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Author(s): Thomas L. Schumacher

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“SEAMLESSNESS IS NEXT TO GODLINESS”: THE THEME OF THE MONOLITHIC BLOCK IN GIUSEPPE TERRAGNI’S TOMBS AND MONUMENTS

Thomas L. Schumacher, University of Maryland

Selection means rejection, pruning, cleansing; the clear
and naked emergence of the Essential.

Le Corbusier 1986, 138

1. Introduction

Modern buildings were streamlined not for aerodynamic reasons like automobiles, ships, airplanes, or even trains, but because of their expected method of manufacture. These buildings were to be built in a factory, and for factory-built objects the addition of ornament, created as the detail to cover a joint or make the building watertight, was considered inexpressive and spurious. The idea that the sequence of the construction process might be registered in the final product would be hopelessly craft oriented. The work could no longer appear to have been manipulated after it was in place. This prescription was as significant as any of Adolf Loos’s moral/aesthetic rantings against applied ornament.

This is not to say that the elegance of smooth, unbroken, well-crafted surfaces is the exclusive domain of the modern architectural sensibility. An unrelieved surface reveals the solidity and quality of materials and workmanship, whether handicraft or machine produced. The sixteen monolithic granite columns of the Pantheon in Rome, rough-cut in Egypt, shipped across the Mediterranean to Italy, floated up the Tiber, hoisted up over the fall-line, polished to a reflective finish and installed, are the ancient embodiment of a variation of Mies van der Rohe’s most famous dictum: “Less is more” becomes “Less *costs* more.”

Parallels to architecture abound. In *haute couture* of the 1960s, women’s dresses were made without darts on the bodice, thus distinguishing high fashion from ready-to-wear. Expensive automobiles of the same period displayed a similar attribute. The flanks of Aston-Martins, Ferraris, and Maseratis were plain, with no creases to prevent “oilcanning,” with no moldings to cover seams or make the car look lower. The car *was* lower; the metal *was* thicker, and it was seamless.

Roland Barthes eloquently dissected the aesthetic substructure of this concept in a short article about the Citroen DS automobile, written when the car was introduced in 1957. Comparing the smooth body of the DS to other, more culturally loaded “design objects,” Barthes wrote: “It is well known that smoothness is always an attribute of perfection because its opposite reveals a technical and typically human operation of assembly: Christ’s robe was seamless, just as the airships of science-fiction are made of unbroken metal.”¹

In the science-fiction film “The Day the Earth Stood Still” (1950), the earthlings were astounded by the materiality of the alien’s flying saucer. While the craft opened like a horizontal

¹ Barthes 1972, 88.

jaw, after it closed it was impossible to even find where the seam was located. To “Less is more” we may add “Seamlessness is next to godliness.”

In these cases seamlessness has an unearthly, mystical quality, as it does in the theory of the Modern Movement, implying that the future will be created by a presently unattainable technology. Thus, while the Space Shuttle makes such a loud noise on takeoff that onlookers must station themselves at least five miles away, flying saucers make barely audible whistling or whirring noises, or no noise at all. And, while ceramic heat-shield tiles protect the Space Shuttle (tiles that are cemented to the fuselage like the *tessere* in an ancient mosaic), alien spaceships have no joints or seams. The façades of International Style buildings of the 1920s and 1930s were finished in stucco, a material that has been around for millennia. Stucco, in its nonmateriality, was the stand-in for some future magical seamless material, like the cloth in the film “The Man in the White Suit” (1951), which would never get dirty and never wear out.

In traditional architecture the distressed surface (e.g., rustication) announces the difficulty of carving an expanse of stone to be perfectly smooth. Smooth surfaces will also show any deformation caused by injury, and therefore they are often pre-deformed. Rustication not only “represents” the basement floor; it protects the ground floor from being blemished by the assaults of daily life. Rustication has other meanings as well. James Ackerman has called it “a symbol of communal pride and power.”² For Charles Burroughs, the contrast between the rusticated ground floor and the smooth *piano nobile* of Bramante’s influential Casa Caprini signified “the opposed worlds of labor and exchange and of refinement and authority.”³ For Giuseppe Terragni, rustication had a special meaning in relationship to the smooth, monolithic object, as we will see below in the case of the Sarfatti Tomb of 1934.

The doorjambs of traditional buildings are covered with moldings to hide the articulated joints between materials. In modern design, however, the unbroken surface is associated with machine production and streamlining. The reveal-joint replaces the molding. This standard creates an irony for the articulation of individual elements in certain contemporary design products. A 1980s print advertisement for an expensive Audemars Piguet wristwatch is a case in point: two men are standing on the deck of a yacht, and one is admiring his friend’s watch. The caption reads, “At a price like that, they could have at least hidden the screws.”

The humor in this ad is sustained by the idea that the streamlined version of modern industrial design had long ago eclipsed the articulated “machine aesthetic” version of Charlie Chaplin’s “Modern Times,” and not only for objects like wristwatches. From cappuccino machines to automobiles to sewing machines, it is almost axiomatic that the expression of articulated parts eventually succumbs to the clean, smooth streamlined finish. The success and influence of Apple Computer’s recent design campaign using transparent volumes is perhaps attributable to the fact that their products do both. In the Macintosh iMac computer line, we see both the streamlined form and all the parts underneath: “Modern Times” and “The Day the Earth Stood Still” combined.

2. Terragni’s Tombs and Monuments

In Giuseppe Terragni’s architecture the seamless surface appears in both the traditional and the modern modes sketched above. In the modern mode the sensibility is apparent in his

² Ackerman 1991, 524.

³ Burroughs 1993, 17.



Fig. 1 (far left). Como, Casa del Fascio, 1932–1936, architect Giuseppe Terragni, detail of south façade (photo author).

Fig. 2 (near left). Giuseppe Terragni, "Sant'Abbondio, Column capitals," oil on canvas, 1925 (photo author).

Sant'Elia Nursery School and the apartment houses in Milan and Como. The exterior surfaces of these buildings are thin and usually constructed of stucco. Both the modern and the traditional readings of seamlessness are present in Terragni's masterpiece, the Casa del Fascio in Como (1932–1936) (fig. 1). This building is covered with marble ashlar panels applied to a concrete frame, but it imparts a monolithic aspect that is heightened by uncharacteristically deep openings for a modern concrete frame building. The same solidity is apparent in Terragni's tombs and monuments, and often includes a monolith.

Many of Terragni's buildings and projects during his fifteen-year career were tombs and monuments, a much higher percentage than was the case for any of the important modernist architects of the interwar period.⁴ Terragni was both a devout Catholic and a card-carrying Fascist. His Catholicism was intense and personal, as his assistant, Luigi Zuccoli, explained.⁵ He became a member of the Fascist Party in 1928 after an older brother Silvio, a member, was killed in an automobile accident. In the late 1920s membership in the Fascist Party was coveted and limited, and young Giuseppe would most certainly have jumped at the opportunity.

Terragni's interest in seamlessness has at least two premodern sources in addition to the expected source in the aesthetics of the International Style (especially the architecture of Le Corbusier). One is *Mediterraneità* and the purity of form associated with the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome. The other is the Lombard tradition of stone cutting embodied in the myth of the *Maestri Comacini*. These masters were the legendary masons of Terragni's home city of Como and the surrounding Lombard towns who were reputed to have been the first great cathedral builders of western Europe in the early Middle Ages.⁶

The spare simplicity of Lombard medieval architecture is noticeable in the church of S. Abbondio in Como, ca. 1100, a building that Terragni had painted (fig. 2). The simple five-

⁴ See Schumacher 1991, 61–63. Other significant references for Terragni's works are Ciucci 1996, and Marciànò 1987. Most original materials for this paper have been provided by the Archive of the Fondazione Giuseppe Terragni, Como.

⁵ See Zuccoli 1981.

⁶ See Porter 1967, 9–10.

