



Liberty Rome, Itineraries Between Modernism and Eclecticism



Diana
Alessandrini
Italy



1. Rome,
Cagiati's cottage.
Photo by
Domenico
Gambardella.

Rome is a city with many architectural and artistic souls: Classical, Renaissance, Baroque, and even Rationalist. All are appreciated by tourists and critics. Among these, however, the Modernist Rome does not appear; it is too little known and not sufficiently valued. Eclecticism is the main feature of Roman architecture from the last two decades of the nineteenth century to the first decade of the twentieth century; with a few caveats on the exact time period, it is known around Europe as Jugendstil (Germany), Art Nouveau (France), Sezessionstil (Austria), Modern Style (England and Scotland), and Liberty (Italy).

Liberty in Rome started later and lasted longer. Liberty in Rome did not explode, overwhelmed by the bulky Classical, Renaissance, Baroque, and Neoclassical heritage. In short there was no space, or there was very little, for

a style of graceful lines and nature-inspired decorations. In Roman Modernism we find such characteristics barely visible within different styles, which exhibit an insuperable link to tradition. Despite becoming the capital in 1871, Rome would have to wait until the Giolitti era to see the ideas and the taste of the bourgeoisie overtake the hegemonic intellectual conservatism of the clergy.

By Roman Liberty we refer to those isolated cases where the modernist element is able to adapt to the pre-existent style. In fact, in the capital the decorations have the closest contact with the floral style rather than the building design. This is the case of Villa Cesana (designer Ezio Garroni, 1908) or the Calzone's House (designer Vittorio Mascanzoni, 1910) in the center of the city. Right here, in the often medieval urban fabric, Modernism slips, car-



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2. Rome,
Villa Florio.
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ves gaps and manages to surprise. Just look at the Galleria Sciarra (Giulio De Angelis designer, decorator Joseph Cellini, 1888).

Liberty manages to find some space especially in new neighbourhoods, as in Prati the Cagiati's Cottage (designer Garibaldi Burba, 1903, photo 1), or in Nomentano the Ximenes Cottage (designer Leonardo Paterna Baldizzi, 1891-1902), which, however, owes its strength to the firm hand of Ettore Ximenes.

To discourage the spread of floral style in Rome, there were also the further obstacles of the delayed industrialization of the city and the lack of schools, or groups, of artists which were supposed to be the core of development, debate, and dissemination of the new ideas.

What were the reactions to the new style, then? After the exhibitions in Paris (1900) and Turin (1902), the most widespread tendency was a mixture of distrust and fear of foreign culture. It was seen by many as a threat to the survival of national tradition. The constructive rigor of the buildings was much more appreciated in the capital than the lightness of Liberty. An example was the appreciation for the villas Florio (photo 2) and Rudini, designed by Ernesto Basile, 1901-1902 and 1904-1906, in the district Boncompagni Ludovisi. These villas have strongly fifteenth century designs, with a heavy spatial layout and nothing of the lightness of Liberty, and were prized for their structural clarity. At the same time the more daringly modern buildings, like the Calderai's House (designer Amedeo Calcaprina, 1902-1903, photo 3), were harshly criticized.

An important moment for the city was - with the master plan of 1883 - the edification of the containing walls of the Tiber. The city radically changed its face: from a sleepy provincial town it was transformed into a bustling metropolis. One loss was undoubtedly the most dramatic destruction of the Port of Ripetta. The wooden chalets of the Boating Party, custodians of the river, were also lost with it. I mention them because, as evident from a vintage photo (Rowing Club Tevere Remo, 1872), they were fine examples of a Swiss chalet transplanted onto the Rome river banks. The so-called Châlet Bazzani (designer Cesare Bazzani, 1898) remains to this day, having once hosted the Circolo Canottieri Aniene and today the environmental services of the municipality.

The taste for the imitation of the Swiss chalet is clear in Owls Cottage of Villa Torlonia, whose first edification (designer Giuseppe Jappelli) dates to 1839 with subsequent alterations and additions (Enrico Gennari and Vincenzo Fasolo) until 1920 that have made it a jewel of Art Nouveau style with many influences (photo 4).

Another jewel, due to the Eclecticism and Modernist wind, is Villa Blanc (1896-1897), now being restored, but for sixty years completely abandoned. The greenhouse, the porch with caryatids, the ceramics decoration signed by Adolfo De Carolis, the moulded ceilings, the leaded stained glass - all were conceived by the antiquarian and innovative taste of Giacomo Boni. Hopefully they will all soon come back to their original splendour.

A lost opportunity for the development of more markedly modernist matrix is the plan of 1909, signed by Edmondo Sanjust di Teulada on behalf of Mayor Ernesto Nathan. The plan

3. Rome, Caldera's House. Photo by Domenico Gambardella.



was to build around the city three types of dwellings called buildings, villas, and gardens. By respecting such constraints, the city would have expanded alternating densely and less densely populated areas. It did not. The owners of the land for villas, in order to earn more from their land, exerted strong pressure to obtain what we call today *an increase in cubic capacity* (deja vu!): basically replace the villas with housing buildings with 5 floors plus the attic. It can be said that the Rome of *palazzinari* was already born then.

Another missed opportunity was the Universal Exhibition of 1911 in Rome. The exhibition was to represent a kind of secular holiday to celebrate the triumph of the country's progress in fifty years of the Unit, thanks to the liberal bourgeoisie embodied by the government of Giovanni Giolitti.





4. Rome,
Owls cottage in
Villa Torlonia.
Photo by
Domenico
Gambardella.

Under the impetus of the organization of events, there was a rapid phase of urban expansion: construction of roads, bridges, palaces, monumental areas, and parks, as well as important works of restoration. It is in this period that modern Rome was born, a monumental Rome once again, rhetorical, of which the most complete expression was the amount of coarse and clumsy Vittoriano, whose only convincing results were the mosaic decorations of the lunettes of Giulio Bargellini and, to a lesser extent, of Antonio Rizzi (1912). Illustrious precedents are, in the nearby church of St. Paul Within the Walls, the mosaics of the apse area by Edward Burne Jones which represent *The theory of Saints and Fathers of the Church* (1872-1876).

In parallel to the intense work of urbanization, between 1908 and 1911, an ephemeral appa-

ratus was created (the halls of the Italian regions and those of the European nations, the Great Hall of Feasts, the monumental entrance, the Forum of Regions and many others) to accommodate the various expositions huge wooden structures that were destroyed in the fall of 1911, when the expositions ended. Nothing remains of the immense economic, organizational, and constructive effort linked to the ephemeral. But the image of the celebrations remains indelible in those urban interventions that have designed the new face of the city.

References:

Alessandrini Diana, Cesaretti Carla (2013), *Roma Liberty. Itinerari tra Eclettismo e Modernismo (1870-1925)*, Rome: Palombi Editori. 332 p.