

“I Find Orientalizing a Very Dangerous Work” The Ludovico Quaroni Project for the Mosque of Rome

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Abstract: In 1976 Ludovico Quaroni as a leader of a group of young Roman architects, Maria Angelini, Florindo Fusaro, Ludovico Micara, Attilio Petruccioli, Antonino Terranova, all assistants in his Composition courses, submits a project to the International Competition for the Italian Islamic Cultural Centre and Mosque in Rome. It is a little known project, unpublished in books on Quaroni’s architectural work, due to its relative eccentricity in relation to current interpretations of his architectural thought. The project highlights the profound interest of Ludovico Quaroni for the Islamic cities and culture, mainly Persian, not to be confused with an *orientalizing* attitude, these cities being also the object of his travels and studies. Another major topic is that of the *architectural order*, no longer a classic order, as in the first Roman experiences, but a rule which is possible to interpret and transgress in order to create new architectural meanings. It is precisely the theme of the architectural order that brings Quaroni back to his first book, *L’architettura delle città*. Its contents, frequently emerging in his designing activity, define in fact Quaroni as a *post-antique* architect, as he liked to define himself, instead of *post-modern*, a label often associated to his project for the Opera House in Rome.

Keywords: Orientalizing, Ancient and Islamic city, Architectural order, Post-antique.

I

With regard to the Orient, what are the values, which seduced and oriented you towards those countries? This is the question Ludovico Quaroni posed to his alter ego, in the television auto-interview, in January 1985. «I believe», he answered, «that I found in Orient, albeit in cadaveric state, the relationship I was looking for, between the city as an aggregate of buildings and monuments and the city as an amalgam

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of people and their great philosophical ideas. It was probably due to the five years I spent in India, that I could appreciate the symbiosis between landscape and architecture, or better between landscape, architecture and people, with their traditions, religions, as well as, the perfect syntony with the sky and trees, the temples and huts, the natural calamities and the pleasure of the changing seasons, even though, I could later see the menace of the Japanese technology and the brutality of the present European colonization».²

“Symbiosis”, writes Ludovico Quaroni, integration between “architecture and landscape”, “architecture and humanity”; this very symbiosis which characterizes the Indian village³, or emerges wonderfully from the “joyful discovery” of Orvieto, is also emphasized in the introduction to his first book *L'architettura delle città*⁴, published in occasion of his professorship. The word “*delle*” in the title, indicating plural, is significant. It excludes in fact the temptation of comparing this book to the one written by Aldo Rossi, entitled *L'architettura della città*, wherein, the city is interpreted as “architecture”. Quaroni would hardly agree with such a statement. His concept of the city is reflected in the pages of *L'architettura delle città*, written, as he recalled, in the printing house, while the book was being printed. The *incipit* of the book discloses a glorious image: «To the one descending for the first time into the Paglia valley, through the Faliscan plateau, the compact image of Orvieto, immersed in the sun and the sky, appears on the rock emerging from the ground, as gemmating from the rock itself. The houses made of golden tuff, are born from golden tuff so that just barely we can recognize their base; the roofs become of the same colour, due to the marvellous providence of time; and throng as a wavy still crowd around the Cathedral: the cause and, at the same time, the purpose of the city... Orvieto is built for the cathedral while the cathedral is built for Orvieto. The immense emergence of the spires and gables, light and flying in the golden and intense use of decorative coloured mosaic

2. Autointervista di Ludovico Quaroni (RAI/TV Television transmission, Ancona, January 1985), in ORLANDI 1986.

3. QUARONI 1947.

4. QUARONI 1939.

tiles, is conceived in relation to the rough, coarse static nature of the uniform block tuff houses. The hill, emerging from the opal green Umbrian valley, resembles a tray for donations that the land offers to the cathedral, the golden jewel». Quaroni remarks that «an architectural work lives only in relation to its environment», from which it cannot be isolated without losing a great part of its significance. He adds «this is the reason why architecture still reserves for the traveller the delight of discovery». Thus we may perceive Quaroni’s fascination for the astonishing unity of the Islamic cities, notwithstanding the diversity of the architectural works. This is the very fascination that Rome exerted on Quaroni. In fact he writes: «The best virtue Rome had and perhaps still preserves, for those who are able to revive the image of its reality, is the creation of an urban landscape and an urban vision that can hardly be emulated by other cities of such quality. These are expressed through its monuments, the Roman and Medieval remains, the Renaissance and Baroque buildings, the more or less Modern interventions, together with the vegetation and the undulation of the landscape».⁵

To comprehend Ludovico Quaroni’s idea of Orient, we need therefore to turn to the idea of *ancient city*, rather than to such categories as *exoticism* and *orientalism*. We should thus refer to «the idea of a whole, for which a building is significant also due to the fact that it stood close to the others, and how the passage of time unified these things».⁶

II

«*I find orientalizing a very dangerous work*»⁷ writes Goethe in 1815 to the composer Zelter, who was putting into music, in a mediocre way, the convivial songs for the *West-östlicher Divan*. «Before one is aware of it, the most solid poem slips out of one’s hands, like a balloon, and vanishes into air, merely from the rational and spiritual gas with which it fills itself...».⁸

