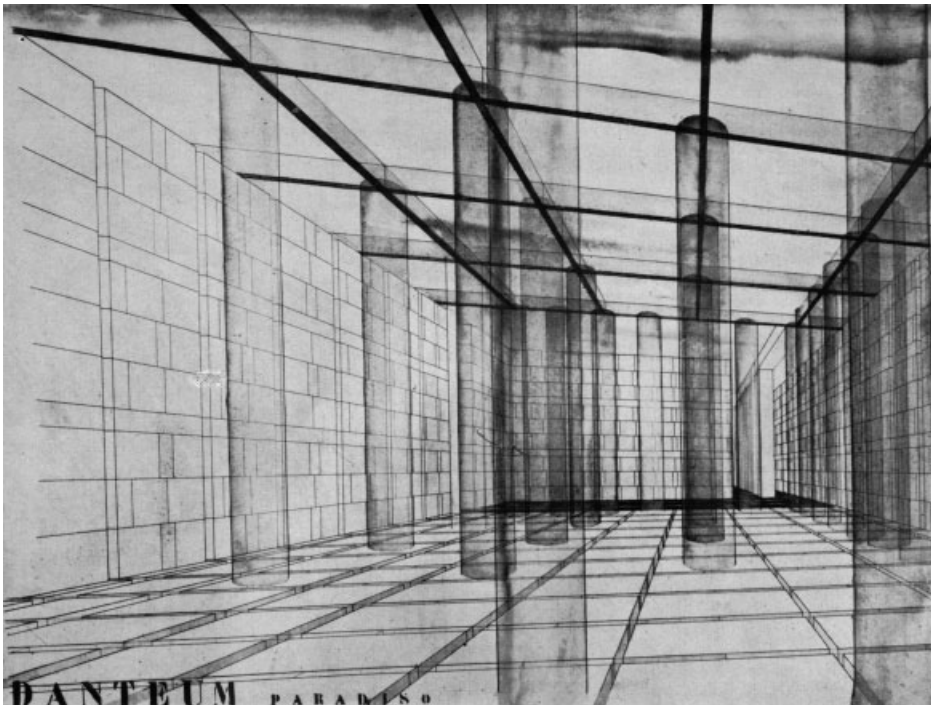


22 DANTEUM

Giuseppe Terragni

Jonathan Mekinda



Giuseppe Terragni, Danteum Paradiso, 1938. *L'architettura* 153 (July 1968): 251.*

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The Danteum is one of the most enigmatic projects by one of the most enigmatic architects of the twentieth century: Giuseppe Terragni.¹ An organization dedicated to encouraging the study of Dante and promoting his work, the Danteum was the idea of Rino Valdameri, the director of the Brera Academy of Fine Arts in Milan and a leading literary and cultural figure in Italy during the 1930s. An ardent fascist and a passionate champion of the poet, Valdameri conceived the new organization in 1938; with the financial and political support of the Milanese industrial magnate Count Alessandro Possi, he then approached Mussolini to secure official state approval for the organization and support for the construction of its headquarters in Rome. This effort was at first successful, and the two men met with Mussolini in Rome on November 10, 1938 to discuss the project in more detail. After the meeting, however, Valdameri struggled to sustain Mussolini's interest in the project, and with the start of the war in the fall of 1939 the plans for the Danteum were officially put on hold. Valdameri's untimely death in June 1943 brought an end to the project.

Also in attendance at the meeting with Mussolini were the two architects that Valdameri had commissioned to design the Danteum, Giuseppe Terragni and Pietro Lingeri.² Terragni and Lingeri had a longstanding relationship with Valdameri and a well-established professional partnership – together they had designed several highly regarded buildings and participated in numerous state-sponsored competitions.³ Likely the most important factor in their selection, however, was Terragni's leading position among Italian modernist architects.⁴ Terragni's prominence was largely due to his passionate efforts to synthesize the principles of international modernism with the traditions and needs of fascist Italy, in particular the demand for new forms of architectural expression that would effectively engage the cultural ideology of Mussolini's regime. Terragni was certainly not alone among Italian modernists in devoting energy to this question, but with his Casa del Fascio in Como, completed in 1936, he achieved a degree of renown that few equaled. The Danteum was an ideal project for such an architect, and Valdameri commissioned Terragni and Lingeri well before the November meeting with Mussolini, where the two architects presented a series of evocative drawings, many with water-color washes.⁵ After the meeting, Terragni and Lingeri continued to work on the project, producing additional drawings as well as a model and a written "report" on their design, the "*Relazione sul Danteum*."⁶ The Danteum is known today through that model and approximately 40 drawings and two albums of photographs of drawings that are held in various archives; substantial portions of the "*Relazione sul Danteum*" also remain.⁷