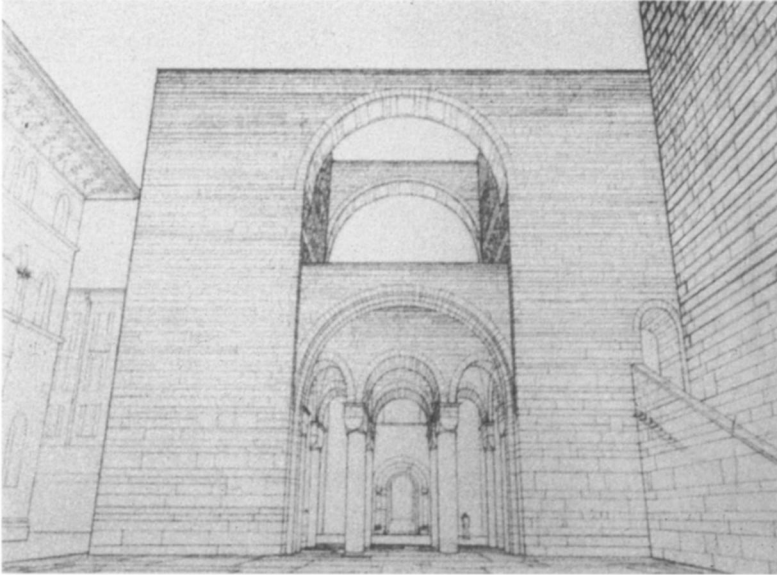


Fig. 3. Como, *Monumento ai Caduti*, 1926, Giuseppe Terragni and Pietro Lingeri, second-place competition project, column details, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

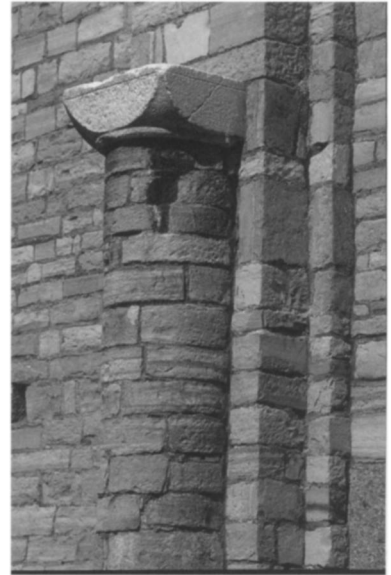


Fig. 4. Church of Sant'Abbondio, Como, ca. 1100, front façade, detail of columns (photo author).

bay *parti*, the unadorned walls, the geometric column capitals, all divulge a purity of form and construction that Terragni emulated as early as his first commemorative project, the *Monumento ai Caduti* in Como, 1926 (designed with Pietro Lingeri) (fig. 3). A neo-Romanesque work, this unrealized project borrowed columns and capitals directly from S. Abbondio (fig. 4). Terragni and Lingeri placed second in this competition; the first-place scheme was never built.

3. *Monumento ai Caduti*, Como, 1931–1933

A half decade later, Terragni was able to achieve his *Monumento ai Caduti* for Como, the stone tower that is often referred to as the “Sant’Elia Monument,” in memory of Antonio Sant’Elia, the futurist architect killed in World War I (fig. 5).⁷ Derived from Sant’Elia’s sketch for an electric power station, the project contains Terragni’s first monolith. It is a block of granite, quarried at Alzo on Lago d’Orta, and shipped to the site at great expense and with great difficulty. The names of the 750 sons of Como who perished in the Great War are inscribed on this monolith. It was very important to Terragni that the block be perfect, and he quarreled with the quarry owner and contractor over quality control and final appearance.⁸ The block occupies the central interior space of the monument like an altar, and almost completely fills the ground plan.

This monolith measures approximately 8 m × 1.70 m × 1.20 m (about 26 ft × 5.5 ft × 3.9 ft) or 16.32 cubic meters. And it was heavy, weighing in at about fifty tons.

⁷ See Shapiro 1996.

⁸ Shapiro 1996.



Fig. 5. Como, Monument to the Fallen of World War I, architect Giuseppe Terragni, 1931–1933, view (photo author).



Fig. 6. Stecchini Tomb, Como, 1930–1931, architect Giuseppe Terragni, front view (photo author).

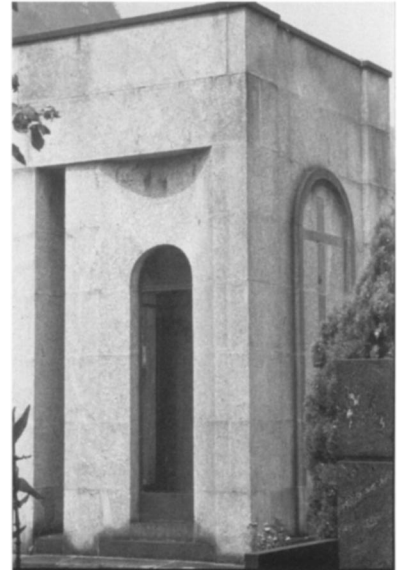


Fig. 7. Pirovano Tomb, Como, 1930–1931, architect Giuseppe Terragni, 1930s, side view (photo author).

4. The Stecchini and Pirovano Tombs, Como, 1930–1931

In the late twenties, Terragni received two commissions for tombs in the Monumental Cemetery in Como. These were for the Pirovano and Stecchini families. Both were built. They face each other on the main axis of the cemetery. They are the same size and shape, as required by the cemetery master plan: vertical boxes, aedicular chapels (figs. 6, 7). These tombs are connected by more than just propinquity.

Until recently, the common wisdom among historians and critics concerning these two “fraternal twin” monuments had been that the Stecchini, with its more archaeologically correct classicism, must have long preceded the Pirovano, with its more broadly limned abstract classicism. Such a chronology is supported by the modernist argument whereby classicism becomes more and more abstract until it metamorphoses into modernism, the result of some Darwinian evolutionary aesthetic process.⁹

Compositionally, the Pirovano Tomb (fig. 8) is indeed the more sophisticated of the two, with its detached frontal plane exposing a slot of space between the doorway and the volume of the block. The Stecchini (fig. 9) is more conservative both stylistically and volumetrically, but it projects an imposing *gravitas* because of its proportions, its precise granite coursing, and its column/wall interaction. The stonework of the Stecchini Tomb is also a prelude to the Sarfatti and Mambretti tombs of the middle and late thirties, discussed below. While not monolithic, the stonework on the Stecchini Tomb is dense and solid like the marble revetments on the Casa del Fascio in Como.

Moreover, the Stecchini and Pirovano tombs share remarkably similar early schemes (fig.

⁹ See Zevi 1980, 54, 140. Zevi places the Stecchini Tomb both tombs in the early thirties. See Marcianò 1987. in 1930 and the Pirovano as late as 1936. Marcianò places

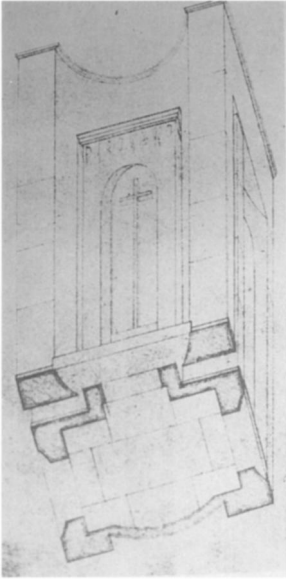


Fig. 8. Pirovano Tomb, up-axonomic view, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

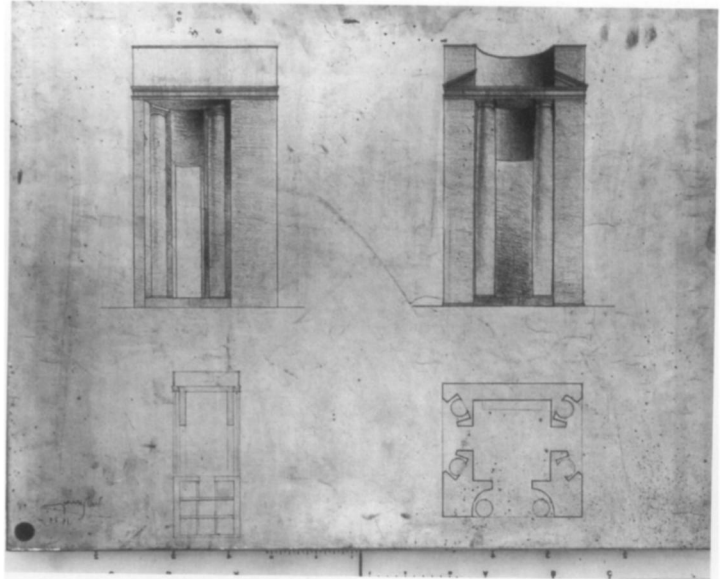


Fig. 9. Stecchini Tomb, two elevation drawings, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

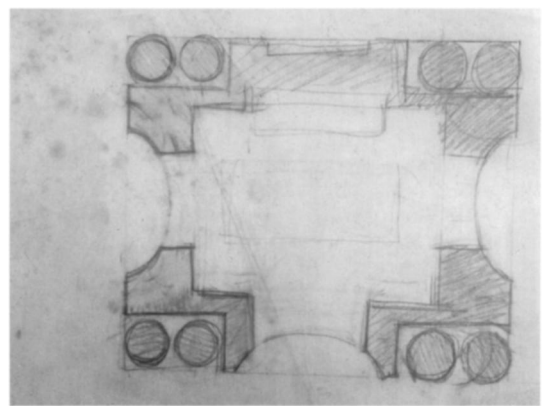


Fig. 11. Stecchini Tomb, plan, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

Fig. 10 (left). Giuseppe Terragni, perspective sketch for Pirovano Tomb, 1930s, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

10). The illustrated perspective in figure 10 is attributed to Pirovano, while the plan shown in figure 11 is found in the *busta Stecchini* at the Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (fig. 11). It seems that Terragni began with the same idea in each case and then went in different directions. Perhaps at a certain point he imagined that these tombs would be identical, rather than fraternal, twins. Terragni made a direct reference to Michelangelo's Laurentian Library Vestibule wall treatment in these two early schemes.



