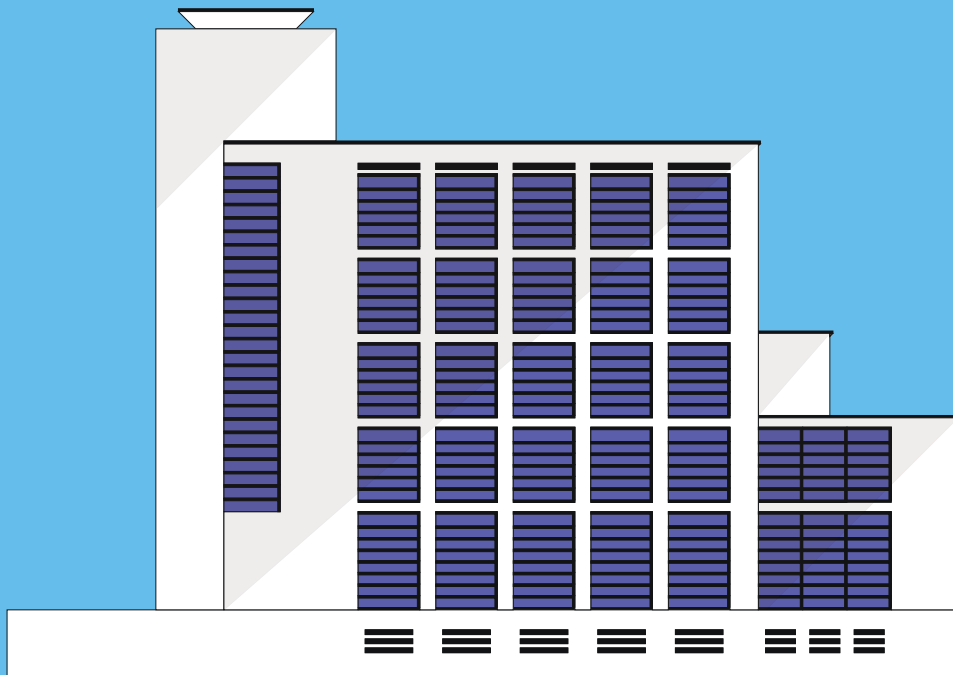


LUIGI MORETTI'S
GIL HOUSE
IN TRASTEVERE

WE E G I L
REGIONE LAZIO LAZIO crea



Dating back to 1933 and commissioned by the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) to the then 26-year-old architect Luigi Moretti as the Casa del Balilla, the house of the Gioventù Italiana del Littorio (GIL) stands out as an example of the project for the renewal of Rome that Mussolini had in mind: the ancient city had to open up to modernity; the glories of the old Roman Empire could no longer be considered only past glories, but had to be projected into the present. Even the Trastevere district had to open up to this idea and embrace one of the cornerstones of fascist propaganda: that is, the physical and moral formation of the 'New Man', the race that was to excel over the others.



Inaugurated on 5 November 1937, the building's function was to impart the first political teachings of Fascism and to provide assistance to the children and adolescents of the Trastevere district; it therefore housed a variety of services: spaces for physical training and education, a school patronage, refectory, medical clinics, and management offices. The chosen area was the long narrow block between Porta Portese, the Mura Gianicolensi and Viale Trastevere.



The building is an important example of rationalist architecture: Moretti alternated the abstract lines typical of this style with softer lines, especially in the interiors, where the play of natural light from skylights and large windows prevails. The dialogue between exterior and interior space is very well maintained.



The building complex consists of three bodies; a quadrangular one, leaning against the pre-existing building in Viale Trastevere, housing the indoor swimming pool, the refectory, the classrooms and the cinema-theatre with a courtyard in the centre; the central body, perpendicular to the other parts, with the façade on Via Ascianghi, reserved for the gyms; the representative body, with the entrance tower, the hall of honour, the exhibition area, the library and the offices. The three parts, although functionally separate, were originally communicating and formed an inseparable architectural unit.

THE FACADE OF THE TOWER

NECESSARIO VINCERE PIÙ NECESSARIO COMBATTERE (necessary is to win plus necessary is to combat) is the inscription on the façade of the tower (almost 30 metres high) that exalted physical exertion and encouraged young men to fight for their country.

On the balcony of the façade, three large bronze eagles forming the 'M' of Mussolini, by Oddo Aliverti, welcome the visitor.

NECESSARIO VINCERE
/ NECESSARIO COMBATTE



THE HALL OF HONOUR, EXHIBITION HALL AND LIBRARY

Once through the entrance, there is the great hall of honour characterised by four large marble pillars and a small staircase delimiting the exhibition area open towards Via Induno. The back wall of the exhibition hall was decorated with a mural painting by Mario Mafai from 1937, of which unfortunately only traces remain today: the work depicted the triumphal procession of a Roman emperor returning from a war victory. The painting was also visible from outside through the large windows that illuminate the hall.





At the end of the hall, a staircase led to the mezzanine where the council chamber was located. From here one could go out onto the balcony that overlooked the gymnastics hall.

A large circular skylight illuminates the room with natural light and shows off the stucco bas-reliefs of Roman emperors' heads by sculptor Mario Barbieri.



