Grand Hotel
Davide Spina

Some buildings carve a space for themselves in the self-image of a city through their idiosyncratic or exemplary qualities, because they are imposing as monuments, or because they embody a familiar type with unusual success. Other buildings become infamous through their abysmal critical fortune. Although architectural history is not conventionally told through cautionary tales, in such a history the Cavalieri Hilton hotel in Rome would be an iconic example. fig.1 The building—a mammoth, eerie-looking slab tacked onto the crest of Monte Mario, the highest hill in Rome—is removed from the buzz of the city below, sinister in its Olympian solitude. Although it is studiously ignored by the average Roman and virtually unknown to the international architectural public, over the years the Cavalieri Hilton has produced great amounts of cathexis amongst the local *cognoscenti*: not only on account of how misplaced it looks (too big and too ugly for its position in the landscape—Bruno Zevi aptly characterized it as an "atrocity" [1]) but also because of what it represents, namely greed, disrespect for the public good, and servility to the forces of capital on the part of its architects. A *cause célèbre* in the urban history of postwar Rome, the dissonance around the Cavalieri Hilton changed the way journalists, critics, and scholars talked about modern architecture and planning in the Italian capital, with reverberations that were to be felt nationally and perhaps beyond.

The Cavalieri Hilton was completed in 1963, but its origins date to the end of the 1940s, at the dawn of what was to be known as *La Dolce Vita*, the US dollar-fueled high life of postwar Rome. In late 1948, the client of the building, the Roman giant Società Generale Immobiliare (SGI) was, by all accounts, the largest real estate developer and contractor in the country. [2] The conglomerate not only enjoyed the technical means, financial resources, and political connections required to build on a national scale, but also had the Vatican's full support (the Holy See owned the company's majority stake, and its representatives sat on the board). [3] Although SGI's main business strategy was build-to-sell, the

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1 Bruno Zevi, "Roma senza politica di sinistra", draft paper for *Mondo Operaio* magazine, n.d., Zevi Archive, folder 20, series 6, subseries 2, file 57.

2 For a study of the company's size and national market share, see Gastone Ave and Franco Pizzon, "Le immobiliari quotate in borsa," in Gastone Ave and Armando Barp, eds., *Il secondo ciclo edilizio: L'attività edilizia, gli operatori emergenti e il ruolo dell'intervento pubblico* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1977), 85–133. For an overview of SGI's activities, and for testimonies by former company employees, see Paola Puzzuoli, ed., *La Società generale immobiliare Sogene: Storia, archivio, testimonianze* (Rome: Palombi, 2003). Italo Insolera's classic book, *Roma moderna: Un secolo di storia urbanistica* (Milan: Einaudi, 1962), points to the agency of the firm in the expansion of the Italian capital from 1870 to 1960. Antonio Cederna's features in the weekly *Il Mondo* (1955–1965) provide further details on the company's production and dubious operative ethos.

3 Two people directly represented the Vatican's interests within SGI: Prince Marcantonio Pacelli and Count Enrico Pietro Galeazzi. Prince Pacelli, lawyer, son of Pius XII's brother Francesco, was from 1946 to 1957 also on the board of LAI (Linee Aeree Italiane), a company jointly owned by TWA (Trans World Airlines) and IRI (Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale), the largest Italian public holding company. Count Galeazzi was also an architect of the Fabric of Saint Peter (Reverenda Fabrica Sancti Petri)—the organization that since the sixteenth century had been responsible for the maintenance of St. Peter's Basilica—as well as president of RCA Italiana (1949–1987), a subsidiary of the US company RCA Records.

firm also built and ran some upscale hotels under the umbrella of its Cavalieri ("Knights") hotel franchise. Following successful operations in Pisa and Milan—namely the Albergo dei Cavalieri in Piazza della Stazione (completed 1948, design by Domenico Cardini) and the Albergo dei Cavalieri in Piazza Missori (completed in the same year, design by Emilio Lancia, Gio Ponti's associate from 1926 to 1933)—the company laid plans to bring its business to Rome. For the Rome expansion, attention initially fell on a plot in front of the Baths of Diocletian, near the Termini train station (then under construction), with the intention of challenging the hegemony of the turn-of-the-century Ritz and Excelsior hotels in the luxury sector.

