executive aspects which connected the actual building to its fifteenth-century antecedent.

A complicated administrative process – the length of which was mainly due to the broad group of participants involved in the operations – characterised the years preceding the beginning of the two building sites; they were conducted according to the parallel directives of reconstructing the new building in the image of the one which had to be demolished and reusing the stone elements belonging to the fifteenth-century cloister.

This contribution tries to fill this gap through the reading of the original documents held in the archives and the direct analysis of the rebuilt palazzetto – through architectural surveys and a few weakly destructive investigations – in order to outline the executive processes linked both to the demolition operations and the new construction ones.

From the pope Paolo II’s secret garden to the ‘Palazzetto di Venezia’, headquarters of the Austro-Hungarian’s embassy.

Built between 1466 and 1469, the *Viridarium* was conceived by the Pope Paolo II as a closed garden which allowed him to walk in the green while remaining in the very heart of the city; following a unique configuration – if compared to the architectural scene of Rome – it was originally independent of the adjacent St. Mark’s palace. (Fig. 1) The building was

The so-called ‘Palazzetto’ in the Palazzo di Venezia Complex: A small construction history among the huge transformation events of the Rome centre in the early twentieth century

composed of a hanging garden placed above a basement level holding artisan shops. These last were accessible from the outside, while the actual garden – at over three meters above the surrounding squares and streets – was only accessible from the Pope’s apartment, situated in the *piano nobile* of St. Mark’s palace [3].

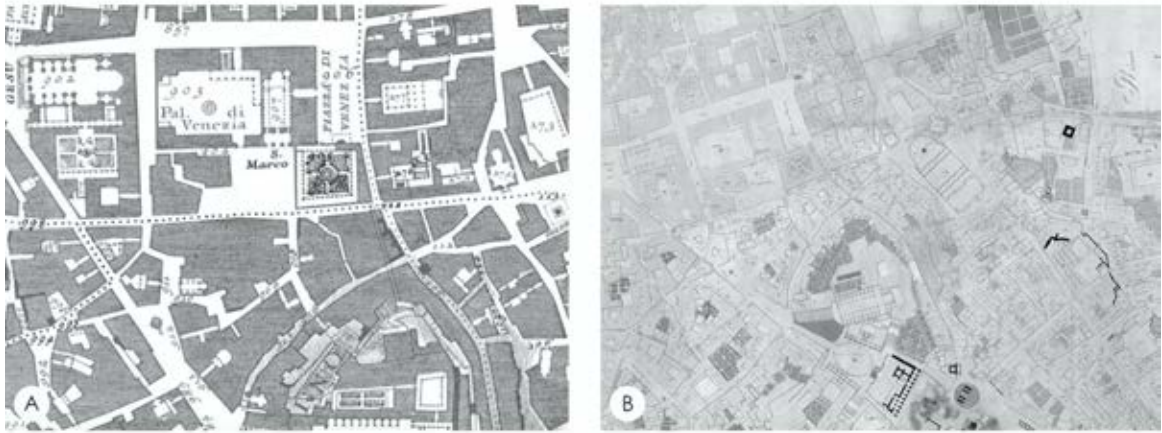


Figure 1: The area of Palazzo and Palazzetto di Venezia in the *Nuova Topografia di Roma* di G.B. Nolli, 1744 (A) and the *Catasto Gregoriano*, 1835 (B).

The masonry structure which enclosed the garden consisted of a two-level cloister open on both sides through wide arcades. The *Viridarium* was therefore a quite isolated space and, at the same time, completely permeable to sight from the surrounding public spaces. The cloister’s spans were originally ten on each side; the first vaulted level had travertine octagonal pillars with capitals in acanthus leaves and curving corner volutes; the second level, with Ionic columns, was covered by a wooden gabled roof, as shown by the surveys carried out before the demolition. An embattlement crowned both the internal and the external walls.

The square plan of the inner garden turned into an irregular shape at the front overlooking the ancient *via Lata* to which the building was aligned [4]. This wing – which for this reason had a trapezoidal plan – held the sole spaces in the building having a residential function which were used by the Cardinal Barbo, the Pope’s nephew.

The building was first subjected to major transformations under the Pope Paolo III (1535-49) when he decided to connect the *Viridarium* to the tower he had built for himself on the Capitoline hill. For this the Pope proposed the construction of a raised walkway supported by arches with the function of a real private footpath (see figure 1A); this was the period when most of the cloister’s arcades were modified – closed or made smaller – deeply changing the peculiar permeability at sight of the garden and determining the change in name of the building, identified as ‘palazzetto’ since then. (Fig. 2)

Just a few decades later, Pope Pio IV (1499-1565) gave the ambassadors of the Serenissima (Venice) the St. Mark’s complex (the main palace, to which the Paolo Barbo’s palace belonged, and the Palazzetto di Venezia) provided that the titular cardinal of S. Mark’s basilica maintained his residence. After the Treaty of Campoformio (1797) and the fall of the Republic of Venice, the entire complex passed to the French government. On the fall of Napoleon in 1814, the complex finally became property of Austrian government.

