

Translated from

G.Strappa , *Architettura come processo*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2015

Chapter 5.

## BASE BUILDING EVERYDAY LANGUAGE / SPECIAL BUILDING LEARNED LANGUAGE

---

**5a** - The modern idea of a masonry language, both local and international, was born with the decline of the consolidated stereotype of a Mediterranean landscape that painters and poets had for a long time idealized in the transparent airiness of colonnades and trabeations used in basically trilithic structures, of wooden derivation.

This landscape, instead, reveals to the travelers, when the geographical and cultural barrier of Rome is overcome, its own nature of plastic, organically man-made territory. It consists of churches, monasteries, even ancient ruins, but above all of urban fabrics of great massive strength. A world of powerful walls and houses with small windows, organized in solid and continuous volumes.

The other side of classicism was also discovered: that of the large uninterrupted walls, where the openings are simple flat-arched holes that don't interrupt their architectural continuity. Reality begins to shake off, in the European imagination, the aristocratic museum of literary representations which, on the basis of the classic tradition, had superimposed itself on the *truth* of the built landscape.



*The modern discovery of the plastic world by K.F. Schinkel. View of Amalfi from the sea (with. date); Rome view from his own room, detail (with. date)*



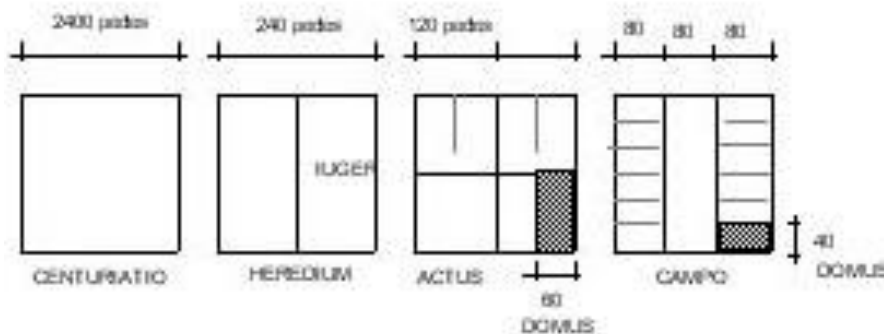
*F. Schinkel, House of the court gardener in Potsdam, 1835.*

At the same time, they become aware of the fact that, also in architecture, alongside the Greek ( a learned language) and next to Latin (the official language) there is a daily speech, the common spoken language. In the Peloponnese, on the coasts of Sicily, on the Aegean islands, the image of a peripteral temple could appear: a flash that remains, because of the exceptional nature of the event, imprinted for a long time in the retina,. But alongside these perfect architectural texts expressed in a learned language, derived from the Dori wooden civilization, it turns out that an everyday idiom, widespread and shared in the different local versions, was above all based on the elementary and immediate forms of masonry walls and vaults. The Basilica of Maxentius, the Pantheon (high expressions of an aesthetic and constructive koinè closely linked to the East Mediterranean and of which the Byzantine world will be heir and continuator), but also the great ruined bases of the sanctuaries of Hercules in Tivoli and that of Jupiter in Terracina, rather than the Basilica Ulpia or the temples of Paestum, are the monuments in which the characters of a shared language appear in a solemn form. But this language has its most widespread evidences in the housing fabrics, in the dialects of everyday building that contains the structure itself of the language and transmits its rules. It was, right from the years when Schinkel drew Roman fabrics, rapidly updating: the entire Italian urban landscape was changing with the diffusion of the compact and massive volumes of a new type of multi-family house that will become the foundation same as the modern Italian city.