The choice of the location indicates that the operation's basic concept did not depart from the Pisa and Milan enterprises—a new building in the heart of the old city. What did change, though, was the scale of the venture: while the Pisa and Milan hotels had, respectively, 116 and 181 rooms, the Rome hotel was to feature 400 rooms, a requirement that called for a substantially larger building—not an easy feat to achieve in a central and constrained plot. [4] This is probably why SGI immediately brought on Marcello Piacentini as a consultant. Piacentini was a man of considerable talent with a practical knowledge of the local planning culture: "He ... will ... contribute with his experience and personality," was the reassuring comment of the SGI management upon his appointment. [5] Sixty-six-year-old Piacentini, who was then trying—with little success—to rebuild his career after the end of fascism, soon started working on a façade design that would help disguise the size of the building: "It will be necessary to play with materials: travertine, tufa, bricks, tiles, etc., so as to break up this large mass. ... [W]e could have a two-floor setback on top of the building." [6] A few months later, though, SGI dismissed him and decided to build the hotel somewhere else, officially on account of irresolvable "planning difficulties ... and restrictions due to the archaeological site next to the plot," though more likely because of a new business partnership that was to propel this hotel development to a spectacularly more ambitious scale. [7]/figs. 2 a–b

Build It and They Will Come

Whilst planning the Rome Cavalieri, SGI was also preparing an (ultimately unrealized) urban scheme filed under the name of Istituto Città del Progresso (roughly, the Institute for the City of Progress, hereafter ICP). [8] The project—which saw the involvement, among others, of FIAT—was meant to turn the fascist-era EUR quarter (masterplanned by Piacentini and then in a state of complete neglect) into a permanent exhibition district surrounded

4 SGI Archive, Bilanci, Bilancio 1948, 12.

5 Unsigned memo, July 18, 1948, Piacentini Archive, folder 280, subfolder: Immobiliare, Via Cernaia, Albergo dei Cavalieri.

6 Marcello Picentini, letter to Aldo Samaritani, September 27, 1949; Marcello Piecentini, letter to Emilio Pifferi, April 22, 1950, Piacentini Archive, folder 280, subfolder: Immobiliare, Via Cernaia, Albergo dei Cavalieri.

7 Eugenio Gualdi, letter to Marcello Piacentini, November 22, 1950, Piacentini Archive, folder 280, subfolder: Immobiliare, Via Cernaia, Albergo dei Cavalieri.

8 The entire documentation related to the ICP scheme is stored in: SGI Archive, Serie H/3: Istituto Città del Progresso, folders 1–10.

by upscale residential compounds. Making a profit via the sale of land and property was of course the ultimate goal of this scheme, but not the only one. SGI also saw the ICP as a means to bolster the international profile of Rome, a city in postwar disarray, and as a means to build bridges with the United States and its business community. "ICP will be of great interest to all the nations of the world, especially to the USA," said a 1948 internal memo. **9** Witness to this fantasy, the company even had detailed plans of the 1939 New York World's Fair shipped to Rome in view of using them as reference. **10**