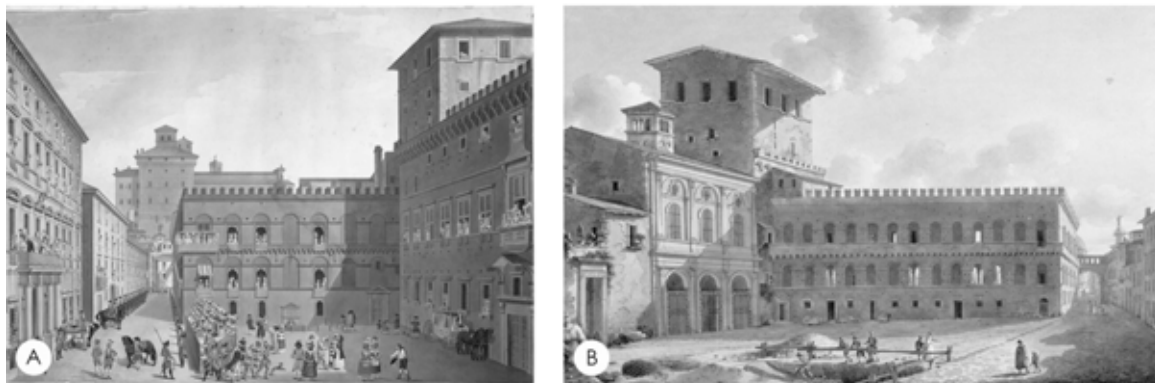


Figure 2: Piazza Venezia in a painting of F. Muccinelli 1781 (A) and piazza S. Marco in a drawing of V.J. Nicolle 1787 ca. (B)

Roma the Capital of Italy, the Vittoriano building site and the question of the Palazzetto di Venezia.

Connected to the period of great transformations in Rome – city expansion and the existing urban fabric’s redefinition [5] – the events concerning the Palazzetto di Venezia were, as abovementioned, closely related to the construction of the Monument to Vittorio Emanuele II, first monarch of Italy.

After a period of uncertainty, the slope of the Capitoline Hill and namely that which overlooked the *Via del Corso* – the beating heart of the city at that time – was chosen for the realisation of the commemorative monument. This area, densely built-up by a thousand-year-old stratified building fabric, was to become the linchpin of the planned expansions on both sides of the Tiber. Despite the large quantity of demolitions which would have been necessary to make way for the new majestic building (not only minor architecture, but also churches and noble palaces), the special office for the Capital’s Public Works and the specially established government committee persisted in the choice of this area on account of the importance that the building should have had in terms of symbolic value. As well as its commemorative purpose, the monument had to trace the architectural ideal of the ‘national style’.

In 1884, Giuseppe Sacconi – the winner of the competition for the monument’s project – defined the demolition works on the slope of the Capitoline Hill (among these the tower of Paolo III, the three cloisters of the Ara Coeli’s Franciscan monastery and several residential blocks) and those necessary to redesign the foothill new piazza, symmetrically placed with respect to *Via del Corso*.

The site of the new piazza was marked out by an urban structure – clearly documented by the “Nuova carta di Roma” published in 1748 by Giovan Battista Nolli and the more recent Gregoriano land register – which consisted of two important adjacent squares clearly separated by the Palazzetto di Venezia’s volume (see figure 1). The Torlonia palace was placed facing the Palazzetto, for which the demolition and the subsequent construction of a new building was planned in order to define the scenic space of the monumental backdrop.

As regard to the Palazzetto di Venezia, the project involved the reduction of its volume as much as the monument’s perspective required with the subsequent definition of new facades. This intervention belonged to a *modus operandi* adopted up to that time for realising new roads or broadening the existent ones through the demolition of the existing buildings or their partial ‘cut’ (Fig. 3).