Fig. 12. Pirovano Tomb, various sketches for Pirovano #38/4/D, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

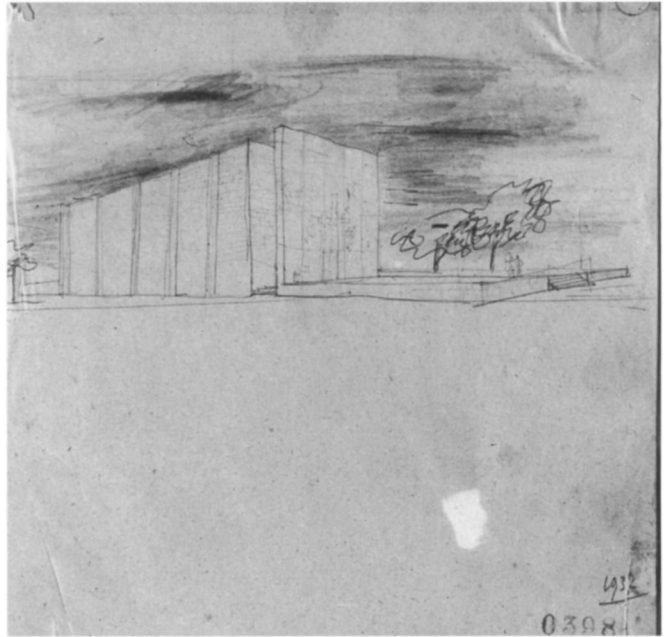


Fig. 13. Giuseppe Terragni, Project for a Cathedral, sketch, 1932, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

For the Stecchini Tomb, Terragni eventually moved the columns away from the corners. This change might have been prompted simply by a need to save the cost of two columns by reducing the total number from eight to six. Or perhaps it was a bid to insure that what Terragni often called the “sure plastic effect,” with its precise hard-edged corners, would irrevocably supersede the stylistic trappings of the chosen vocabulary. The subtractive, “carved” Michelangelesque composition is enhanced by the hard-edged corners.

The columns disappeared altogether in the Pirovano Tomb. This tomb also presents us with an interesting question of chronology, and a monolith in its early iterations. A sheet of Terragni’s sketches that were unquestionably made for this project contains some volumetric studies and a perspective of the aedicule (fig. 12). The sketch is an anomaly, bordering on an anachronism for this date. The abstraction of the elements coupled with the interlocking motif of a heavy monolithic block, with an inscription (composed of seemingly unrelated letters), makes this sketch a harbinger of things to come, a depiction of ideas that do not otherwise emerge in Terragni’s *oeuvres* until about a half decade later. But, while the monolith was unrealized here, it appears to have been in Terragni’s mind during the design of these projects, and would surface again soon after.

5. Project for a Cathedral, 1932

There is one more project from Terragni’s early period, that is, before the Casa del Fascio in Como (1932–1936), which evinces similar formal themes and is an indication of things to come. This is the Cathedral project of 1932 (fig. 13). Some sketches for this building display the parallel solid walls and displaced rectangle plan motif that will dominate

Terragni's compositional palette after 1936;¹⁰ while he did not provide this project with a monolith, the solidity and thickness of the walls prefigure the commemorative projects of the late thirties.

6. *The Roberto Sarfatti Tomb, 1932–1938*

In the early thirties Terragni received the commission for a tomb and monument to Roberto Sarfatti, one of the youngest Italians to have been killed in the Great War.¹¹ Sarfatti died on a hill called “Col d’Echele,” near Asiago in the foothills of the Alps, 21 January 1918. He had been interred in a common grave with his comrades, but his remains were exhumed and identified in 1934. Roberto Sarfatti was important because of his mother’s fame; she was Margherita Grassini Sarfatti, the Jewish Venetian intellectual—a writer and art critic—who had been Mussolini’s mistress during his formative years as a politician. Margherita Sarfatti was a major intellectual force behind Mussolini’s rise to power. She was also an active supporter and promoter of modern art and architecture in Italy, especially of the avant-garde influenced by Le Corbusier,¹² and became a close friend of Terragni and other rationalist architects, having first met him in 1929 on the occasion of an exhibition of paintings in Como in which he had participated.¹³

Roberto’s remains were identified on 19 August 1934. Philip Cannistraro and Brian Sullivan have chronicled the story in their biography of Margherita Sarfatti, *Il Duce’s Other Woman*: “Roberto’s body had been discovered in the little military cemetery in the village of Stoccareddo, about three miles from where he had fallen on the Col d’Echele . . . Margherita commissioned Giuseppe Terragni to design a tomb for Roberto, to be built near the peak of the Col d’Echele.”¹⁴

The history of the design development and construction of this monument is a lesson in patronage, style, design method, and the economics of the building industry. It is also a lesson in historiography. The project’s chronology—what Terragni drew and when and why he drew it—is also important. Seamlessness, in the form of a monolithic block, appears to dominate the history of this funerary monument, and, as in the Sant’Elia Monument, the monolith posed such a problem of cost and installation that it was eventually drastically reduced in size.

Cannistraro and Sullivan state that “[Terragni’s] first design for a massive tomb faced by a high tower proved impractical due to the expense and difficulty of transporting materials up the narrow dirt road to the peak. In the end, Terragni and Margherita agreed on a symmetrical T-shaped structure, intersected by stairs leading to an inscribed block on top of the tomb.”¹⁵ The “massive tomb faced by a high tower” to which Cannistraro and Sullivan refer is one of three sketches Terragni drew (figs. 14–16), and these are commonly assumed to be the preliminary versions of the project, cast aside for primarily economic reasons.¹⁶

¹⁰ See Schumacher 1993, 61–85.

Portrait in Military Cloak,” exhibited in the show. See Zuccoli 1981, 37.

¹¹ See Muntoni 1996a.

¹⁴ Cannistraro and Sullivan 1993, 458.

¹² See Cannistraro and Sullivan 1993, 318–319.

¹⁵ Cannistraro and Sullivan 1993, 458.

¹³ According to Terragni’s assistant, Luigi Zuccoli, Signora Sarfatti had particularly admired Terragni’s “Self-

¹⁶ Marcianò 1987, 136.

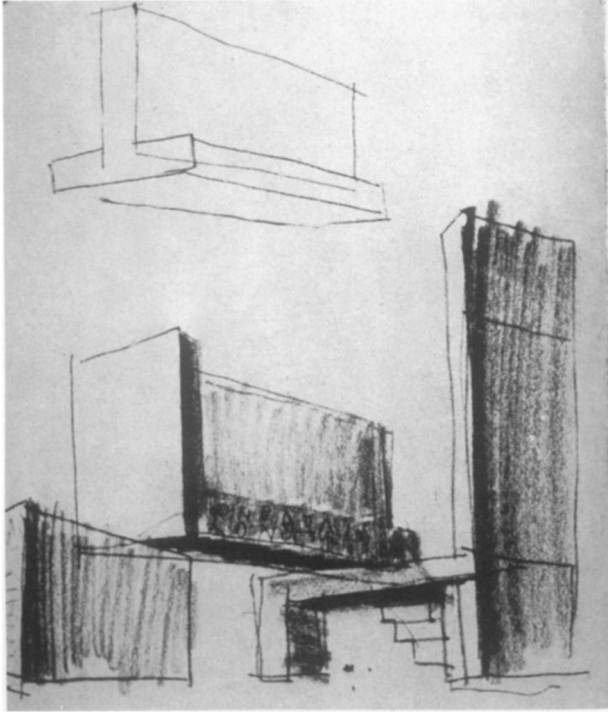


Fig. 14. Giuseppe Terragni, sketch for Sarfatti Tomb(?), scheme 1, perspective sketch, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

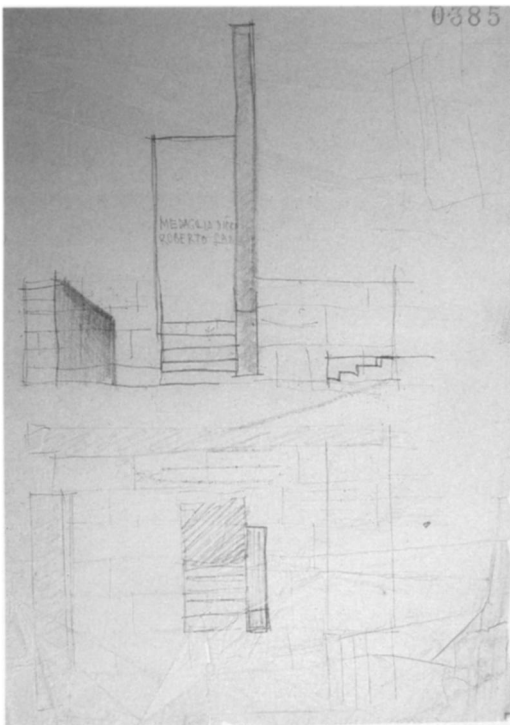


Fig. 15. Giuseppe Terragni, Roberto Sarfatti Tomb, Col d'Echele (Stoccareddo), scheme 2, plan and elevation, 1932(?), Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