5. In the interview of Giorgio Ciucci to a RAITRE program, partially published in CIUCCI 1985.

6. CIUCCI 1985, p. 32-34.

7. Goethe’s letter to Zelter, Weimar, 17th April, 1815, in the Ludovica Koch’s introduction to GOETHE 1990, p. 7.

8. Goethe’s letter to Zelter, op. cit., English transl. by A. D. Coleridge, in COLERIDGE 1892, p. 117.

In Goethe's oriental exploration «along every path / from the towns to the desert» he bridges over themes and forms of the many European orientalist manners in the eighteenth century, such as illuminist, utopian, libertine and romantic, searching for a First Language, a First universal and lost Literature. The philological studies on the Arabic and Persian languages, literature and poetry, the reports, travel accounts and embassy missions visiting those countries (Marco Polo, Pietro della Valle...) encourage Goethe to immerse himself with enthusiasm in a new exalting poetic experience.

*North and South and West – they shake! / Thrones are cracking, empires quake, / To the purer East, then, fly / Patriarchal air to try / / There, in what is pure and right, / Generations I, with might, / urge to depth of origin / Where they from the Lord would win / Earthly-worded Heaven-lore; / / Word still worthy to be heard / for it was the spoken word. / Mine with shepherd-lives will mesh / At oases that refresh / When with caravans I wander, / Coffee, shawls, and musk up yonder; / Every path I'll travel down / From the desert to the town.*⁹

Meeting a different world creates a new life:

*In the shrouded, cloudy North / Dust of earth had been belied. / In the heat it's coming forth, / and I'm greatly gratified. / It's been long since well-loved gates' / Hinges moved with eager will. / Heal, you rainstorm, one that waits: / Fragrance of the green instill! / Now, when all the thunders roll, / Sky shines through where maelstrom moil; / Wild, the dust the storm-wind stole, / Moistened, falls upon the soil. / Underlying life will spring - / Welling, blessed work of birth / In a greening – freshening / Vernal regions of the earth.*¹⁰

III

In 1976, together with Ludovico Quaroni, Maria Angelini, Florindo Fusaro, Attilio Petruccioli, Antonino Terranova, we decided to participate in the International Competition for the Italian Islamic Cultural Centre and Mosque in Rome.¹¹ The little known project

9. From the poem *Hegira* (*Hegire*), in GOETHE 2010, p. 1-2.

10. From the poem *The Living All* (*All Leben*), in GOETHE 2010, p. 15-16.

11. The competition, announced by the Centro Culturale Islamico d'Italia in 1975, awarded ex-aequo

engaged Quaroni and the group intensely. We were searching for an image that would be clearly part of the Roman landscape, yet inspired by an “Islamic vision of life” avoiding formal stereotypes. On the other hand, as Quaroni mentions in the report, «it is not so difficult to find, in certain architectural features, points of convergence between Islam and Italy: the same sincerity in exposing the issues, the very spatial use of the bearing structures and roofs, as well as, the balance between the essential scheme of the plan and the decorative patterns are present in the architectural artefacts produced in both cultural spheres».¹² The project is composed of few elements, which include the large hypostyle hall of the Mosque; the arcade around the entrance court, formed by metal lattice-structure pyramids and supported by a *quincunx* pattern of columns, wherein the buildings of the cultural centre are ‘immersed’; and the residential centre for the students (fig. 1, 2, 3, 4). I was deeply impressed by certain moments of Quaroni’s design process. When we needed to put together the different elements composing the whole, Quaroni did not hesitate and laid these elements in a sacred enclosure on a podium. The axial sequence of the complex started from the most important element, the hall of the Mosque, followed by the entrance and reception courtyard, the congress hall, the library and the residential centre (fig. 5). An *ancient gesture*, recalling the great religious complexes of antiquity, proposed in a contemporary building. It could not be otherwise (fig. 6). It was necessary to orient people and direct them towards the entrance to the holy prayer space. Thus the roof of the arcade, made of great metallic stalactites, progressively lowers toward the ground, while the pillars thicken as in a forest, approaching the entrance gates. These open towards the lofty space of the mosque, enlightened by the suffused light, flowing through the great glass wall overlooking the garden. The progressions light, shadow, light and high, low, high, underline the main axis through the sequence of diverse spatial experiences: the paratactic composition of the elements confers unity and hierarchy to the whole (fig. 7, 11). The authoritativeness and intensity of such a gesture revives the memory of

Paolo Portoghesi with Vittorio Gigliotti, and the Iraqi architect Sami Musawi.