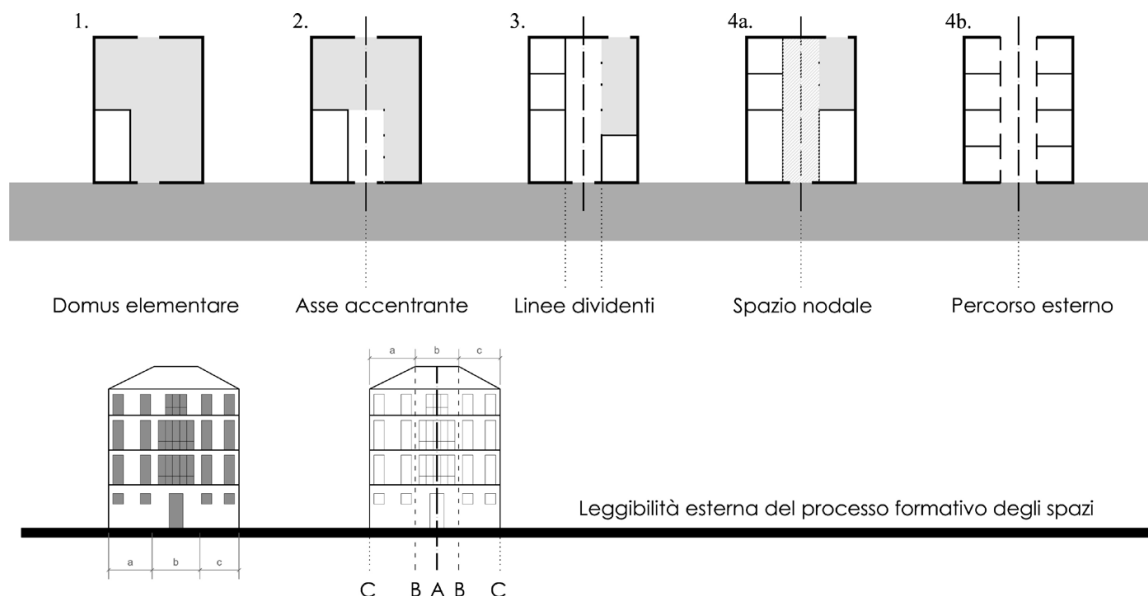
The preexisting fabrics, impossible to erase due to the very nature of the matter employed, still constitute a constant contribution to the becoming of the urban form as a deep substratum that resists the modifications of the most superficial layers, ensuring the continuity of the language, even in the succession of extensive contaminations and continuous updates .

In this powerful, organic process that links everything into a same vital flow, the ancient *substratum* is, therefore, not only the basis of the subsequent urban fabrics, but also of the learned language used by the “high” architecture, as in the construction of buildings that, starting from the middle of the fourteenth century, are formed by “specialization” of the housing base.

**5b** - The vital continuity of this language is evident in the extraordinary story of the Venetian palace, where the formation of the outer facade of the hall (indicated by the light and transparent *polyphora*, complementary to the masonry mass of the original housing cells) constitutes the expression and the limit of a virtually open space, the imprint of the court in the primitive domus around which rooms stairs and paths are gathered and knotted together. Here the permanence of the court structure binds the typical dimensions of the building enclosure to the more general system of soil partition in use in the Roman world, indicating its substantial duration in the transformation process. The geographical and historical continuity, from the territory to the city (from the Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages) is indicated by the permanence of the *heredium*, derived by the *centuriatio* subdivision, and of the *actus*, half of whose side constitutes the measure of the front of the lot on which the *domus* (roman courtyard house type) is built.



The early Venetian courtyard house gives rise, in the successive adaptations, to the Palazzo type as well as to single-family house type maintaining, albeit in the richness of the outcomes and in the variety of declinations, the generating principles linked to the use of the fenced space **23** .