History

In the statutes that he drafted for it, Valdameri explained the functions that the Danteum was to perform: "A 'Danteum' is to be created in Rome: A National

Organization that proposes to erect, on the via dell'Impero, in this epoch, in which the will and the genius of the Duce have realized the Imperial dream of Dante, a Temple to the greatest of Italian poets. The Danteum is proposed to: carry out the celebration of the words of Dante, considered a primary source for Mussolini's creations..."⁸ As these lines make clear, Valdameri conceived the Danteum to promote an understanding of the poet and his works that would emphasize their direct and vital connection to the fascist present. In this view, Dante's significance rested not only on the beauty of his poetry, but also on his vision of Italian unification and imperial expansion rooted in Catholicism, a vision that was widely understood during the fascist era as foretelling Mussolini's rise to power. This conception of Dante as an avant-garde prophet of fascism, at once temporally distant and spiritually intimate to the present, was also shared by Terragni and Lingeri. Indeed, the two architects explicitly designed the Danteum both to commemorate the poet and to illuminate the significance of his work as a prophecy of the fascist empire.

The site in Rome chosen for the Danteum was an irregular trapezoid set in the acute corner of the intersection of the Via Cavour and what is now the Via dei Fori Imperiali. The longest side of the site fronted on to what was then the recently constructed Via dell'Impero (Street of Empire). This broad avenue had been built to link the Piazza Venezia with the Colosseum and to reveal the remnants of various ancient fora, which had been almost completely built over during the centuries since their construction. The Via dell'Impero is one of the most striking examples of the policy of *sventramento* (clearing out) implemented under Mussolini that demolished large swaths of the modern city in order to uncover remnants of the ancient city. In its willful destruction of anonymous medieval structures to reveal more fully antique monuments and inscribe into the fabric of the city more direct relationships between those monuments and the centers of fascist power, this policy demonstrates the same attitude to history that inspired the Danteum. In the view of Valdameri and other fascists, the value of the past was determined primarily by the present to which it led, and that value was only made visible – literally “abstracted” from history – with the passage of time.⁹ Terragni and Lingeri evoked this attitude in their description of the ancient monuments crowded around the site of the Danteum:

But here is the great revelation: The contingent pretext that, when they were built, seemed the only reason and the only justification for their need (because it was the most obvious) has disappeared, and what remains standing, with terrible mutilations, are stone blocks in which monumentality resides, transformed, through the fundamental laws of numerical or geometric harmony that bind spaces and volumes, solids and voids, materials and colors.¹⁰

Terragni and Lingeri were intensely interested in this rich context, which they already knew well from their participation in the competition for the Palazzo del

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Littorio in 1934. Planned as a new national headquarters for the fascist party, the Palazzo del Littorio was conceived as a massive structure that would have fully occupied the triangular site delineated by the Via Cavour, the Via dell'Impero, and the Via del Colosseo, including the area later chosen for the Danteum. For that competition, Terragni and Lingeri joined a larger team of artists and architects, including Marcello Nizzoli and Mario Sironi, that produced two entries as the Gruppo Milanese.¹¹ Their work on this project provided Terragni and Lingeri the opportunity not only to study this section of Rome closely, but also to develop a method of site analysis that embodied the fascist vision of history in its identification and assertion of direct connections between ancient ruins, existing structures, and future programs. But while the 1934 competition yielded a remarkable range of entries, the program was eventually moved to another site and the lot on the Via dell'Impero was left vacant.