12. From the project report, published in QUARONI 1982, p. 173.

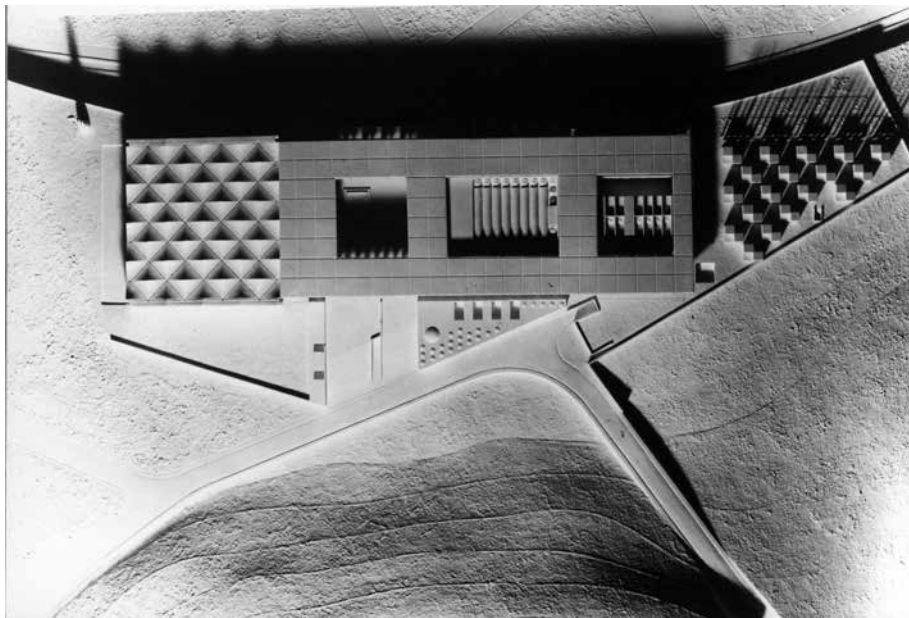


Fig.1. The competition project for the Islamic Cultural Centre and Mosque in Rome: the zenith view of the model.

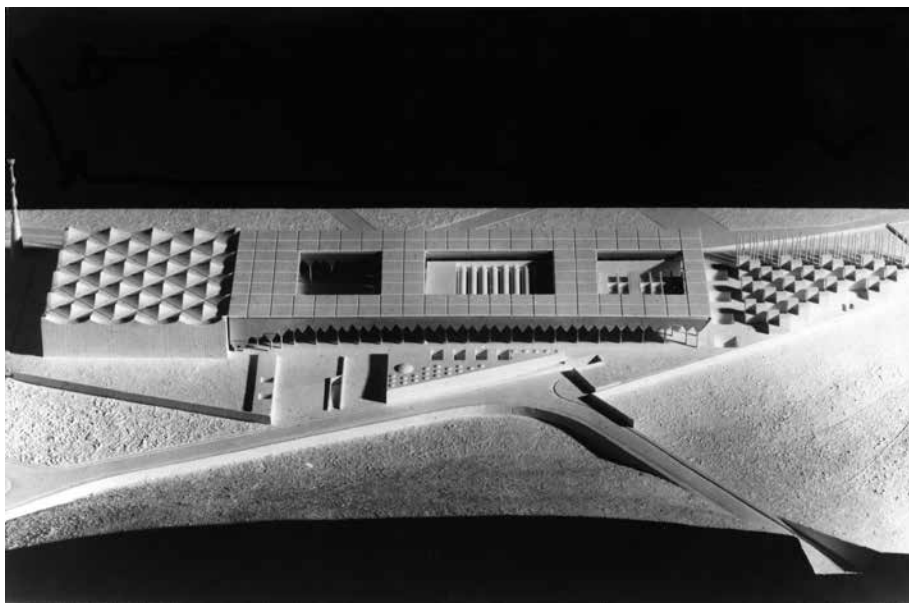


Fig.2. The South-Eastern view of the model: in the foreground the entrance to the Centre.

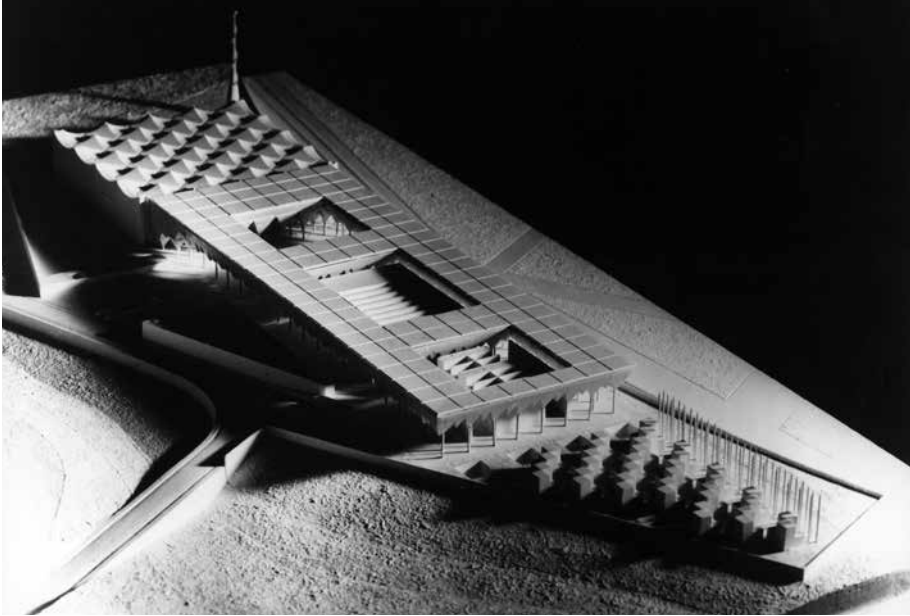


Fig.3. The North-Eastern view of the model: in the foreground the residential centre, followed by the arcade with the Cultural Centre, and by the Mosque with the minaret.