The so-called ‘Palazzetto’ in the Palazzo di Venezia Complex: A small construction history among the huge transformation events of the Rome centre in the early twentieth century

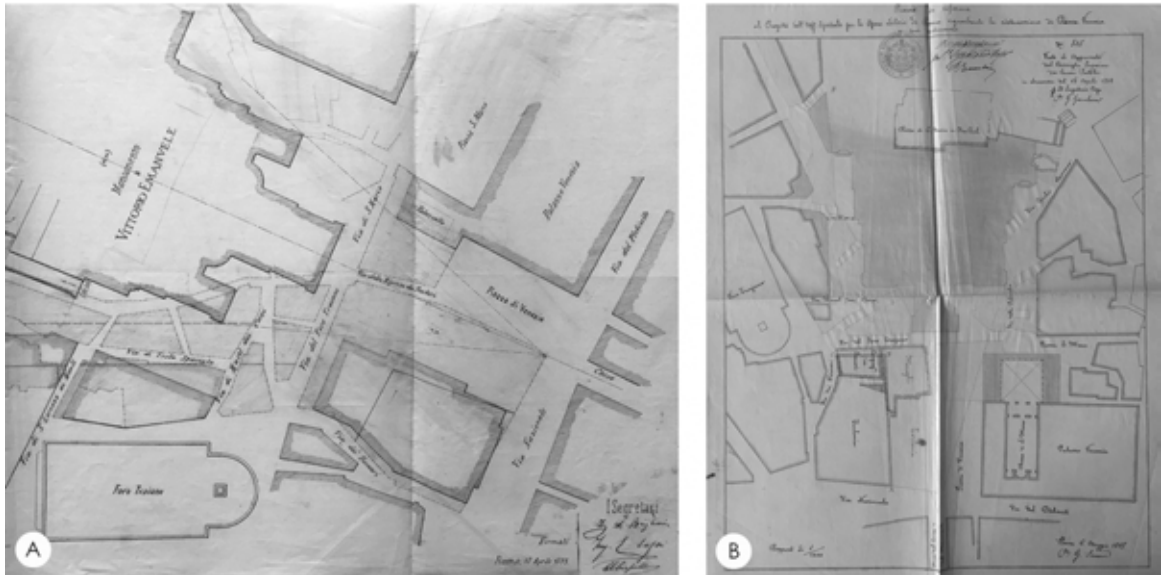


Figure 3: The first prevision for the cutting of a Palazzetto di Venezia's portion, 1893 (A); the Giuseppe Sacconi plan, 1887 (B).

The discovery of tunnels – as well as traces of the ancient Servian city wall – during the demolition, two years after the monument's construction site was launched, required in 1887 a thorough review of the project. The new proportions of the building and the subsequent enlargement of the construction area had significant consequences for the new Piazza Venezia's space, for which a new master-plan was drafted and then approved in 1897. The early prevision of partial – although considerable – expropriation of the Palazzetto di Venezia had ultimately turned into a total demolition and reconstruction [6]. The project had now to put together three different requests coming from the diverse participants in the operations: clearing the perspective of the monument under construction; symbolically preserving the Palazzetto, recognised as significant in the Italian architectural history; not depriving the Austro-Hungarian government of its property.

A close correspondence – held in the Italian central state archive in Rome – between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Public Works, the Municipality of Rome and the Austro-Hungarian Embassy clarifies the difficulties in drawing up decisions about the Palazzetto's fluctuating fortunes. According to Sacconi's idea, the new building should have been built adjacent to the main palace and, to be exact, in correspondence with the St. Mark Basilica's building, for which the new Palazzetto would have assumed the role of forecourt. But the Austro-Hungarian government didn't accept this proposal because of the right of way which was necessary to allow free access to the church. The negotiations between the two countries, lead unofficially, proceeded slowly while in the meantime the demolition of the existing buildings and the elevation of the new monument were carried on. In 1899 a turning point was reached: the compensation amount awarded for the expropriation of the Palazzetto was fixed and the Austro-Hungarian government made a request for a specific area to build the new Palazzetto. This request was firstly considered too onerous by the Italian government, which took into account the possibility of a coercive expropriation instead, but reasons of international convenience, expressed by the Minister of Justice, suggested continuing friendly discussions.

In 1903, while the discussion on the Palazzetto's fortunes was becoming more and more urgent because of the progress of monument's work, no decision was yet made. The need to reach an agreement was finally clear in 1904 when, in order to complete the laying out of the square, all that remained was to purchase and demolish the building. It then became

necessary to resume the suspended negotiations providing the approval of the abovementioned Austro-Hungarian government's provisions. The Italian government thus began the expropriations of residential blocks resting on the new Palazzetto's construction area. In 1906, along with the buildings' demolition, the Rome town council approved all the measures required to redefine the related road system: the Madama Lucrezia alley's suppression, changes in Via degli Astalli's layout and the expansion of the St. Mark square. (Fig. 4)