A key actor in this imaginative scheme to bring US citizens and US dollars to Rome was a man called Frank Henius, a name ubiquitous in SGI's papers around 1948 to 1949. Henius was a character of a particular type, a high-flying American middleman, one of the many businessmen who roamed postwar Europe offering their services as go-betweens in reconstruction deals.
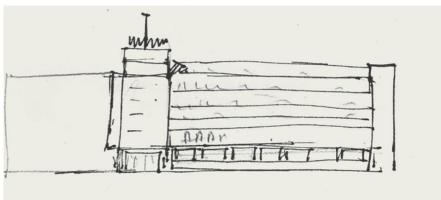
During World War II, as an executive in the Language Unit of the US Military, he had authored a series of pocket-size dictionaries for American GIs, the widely successful *Dictionaries for the American Soldier* (available in eight European languages, including Italian); after the war, he published a reference book on international business with Prentice Hall (*Dictionary of Foreign Trade*, 1947); his letters to SGI's managing director Aldo Samaritani are all written on headed paper of swanky continental hotels. **11** The archived correspondence shows that whilst looking for investors for the ICP scheme in the US, Henius talked Samaritani into also accepting American partners for the Rome Cavalieri project: "You can of course retain absolute control while the investor has a mere investment with certain privileges in the hotels. ... I have talked about it here and have very definite ideas of my own," guaranteed the middleman. **12** This was 1948, and the biggest hospitality entrepreneur in the US was Conrad Hilton. Henius immediately approached him, but the initial response was negative: "I don't believe that we are going to be interested in any European hotels for the present ... things are rather uncertain at the present and I don't think that we will embark on any investment outside of the United States for the present." **13** Only a few months later, however, in 1949, Hilton had traveled to Europe, and after returning stateside he decided to expand his operations: Hilton Hotels International (HHI) was born. **14**

fig. 2 a—b Marcello Piacentini, sketches for the Rome Cavalieri (1950). Source: Piacentini Archive, folder 280, "Immobiliare. Via Cernaia — Alb. Cavalieri."

9 Invito alla Città del Progresso, unsigned memo, n.d., ibid., folder 6.

10 Minutes of a meeting between SGI MD Aldo Samaritani and SGI engineer Alberto Ressa, document dated October 10, 1948, SGI Archive, Serie H/3: Istituto Città del Progresso, folder 6.

11 See Frank Henius, "GI Joe Becomes a Linguist," *New York Times Magazine*, November 12, 1944, 21, SGI Archive, Corrispondenza A Samaritani — E Gualdi 1935—50, folders 13—14.

12 Frank Henius, letter to Aldo Samaritani, November 27, 1948, SGI Archive, Serie H/3: Istituto Città del Progresso, folder 6, subfolder: F — materiale di studio.

13 Conrad Hilton, letter to Frank Henius, November 23, 1948, ibid.

14 Annabel Wharton, "Economy, Architecture and Politics: Colonialist and Cold War Hotels," *History of Political Economy* 31 (1999), Supplement, 285—301, here 290.

15 Frank Henius, letter to Marcello Piacentini, November 13, 1950, Piacentini Archive, folder 149.

Fast forward a few months. Henius (apparently) introduced Hilton to Samaritani: "Mio caro Marcello [Piacentini] ... [V]ous savez sans doute que c'etait moi qui ai introduit Hilton, l'hotelier Americain maintenant a Rome, chez la Societé Generale Immobiliare." 15 Samaritani gave Henius the boot, and Samaritani and Hilton began directly discussing plans for a Rome Hilton. An informal deal between SGI and HHI was reached a few months later, on November 4, 1950, marking the beginning of the longest and most tortured planning process in the history of HHI. The deal was based on six terms: the companies would create a new dedicated company on a 75/25 split; HHI was to manage the hotel for fifteen years and forward SGI 75 percent of the profits; 50 percent of the building costs would be covered by a Marshall-Plan-backed state loan (that the new company would have to apply for); Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) would be involved as a design consultant; SGI-owned contractor Società Generale di lavori di pubblica utilità (SOGENE) would deliver the building; and the site would be moved to an SGI-owned plot on top of the Monte Mario hill. 16