*Interpretative scheme of the Venetian palace forming process.*

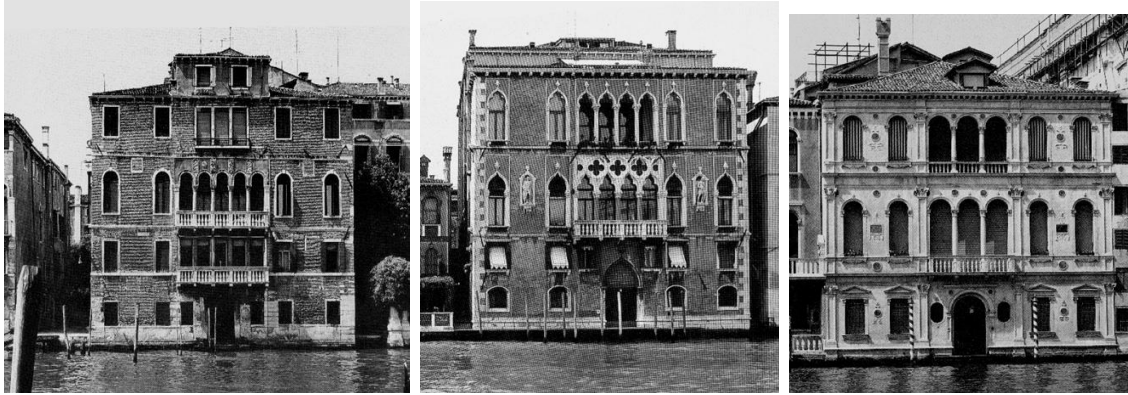
*1. Elementary domus, formation of the enclosure; 2. Formation of the “portego” and the central axis; 3. early formation of the nodal space and of the dividing lines; 4. Formation of the “fondaco” house; 4b. Formation of pseudo-rowhouses on the nodal axis of the street.*

*A: centralizing axis; B: dividing line; C: margin..*

It is worthwhile to briefly mention this process, which is actually very complex, noting that the larger lots of the *domus* are preferably arranged with the short sides facing east-west in order to obtain the water-mainland passage parallel to the side occupied by the early building arranged according to the typical orientation of the courtyard house, that is preferably facing south.

The internal path, a true central axis derived from the walking repeated over time, is gradually organized and covered giving rise to the *portego* (porch) connecting the entrances. Also in the north-facing side rooms are built.

In subsequent changes, this building type basically takes on two roles in function of economic and social diversification, already underway since the 12th century, which lead to the transformation of the house into a courtly residence, on the one hand, or to its subdivision into dwellings for the lower income classes on the other.



*The facade as an aesthetic synthesis of the forming process. Legibility of the spatial node originating from the domus court, indicated by the transenna structure in the Venetian palace.*

*Fig. 41 - Ca 'Donà.*

*Fig. 42 - Ca 'Loredan.*

*Fig. 43 - Palazzo Grimani-Giustinian.*

In the first case the central “nodal” space of the building is formed, the "sala veneta” (venetian hall) where the transversal and mono-directional texture of the larch floors frees the façade from any static commitment, allowing to build the transparent transenna; in the second a new rowhouse aggregation is formed. The façades deriving from this process, both in the Byzantine *casa-fondaco* (ware-house, such as Ca 'Da Mosto, Ca' Vitturi, Ca 'Barzizza, Ca' Priuli-Bon), and in the transition phase of the Gothic palace ( as Palazzo Zorzi in Rio di San Lorenzo, Palazzo Pisani in Rio di Santa Marina, or many palaces on the island of San Polo.) 24, directly reveals its structure: margins, centralizing axis, nodal space, dividing lines. The Venetian palazzo expresses in an exemplary way the story of a constructive and spatial process, and also the characters "of the conversion into masonry of a wooden city" 25.

**5c** - The genesis of the Roman palace, one of the most fruitful events in the entire history of European architecture, indicates a different path to the formation of modern architectural organisms. A phenomenon that can be read clearly in its manifestation as the becoming of the manifold to form unity. As for the Venetian palace, the process that is at the origin of its particular character is not due to the contribution of a small group of architects, but constitutes the collective, living result of the transformations operating in the fabric. It comes to light from successive mutations of the housing aggregates of medieval origin and from the permanence of that

ancient substratum which, in Rome, has always constituted an inexhaustible source of renewal.

Its formation process began with the recast, in the 14th-16th century, of simple single-family dwellings to satisfy the need of building new large-scale residences for the emerging political and economical classes.

In the context of an already densely built city, the only one possibility was the progressive acquisition of fabric units, linking them together through a common private, inner path.