Building on their experience with the Palazzo Littorio, Terragni and Lingeri prepared a site plan, drawn at a scale of 1:2500, to situate the Danteum more precisely within its context. Notably, and against convention, Terragni and Lingeri did not depict existing structures on this plan. Instead, they included plans of the recently uncovered fora and other ancient structures in the area, including the Basilica of Maxentius and the Baths of Trajan, as well as other, more recent monuments such as Michelangelo's Campidoglio in order to illustrate what they described as an "experimental field of eight centuries of concrete and documented architecture."¹² Heightening the oddity of this quasi-archaeological plan, which shows the contemporary street grid blending into the field of ancient structures, are two aerial photographs of the Via dell'Impero arrayed on the periphery of the sheet alongside two illustrations of the Palace of King Sargon in Persia and the Temple Complex at Karnak in Egypt. Together with the plan, these illustrations present an overview of the site and reveal how the design of the Danteum was conceived in concert with history in order to establish connections across time and space that would not simply legitimize the present, but power it toward a better future.¹³

Rooms

From the extant materials, it is possible to construct a view, albeit partial, of the complex that Terragni and Lingeri designed. The proposed building is essentially a golden-section rectangle in plan, oriented longitudinally east-to-west on its site and with the primary façade facing south onto the Via dell'Impero. Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the plan also comprises two equal but slightly overlapping and offset squares, which largely define the interior spaces within the primary rectangle. As Thomas Schumacher has noted, Le Corbusier's Villa Stein at Garche of 1927 was likely a model for this "slipped rectangle" configuration, but the architects identified the Basilica of Maxentius as the fundamental inspiration for their design.¹⁴ Standing directly across the Via dell'Impero and

rectangular in plan, with an apse on its northern side, the Basilica not only embodies the golden ratio that Terragni and Lingeri adopted for the Danteum, but the length of its short ends determined the length of the long sides of the Danteum.¹⁵ In addition, the interior divisions of the Basilica demarcate two overlapping squares as well as a series of smaller golden-section rectangles, motifs that also play a fundamental role in the organization of the Danteum.

For the architects, the adoption of the golden ratio and slipped-rectangle configuration was motivated by their rejection of symbolism and representation as the means with which to “celebrate the words of Dante.” Instead, Terragni and Lingeri deployed geometry and numerical logic to construct a sympathetic and harmonious resonance between the building and the ideas of the poet:

In our case the architecture could adhere to the literary work only through an examination of the admirable structure of the Divine Poem, itself faithful to a criterion of division and interpretation through certain symbolic numbers: 1, 3, 7, 10 and their combinations, which happily can be synthesized into *one* and *three* (unity and trinity). Now, there is only one rectangle that clearly expresses the harmonic law of unity in trinity, and this is the rectangle known historically as the “golden”: the rectangle, that is, whose sides are in the golden ratio (the short side is to the long side as the long side is to the sum of the two sides). *One* is the rectangle, *three* are the segments that determine the golden ratio.¹⁶

Embracing the interplay between the perimeter rectangle and the two interlocking squares, Terragni and Lingeri conceived the interior of the Danteum as four primary spaces, with additional spaces interspersed uniformly between them. All of these primary spaces are either squares or golden-section rectangles in plan, and though in most cases these geometries would not have been visible to visitors, Terragni and Lingeri felt that they would have been perceptible as pure, abstract forms.¹⁷ Despite this regular arrangement, the interior is not divided into simple uniform quadrants as the architects also took full advantage of the height of the building to arrange the primary spaces in a sequence that varies both their horizontal and vertical position with respect to one another.¹⁸ The result is a series of interlocking and interpenetrating spaces that articulate an ascending spiral through the complex, echoing Dante’s own journey in *The Divine Comedy*.

After passing through the narrow entryway on the main façade, visitors would enter a square, open courtyard occupying the south-west corner of the complex. Across this courtyard, they would see an enclosed array of 100 densely-packed columns, filling the north-west quadrant. (Some drawings for the project also show a regular grid of thin members mounted in front of the columns as a display system.) To enter the interior, visitors would pass through the columns and move into a narrow corridor running laterally through the center of the complex.¹⁹ From this corridor they could enter the library and study center, set slightly below the main level in the north-east corner of the building, or move along its length back toward

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the front façade in order to enter the room of Inferno in the south-east corner.²⁰ The room of Inferno contains seven columns, each a different diameter ranging from 2.78 m to 0.48 m, arranged in a spiraling pattern determined by a series of seven squares ranging in size from 17 m to 0.7 m on a side, inscribed on the floor. The largest square, located next to the entry, was derived directly from the golden-section rectangle that is the plan of the room, and the remaining squares follow this logic, each derived from the next largest. The columns are positioned at the center of these squares and support an identical arrangement of squares inscribed into the ceiling, which was also to be incised so as to admit a dim light to the room. Oppressive and heavy in its affect, the room deploys numerical logic, geometry, and scale to evoke the descent into hell.