Fig.4. The Northern view of the model.

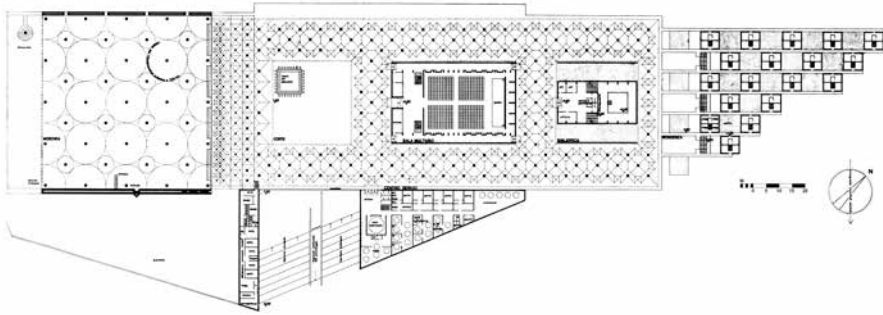


Fig.5. Plan of the ground floor.

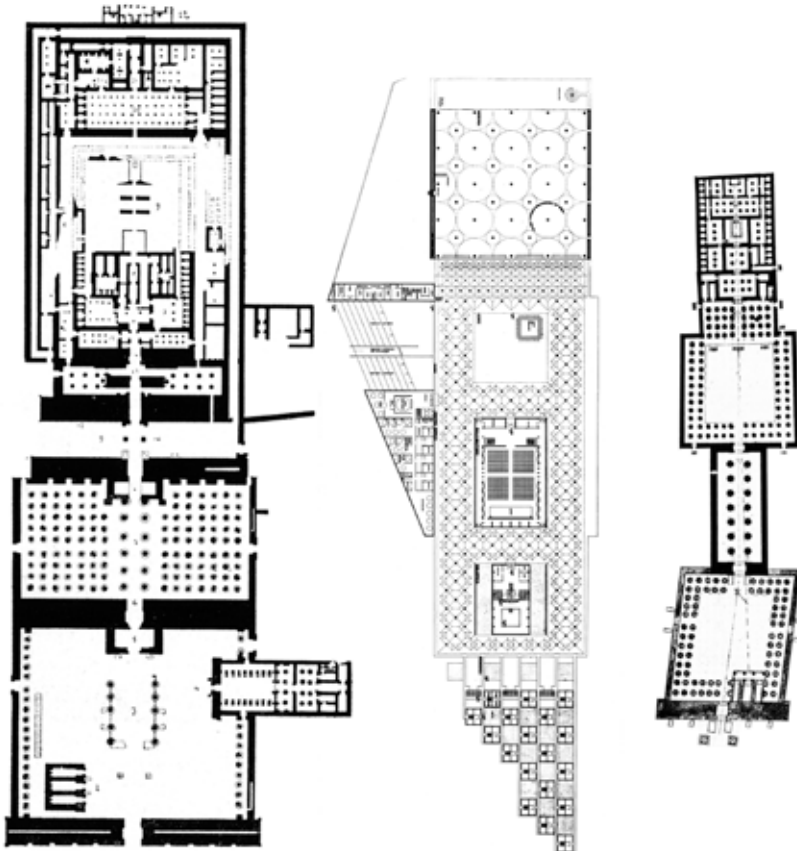


Fig.6. The project for the Islamic Cultural Centre and Mosque in Rome compared, at the same scale, to the plans of Amun temple in Karnak, to the left, and of the Luxor temple in Thebes, to the right, (from L. Quaroni, *L'Architettura delle Città*, pl. 109, 111).

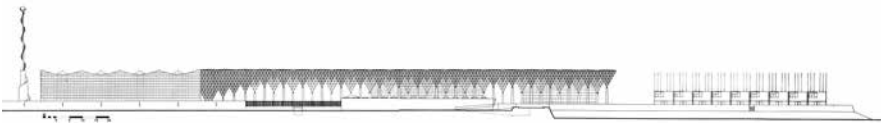


Fig.7. The South-Eastern elevation.