On the side of the council chamber facing the hall of honour was a bronze bust of Mussolini by Massimo Spadini.

The bust was later lost and in its place, since 2005, a fibreglass sculpture by artist Marcello Mondazzi ('Forma quasi Sferica') has been installed.

In front of the council chamber, on the wall that bordered the fencing gymnasium is a large stucco map of Africa with an indication of the Italian colonies. At the top of the map is the inscription NOI TIREREMO DIRITTO (WE WILL RIGHT), i.e. the sentence that Mussolini pronounced on 8 September 1935 in response to the criticism of the League of Nations against Italy's military policy in Ethiopia. A little further down we find the inscription THE IX MAY XIV BENITO MUSSOLINI FOUNDS THE EMPIRE and, at the height of the Horn of Africa, a large 'M' referring to the dictator. On the sides of the map are the places and dates of battles won by the Italians between 1935 and 1936. Needless to emphasise the propaganda function of this work. The lower part of the map reads XVIII NOVEMBER A XIV SANCTIONS in reference to the economic sanctions imposed by the League of Nations following the invasion of Ethiopia.



Sistema Archivistico Nazionale

We find another example of a fascist motto on the large stucco slab placed inside, above the entrance door: a battle scene, in allegorical form, surmounted by the writing WE ARE THE ANTICIPATORS OF A FUTURE.

On the first floor there is the library and the terrace which also served as an outdoor reading space.

Then follows the arengario room, which was the office of the district commander of the Gil. From here the commander could go out onto the balcony of the eagles to speak to the crowd gathered in the entrance square.

THE GYMS, THE SWIMMING POOL AND THE HELICAL STAIRCASE

Originally, there were two gyms on the ground floor: the fencing and boxing gym, which has a curved headboard and is located under the outdoor gyms, and the large gymnastics gym illuminated by skylights. The gyms, located on different levels, communicated with each other via a staircase.



The swimming pool was instead lit by large windows that overlooked the internal courtyard and had walls decorated with figures of swimmers created by Orfeo Tamburi; unfortunately, these images have also been lost.

In this part of the building, on the side of via Ascianghi, we find a spectacular helical staircase whose peculiarity is that it has decreasing rises to make the climb less tiring.



THE CINEMA-THEATRE

The cinema-theatre, overlooking Via Induno, had a 650-seat hall lit by skylights and with walls decorated with graffiti by Achille Capizzano. In the post-war period, the hall continued to be used as a cinema and, from 1952, was sold to private owners. Badly damaged by fire, it has recently been completely renovated.





POST-WAR PERIOD AND SUBSEQUENT RESTORATION

The Casa del Balilla only fulfilled its function for a short period due to the onset of the war. In 1943, with the dissolution of the fascist party and all its organisations, the Gioventù italiana del littorio was first placed under commission and then transformed into the Gioventù italiana organisation, which was formally suppressed in 1975. The building occupied by German and then American troops was granted by the Commissariat for Italian Youth to Don Orione's Little Work of Divine Providence, which used the premises to give shelter to abandoned children and orphans. The Opera officially took possession in May 1952 on the basis of an agreement that established a twenty-nine year use.

During this phase, various works were carried out: first of all the plugging of the overlapping gyms. Outside, Via Ascianghi was taken away from public use: first in 1943, with a wall erected along Viale Trastevere; then from 1952 with another wall (from the edge of the tower to the walls of Urban VIII), which enclosed an area designated as a sports field. Although a municipal ordinance of 1967 ordered the demolition of the two walls, they still remain standing.



In 1981, when the agreement expired, the Municipality of Rome and the Region of Lazio, the owners who had taken over from the Italian Youth, warned the Opera Don Orione to hand over the building, which had not housed any boys since 1969.

In 1983, the building was divided into two parts: the part with the entrance from Largo Ascianghi passed to the Lazio Region, which used it as a vocational school managed by ENFAP, while the part with

the entrance from former Via Ascianghi went to the Municipality of Rome, which used it for sports activities. The theatre, which was used as a cinema in the post-war period, and was devastated by a fire and partly transformed, remained in private ownership and was heavily tampered with in 1997.

Between 2005 and 2007, the building underwent a major restoration aimed at returning it as much as possible to its original appearance: for example, superfetations both inside and outside were demolished, and an attempt was made to partially restore Mafai's mural painting as far as possible. The exterior walls were restored to their original white colour, from the dark red that had been given in the 1960s.



The WeGil today

From 2017 to 2024, the Lazio Region continued the restoration of the building.

The restoration took place in several phases: the first (2017-2018) allowed the partial opening of the space (gymnasium ground floor, now auditorium, corridor of honour, first floor with terrace) for exhibitions, events and cultural activities; the second, completed in 2021, completed the recovery of the body overlooking Via Induno, expanding the available functions to allow the Gian Maria Volonté School of Cinematographic Art, food and wine training and the Lazio Region's ACL cybersecurity academy to be housed inside.

In 2021, in order to restore the open-air gyms to their original layout, renovation work was begun that led to their current appearance by removing the infill and enclosing the spaces with large windows

The building is now called Wegil and is a prestigious cultural hub managed by Lazio Crea on behalf of the Lazio Region.



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