To enter the next room, Purgatory, visitors would cross the room of Inferno and ascend a long, narrow staircase with three groups of three stairs squeezed into the gap between the room of Inferno and the eastern exterior wall. The room of Purgatory echoes the room of Inferno: a spiraling arrangement of seven squares would lead visitors across the room and back toward the center of the complex. Unlike Inferno, however, Purgatory contains no columns and the squares are not inscribed in a level floor but rather rise toward the exit, each square set slightly above the larger square preceding it. Through this gentle ascent, the viewer would slowly rise toward the passage to Paradise, located, as in the room of Inferno, across from the entrance and in another gap between the overlapping and offset squares governing the plan. Also like the room of Inferno, the room of Purgatory was to be lit from above, but rather than narrow slits emitting a dim light the ceiling in Purgatory is pierced with wide openings to allow sunlight to flood into the space. After the heavy darkness of Inferno, the passage through Purgatory would lift the visitor with its light-filled and dematerialized architecture.

The rooms of Inferno and Purgatory show most clearly how Terragni and Lingeri synthesized the architectural elements of geometry and scale with numerical logic to establish abstract harmonies between two distinct “structures,” Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and the Danteum itself. Unlike the rooms of Inferno and Purgatory, the room of Paradise is not described in much detail in the existing portions of the “*Relazione*”; the few extant drawings and plans, however, offer a captivating glimpse of the architects’ vision for the space. The passage to Paradise consists of another staircase with three flights of three stairs each, but shorter and narrower than the passage from Inferno to Purgatory. At the top of the stairs, visitors would find an open space, or antechamber, equal in size and orientation to the entry corridor on the main floor. Across this space, a square, gridded array of 33 glass columns demarcates Paradise. The use of glass produces shimmering columns of breathtaking lightness, light-filled and light-weight. The sensation of lightness is further emphasized by the thin trellis above, opening the room almost completely to the sky, as well as the arrangement of the columns: 24 of the 33 columns demarcate three sides of square, while the remaining nine define another square at its center. (The fourth side of the larger square is formed by the rear wall of the

complex.) Continuing their trajectory of dematerialization, Terragni and Lingeri constructed in the room of Paradise an otherworldly environment in which substance and matter – the fundamental elements of architecture and of the world – have been abandoned almost entirely.

As in the other major rooms of the Danteum, visitors would cross the room of Paradise in order to exit it. There is an alternative, however: the room of Empire. Stretching eastward from the antechamber before Paradise, the room of Empire occupies the narrow slot between the golden-section rectangles of Inferno and Purgatory below. For the architects, the room of Empire was the physical and spiritual heart of the Danteum, the “germ of the architectural whole as the conclusion of the experience of the spaces traversed.”²¹ The design of the room embodies its importance: a row of 12 paired piers, with a single pier at its end, stretches down the center of the room, leading to a monumental statue of an eagle (depicted with only a rough sketch in the sole remaining drawing of the room). This is the only room in the complex without a clear, direct path from entrance to exit and the visitor would follow the piers to the monumental eagle and then double back in order to exit the building. This pathway sets the room of Empire as the culmination of the visitor’s spiraling journey, thereby proclaiming Dante’s stature as a prophet of Mussolini’s rise and the formation of the fascist empire under his rule.²²

The merging of Dante’s ideas and contemporary politics in the room of Empire confirms the Danteum’s function as an indoctrination “machine.” For Terragni, Lingeri, and Valdameri, the purpose of the Danteum was not only to encourage the study of the poet through its library and study center, but also to promote an understanding of Dante that celebrated his vital and still constructive contribution to present-day life. Wielding the fundamental elements of architecture and poetry, Terragni and Lingeri designed a complex that would literally carry visitors through Dante’s vision to the culmination of history: the fascist empire. In the Danteum, history is deployed alongside architecture and poetry as an abstract material, stripped of its particularities and transformed into an “eternal” substance that bears meaning only for the present that it helps to construct.