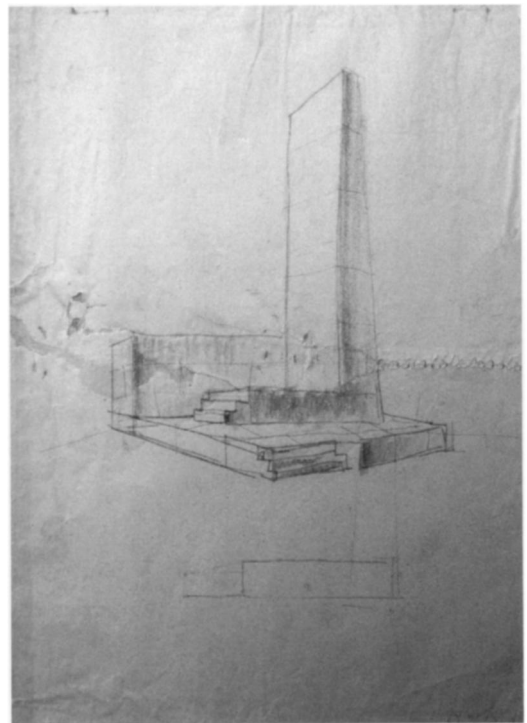


Fig. 16. Giuseppe Terragni, Sarfatti Tomb, scheme 3, perspective sketch, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

Although Roberto's remains were discovered in 1934, apparently Margherita Sarfatti first approached Terragni in 1932. A letter from Margherita Sarfatti about the project, dated 12 March 1932, predates Roberto's disinterment by two years. This leads to the speculation that the first three schemes for this project (if they are indeed *all* for this project) were not for a tomb *per se*, but rather for a cenotaph.¹⁷

One of these sketches, a mere scribble (fig. 14), looks more like a modern version of a Wiltshire megalith than an Italian tomb. Mirko Galli and Claudia Muhlhoff, who refer to Sarfatti's 1932 letter, have generated a computerized virtual reconstruction of the various versions of the tomb, including this putative first scheme,¹⁸ and there seems to be little room in it for a tomb. Indeed, the consistent association of this drawing with the Sarfatti Tomb should be questioned, especially if it dates from as late as 1934 (see below).¹⁹

All three early projects appear to support the "cenotaph" interpretation.²⁰ (Without definitive evidence that scheme 1 is undeniably the Sarfatti monument, we can proceed to the other two sketches, which are indisputably versions of some sort of monument to Roberto Sarfatti.) Scheme 2 (fig. 15) appears to be the project to which Cannistraro and Sullivan refer. Both schemes 2 and 3 are markedly different from the versions that are undoubtedly the final two schemes, 4 and 5 (fig. 16). But all of the early schemes, 1 through 3, appear unrelated to any location, much less the dramatic site of an alpine hilltop. By comparison, all the early sketches for schemes 4 and 5 show the site clearly. Schemes 2 and 3, like scheme 1, do not appear to accommodate a tomb comfortably, and they are distinctly different in design from any of Terragni's other tomb projects.

Schemes 2 and 3 are but one step up from the scribbles Terragni typically produced at the beginning of most of his projects, and these two versions are sufficiently different from each other, yet detailed enough, that one might expect to find many more drawings of each. None are extant. Nor do these two *bozzetti* resemble the ruled drawings of the final two schemes. Schemes 2 and 3 are not the kind of sketches normally shown to clients, except in situations where an architect also has numerous drawings of greater detail and finish. Scheme 2 shows a sketch plan and elevation, scheme 3 only a rough perspective. Further complicating matters is the fact that there is so little material conserved in the Archivio Giuseppe Terragni concerning the early stages of the commission. By contrast, Terragni saved numerous letters pertaining to the Stecchini Tomb contract, including records of payments.²¹

If Cannistraro and Sullivan are correct, Margherita Sarfatti knew enough about the cost of scheme 2 to reject it. This would imply that at least a preliminary cost estimate had been completed; but on what basis? It is unlikely that an estimate could have been performed on such sketchy drawings, which are not drawn to any scale.

Other factors cloud the chronology of schemes for the Sarfatti Tomb. First, there exists a sketch-perspective of scheme 4 which closely resembles Terragni's Erba monument of a few

¹⁷ Letter from Margherita Sarfatti to Terragni, dated 12 March 1932 (Archivio Giuseppe Terragni). Until the 1990s, scholars considered the three early sketches to have been done for the 1934 project; see Zevi et al. 1968, 78–79. Later, the theory was entertained that they might have been intermediate schemes. See Schumacher 1996.

¹⁸ Galli and Muhlhoff 1999, 35 and 39.

¹⁹ Architect Gabriele Milelli first noticed, as early as 1977,

the resemblance between this sketch and Terragni's drawings for the Palazzo Littorio competition, Solution "B," also from 1934 (conversation with the author). It is indeed possible that the drawing in question is for the Palazzo Littorio and not the Sarfatti Tomb.

²⁰ For this essay I will use Galli and Muhlhoff's numbering of the projects 1 through 5.

²¹ These documents are now located at the Fondazione Giuseppe Terragni.

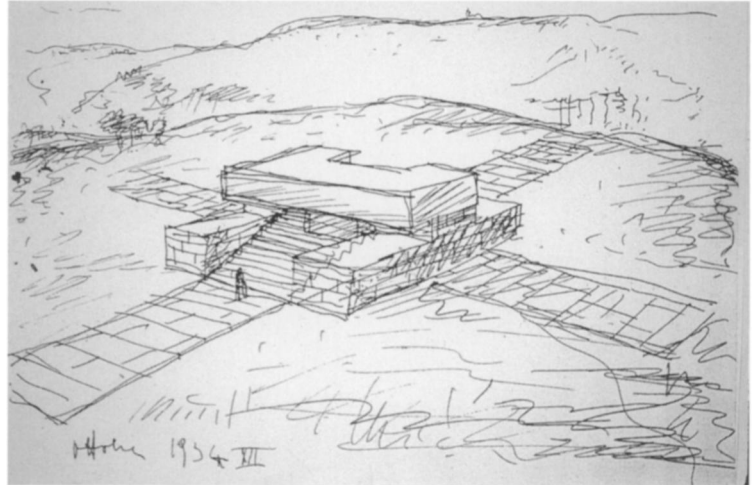
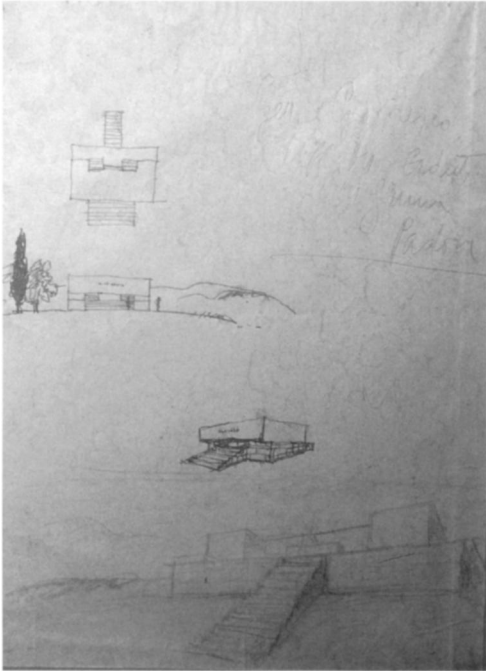


Fig. 18. Giuseppe Terragni, Sarfatti Tomb, scheme 4, early sketch, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

Fig. 17. Giuseppe Terragni, Sarfatti Tomb, scheme 4, preliminary sketch with General Gordesco's name scribbled on it, 1934(?), Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

years before (fig. 17). Like scheme 4 for Sarfatti, Erba was a *scala santa* (a “sacred stair”) which, according to Zuccoli, “was to represent a ‘sacrifice’ for he who would ascend, to honor those who sacrificed their lives.”²² Terragni had scribbled onto this drawing the name and address of General Gordesco, of the Ufficio Centrale per la Cura e le Onoranze delle Salme dei Caduti in Guerra (Central Office for the Care and Honoring of the Remains of the War Dead), in Padua. This is the sort of note one normally finds on an architect’s drawing at the very *beginning* of a project, not at a late stage, further suggesting that it was an early sketch for a tomb on this site.

Second, while scheme 2 contains a monolith, it is relatively small, probably about $8\frac{1}{2}$ ft \times $4\frac{1}{2}$ ft \times $4\frac{1}{2}$ ft (2.59 m \times 1.37 m \times 1.37 m = 4.86 cubic meters), less than one-third the total mass and weight of the monolith in the Sant’Elia Monument.²³ (Were Roberto Sarfatti to be buried in this mass he would have had to be standing.) The monolithic block appears to be about the same dimension in plan as the block of the built version, scheme 5, albeit considerably taller, but it is still miniature when compared to the 5 m \times 7 m \times 1.5 m U-shaped monolith of scheme 4, which would have displaced 38 cubic meters, more than double the fifty tons of the Sant’Elia Monument monolith (fig. 18).