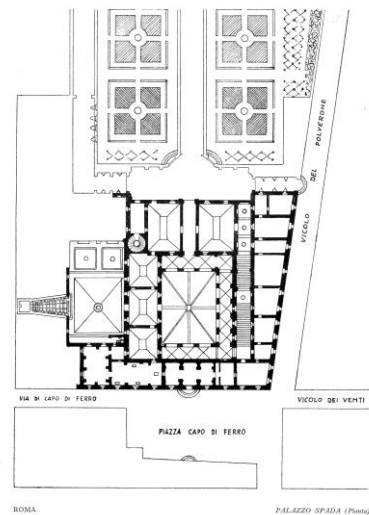
Thus, around the central space of the courtyard that brings together the original pertinent areas, a sort of "reversed" fabric is formed, a small introverted city that takes its characters from the external city. The transition from aggregate to building is expressed by unifying the external facades into a single **wall** merging the single buildings in a common rhythm of openings. The process also establishes a hierarchy between the different parts:

- .the *base* at ground level in which expresses its solidarity with the external spaces;
- .the *elevation* on which is imprinted the regular rhythm of the windows, differentiated into "complete order" ones, and simple "hollow" ones, according to a language that expresses the meaning (not the simple geometry) of the inner spaces;
- .the *unification* that unifies the wall in its terminal, upper part;
- .the *conclusion* that ends the entire construction through the covering: roof, balustrade, attic etc.

See, XVI



*Palazzo Ossoli*



ROMA

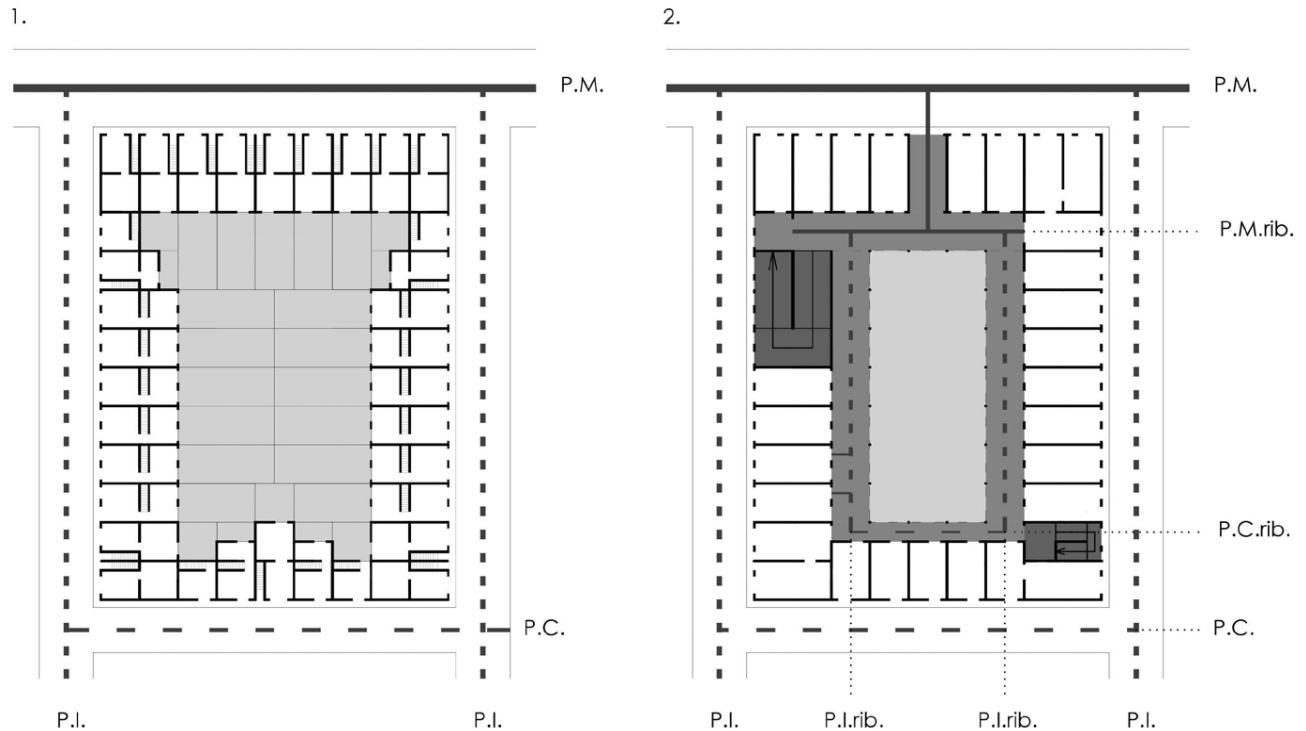
PALAZZO SPADA (Piano)



*Palazzo Ossoli*

The Roman palace is not, therefore, a simple mediation between fabric and building: it constitutes, in a certain sense, a common product of the city, the outcome of an historic process that links a group of individuals into a common society. Of this building process the architect provides his own interpretation and his individual aesthetic synthesis.