Walls

For all of the richness of its interior, the Danteum would have revealed little to passers-by on the Via dell’Impero. This aspect of the design is not only in keeping with the architects’ rejection of symbolism and representation, but also reflects their appreciation for the surrounding ruins and remnants, which they saw transformed by the passage of time into pure, powerful forms. The most prominent exterior element of the Danteum is a monumental wall of marble blocks that the architects arranged in front of the façade, parallel to the Via dell’Impero. Standing approximately 16 m tall and stretching almost the entire length of the building, the wall would have separated the Danteum from the adjacent street and

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obscured the main entryway. (A single pier of equal height to the wall stands slightly apart at the western end, directly in front of the stairs leading down from the exit from Paradise.) The wall was designed to act in several capacities: first, as a counterpoint and equal to the massive wall of the Basilica of Maxentius, just across the Via dell'Impero; second, as a plane to demarcate the view along the street toward the monuments at either end; and third, as a mounting surface for a series of shallow, sculptural panels, illustrating the cantos of *The Divine Comedy*.²³

Based on the remaining drawings, the exterior of the Danteum was to be as flat and opaque as the ante-wall, serving primarily to demarcate and protect the carefully calibrated ambience of the interior. (While the southern wall of the courtyard is regularly punctuated by tall, narrow slits, all the other walls of the complex are free of windows; light in the primary interior spaces was to be provided exclusively by openings in the ceiling.) The walls themselves were to be constructed of stone laid in a precise sequence that continued the numerical logic governing the interior plan: three courses of regular stones with equal height would be followed by a string course, and each string course would in turn correspond to an interior level (either floor or ceiling). Through this masonry pattern, the architects aimed to transform the numerical structure of *The Divine Comedy* into physical form once again and literally “cement” it into the physical structure of the Danteum.

Beyond the reliefs on the ante-wall and the regular masonry pattern of the main block, the Danteum is devoid of ornament and decoration. As a result, the building appears in the drawings as a solid, massive block, equal in stature and substance to the remnants of the ancient empire that surround it. While the bulk of the Danteum sits comfortably within that context, when considered in light of Terragni's other work, the solidity and weightiness of the design is striking. Terragni was an ardent fascist who devoted substantial energy to understanding the philosophical structure of the revolutionary movement that he proclaimed.²⁴ As numerous scholars have pointed out, this engagement profoundly shaped Terragni's design of the Casa del Fascio in Como. Known chiefly for its open, transparent façade and rich use of materials to generate visual and spatial effects that evoke core tenets of fascism, the Casa del Fascio is a remarkable work that demonstrates the deep intertwining of the tenets of international modernism with the ideals of fascism at the core of Italian rationalism.²⁵

As different as it is from the Casa del Fascio, the Danteum is a more powerful example of rationalist architecture; indeed, it highlights some of the most distinctive elements of Italian modernism, which are effaced at the Casa del Fascio precisely because that building so neatly deploys the most familiar tropes of modernist architecture. The synthesis of architecture, poetry, and history at the Danteum was fundamentally rooted in the way in which modern architects in Italy conceived the possibilities of modernism. Terragni and Lingeri saw the abstract purity of geometry and structure, matter and material as the foundation of all powerful architecture and they recognized this lesson in the ancient ruins and monuments that surrounded them. Furthermore, with the Danteum, the architects aimed explicitly

to rectify the failure of international modern architecture to articulate a new approach to monumentality, an essential program for the fascist regime. The spare, unbroken walls of the Danteum, towering over the Via dell'Impero, offer a powerful vision for a modern monumentality that synthesizes abstraction and history, modernism and fascism.

Notes

- * Image courtesy of the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, Art Institute of Chicago.
1. Ironically, much of the confusion about Terragni is the result of various campaigns to celebrate his work. The effort of contemporary figures such as Peter Eisenman and Daniel Libeskind to separate his architecture entirely from its context is just one example, and Italian scholars such as Bruno Zevi, looking to cleanse modernism in Italy of the taint of fascism, have also done much to complicate Terragni's significance.
 2. The exact nature of the partnership between Terragni and Lingeri on the Danteum project is still debated by architectural historians. The two architects had a longstanding partnership and a substantial portion of the extant archival material relating to the project is held by the Lingeri family; nonetheless, the project is typically described as Terragni's alone. For two different treatments of the issue see Thomas L. Schumacher, *Terragni's Danteum*, 2nd ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996) and the catalogue entry on the Danteum in Giorgio Ciucci, ed., *Giuseppe Terragni: Opera Completa* (Milan: Electa, 1996).
 3. Lingeri had studied under Valdameri at the Brera academy during the 1920s, and both architects worked with him on a number of projects, including a never realized proposal to renovate the Brera Academy, before the Danteum.
 4. Terragni had been a member of the Gruppo Sette (Group of Seven), which in 1926 and 1927 issued the first calls for Italian architects to align themselves with the growing international modern movement in architecture. In the years following, he contributed to numerous conferences, exhibitions, and competitions within Italy and without, realized several notable projects, including the Casa del Fascio in Como, and established himself as a leading advocate for an intimate relationship between fascism and modernism. The literature on Terragni is vast, but a good starting point is Ciucci, *Giuseppe Terragni*.
 5. The letter that Valdameri sent to Mussolini's secretary in October 1938 requesting a meeting implies that the selection of Terragni and Lingeri for the Danteum had already been approved by Mussolini. See Schumacher, *Terragni's Danteum*, 154
 6. Giuseppe Terragni is widely accepted as the sole author of the "Relazione sul Danteum," the extant portions of which have been analyzed and translated by Thomas Schumacher in Giuseppe Terragni, "Relazione sul Danteum," in Schumacher, *Terragni's Danteum*, 127–49.
 7. The bulk of material is held at the Centro Studi Giuseppe Terragni in Como and the Lingeri archive in Milan.
 8. Schumacher, *Terragni's Danteum*, 153.