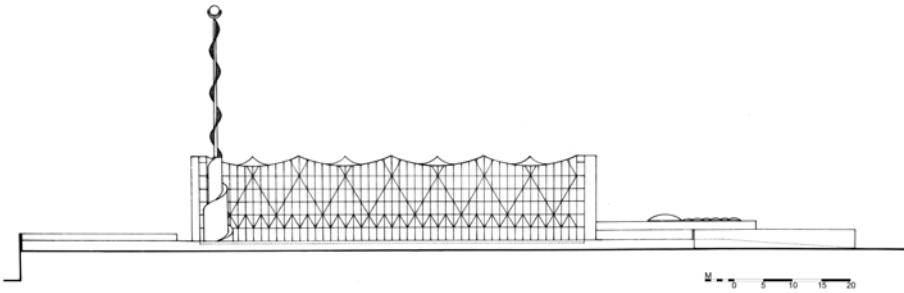


Fig.8. The South-Western elevation.

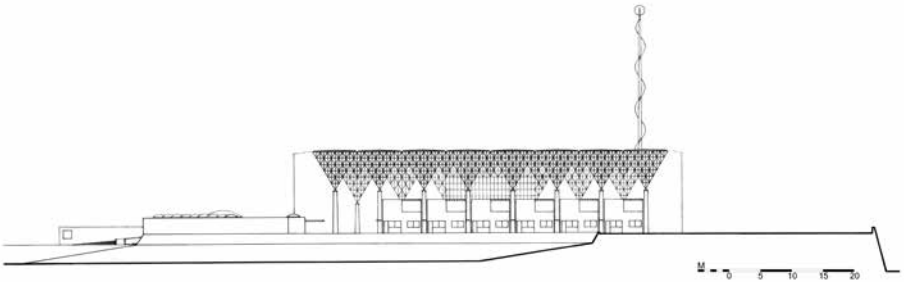


Fig.9. The North-Eastern elevation.

the engravings and ideas expressed in *L'architettura delle città*. These «memories, filtered through the language of modern architecture, refer to other ‘models’, selected as reminiscences of different cultural contexts: from the stalactites in Granada to the hypostyle halls in the Kairouan Mosque; from the spiral minaret in Samarra to the inner courtyards in the Syrian mosques; from the columned pavilions, *tālār*, in Iran and Uzbekistan, to the *plateau* of the Omar Mosque in Jerusalem. However, we intentionally discarded the idea of having a dome, such a relevant feature in the Islamic architecture, in order to avoid a close comparison with the many domes, in the city of Rome. We also decided to design only one minaret in a city as Rome, where even the bell towers rarely appear. In fact the minaret in the project was designed subtracting any bodily feature, as an abstract symbol, high and slender in the sky».¹³ The above mentioned references, were not thus used in the project to *orientalize* or to exhibit exoticism in Rome, but to reveal the intention, as well as, the difficulty of «conceiving a modern work, that could take advantage of the technological and cultural progress in the twentieth century, without betraying the spirit of an architecture that left a unitary imprint, though using different languages, in the wide cultural diffusion from the Atlantic, African and Iberian coasts to the great and small Indonesian islands in the Pacific Ocean».¹⁴

IV

“Orientalizing” is therefore, as already mentioned, a “very dangerous work”: the “most solid” project, as Goethe writes, «slips out of one’s hands... before one is aware of it”, if it is not anchored firmly to a composition idea». In the project of the Mosque in Rome, this idea is based on the architectural order of the great arcade, which dictates and defines the layout of the different spaces and architectural pieces assembled together. It is not a simple architectural order. The columns of the portico are arranged following a *quincunx* plan, displaying five columns in a square module, four of which at the corners and one in the

13. QUARONI, 1982, p. 173-174.

14. QUARONI 1982, p. 173.

centre. The *quincunx* setting of the columns allows us to read spatially not just the two orthogonal directions of the plan based on simple square modules, but also the oblique directions, due to the central column, which multiplies and complicates the viewpoints and thus the orientation. Such a layout allows a crowded filling of the space.

The architectural order conceived for the Mosque in Rome is a composite one, both in forms and materials. It is composed of steel columns, covered with travertine-modelled pieces. The columns become progressively slender, on the top, and terminate in a conic capital in bronze, bearing a sphere on which the green glazed bronze pyramid structures, modelling the ceiling of the arcade, are inserted (fig. 15). This modular system covers, as a carpet, the whole length of the arcade, between the mosque and the residential fabric (fig. 16). Three void rectangular spaces are formed, by removing some modules from the arcade, wherein the courtyard, containing a water-basin for the ritual ablutions, and the conference hall and the library are immersed (fig. 12, 13, 14). The space composed of pyramidal stalactites is in itself complicated due to the different dimensions of the pyramids. Thus, the columns at the centre of the *quincunx* have different sizes. Furthermore, this space doesn't develop indifferently in the whole arcade, but it defines, through the progressive transformation of its architectural order, a clear direction towards the mosque. This constituted an essential moment in the project process.¹⁵ It implied, in a still non-expressed form, the essential meaning of the act of ‘entering’ in a mosque, the principal space of the project. The entrance gate embodies “separating and connecting”, that are two aspects of the same act.¹⁶ Compared to other separating and connecting structures such as, the bridge, which connects indifferently the two sides of a river, the door, «displays a complete difference of intention between entering and exiting» as Simmel sustains.¹⁷

15. I clearly remember a small drawing sketched by Quaroni. He started to draw the quincunx pattern of the arcade, and then to reduce increasingly the distance between the columns and consequently the dimension of the quincunx. The result was a synthetic, but speaking diagram of the possible transformation of the architectural order.

