

## **The Foundation Cities during Fascism in Italy: The Radial Plan of Littoria**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study focuses its attention on the plan for the founding of the city of Littoria and subsequent expansion plans, all drawn by the same designer, Oriolo Frezzotti. Designed during the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes, undertaken by the fascist regime, the town plan of Littoria was of great importance in the urbanistic debate of the '30s, presenting aspects of considerable interest both for the basis radial scheme, both for the relationship they establish with territory.

The paper analyzes in particular:

- the reasons behind the choice of a radial system, by searching in the will to include, in the existing urban design, the regional matrix paths;
- the relationship between urban planning and the infrastructure network created for the reclamation of swampland, with particular attention to the system of surrounding rural villages;
- the formal differences between the urban axes, demonstrating the desire by Frezzotti to differentiate the paths derived from the territory with respect to the paths introduced ex novo;
- the method of hierarchization between axial paths and annular ones, with particular reference to road section and to the arrangement of the main buildings;
- the role and the provision of open spaces, that introduce secondary axiality within the urban design;
- the outcome of the chosen founding plan on the shape of the urban space;
- the hierarchy introduced between the main squares, participants in a representation of political, administrative / educational and religious power;
- the formal role played by the different building types in the conformation of the urban structure;
- the changes introduced to the original plan by the successive expansion projects.

**KEYWORDS:** City of foundation, fascist new towns, Littoria, Oriolo Frezzotti, radial plan, forma urbis.

### **1 THE RECLAMATION OF THE PONTINE MARSHES: THE TERRITORIAL MODEL**

The reclamation of the Pontine marshes, with the foundation of the new city, was a work of great complexity, driven by political, economic and social issues. Starting at the end of the '20s, this was part of the policy of “disurbanesimo” (dis-urbanisation) initiated by the fascist regime: the goal was to redistribute the population avoiding the concentration in large urban centers. At the same time, the regime was aimed at re-introduce in the working world the large number of unemployed created by the economic crisis after the First World War. The reclamation, with the consequent land reform, was an opportunity in this sense, even in the direction of an economy mainly oriented to agricultural production. A further source of employment was made for the activity of construction industry, connected to the foundation of

the new city. Finally, the reclamation would have allowed the improvement of the sanitary conditions of the area, eliminating the risk of malaria. To these reasons, it would be added those related to the return in terms of propaganda and demonstration of activism and major technical and organizational capacity offered by the fascist regime.

In the specific case of Littoria, all of these instances were concretized in a territorial model, useful first to the technical implementation of the reclamation, later to the urbanization and land management. The settlement patterns provided for a low-density model, with a distribution of the settlers in the city of Littoria and in a system of rural villages. The first was the administrative center with the facilities, the latter were related to agricultural use of the land. The road and infrastructural system, which supported the system of canals of land reclamation, was the network of a radial system, where Littoria was in a central position and villages were located in the nodal intersections. But the plan of Littoria cannot be considered, on the other hand, only a simplistic translation of the instances of reclamation adopted by the regime. It is rooted strongly in the pre-existing surrounding environment, strengthening and extending a system of triangulations which found in the radiocentric morphology of Littoria the driving force of the whole territory. These existing elements are taken as points to locate both the rural villages that the city itself. Littoria takes the place of Quadrato, a small urban center already exists. The rural villages will arise at the other crossroads of reclamation, joining together the intricate network of ancient farmhouses, towers, canals, with new roads, canals, farms, churches, schools.

In the intentions of the authors of the founding plan, the city had to accommodate all the institutions necessary for the conduct of civil life, together with religious ones, to residences and facilities for leisure; all this, however, suited to the population of an open city, as had to be Littoria. In this urban center, the amount of residences are however only commensurate with the stable population of the city, that is to say the population that would run this driving center of the entire territory, with its residential system distributed over a wide area. This aspect justifies the imbalance, even compared to all other cities of the foundation, among the amount of public and residential building, which corresponds to a substantial and harmonious balance between the political and administrative potential center and the extension of the highly decentralized urban fabric which leans on.