None of the monolithic blocks is so large as to pose a problem in cutting or delivery, except the one in scheme 4. (Scheme 3 dispenses with the monolith entirely, and shows coursed stones.) Only scheme 4, therefore, would have created a stir. It is eminently possible, then, that schemes 2 and 3 were not simply the first iterations of a project “tradita in corso d’opera” (“betrayed in the course of design”),²⁴ as has been the common wisdom concerning this project, but rather sketches for a very different, and earlier, Cenotaph to Roberto Sarfatti.

²² Zuccoli 1981, 23 (author’s translation).

2, assumed to be about 6–7 inches high.

²³ The drawing has no visual or mathematical scale. My estimate is based on the size of the steps shown in scheme

²⁴ Marcianò 1987, 36.

Fig. 19 (near right). Giuseppe Terragni, Sarfatti Tomb, axonometric and elevations (redrawn by Joanne Kuo in 1990).

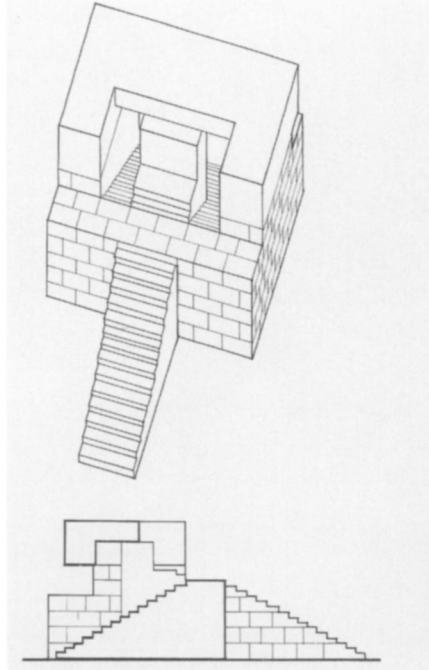
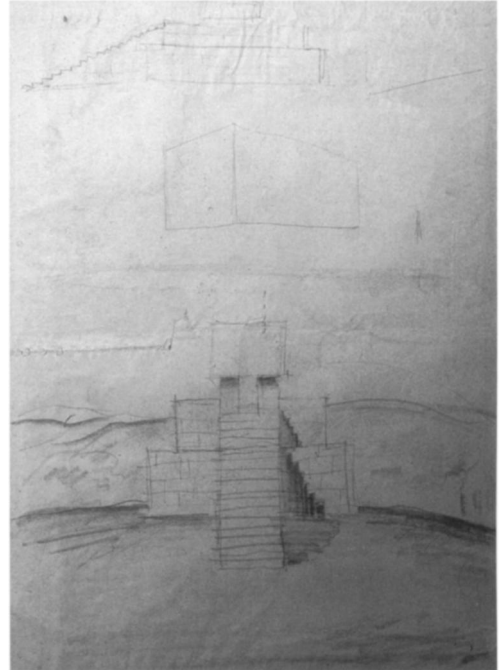


Fig. 20 (far right). Giuseppe Terragni, Sarfatti Tomb, elevation, stage between schemes 4 and 5, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).



Terragni's almost maniacal pursuit of the monolith is revealed in the correspondence for the definitive project, that is, schemes 4 and 5. The transition from scheme 4 to scheme 5 is important to trace. Scheme 4 was elaborately drawn and measured (fig. 19). Terragni also sketched a number of intermediate versions between schemes 4 and 5 (fig. 20). One of these sketches shows the larger project reduced to two plinths, with the monolithic block reduced even proportionally further. Drawing #35/014/B4/S/G is a sheet of sketches, some of which resemble the final project (fig. 21). The lower set shows what looks like the final project (fig. 22), but without its T-shaped wings.²⁵

The Ufficio Centrale per la Cura e le Onoranze delle Salme dei Caduti in Guerra was to provide 3,000 lire toward the construction. Referring to an early cost estimate, Mario Brindisi of the Ufficio wrote on 6 December 1934 that the price of 19,257 lire was "already pretty far above the 3,000 lire that the commissioner has placed at our disposal, and perhaps also greater than that which the Noble Lady Sarfatti has intended to extend to augment the 3,000 lire above."²⁶

The prohibitive price of scheme 4 was mainly the result of Terragni's insistence on using a single solid block of stone for the cap. One of the earliest letters on this issue is from Ditta Giosellino e Giuseppe Peverelli and gives an estimate of the cost of the block of granite alone at either 70,000 lire cut and transported in one piece, and a mere 38,000 lire in three pieces (the block was U-shaped, and therefore easily divisible into three sections).²⁷

²⁵ It should be noted here that because Roberto Sarfatti was Jewish, Terragni had to refrain from any Christian symbolic forms, such as a cruciform ground plan for the tomb.

concorso che la Nobile Donna Sarfatti ha manifestato intenzione di versare a integrazione dell' 3.000- di cui sopra" (letter to Terragni, 6 December 1934/XIII, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni).

²⁶ ". . . già ben lontano dalle lire 3.000- che il Sig. Commissario ha messo a disposizione e, forse, anche a quella [sic] che si sarebbe potuto raggiungere con il

²⁷ Letter to Terragni, 17 November 1934, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni. In 1935 the lira was worth about five dollars.

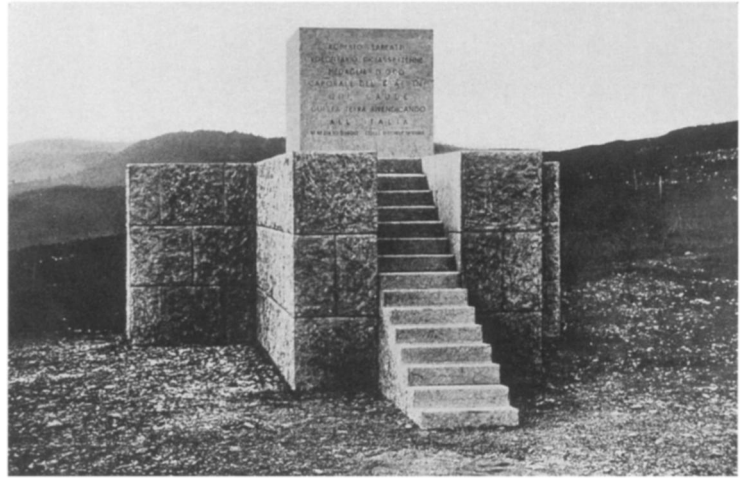
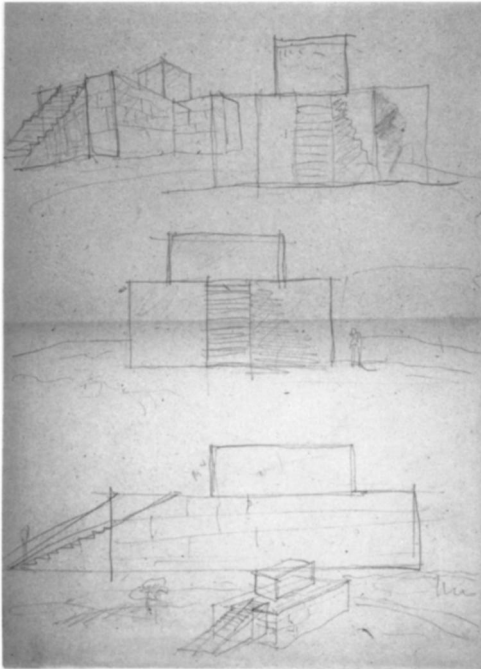


Fig. 22. Giuseppe Terragni, Sarfatti Tomb, scheme 5; photo of built tomb in the late 1930s, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

Fig. 21. Giuseppe Terragni, Sarfatti Tomb, various sketches for scheme 5, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

Margherita Sarfatti wrote to Terragni late in 1934: "I would prefer, however, in agreement with Marcello Piacentini, and he is also very satisfied with your beautiful project, the smaller size, not for its price, but also because, like Marcello, I like it better."²⁸

She then continued to allude to the problems that she and Terragni were encountering concerning the quarrying and transportation of the blocks of stone for the project. Only about three months had elapsed between the earliest possible date of the 1934 commission and this letter. Judging from the words, "*misura più piccola*" ("smaller size"), and not something like, "*progetto più piccolo*" ("smaller project"), it seems that Signora Sarfatti was referring to schemes 4 and 5. But it appears as if Terragni was still pushing her, and his potential suppliers, to construct the larger scheme 4.

Margherita Sarfatti wrote again to Terragni, perhaps in late 1934 or early 1935 judging from its content (the letter lacks a date). In it she complained of her difficulty in contacting Terragni, and reaffirmed her congratulations for the Palazzo Littorio competition victory (Terragni and his team were among a group of first-stage winners). She then repeated her preference for the "smaller project," which she specified as the one with the 2.40 m × 2.40 m façade, indubitably scheme 5.²⁹ Signora Sarfatti was also quite clear that she wanted the volume coursed in three vertical blocks (the larger scheme displays five stone courses).