16 Board meeting, October 9, 1954, SGI Archive, Consiglio di Amministrazione, folder 4, book 12, 180.

Up on the Hilltop
Monte Mario had until then been virtually untouched by real estate development, a large stretch of semi-virgin sloping land in the green belt that enclosed Rome's west end from Villa Sciarra in the south, via the Janiculum and the Vatican hills, up to the Tiber Valley in the north. In the historical record, Monte Mario is the picturesque entryway to Rome for pilgrims and the locale of suburban delights for the Roman elite: Villa Madama (sixteenth century), Villa Stuart (eighteenth century), and Villa Miani (nineteenth century), and the setting for religious and artistic retreats—see the Church of the Madonna del Rosario (1628), expanded by Filippo Raguzzini in 1726 and home to Franz Liszt during his Roman stay from 1862 to 1866. 17 In popular imagination, on the other hand, Monte Mario is a favored destination for the traditional jaunt out of Rome, the proverbial *scampagnata* (not so much a hike as an excuse for a large meal in the countryside).

17 On the history of Monte Mario, see Giuseppe Aldo Rossi, *Monte Mario: profilo storico, artistico e ambientale del colle più alto di Roma* (Rome: Montimer, 1996); Luigi Pallottino, *Monte Mario: tra cronaca e storia* (Rome: La Via, 1991).

But things changed in the 1930s and 1940s: the Piacentini-supervised 1931 City Plan earmarked Monte Mario for low-density residential expansion, and in 1942 almost the entire hill fell into SGI's hands. By the time the Hilton deal was closed in late 1950, the Roman company was already building two large schemes in the area and cashing in from the sale of real estate to smaller developers. 18 The new hotel plot was located at the eastern edge of SGI's possessions, in a "no building" zone between the Church of the Madonna del Rosario and the Villa Miani, a large clearing

18 The story of these and other residential developments by SGI is treated in a dedicated chapter of my doctoral thesis: Davide Spina, "Christian Democrats, Architecture, and Capitalist Development in PostWar Italy: The Società Generale Immobiliare (SGI), 1945–69" (forthcoming).

boasting too superb a view not to be turned to profit. The importance of this change of location in the economy of the Rome Cavalieri scheme cannot be overstated, as most of the trouble that SGI would deal with over the following ten years can probably be attributed to this one single decision. Moving the hotel to this place, in fact, would soon require controversial administrative gymnastics to change the plot's zoning. Yet SGI must have concluded that the pros outweighed the cons: the new location was not only more congenial to the company's real estate interests (luxury hotels raise property prices around them), but it was also a better fit for a business that was to cater to air-traveling American tourists (the Monte Mario plot was larger and better connected to the projected Fiumicino airport and the motorway system). In addition, the hilltop location was a guarantee of a grand statement, and SGI, at this point in time, had a great deal of bravado. It goes without saying that Conrad Hilton okayed the move "with great enthusiasm," and so the development machine set into motion. [19]

The Battle of Monte Mario

But how was an Italian company going to build an American hotel in 1950? After twenty years of fascist-sponsored cultural solipsism, the average Italian architect knew close to nothing about America, let alone its architecture. [20] For this reason, immediately after the agreement SGI sent its head architect Emilio Pifferi to the United States to learn about Hilton hotels and American hotel design in general. [21] Pifferi thus spent three months at SOM's office in midtown Manhattan, studying and sketching plans next to Gordon Bunshaft, who was then drafting the Istanbul Hilton. [22] The Turinese architect also interspersed his short stint with visits to various Hiltons around the country (thirty-two in total). [23]

Contemporary to Pifferi's spell in America, the company drafted Ugo Luccichenti as the third member of the Cavalieri Hilton core design team, which included Pifferi himself and Alberto Ressa, civil engineer and head of the SGI design department. Luccichenti was by then a household name in Rome, author of several *palazzine* (medium-sized apartment blocks) in the affluent Parioli district, and a loyal servant of SGI since the mid-1930s. [24] The 52-year-old engineer was also amongst the few professionals conversant in the modernist idiom at a time when Neorealism was all the rage in the city, an inclination that certainly made him look a good candidate for the Rome Hilton gig. After the completion of the San Juan Hilton in 1949 (the first outside of the continental United States), and SOM's appointment for the Istanbul Hilton a year later, it was evident that the

19 SGI Archive, Bilanci, Bilancio 1950, 20.

20 Italian texts on American architecture were rare in the 1930s and 1940s. Perhaps the most comprehensive text in this literature is Pasquale Carbonara, *L'architettura in America: la civiltà nord-americana riflessa nei caratteri dei suoi edifici* (Bari: Laterza, 1939).