## **2 THE FORMA URBIS OF LITTORIA**

The location where the city of Littoria was built (from 1932) was determined by the barycentric role that the city would have done in this territorial model. The choice fell on Quadrato, a service center for the reclamation, placed at an intersection of three streets: a first path, oriented north-south, joined the Via Appia with Lake Fogliano; a second, north-east, leading to the railway station and the last, northwest-southeast, was oriented in the Cisterna (and Rome) – Terracina direction. They were three routes of great importance, both in the overall context of the pontine territory, both in the logistics of the reclamation: the Via Appia was the main way of communication in the area, and it was therefore necessary that the most important city had a direct link with it. The city of Cisterna was the seat, until that time, of the Consorzio di Bonifica (Consortium of Reclamation), which is the center of coordination for the operations of land reclamation. Crucial was also the direct connection to the railway station, indispensable means of transport for all the machinery needed for the reclamation itself.

In its final form (the result of more subsequent processing, all designed by architect Oriolo Frezzotti), the plan of Littoria presents a radial pattern, with a large central square located on the site of Quadrato, right at the intersection of the three territorial paths. This square is rectangular in shape, with the longest dimension in the east-west direction, placed off-center with respect to the same axes; the first one (Corso Vittorio Emanuele III) divides the square into two parts, the greater to the west, and is the main road artery. The remaining, inclined asymmetrically with respect to the first, cut the square near the corners. In his urban design, Frezzotti embraced the three territorial patterns, transforming in the five radial axes that branch off from the main square.