The deluge of Terragni's sketches for scheme 4 may mean that he was valiantly trying to reduce the cost, but he remained insistent on the idea of the monolithic block. This was obviously important for iconographic reasons, as it was for other projects. Trying another

²⁸ "Preferirei però, d'accordo anche con Marcello Piacentini che lui pure é soddisfattissimo del suo bel progetto, la misura più piccola, non per il prezzo, ma perchè anche a Marcello come a me piace di più" (Sarfatti, 21 December 1934, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni). For Signora Sarfatti to have turned to

Piacentini must have irked Terragni no end, as he detested Marcello Piacentini, whom he viewed as an opportunistic *trasformista*.

²⁹ Letter from Margherita Sarfatti to Terragni, undated, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni.

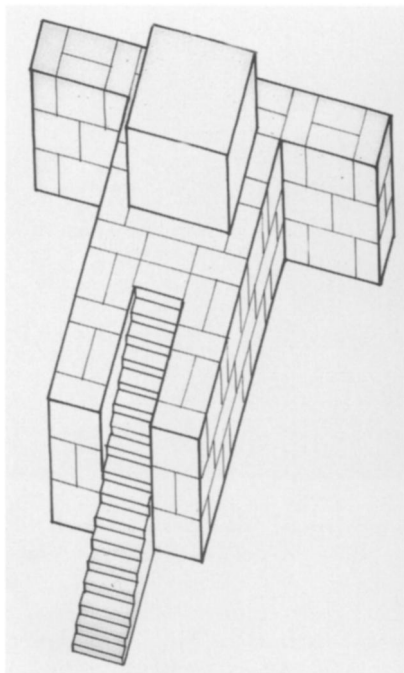


Fig. 23. Giuseppe Terragni, *Sarfatti Tomb*, axonometric view (redrawn by Joanne Kuo in 1990).

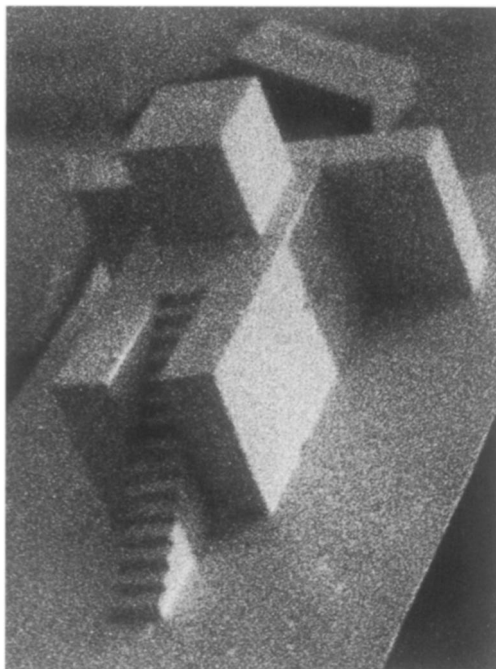


Fig. 24. Giuseppe Terragni, *Sarfatti Tomb*, massing model, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

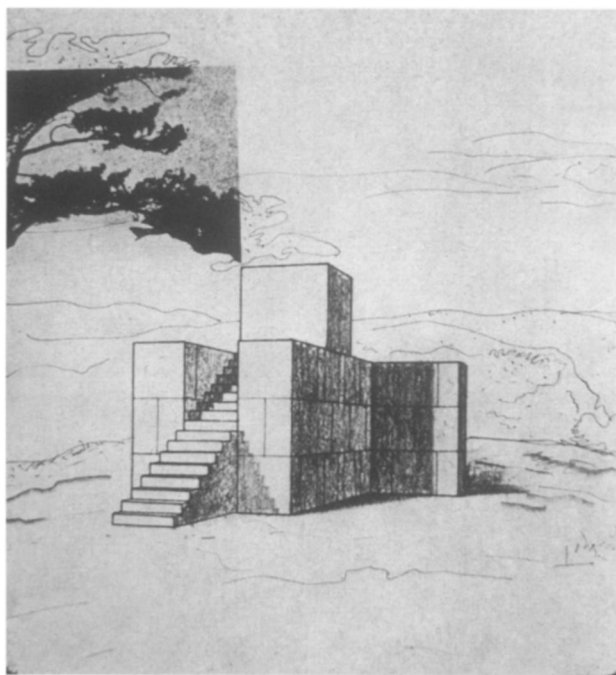


Fig. 25. Giuseppe Terragni, *Sarfatti Tomb*, scheme 5, perspective drawing, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).



Fig. 26. Giuseppe Terragni, *Sarfatti Tomb*, photo taken in 1998 (photo author).

contractor, Terragni wrote to the Impresa di Costruzione Ferlini & Roncari in Verona, on 27 May 1935 that, "The top block must be Monolithic and of hard stone, like the steps" (his capitalization).³⁰ Engineer Roncari had written to Margherita Sarfatti as early as 12 January 1935 telling her the estimate for the monument would now be 18,000 lire. The size and price were dropping, but slowly.

In a letter to Terragni from yet another stone contractor, Fratelli Stella, on 5 June 1935, the block is described as being too big to transport.³¹ And written on the same day, a letter arrived at the Terragni studio from Soc. An. Marmi Colorati, in Luisano; they would cut the block into two pieces and charge only 10,500 lire for the monolith alone.³²

Despite her dissimulations, Margherita Sarfatti rejected scheme 4 on the basis of cost, and Terragni finally decided to proceed with the smaller project 5 in July 1935, fully six months after Signora Sarfatti had expressed her preference for the smaller version. On 2 July, Marmi Colorati, confirming a price of 10,500 lire, settled the bid "including the foundations and excluding only the acquisition of the land."³³ Terragni caved in, but his project did not suffer. It is suitably monumental despite its reduced size (fig. 23), and in its compact form is perhaps more moving than his preferred scheme 4 (fig. 24). Zuccoli later described the final project as "less brilliant but nevertheless very meaningful."³⁴

The built tomb shows heavily rusticated stones for the base, hard smooth stones for the stairs, and smooth stone for the cap. While a reference to buildings like Bramante's Casa Caprini is remote, the idea of rusticated stones rising from the earth to be transformed into perfect, monolithic, form is unmistakable. Terragni's perspective (fig. 25; AGT. 35/4/D) of the built version, drawn in Corbusian style, depicts the monument, a tree, and the hills behind. The drawing shows seventeen steps to the top, equal to Roberto's seventeen years. The tomb as built has fifteen steps (fig. 26).

An important, albeit parenthetical, canard still plagues the Sarfatti Tomb chronology. This involves the date of the completion and dedication of the monument. The documents in the Fondazione Terragni show that the monument was finished and paid for by the autumn of 1935. A letter, dated 25 September 1935, from Marmi Colorati to Terragni states: "The construction of the memorial stone for Gold Medalist Sarfatti [*sic*] was finished a week ago. Please pay me the courtesy of telling me soon when you will arrive."³⁵

Terragni planned to visit the monument with Margherita Sarfatti in October. He sent a telegram to Matteo Rossi (assistant of the works), 10 October 1935: "I will arrive with Donna Sarfatti at the works Sunday morning, and we'll see you there."³⁶

But according to Cannistraro and Sullivan, Roberto's interment and the dedication did not occur until three years later, in the late summer of 1938. They assert that "Margherita

³⁰ "Il blocco superior deve esser Monolitico e in pietra dura come i gradini" (letter from Terragni to Ferlini & Roncar, 27 May 1935, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni).

³¹ Letter from Fratelli Stella, 5 June 1935, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni.

³² Letter from Marmi Colorati, 5 June 1935, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni.

³³ "... compresse le opere di fondazione ed escluso soltanto l'acquisto del terreno" (letter from Marmi Colorati, 2 July 1935, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni).

³⁴ Zuccoli 1981, 37.

³⁵ "Il Cippo in Memoria della Medaglia d'Oro Sarfatti [*sic*] è terminato la sua costruzione ancora della settimana scorsa. . . . Ci farà la cortesia di avvisarci in tempo quando sarà il Suo arrivo" (Archivio Giuseppe Terragni).

³⁶ "Prego avvertire impresa trovarsi con Lei Asiago domenica mattina. Sarò costi con Donna Sarfatti" (carbon copy of letter from Terragni to Matteo Rossi, 10 October 1935, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni).



Fig. 27. Sarfatti Tomb, ceramicized portrait of Roberto Sarfatti (photo author).