16. SIMMEL, 1909, p. 67.

17. SIMMEL, 1909, p. 68.

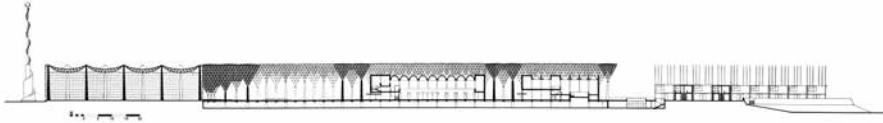


Fig.11. The longitudinal section.

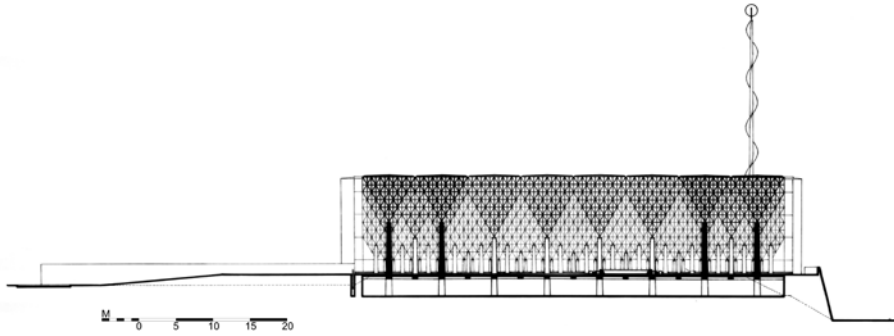


Fig.12. The section through the courtyard, looking the entrance into the mosque.

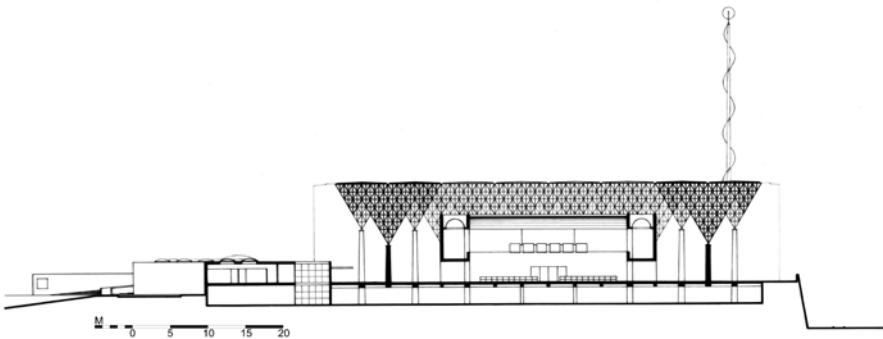


Fig.13. The section through the conference hall.

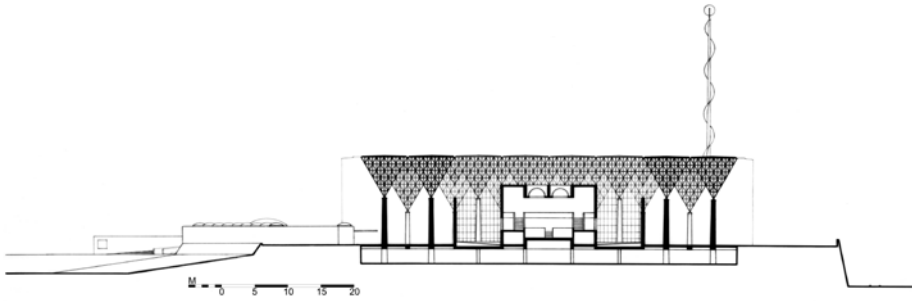


Fig.14. The section through the library.

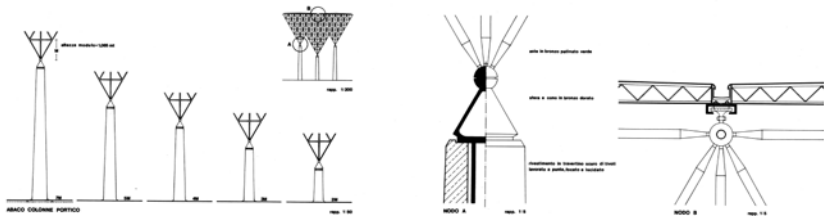


Fig.15. The architectural order of the big arcade.

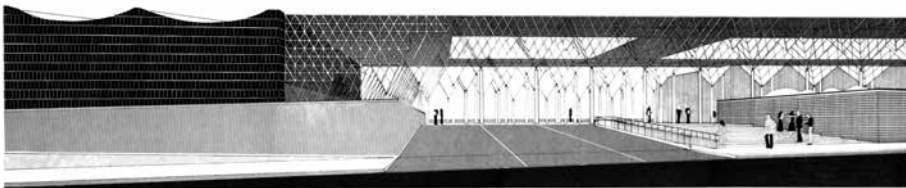


Fig.16. A perspective view of the entrance to the Cultural Centre and Mosque. (Alessandro Orlandi's drawing).