21 SGI Archive, Consiglio di Amministrazione, October 6, 1951, folder 4, book 12, 9–10.

22 Emilio Pifferi, memo 10, Le mie americhe, 2. I tre mesi dell'Hilton, Ezio Pifferi Archive, Rome.

23 Ibid.; John E. Houser, letter to Conrad Hilton, January 23, 1951, cited in Annabel Wharton, *Building the Cold War: Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 232.

24 On Ugo Luccichenti, see Mario Manieri Elia, *Ugo Luccichenti, architetto* (Rome: Officina, 1980); Giorgio Muratore, "Una maestro romano: Ugo Luccichenti," *Rassegna di Architettura e Urbanistica* 30, no. 89–90 (1996), 110–15.

International Style was on its way to become HHI's *own* signature style. **25**

25 See Wharton, *Cold War* (see note 23), 186–90.

Within just about a year, in 1952, Luccichenti delivered a first design of the projected Rome hotel. These drawings present all the essential elements of the realized scheme: the positioning of the building (along the side of the hill in what looks like a "topographically sensitive" fashion); the three-segment zigzagging plan with a central corridor and rooms on both sides; the height (a little shy of 30 meters); the fully balconied façades slit at approximately a third of their elevation (the mechanical floor); the rooftop restaurant; the concentration of shared areas and amenities on the ground and underground floors; and the lavish Mediterranean landscaping all around the building — complete with a large swimming pool and two tennis courts. **26**

26 SGI Archive, Archivio Progetti, Progetti (II parte), storage tube no. 658.

And then: a two-year standstill. The Rome association of hoteliers successfully blocked SGI's access to the coveted state loan, a hitch that forced the company to refinance the scheme. By late 1954 wheels were turning again, with SGI and Hilton formally sealing their partnership to create the prospected joint company IANA (Italo-Americana Nuovi Alberghi / Italian-American New Hotels) with capital from overseas: "The creation of a company based on American capital with a practical end," reads SGI's statement, "responds to the Italian and American governments' call for an effective introduction of American capital in Italy." **27**

27 Board meeting, October 9, 1954, SGI Archive, Consiglio di Amministrazione, folder 4, book 12, 180–81.

A few months later, in March 1955, SGI brought the scheme to the town hall for a preliminary consultation with the authorities. The mayor, civil engineer and Vatican-man Salvatore Rebecchini, "expressed a lively interest in the project," while the head of the City Planning Committee Ugo D'Andrea was more cautious, recommending that the company install scaffolding pipes and connect them with wires to simulate the mass of the projected building and thus "help the work of the planning committee and of the town council." **28** This local iteration of the Swiss *Baugespann* was by no means a standard practice in 1950s Rome, but, after all, no one had tried to build such a big and prominent
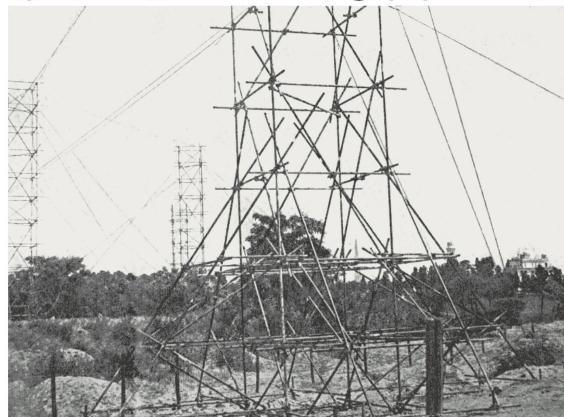
fig. 3 The only *Baugespann* (building height markers) Rome has ever seen. Source: Antonio Cederna, "Un albergo in paradiso," *Il Mondo*, June 14, 1955, 11–12, here 11.