*Interpretative scheme of the process of transformation of a fabric of rowhouse units into a specialized building in the Roman area. 1: Basic building block; 2: Recasting and overturning of routes.*

*P.M. : matrix route. P.I. : building route; P.C. : connection route; P.M. rib : internal matrix route; P.I.rib : internal building route; P.C.rib : internal connection route.*

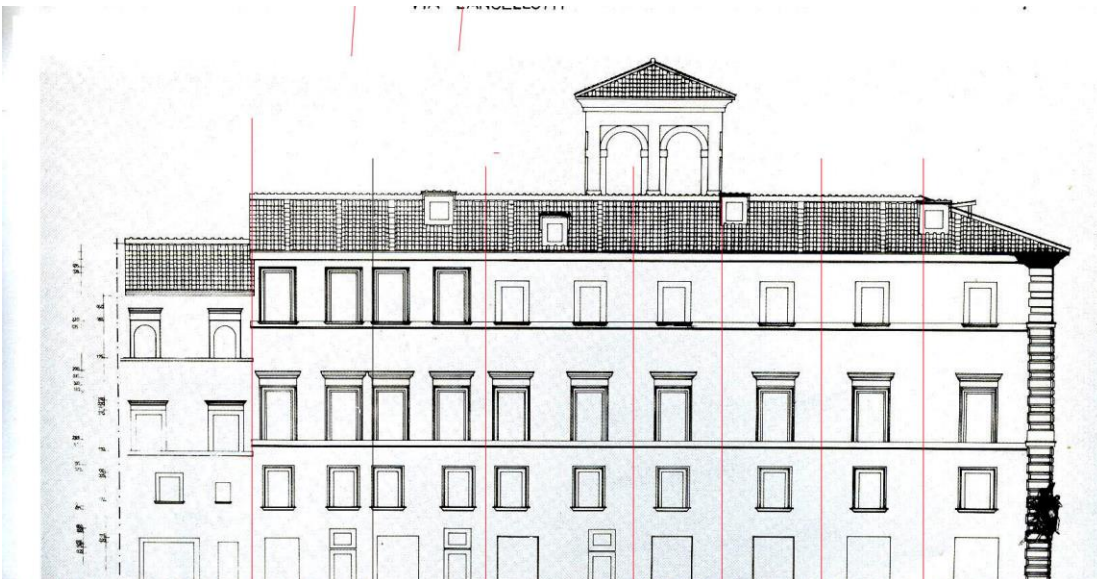
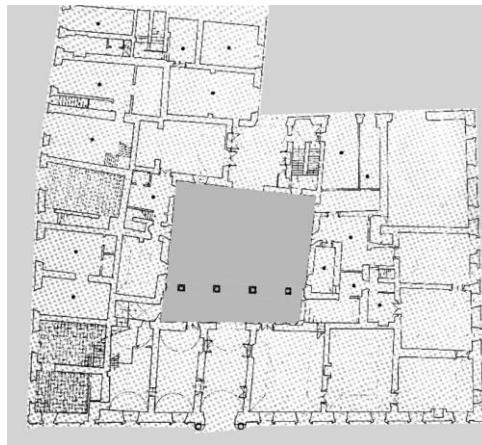
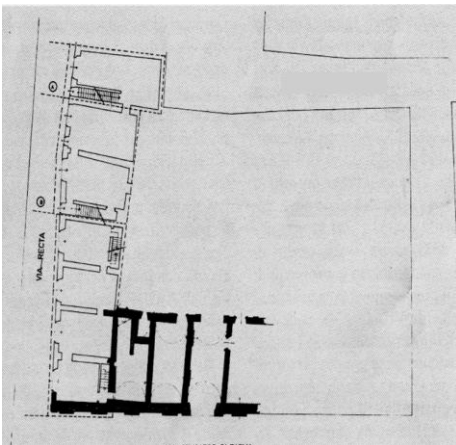
In buildings directly derived from the renewal and transformation of existing fabric, it is evident that the greatest expressive attention is devoted to the space of the inner courtyard (the center of the new “small city”). The external façade, instead, rhythmically composed almost independently from the internal layout, identifies an architectural axis corresponding to the entrance-atrium-courtyard spatial sequence, often expressed at the end by a special element or by an opening that leads to pertinent spaces.