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9. This way of thinking about the relationship between the past and the present was not unique to Valdameri and his associates, but was typical of fascism more broadly. For more on this see Mark Antliff, "Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity," *Art Bulletin* 84, no. 1 (March 2002): 148–69; and Claudio Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).
10. Terragni, "Relazione sul Danteum," 128.
11. For more on the Gruppo Milanese and its entries to the Palazzo Littorio competition, see David Rifkind, *The Battle for Modernism: "Quadrante" and the Politicization of Architectural Discourse in Fascist Italy* (Vicenza: Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio, 2012).
12. Terragni, "Relazione sul Danteum," 129.
13. As Mark Antliff has explained, this conception of history was central to fascism: "to reinvigorate the body politic, fascists looked beyond a decadent present to past eras, but they did not advocate a nostalgic return to, say, the era of imperial Rome. Instead, they sought to incorporate qualities associated with past eras into the creation of a radically new society, fully integrated with twentieth-century industrialism and technology." See Antliff, "Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity."
14. Schumacher, *Terragni's Danteum*, 95–6.
15. Terragni, "Relazione sul Danteum," 132.
16. *Ibid.*, 131.
17. The moments where the organizational logic of the plan would have been most visible were all points of entry and exit, which the architects located in various gaps articulated by the overlapping squares and rectangle of the plan. The primary entrance is located in the gap between the front walls of the two squares on the main façade on the Via dell'Impero, while the primary exit occupies the trough between the walls of the western square and the larger golden-section rectangle. Another doorway, leading directly to the study center and library, is located on the northern façade of the building, opposite the main entrance. Terragni and Lingeri's fascination with geometry was well established before they began work on the Danteum. For more on the use of geometry at the Casa del Fascio, for instance, see Rifkind, *The Battle for Modernism*.
18. The main floor is set at a height of 1.6 meters above grade, while the second level is set at a height of 6 meters, and the third level at a height of 10 meters; each level was to have a height of 8.10 meters.
19. The arrangement of columns evokes the forest in which Dante wanders at the beginning of *The Divine Comedy*. The hidden entrance, tucked in the space of overlap between the two squares, also references the opening lines of the poem. The metaphorical equivalencies between the Danteum and *The Divine Comedy* have been thoroughly explored by Thomas Schumacher in *Terragni's Danteum*.
20. There is little information in the extant documents about the library and study center, but together they defined a golden-section rectangle equal in size to the rooms of Inferno and Purgatory, located adjacent to and directly above them respectively.
21. Terragni, "Relazione sul Danteum," 138–9.
22. *Ibid.*, 139.

23. These panels were to be designed by the artist Mario Sironi, who prepared a small series of rough sketches of the panels. The architects incorporated these into the drawings that they presented to Mussolini at the meeting on November 10, 1938.
24. See Diane Y. Ghirardo, "Italian Architects and Fascist Politics: An Evaluation of the Rationalists' Role in Regime Building," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 39, no. 2 (1980): 109–27; Diane Y. Ghirardo, "Politics of a Masterpiece: The Vicenda of the Decoration of the Façade of the Casa del Fascio in Como, 1936–39," *Art Bulletin* 62, no. 3 (1980): 466–78.
25. "Architettura razionale" was one of the earliest terms used by Italian modernists to describe their work, which led to the widespread use of "razionalismo."

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