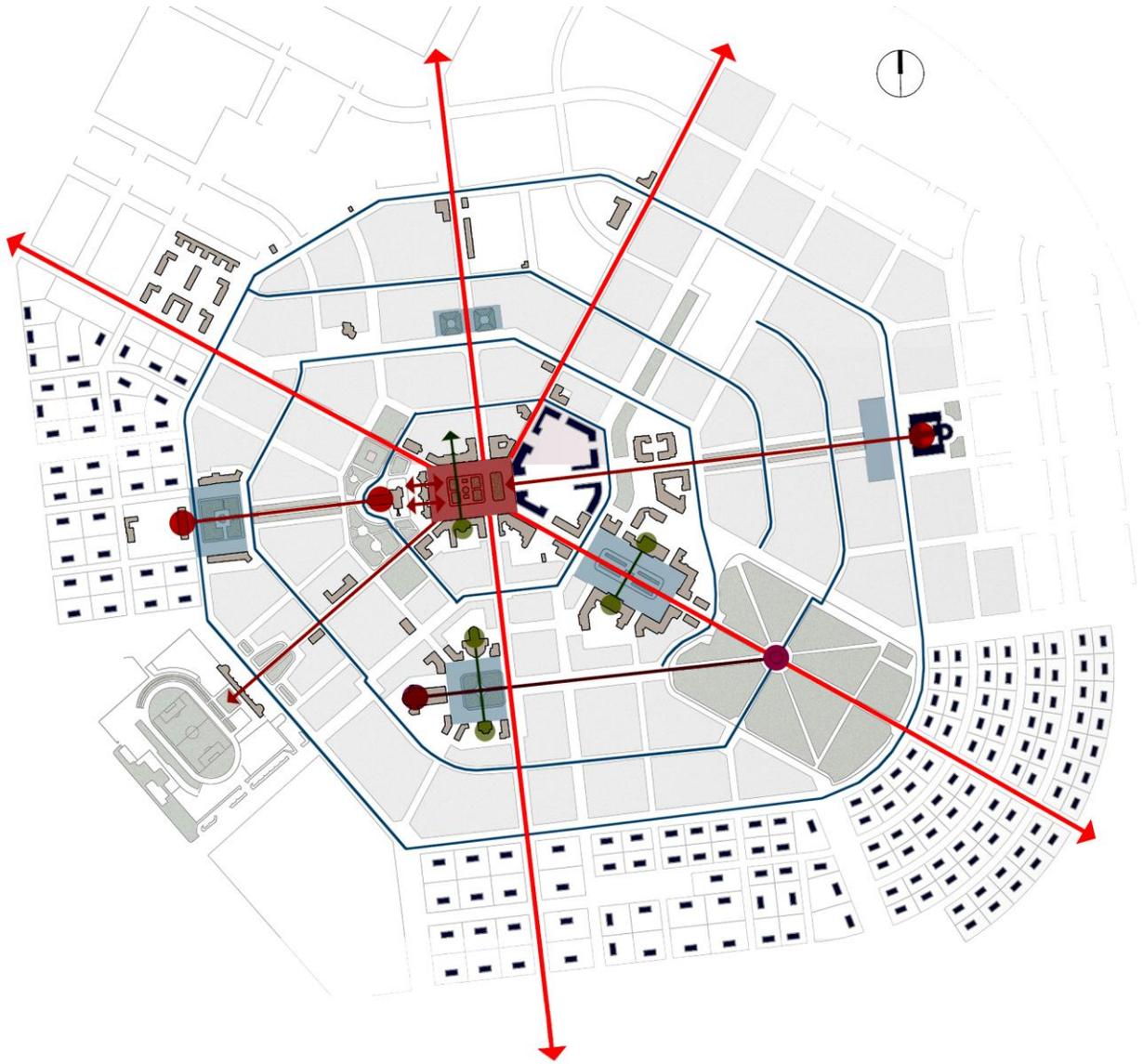


Figure 1: Expansion plan of Littoria (1935), by Oriolo Frezzotti.

To these, Frezzotti added three planning axes, not derived from the local context. The first of these is the prolongation of the northeast direction towards the southwest, with a different angle, to cut the square in angular position. The remaining two axis are oriented the first in east direction, the latter in west. This first step gives a highly harmonious appearance to the urban whole that once the radial pattern had been completed, looks like a radial plan which has a polarity formed by the central main square.

With respect to the urban design, a first notation concerns the will of Frezzotti to figuratively differentiate the axes derived from the territory with respect to those introduced in the design phase, making it readable their different nature and vocation, at the territorial scale of the first ones, and at the urban scale of the latter. While the first come out of the city and represent the uninterrupted visual axes, the latter one present public buildings placed on the headboards, in polar position; this buildings interrupt the urban views and prevent axis from exiting to the city, leaning forward in the territory. In fact, the south-west axis end in the access portal of the stadium; the west direction axis end in the seat of ONC (National Organization of Fighters), while the headed east presents in the headboard the courthouse.

Once conceived radial pattern of the main paths, the second operation involved the design of a second road system, superimposed on the first, which makes the city design more articulated: it is a system of concentric annular paths, that transforms the plan into a radiocentric scheme. These annular routes do not follow a regular and closed pattern, but are arranged according to a development broken and gradually widen, defining a sort of spiral made from ring sections connected to the radial roads. To close the overall urban design, is placed, on the outer annular path, the avenue Mussolini: this is the path with the wider road section, with rows of trees, which marks the transition from intensive settlement area with a more rarely settlement patterns. In the intersection points between the two road systems, are placed the other urban voids, a system of squares, each with a precise urban role and characterization of its own, in particular as regards to the provision of public buildings.

The main square (Piazza del Littorio) is the political and administrative center of the composition: the Town Hall and the headquarters of the Consortium of Reclamation are placed here. One aspect that strongly characterizes the square is the position of the bell tower, off-center from the square itself. This feature, although due to the configuration of the axes derived from the territory, highlights better than any other the dynamic predisposition of the whole system, so which mitigates the otherwise too rigidly geometric diagram of the layout and reveals, at the same time, his implicit complexity. The character of the square then refers also to the models proposed by Camillo Sitte, in particular the unification role played by the built fronts with arcades. In fact, the rejoining made by arcades is failed: the fragmentation of fronts generated by the radial routes, the division of the square into two parts caused by the north-south route and emphasized by the different treatment of the pavement, the unsatisfactory relationship between height of buildings and width of the square, hinder the unitary perception of space.