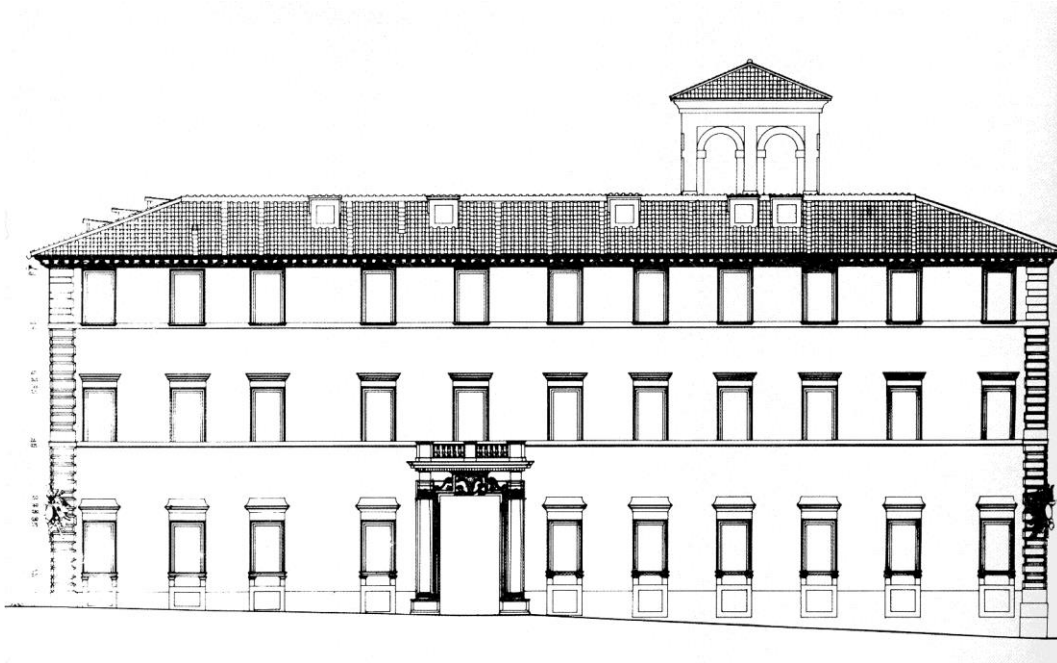
In the succession of the formative phases the signs of the original structures remain evident, often preserved as legible traces in the facades palimpsest through geometric anomalies (as in the span of the windows) that architect's unification effort will not succeed in canceling.





*Formative process of the Roman palace. Lancellotti Palace in the context of the via dei Coronari fabric derived from the consumption of the ancient insulae that produced, in correspondence with the inner courtyards, via dei Tre Archi. On the aerial phot, the indication of the probable position of the "ambitus" and of the courtyards has been reported.*



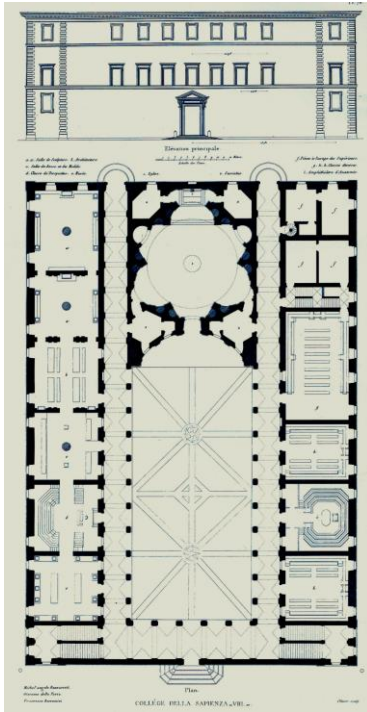


*Formative process of the Roman palace. Recasting of the rowhouse units in Palazzo Lancellotti: basic building on the via Recta and via dell'Arco di Parma routes; Palazzo's ground floor plan at present; side and front elevation.*