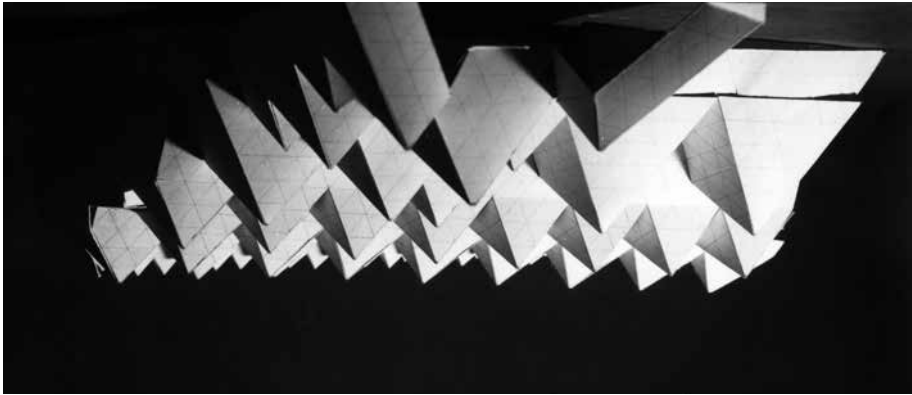
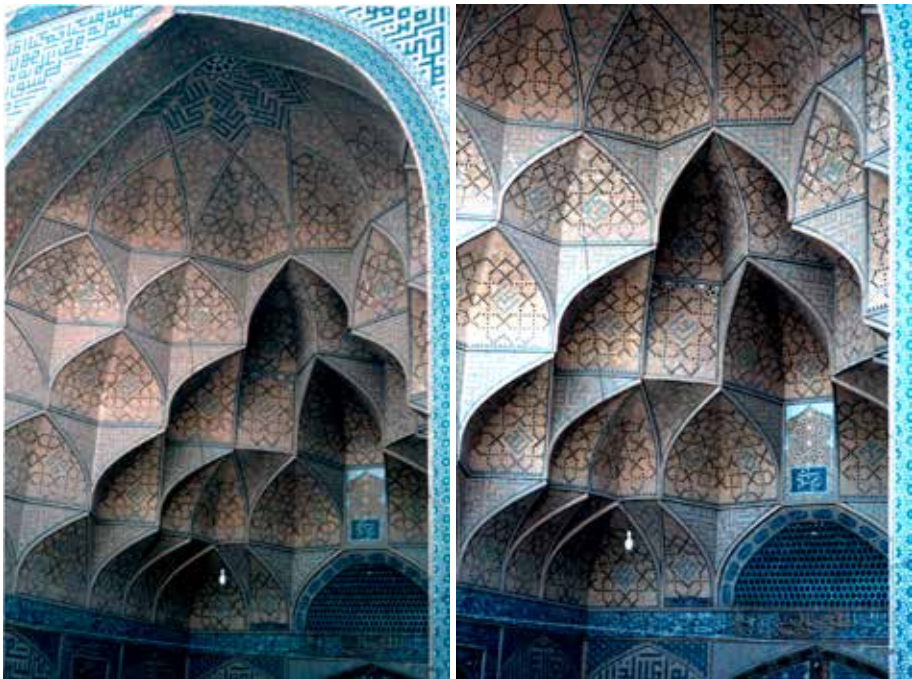


Fig. 17. The view, from below, of the reversed pyramids of the ceiling of the arcade in a study model.



Figg. 18-19. A view of the muqarnas, or stalactites, in the iwan of the Friday Mosque in Isfahan. (Photo L. Micara, 1995).

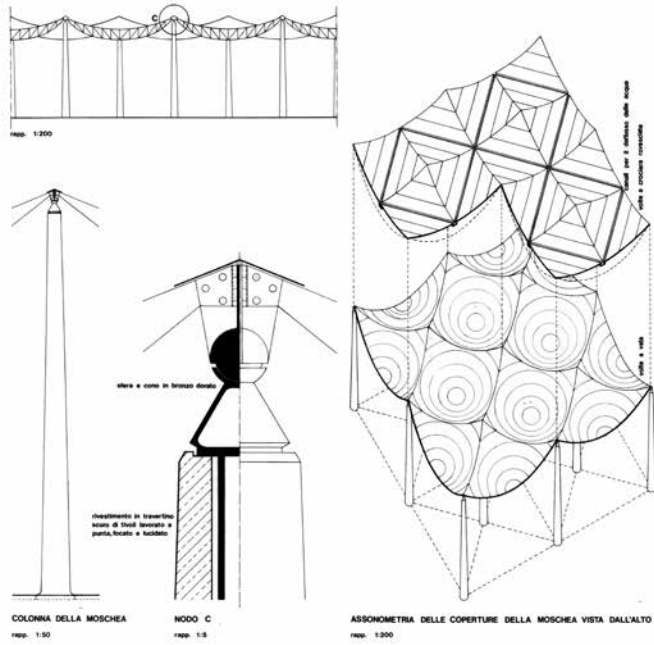


Fig. 20. The double roof of the hypostyle hall of the Mosque.