Along the north-south axis are inserted two squares that generate the secondary urban axiality and are themselves equipped with internal axiality, generated from public buildings overlooking the square. The first is the Savoia square (now Piazza San Marco), which plays the role of religious and educational center: in this space are placed the church, the seat of the ONB (National Organization of Balilla, the Fascist youth) and the seat of the OND (National Leisure Hours Organization). The last two buildings, placed symmetrically on either side of the church, generate a secondary axiality inside the square.

Continuing southwards, on either side of the road axis, are arranged Palazzo "M", home of the National Fascist Party, and the barracks of the GIL (the Italian Fascist Youth), which identify a square, the Littorio Forum, entirely dedicated to the party, partially enclosed by arcades (in fact, the barracks and the arcades were never realized).

Ultimately, the system of squares, that starting from the middle one, spread to the south, would have represented, through the *forma urbis* (urban form), the tripartite division of power and roles, political, administrative, religious, educational, military, through the precise distribution of public buildings. In this urban tale, the vertical elements of the tower of the town hall, the tower of Palazzo M (collapsed during the war, when it was still under construction) and the steeple of the church played a key role, establishing a dialogue of visual and symbolic references between them and with the road system, clearly debtor of the theories of Sitte.

Even the remaining squares are part of this pattern of specialization and close relationship with respect to public buildings: the inclusion of the square located towards the southeast (XXIII Marzo square) is required once Littoria becomes province, and in fact is the seat of the province and that of the Bank of Italy, which again create a secondary axiality than the main road network. Continuing in the same direction, is inserted the great urban void of Mussolini Park, green space used for leisure, arranged symmetrically to the stadium with respect to north-south axis. The park, with a classical plan, establishes a dual relationship with the square of the church: the first one, visual in nature, through the relationship which is created between the obelisk in the center and the bell tower; the second one, of a physical nature, across the road (Viale Regina Elena) that connects directly with the square itself, at right angles to the axis north-south.

The last two open spaces are those placed on the two ends of the east-west axis: the first hosts the courthouse, the second houses the headquarters of ONC (in Quadrato square), and an organization which played an important role in coordination, control and funding for the reclamation.

### 3 THE EXPANSION PLAN

The just described one is the final *forma urbis* of Littoria, reached through a succession of different urban plans, all drawn from Oriolo Frezzotti, which have gradually developed and deepened the radiocentric base plan.