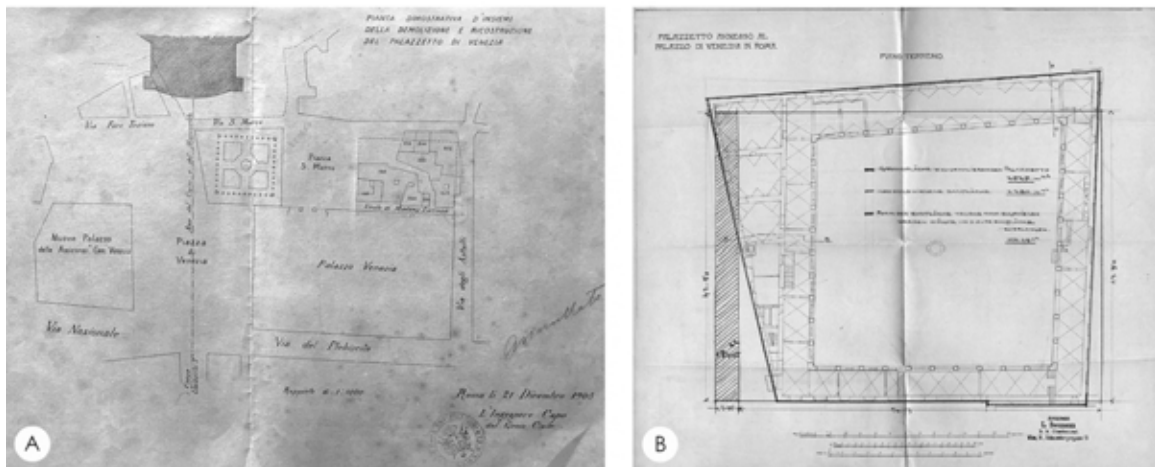


Figure 4: Preliminary plan for the Palazzetto di Venezia, 1903 (A). Survey elaborated before the starting of the demolition intervention (B).

After obtaining the approvals related to both the financial aspects and the assignment of the new construction area, the two governments signed an agreement aimed at formally regulating the building activities in June 1907 [7]. On the one hand, the Austro-Hungarian government committed itself to the demolition of the ancient *Viridarium* and the construction of the new Palazzetto di Venezia of an equal surface area; on the other hand, the Italian government was responsible for the expropriation and demolition of the existing residential blocks. The agreement also defined the methods and the times of the activities to be carried out: the Italian government had firstly to consign the area vacated after the blocks' demolition activities to the Austro-Hungarian government which, from that moment on, would have been committed to consign to the Italian government – within two years – the area vacated after the demolition of the *Viridarium*.

In early 1908 the blocks' demolition work began; despite the duration of the site being estimated at two months, only on October 1 was the area actually consigned to the Austro-Hungarian government.

In 1909 the Austro-Hungarian government appointed the architects Camillo Pistrucchi, Jacopo Oblat and Ludwig Baumann to design and direct the work both on the demolition of the *Viridarium* and the construction of the new building. After solving some bureaucratic obstacles, a memorandum between the Municipality of Rome and the Austro-Hungarian government clearly defined the demolition works' procedures for the *Viridarium*. The greatest concerns were related to the possible superimposition of works to be performed on the ancient building and those necessary for the erection of Vittorio Emanuele's monument. Moreover, the celebrative monument had to be completed by the spring of 1911, on the occasion of its inauguration during the Great Universal Exhibition – which also corresponded to the fiftieth anniversary of the Italian Unification. These reasons required great care to avoid any interference between the two building sites.

All cautions were exercised in the demolition from the executive point of view. As regard to the walkway of St. Mark – whose demolition pertained to the monument's works supervisor – the operations firstly provided for leaving the last

The so-called ‘Palazzetto’ in the Palazzo di Venezia Complex: A small construction history among the huge transformation events of the Rome centre in the early twentieth century

arcade on site as a buttress for the *Viridarium*’s corner: it was finally removed after the fifteenth-century building’s walls had been reduced to the height of the arcade itself. (Fig. 5)