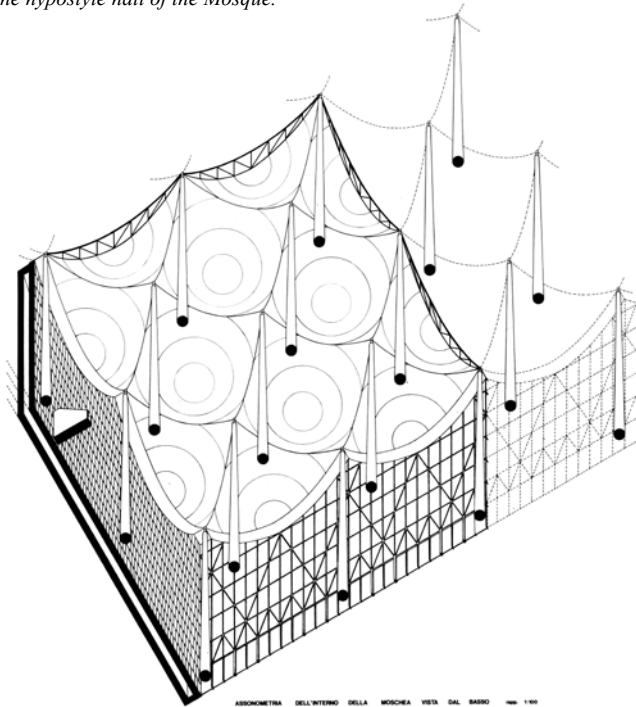


Fig. 21. Axonometric view, from below, of the ceiling of the hypostyle hall of the Mosque.

In our project, the emphasis conferred to the act of entering in the mosque resulted in the transformation of the above-mentioned architectural order, achieved through the progressive reduction of the distances between the columns and the consequent shortening of the columns and pyramids (fig. 12). The resulting spatial compression towards the ground, exalted the sudden lofty and luminous space of the mosque. The spatial elaboration of the entrance, inedited in its contemporary forms, has nevertheless important precedents in the history of architecture. It evokes the portals of the Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals, through the progressive decreasing of the thickness of the walls and the height of the entrance vaults through minor arches, semi columns and sculptured figures. We may also recall the spectacular *muqarnas*, defined as stalactites, in the lofty niches and portals of the Arab-Islamic, as well as, Persian architecture, that constitute a source of inspiration for the reversed pyramids of the Mosque in Rome (fig. 17, 18, 19).

The architectural order of the mosque follows in a way, the order of the arcade. The hypostyle space of the hall in the mosque is composed of the same type of columns, according to a *quincunx* setting, but in a different size, 13 meters. Yet here, the ceiling is not shaped as reversed pyramids, but as a set of reversed spherical vaults, hanging down as a canopy into the space. Above these another set of reversed cross vaults, supported by the same columns, overlaps the spherical vaults, in order to drain the rainwater (fig. 20, 21). All over the space of the mosque, at the height of two meters twenty from the carpeted ground, a metal net, composed of circular rings of different sizes, bear bowls of light, as a firmament. This illuminated surface recalling the Ottoman mosques of Istanbul, symbolizes the starry vault of heaven above the believers.

V

To go back to *L'architettura delle città*, Antonino Terranova comments, “much is already contained in the embryo”.¹⁸ In his book Quaroni analyses the many plans and views of ancient cities. He considers the city “as a composition.”¹⁹ Orthogonal, axial, symmetrical,

18. TERRANOVA, 1981, p. 5.

19. QUARONI, 1939, p. 13.

straight and curved lines, as well as geographical and geometrical constitute the over and over repeated orders, in the design of the cities and their architecture. These rules frequently come to the surface in his projects, and in particular in those for the Mosque in Rome, and in the extension of the Opera House in Rome.

Strangely nobody has highlighted the fact that these two projects, though distant in time, respectively in 1976 and 1985, have certain architectural elements in common, such as the great *quincunx* arcade, wherein the concert hall is immersed, as well as the materials, steel and travertine. I believe that the Opera House was not just a turning point in Quaroni’s architectural research, as some critics have suggested, but rather the emerging, in specific conditions, of the ever present themes and ideas, related to the ancient city, in his book *L’architettura delle città*. In fact Quaroni rejected the label *post-modern* attached to his project for the Opera House, and preferred rather the definition of *post-antique*. Let us now return to one of the ten questions, posed in a provocative and subtly ingenuous way, in the interview, Quaroni had organized with other architects. He asked them: «Do you consider infantile my invitation to look back to the five past architectural millenniums as a book from which it would be possible, although arduous, to extract the general principles for the architecture of tomorrow?»²⁰

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