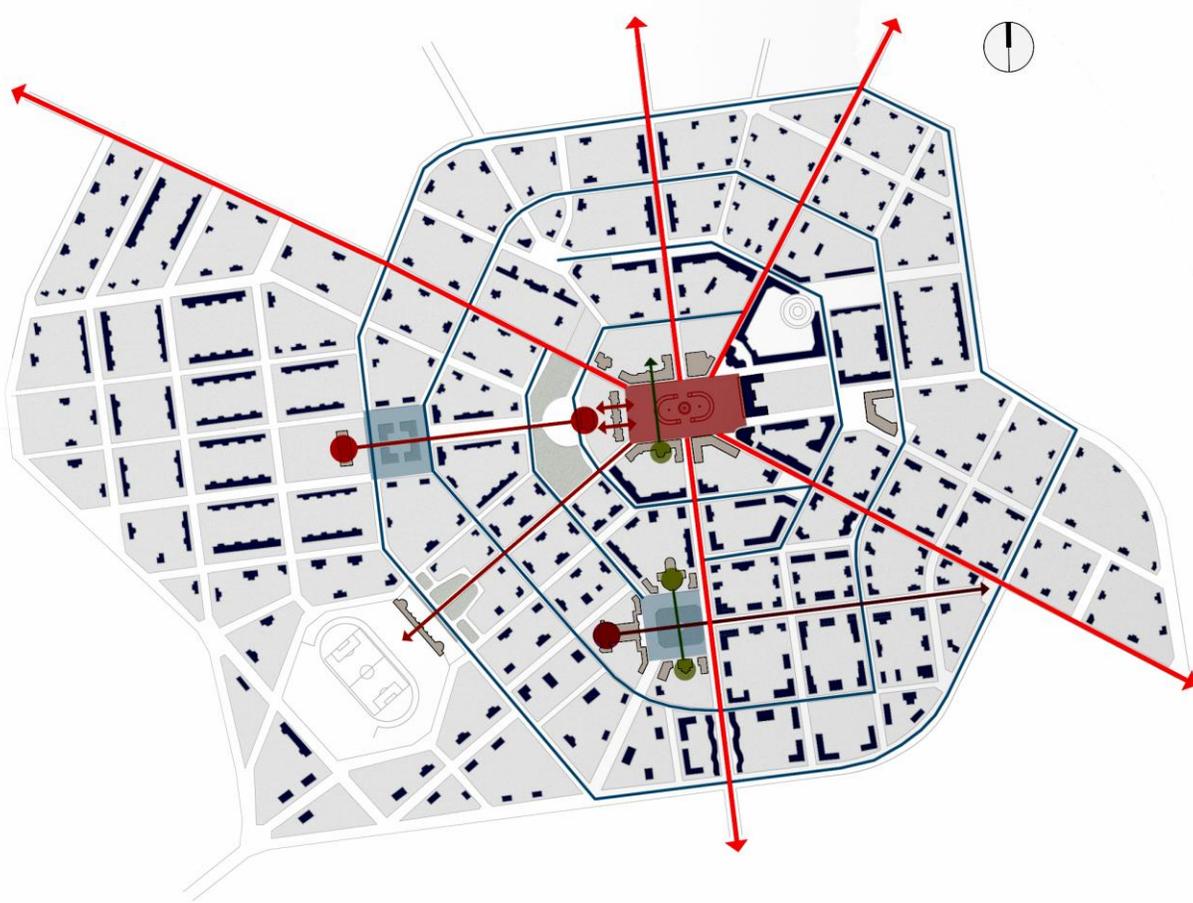


Figure 2: Plan of Littoria (1932), by Oriolo Frezzotti.

The first plan dates back to 1932 and has already the described assumption of local axis converging on a central pole (Piazza del Littorio), completed by the insertion of the annular paths and squares at the intersections. There are only three squares: Piazza del Littorio, Piazza Savoia with the church of San Marco and Quadrato Square to the west, corresponding respectively to the political-administrative, religious, educational, economic and agriculture centers. Piazza del Littorio has a different design than the final: Frezzotti try to correct the asymmetry resulting from the position of the routes, shifting the eastern front, where a building located centrally on the short side is flanked by two buildings with a curved profile, in an uncertain classical style design. Compared to subsequent drafts, the design of the axes is incomplete: the east-west axis is polarized on the famous post office building by Angelo Mazzoni, without continuing over the Littorio square. The polarity of the church is not balanced by the park Mussolini: the axis of Viale Regina Elena looks so lame, finding an unsatisfactory conclusion in a small open space located at the intersection with Viale Mussolini. It is thus lacks one of the distinctive elements of the final plan, which is the distinction between radial territorial axes, accepted in the plan of the city and left out of the city itself, and between the designed axis, polarized on public buildings. All urban fronts along the radial, with the exception of Corso Vittorio Emanuele III, appear to be strongly

fragmented and discontinuous. The layout of the buildings seems to favor the prospect on the annular paths. The result is an urban design of a low density city, similar to the English models of the garden city and to the district of Rome Garbatella and Monte Sacro, made a few years earlier. The most intensive building development is concentrated along the North-South and East-West; the remaining parts of the city appear to consist of a detached villas, consistent with the idea of urban sprawl associated with the early stages of reclamation.