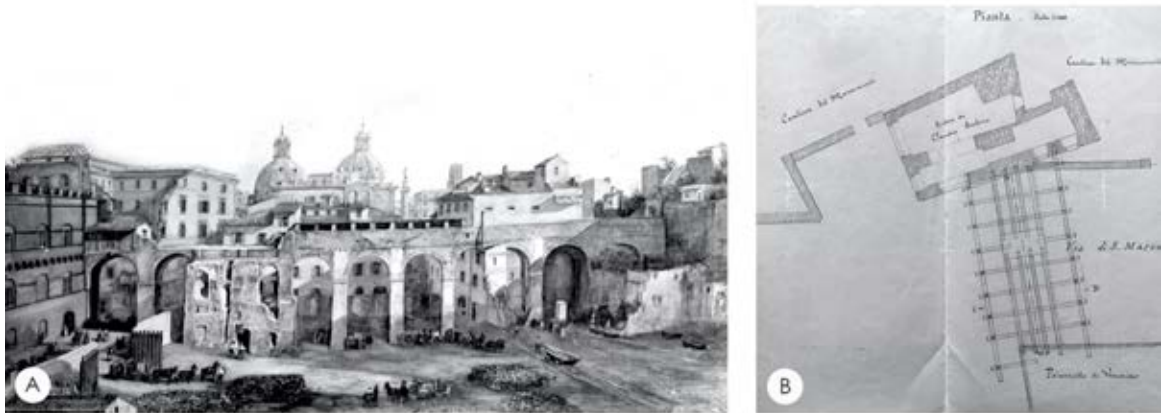


Figure 5: The walkway supported by arches connecting the palace and the Paul III’s tower, 1839 (Pietrangeli 1978) (A); demolition project for the arch adjacent to the Palazzetto di Venezia, 1909 (B).

A further issue concerning the demolition was the requirement to produce appropriate documentation on the *Viridarium* because of its imminent disappearance [8]. Along with the request for an accurate survey, the Directorate-General for Antiques and Fine Arts – led at that time by Corrado Ricci – made further demands. Worried about the loss of the ancient building’s material witnesses, Ricci proposed to carry out the analysis of the construction technique and of the original coloration in order to increase the knowledge of the history of architecture and to obtain a quite perfect reproduction of the ancient building through the construction of the new one.

In January 1910, when the project for the construction of the new Palazzetto was consigned to the Italian authorities the demolition works had not yet begun.

The demolition building site

Finally, in February 1910, the Austro-Hungarian government concluded an agreement with the Domenico Vitali company for the execution of the two construction sites: the *Viridarium*’s demolition and the construction of the new Palazzetto. The delayed start of the works was probably due to the desire to begin them simultaneously; along with the advantages in terms of construction operations’ costs, this choice probably allowed a better and faster management of the demolition materials, which had to be reused from the ancient *Viridarium*. Some agreements with the Municipality of Rome related to the permission to install a Decauville rail from the actual to the future Palazzetto’s area and to provide for specific storage areas seem to confirm this hypothesis. (Fig. 6)

In this regard the possibility of using wide areas to methodically store the stone elements of the *Viridarium*’s cloister assumed a quite significant role. These, according to the 1907 convention, had to be reused for the new Palazzetto in order to build a strong relation between past and present.

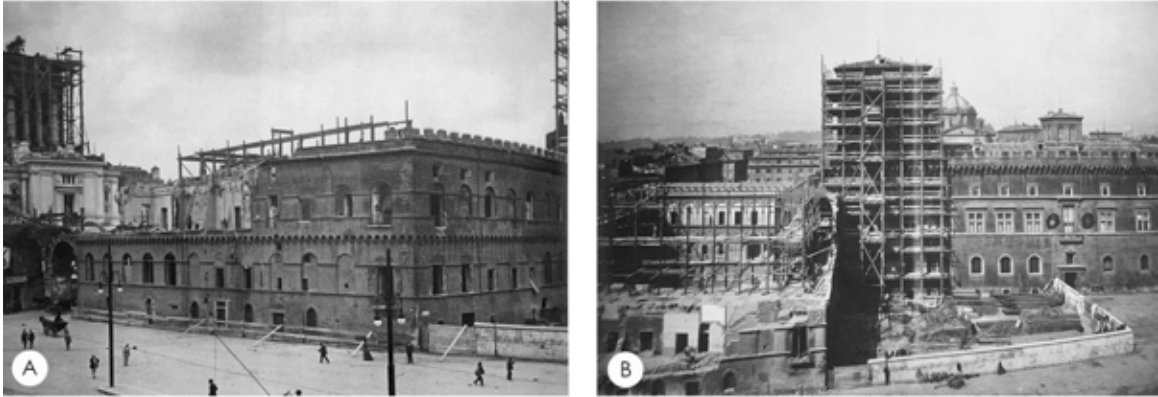


Figure 6: Palazzetto di Venezia demolition, 1910 (M.R. Coppola 2012). The Vittoriano monument construction site in progress (A) and the Biscia's tower covered by scaffolding (B).