See the evident example of Palazzo Lancellotti, which reveals in the part left of the entrance and in the frontage on via dei Coronari the twin rhythm of the individual original row houses. On the right side of the façade, instead, Francesco da Volterra and then Carlo Maderno, completing the construction, will organize the openings in a perfectly regular way, organizing the new series of rooms around the central open space that was "logically" and "economically" "Forming a courtyard in the center of the building according to an anthropic use of space not unlike the way in which the ancients built the *insulae*, underlying the areas along the via Lata / via dei Coronari as a substratum.







*Sapienza University*

**5d-** Not always the type of building, derived from the experience on the existing fabric and designed ex novo since the XVI century have characters directly referable to examples like this.

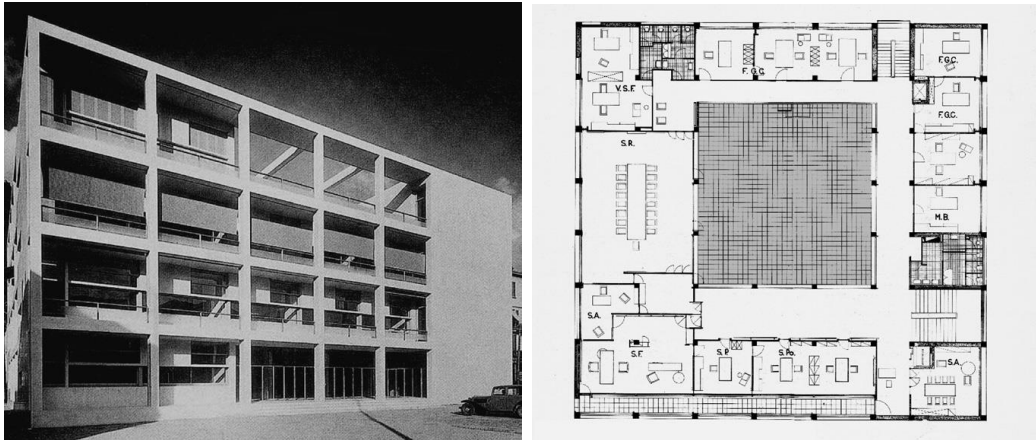
And yet it is the recognition of these formative rules that is a fertile datum for the contemporary designer, to whom it is possible to read in history how the special building in general (not only the palazzo) can be linked to the pre-existing built reality not by a relationship of simple affinity, but by a solidarity that derives from the interpretation of its structuring order.

Because of their congruence and sympathy with the housing fabric, the Roman palaces, even when they reach imposing dimensions, seem to fully shear measures and characters of the built environment in which they are inserted collaborating with the surrounding to form a single architectural organism. The roman palazzos speak a learned language derived from everyday speech that finds in the architect/artist, at the same time, the interpreter, the innovator and the jealous guardian of the roots.

Seen in this aspect, not only the great nineteenth-century Roman buildings such as Palazzo Brancaccio by Luca Carimini or Palazzo Margherita by Gaetano Koch, but also more recent buildings ) seem to show a deep, common matrix.

See the many interwar examples as the Palazzo dell'Industria designed by Piacentini and Vaccaro, with its serial rooms aggregate along via Veneto and

ordered according to the vertical hierarchy of a plastic language, or the Palazzo degli Uffici in the new Eur quarter by Gaetano Minnucci, whose central courtyard opens up to involve the urban space according to an updating process usual in many modern buildings types, or the Giuseppe Terragni's Casa del Fascio, “knotted” around its own courtyard.



*Vitality of the palazzo type.*

*G. Terragni, Casa del Fascio in Como, 1932-36, an example of a building "knotted" through the covering of the courtyard space.*