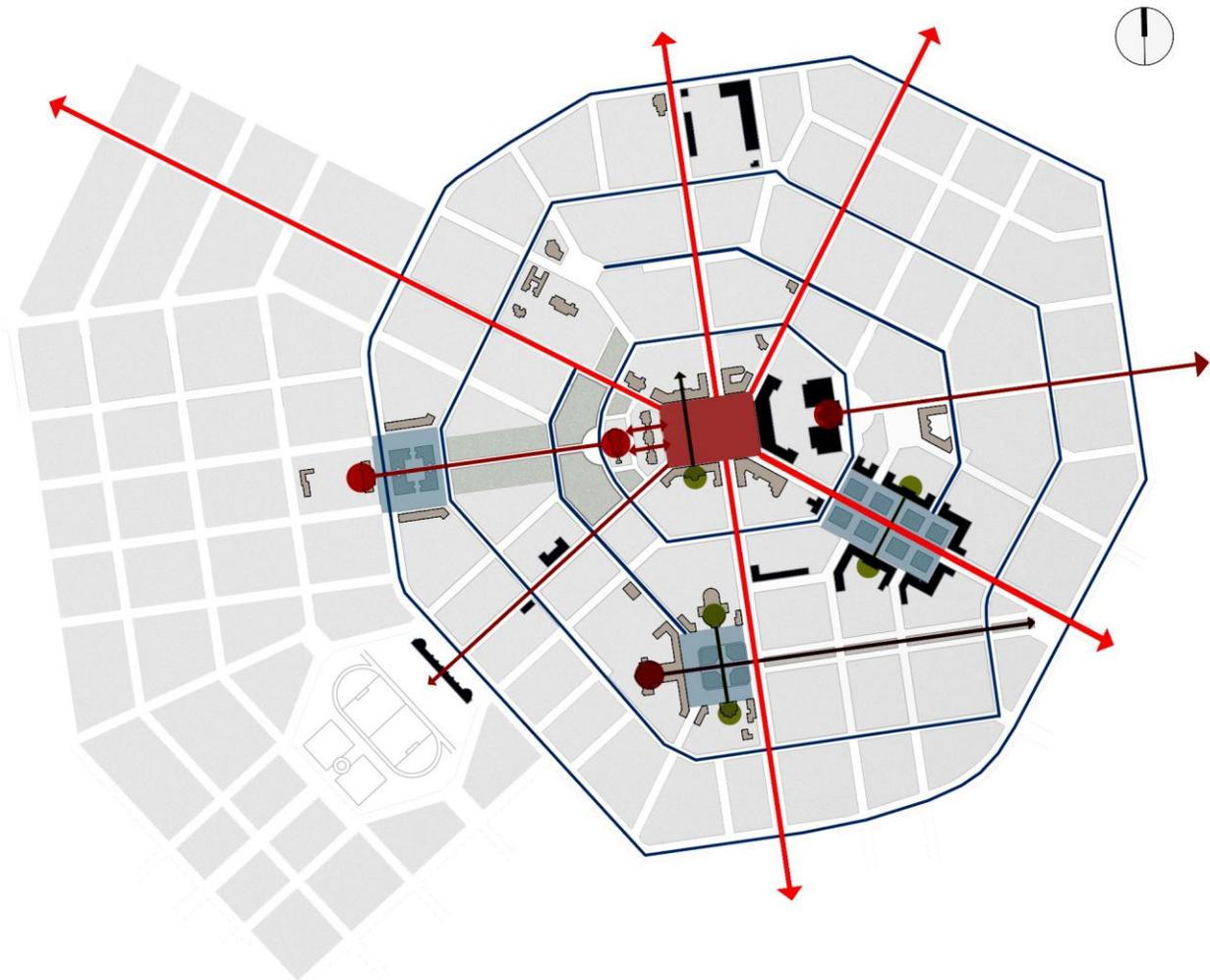


Figure 3: Plan of Littoria (1932, 2<sup>nd</sup> version), by Oriolo Frezzotti.

From 1932 to 1935, the plan is progressively refined by Frezzotti. In one of the most significant hypothesis, always dated 1932, remains the incompleteness of Viale Regina Elena and completely lacking an indication about nature and morphology of the residential building fabric; appear, however, the XXIII Marzo square and the extension of the east-west axis, lacking the closing given by the presence of the court. The XXIII Marzo square appears in its final form, with the secondary axis that connects the palace of the Province and the Bank of Italy. Is introduced a solution that will be replicated in other squares: the short side of the square is closed by two twin buildings, arranged symmetrically to the road, as to constitute a kind of city gate. With regard to the central square, it is accepted the asymmetry. One difference with respect to the other plan consists of a large urban expansion towards the west, between two radials, which continues the radio-centric plan the original city core.