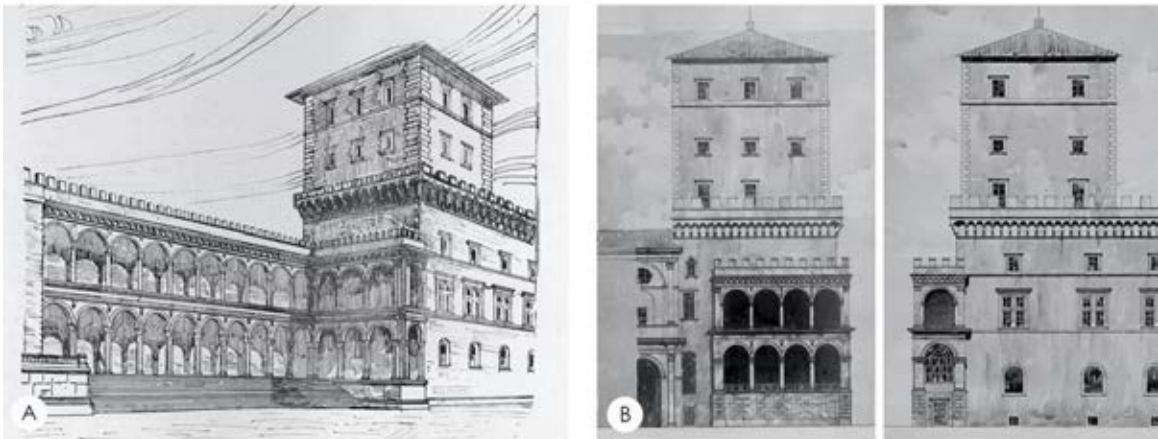


Figure 7: Corrado Ricci's proposals to avoid the complete demolition of the XV century building.

Many disputes arose when the demolition work made visible the fifteenth-century cloister from Piazza Venezia. The debate in the press involved public opinion and the proposal put forward in August 1910 by Corrado Ricci was also made known via an essay by Gustavo Giovannoni, which was promptly published [9]. The reasons asserted by Corrado Ricci were based on a more conservative approach but also expressed a very precise observation on the stability of the Biscia's tower, to which the Viridarium was backed against. (Fig. 7a)

The opinions favourable to Corrado Ricci's proposal – to which the High Council of Fine Arts first and foremost belonged – was opposed by many other influential players so that, despite the increasing protests, the Italian government approved the continuation of the demolition works.

However, the issue on the stability of the Biscia's tower was still unsolved; so, it was decided to carry on some structural works before the removal of the *Viridarium's* walls closer to the tower; in fact these last, conveniently reinforced, would have shored the high building during the strengthening intervention.

The so-called 'Palazzetto' in the Palazzo di Venezia Complex: A small construction history among the huge transformation events of the Rome centre in the early twentieth century

This represented the last chance for Corrado Ricci to save from the destruction at least a small part of the ancient building. In November 1910, Ricci proposed maintaining the double order of arches still in place and to proceed with their reorganization in the form of a loggia; this proposal would have avoided leaving visible the tower's rough basement on the other side, the S. Mark's façade. (Fig. 7b) Ricci's proposal also considered the executive issues related to the different configurations of the two buildings (the old one and the new one); in fact, in order to cover the same area and increase the covered spaces, the project of the new building included the reduction of the cloister. The proposal to leave in their original place the four ancient arches to form a loggia would have, among other things, returned a public function to the redundant stone elements [10].

In December 1910, the area was level to the surrounding roads but the fragments of the two cloister's arms closer to the Biscia's tower were still on site and under reinforcement. The final date for their complete demolition and the final liberation of the area was set for 15th February 1911. Pressures, indecisiveness and discordant viewpoints meant that on 10th February no decision had been taken concerning these last arcades. The same situation of uncertainty continued until the end of May but, in the meantime, the Austro-Hungarian government made it clear that it would not incur any additional costs for the recovery of the loggia. On the other side the Italian government had to come to terms with the time restrictions related to the inauguration of the monument to Vittorio Emanuele, scheduled for 4th June 1911.

The Palazzetto reconstruction site: where it wasn't, how it wasn't.

Often reduced in the literature to a simple relocation work, the project for the new Palazzetto was a far more complex process because of the involved symbolic connotations, material constraints and functional expectations. Spurning an impractical faithful reproduction of the ancient building, the Italian government's requirement for the new project was essentially that "... on the external facades and in the inner cloister the ancient building's style and the decorative apparatus' main features have to be respected ..." [11].

The willingness of referring to the Viridarium's architectural language – firstly obtained through the reuse of the cloister's original elements – was accompanied by two further issues which heavily influenced the project definition: the connection with the southern wing of the main palace, which the Palazzetto had to join, and the urgent demand, expressed by the Austro-Hungarian government, to realize a real palace able to house the embassy's offices, instead of a simple four-sided cloister-enclosed garden.