Fig. 28. Giuseppe Terragni, Sarfatti Tomb, detail of block and inscription (photo author).

had been following the progress of construction on Roberto's tomb with mounting anxiety, even making an inquiry about it from Istanbul in May. Work was finally completed in August, and Roberto's casket was prepared for transfer to Terragni's monument."³⁷ If the project was finished by the end of 1935, why did it take three years to transfer Roberto's remains and hold the ceremony? This may be explained by the insistence of King Vittorio Emanuele III on attending the ceremony. Perhaps the king's busy schedule delayed the ceremony. Or perhaps the delay was caused by the increasing influence of anti-Semitism in Italy, culminating in the "Racial Laws" of 1938, making it difficult for a king of Italy to dedicate a tomb to a Jew. The dedication, described by Cannistraro and Sullivan, was sometime after August 1938: "Awaiting the Sarfatti family on the mountain slope above Stoccareddo were the King, his military aides, local army and civil authorities, and an honor guard formed by a company of *Alpini* from Roberto's old regiment. . . . The entombment was simple and moving."³⁸ Atop the windswept Col d'Echele, facing the Alps and the enemy, stands the recently restored Tomba Sarfatti. The elliptical ceramicized engraving of Roberto Sarfatti that now adorns the stone (fig. 27) was placed there in the 1990s by the Association of the Alpine Soldiers. The "monolithic" block is made of *two* pieces of stone (fig. 28).

7. The Mambretti Tomb, Fino Mornasco, 1936–1938; the Danteum, Rome, 1938

Between 1936 and 1938 Terragni received commissions for two important commemorative buildings: the Danteum in Rome³⁹ and the Mambretti Tomb. Neither was built. The Mambretti Tomb was designed for the cemetery in the small town of Fino Mornasco, near Lago Maggiore.

³⁷ Cannistraro and Sullivan 1993, 513.

³⁹ See Schumacher 1993.

³⁸ Cannistraro and Sullivan 1993, 458.

Terragni obviously labored over this project, as there are innumerable scribbles and sketches.⁴⁰ One of two definitive schemes was drawn in great detail; the drawings are essentially working drawings, lacking only dimensions.

Like other Terragni tombs, the date of this project has been a problem for scholars. B. Zevi and Pedio placed it in 1929–1930,⁴¹ although other scholars working during the period that immediately predated the systematic organization of the Archivio Giuseppe Terragni in the late 1980s tend to place the tomb in the late 1930s. Some of the rudimentary sketches are datable from early 1938, placing the design in the same time frame as the Danteum project, which shares compositional motifs with both iterations of the Mambretti Tomb.

Terragni began with a modern scheme for the Mambretti Tomb; little hint of the classical vocabulary remains. We are, after all, in the late 1930s, Terragni's and Modernism's mature period. The earliest sketches—there are literally scores of sketches for this project—show the abstract geometries of modern composition as well as Terragni's interest in the motif of the displaced rectangle.

Both fully elaborated versions of this tomb were taken to an advanced level of completion and detail. They may be classified for our purposes here as the “square plan” scheme, which I will call project 1, and the “oblong plan” scheme, or project 2, after A. Muntoni.⁴² In project 2 (figs. 29, 30) the wall of coursed stones is totally dominant, whereas in project 1 (fig. 31) the wall breaks down into vertical shafts that are decidedly pillarlike.

Initial sketches and scribbles are typical of Terragni's working method. He hit upon a geometric idea, in this case the decomposition of the aedicule into heavy planes, a system prefigured by the Cathedral project of 1932. Terragni churned out countless sketches of overlapping planes, grids, and rectangular figures in order to arrive at a solution. Some of these sketches show the basic elements of the architecture. Sketch #0302 (fig. 32) includes a plan, an axonometric, an elevation, and a perspective of a stair wrapping around a volume. The volume can be read either as a solid or as composed of two planes at right angles.

In scheme 1 a pair of piers holds up a planar stone monolith, forming the front façade (fig. 33). We were to enter between the piers, latter-day versions of Jachim and Boaz, the columns that “guarded” Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. We enter under the monolith, and into Terragni's *Tempietto*. The piers are rectangular, not cylindrical, and provide a narrow slot like a narthex that leads us into the chapel. In the final version of scheme 1, illustrated in drawings that are very close to construction documents, the monolith is a perfect square, the top of a vertically disposed golden section rectangle (fig. 34).

The similarity between the Mambretti Tomb and the early versions of Pirovano, despite almost a decade between them, gives credence to the idea that the square scheme is the first project for Mambretti.⁴³ Also, the compositional resemblance between the oblong Mambretti Tomb scheme 2 and the Danteum project of 1938 places these two projects together chronologically. This final Mambretti Tomb dispenses with the monolith in favor of coursed stones.

The 1938 project for a Dante museum, or “Danteum,” in Rome contains Terragni's last monolith. A freestanding wall in front of the project faces the Roman Republican Forum

⁴⁰ Terragni had plenty of time for these projects at that juncture in his career. He had very little commissioned work at that time. The Asilo Sant'Elia and the Villas, as well as the apartment houses in Milan, were finished. The only major commission he would receive after 1938 would be the Casa Giuliani-Frigerio, 1939–1941.

⁴¹ See Zevi et al. 1968, 32.

⁴² See Muntoni 1996b.

⁴³ Muntoni 1996b.

Fig. 29. Giuseppe Terragni, Mambretti Tomb, Fino Mornasco, 1936–1938, project 2, perspective, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

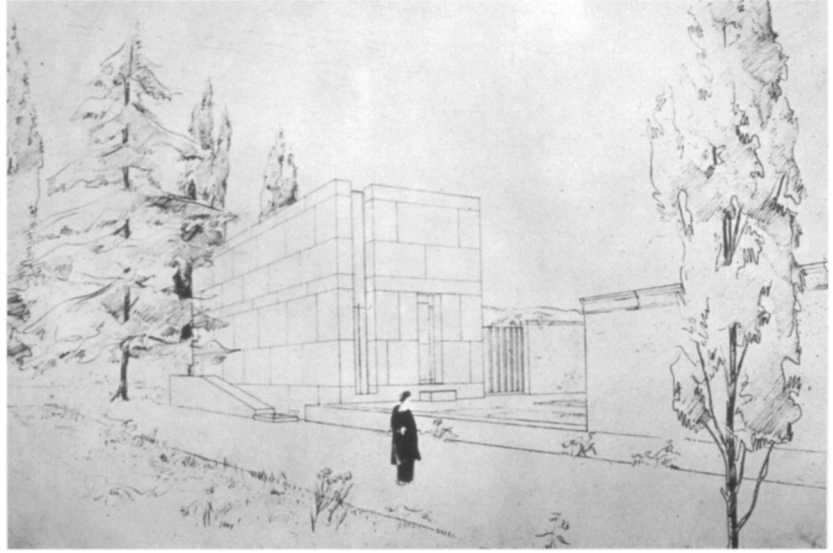
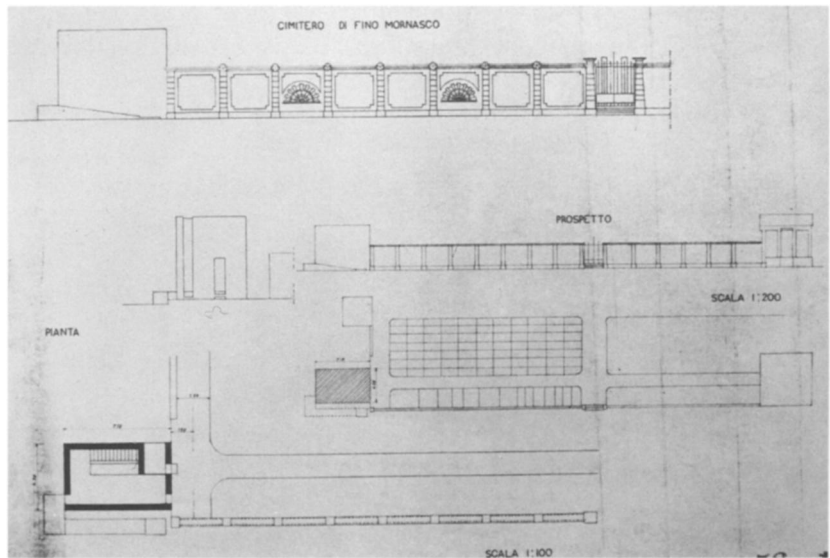


Fig. 30. Giuseppe Terragni, Mambretti Tomb, sheet of drawings with plan, elevations of Mambretti Tomb, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).



across Via dell'Impero (fig. 35). The renowned artist Mario Sironi made sketches for bas-reliefs to be carved into the marble wall. The reliefs depicted those cantos of Dante's *Divine Comedy* that prophesied the resurrection of the Roman Empire.⁴⁴

In his "Relazione sul Danteum," written in 1938, Terragni wrote, "The *monolithic* block at the head of the sequence, on the Piazza Venezia side, is the Greyhound" (*italics added*).⁴⁵ The Greyhound was Dante's metaphor for the man he hoped would liberate all Italy from the shackles of the papacy and individual local tyrants, and restore the Roman Empire. This was Henry of Luxembourg. For Terragni, the Greyhound was Mussolini.

⁴⁴ Mussolini's government had declared the existence of the new Roman Empire in 1936, when Abyssinia had fallen to the Fascists.

⁴⁵ G. Terragni, "Relazione sul Danteum," in Schumacher 1993, 140.