Finally, in 1935, drafted the final version of the expansion plan, which brings the city to take over the shape described in the previous paragraph.

#### 4 THE URBAN FABRIC

A final observation concerns the morphology of the urban fabric: the building code, drafted by Frezzotti, always implied a density decreasing outwards of the city. In the area enclosed within avenue Mussolini was expected that the residences disposition follows the outline of the lots, creating a continuous front along the edge of the road and providing empty spaces in the central part of every city block. In this part of town, the height of buildings, according to the prescriptions of the Modern Movement, was placed in relation to the width of the road. In contrast, in the outer strip were designed single or two-family detached villas, set back from the street frontage and located in the center of each lot. The outcome space was to move from an image of a dense and compact city, close to the Italian historic centers, with towers and arcades, to a low-density image of the city, close to the concepts of garden city. Finally, it is important to note the frequent use of the previously described solution of the twin buildings, arranged symmetrically to the road layout, which constitute a kind of city gates. This is the case of INA buildings by Paniconi and Pediconi to the north, and the case of INCIS buildings arranged along the axis leading to the court and in XXIII Marzo square.



Figure 4: top to bottom, from left to right, the Town Hall, the church of S. Marco, the palace of the financial police, the Court Hall, the INA and INCIS buildings.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The plan of Littoria proves of great interest to a number of factors, some of whom may also be relevant in the current debate on urban planning: first, it is worth highlighting the close relationship between the city and the territory. This relationship is expressed not only through the adoption of territorial matrix routes within the urban design, but also for the adoption of a territorial and urban model both based on the same radial pattern; in addition, to the idea of a city strongly interrelated to a widespread system of rural centers, which allow human settlement and the government of the territory. Inter alia, it is important to emphasize that this widespread system arises relying on existing structures, in particular the dense network of houses, towers and canals. Finally, the plan of Littoria is important for the close relationship between settlement patterns and environmental, social and economic background. From the initial planning stages, the economic role which Littoria and its suburbs would have done is clear: this role were related to agricultural use of the land. Even the choices related to the architectural style, particularly in the villages and before the proclamation of the province, recall the desire to recreate a family atmosphere for the settlers, featured a image of modern rurality.

Still, the plan of Littoria is characterized by the close synthesis between urban planning and architectural design, made possible by the figure of Frezzotti, which realizes the plan of foundation and designs most of the buildings. It is an approach which rejects the two-dimensional logic of zoning, in favor of a three-dimensional view, which tries to predict the spatial outcomes of urban planning. In this light, the road not only plays the role of infrastructure but, with the system of squares, plays the role of a structuring element and defining the urban space. The fact that the core of Littoria still remained intact and readable, despite the great urban sprawl subsequent to the '60s, testifies to the quality and goodness of this methodological approach.

Finally, the plan demonstrates, from an historical point of view, an important moment in the international urban debate. It is linked to the renewed and widespread interest in the study of models of the ancient ideals city, especially those of the Renaissance, and in particular the radio-centric model. It is important to remember the book published by Gustavo Giovannoni in 1931, " Vecchie città, Edilizia Nuova ": in its pages are reproduced the plan of the ideal cities of Francesco di Giorgio Martini, Giorgio Vasari and Scamozzi, the plan of the city of Grammichele , etc.. Giovannoni, for the modern city, offers a kind of kinematic model which consists precisely in a system of radial roads and circular rings. In the model of Littoria however, you can also read the influences of German culture, the theories of Eberstadt and theoretical contributions of Wolf, who, just connecting with the culture of the Renaissance, offers a radiocentric model for the new city, judging it the most functional, preferring one with radial pattern to one with concentric rings.

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