Related to the latter question was the decision to decrease the number of the arcades – and so the overall size of the garden so as to place in the new building three wings of appropriate depth, the total area being equal. On the other hand, the new mutual relationship between the Palazzo di Venezia and the new Palazzetto introduced a twofold difficulty in the management of the different, and not modifiable, floor levels: those concerning the existing building and those dependent on the measures of the cloister's stone elements.

As confirmed by the consulted archive documents, the architects in charge of the project started elaborating it as early as 1908 and, long before the beginning of the Viridarium's demolition works, the new Palazzetto project was defined in detail.

The architect Camillo Pistrucci was entrusted with the management of the demolition works and the simultaneous organisation of the reconstruction operations.

On the day of the inauguration of the Vittoriano, the building was elevated with respect to the external roads by only one level, corresponding to the height of the internal courtyard in which the portico was to be established. (Fig. 8)



Figure 8: The opening day of the Vittoriano, June 4th 1911. The torre della biscia is still covered by the scaffolding (A), while the palazzetto reconstruction is ongoing (B).

Despite the lack of documentary sources on the peculiarities of the building site, we can here illustrate – not pretending to be conclusive – some information both from the memoirs of Camillo Pistrucchi and the results of field surveys in which the authors took part in 2019. (Fig. 9)

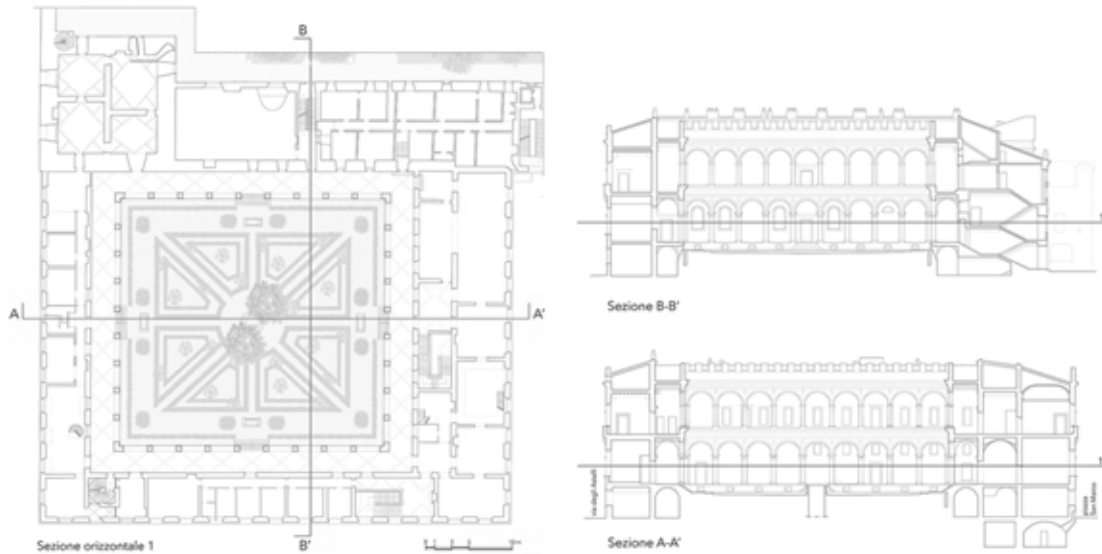


Fig. 9. Survey of the nowadays Palazzetto di Venezia.

The new Palazzetto is characterised by a clear masonry conception and the construction site used knowledge and methods belonging to the great masonry tradition; despite this, a clear modern execution emerges from the use of industrial materials – bricks and metal beams – which make up the structure, except, of course, for the arcades of the internal courtyard coming from the ancient Viridarium. The coexistence of both industrial material – cheaper and easier to assemble – and ancient stone elements introduced the necessity to conform the final aspect of the building to uniform architectural facies. The intended traditional effect is achieved through the use of decorative apparatuses which

The so-called ‘Palazzetto’ in the Palazzo di Venezia Complex: A small construction history among the huge transformation events of the Rome centre in the early twentieth century

dissimulate the horizontal structures in the most representative rooms while the metal roof and jack-arch floors are left visible in the utilities. (Fig. 10)