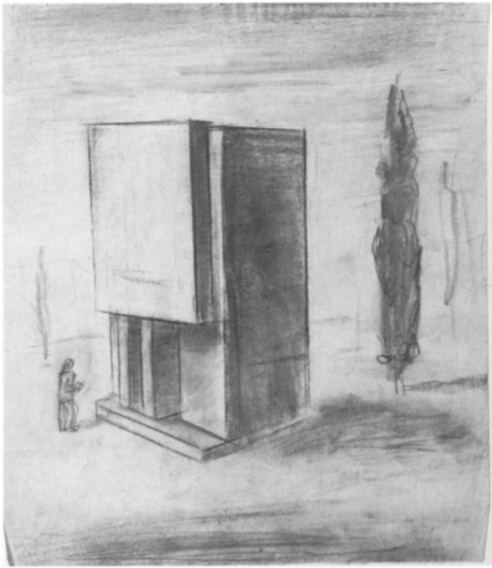


Fig. 31. Giuseppe Terragni, Mambretti Tomb, scheme 1, perspective sketch, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

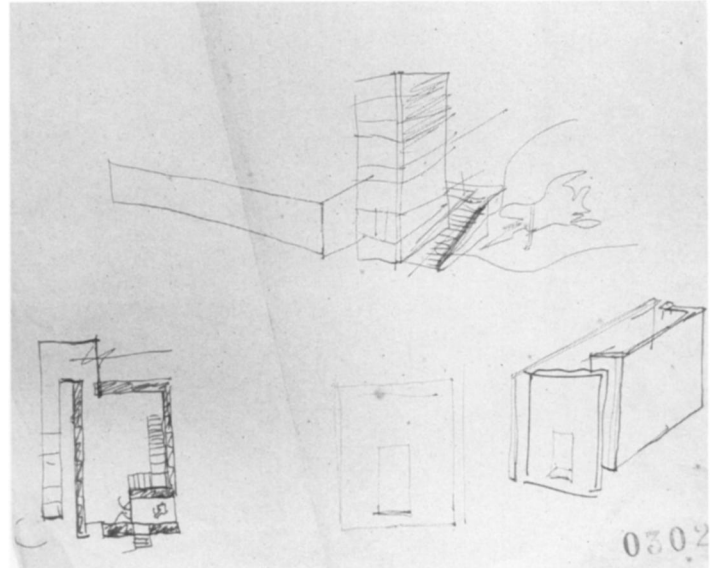


Fig. 32. Giuseppe Terragni, Mambretti Tomb, sheet of sketches showing stair, tower, and mass, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

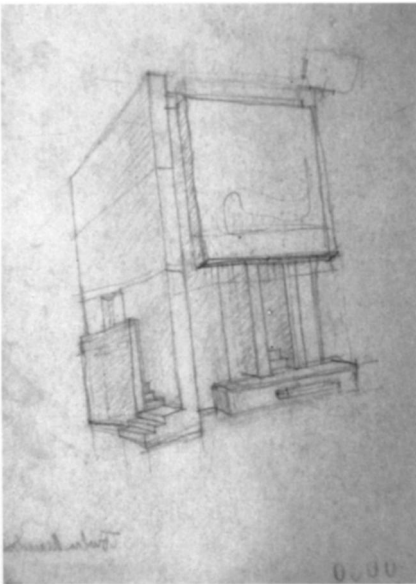


Fig. 33. Giuseppe Terragni, Mambretti Tomb, scheme 1, perspective sketch in conte chalk, Archivio Giuseppe Terragni (photo Archivio).

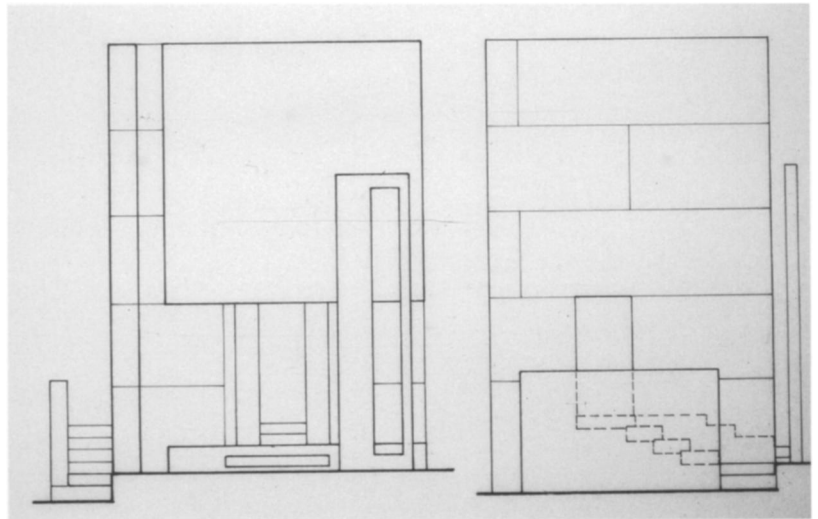


Fig. 34. Giuseppe Terragni, Mambretti Tomb, scheme 1, front and rear elevations (redrawn by Joanne Kuo in 1990).

Fig. 35. Giuseppe Terragni and Pietro Lingeri, *Danteum* project, Rome, 1938, elevation, monolith on left (photo author).

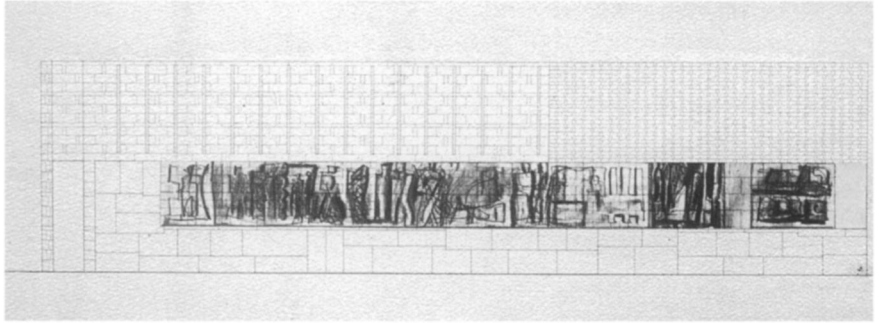
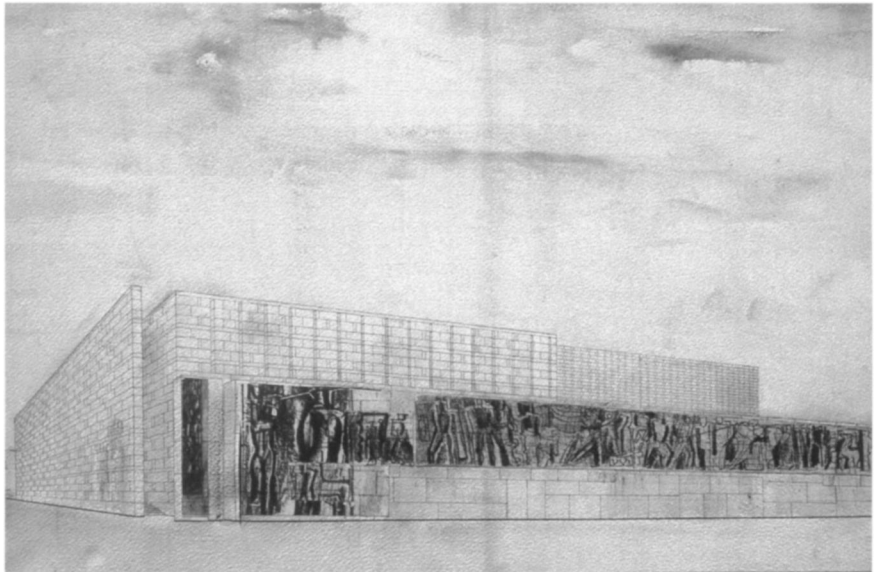


Fig. 36. Giuseppe Terragni and Pietro Lingeri, *Danteum*, front perspective view (photo author).



Like the later version of the Mambretti Tomb, some drawings (fig. 36) and the model of this project show coursed stones for the “Greyhound” block, although the elevations illustrate it as a monolith.

8. Conclusion

The fact that Mussolini, the anticlerical Fascist, could be portrayed by Terragni as a monolithic block in the *Danteum*, like Roberto Sarfatti the Jewish war hero, confirms the lunacy and contradictions of the *Epoca*. It also attests to the astonishing influence that Fascism, in the persona of Mussolini, exercised on the Italian intelligentsia. Terragni the devout Catholic and card-carrying Fascist is an incongruity that postwar generations have had difficulty grasping. He was also a modernist architect who never lost the connection to the classicism and conservatism of his education.

All these influences meet in Terragni’s *oeuvres*, and they are particularly evident in his pursuit of the monolithic block. The monolith is the abstraction of modernism, a symbol of purity

and of the divine, and a bridge to the Lombard craftsmen of the Middle Ages. It also reifies Terragni's belief in the rectitude and legitimacy of Fascism. The monolith represents for Terragni a polysemous interpretation of commemoration through the act of building. Terragni the Mediterranean classicist and Terragni the Lombard *maestro* meet in the design of modern tombs and monuments, and the result is an architecture of extraordinary complexity.

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