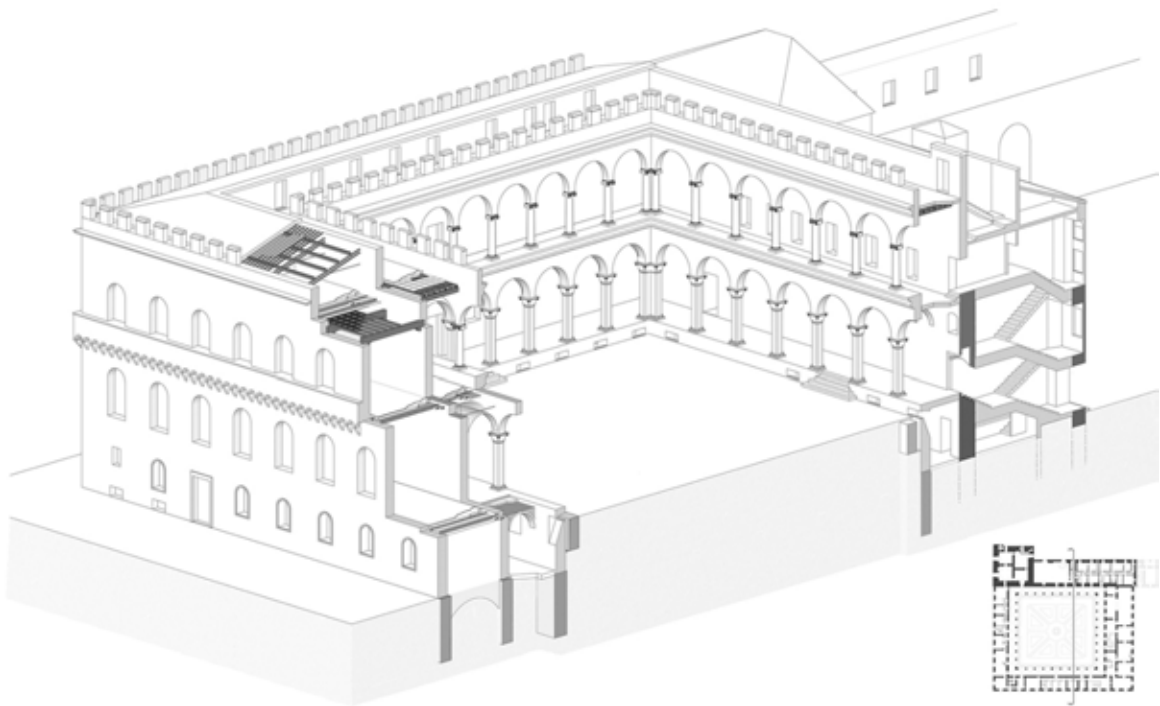


Figure 10: The new palazzetto and its relationship with the existing wing of palazzo di Venezia: a staircase manages the different floor levels' heights.

Some constructional features have been recognised from the analysis of the walls' arrangements and their connection's characteristics. The foundation plan is composed using extensive brick-vaulted substructures which locally define underground spaces accessible from the ground floor through specific stairs, recognisable from the outside by the presence of windows. The irregularity of the underground level's volume thus determined was probably due to the need to retain the possibility of creating as much space as possible and the obligation to preserve the archaeological findings of that area. The analysis of the masonry works and the connection of orthogonal walls showed a deep care in the realisation of the external corners and a less refined solution for the connection of the internal walls to the perimeter walls: the latter were the first to be built and had to be toothed to the former. This constructional sequence is probably due to the desire to first enclose the building area and then proceed to construct inside, minimizing the occupation of public property [12]. Thanks to a detailed study of the cloister's stone elements, it was possible to infer the technique used for their handling from the storage area to the subsequent installation at the works site. The use of specific construction machines is evidenced by the presence on each stone block of cavities, used to move the elements and doweled once assembly was complete. Numerous plaster repairs at the elements' corners and joints replace the absence of stone caused by damage when moving from the demolition site to the construction site [13].

Conclusion

Conceived within the background of Rome's designation as capital of Italy in 1871 and in the light of the consequent opposite requirements of innovation and conservation, the demolition of the fifteenth-century building and the reconstruction of a new Palazzetto only to a small distance from the previous one represents a small piece in the framework of the huge demolition operation conducted to make way for the monument devoted to Vittorio Emanuele II.

Of the large part of the building fabric demolished on that occasion, only a few buildings were rebuilt, including the Palazzetto di Venezia, whose reconstruction took place even before the great monument was finished. Reasons of international opportunity were crucial in this choice, which significantly complicated the progress of the work on the new Piazza Venezia.

This paper, through the examination of the published bibliography and the re-reading of archival documents – already known but studied until now only from the perspective of the great monument – has attempted to outline the specific framework of the vicissitudes of the *Viridarium* of the Pope Paolo II, of the decisions taken regarding its fate and of the construction sites that have decreed its position and current appearance.

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