28 Board meeting, March 30, 1955, ibid., 249; board meeting, July 14, 1955, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 11.

building at least since Giuseppe Sacconi's Monument to Victor Emmanuel II (1885–1911). And so, the company complied with the request, and the structure, made from hundreds of metal pipes, went up on site — dozens of small flags waving in the wind. **29/fig. 3**

29 Antonio Cederna, "Un albergo in paradiso," *Il Mondo*, June 14, 1955, 11–12, here 11.

The apparition of this strange metal structure in the Roman sky-line marked the entrée of the Cavalieri Hilton into public discourse. Archaeologist and conservationist Antonio Cederna, who had been investigating SGI's activities for a while, immediately denounced the scheme in the liberal magazine *Il Mondo*,
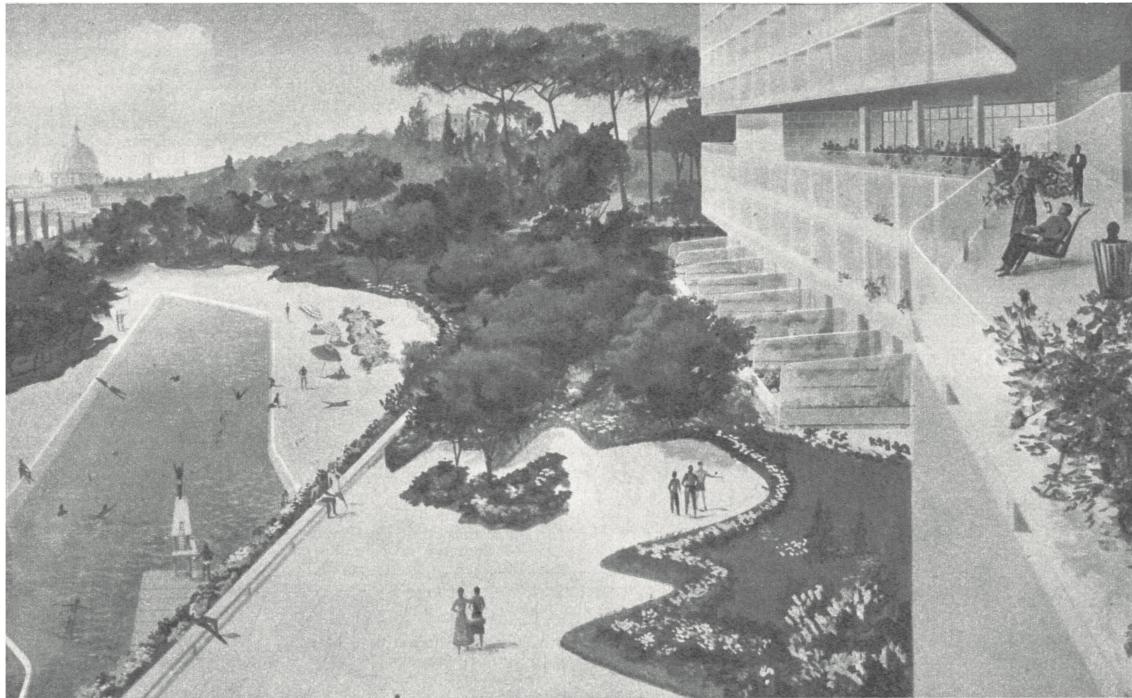
Il progetto dell'albergo di Monte Mario prevede piscine, campi da tennis, cinematografi, negozi, farmacie, sale per congressi, ristoranti, *night clubs*, giardini, palestre. Contro di esso, tuttavia, è stata scatenata una campagna: lo si accusa di contrastare con le bellezze artistiche di Roma.

officially starting his personal war against the Vatican-owned company: "Even the most naïve will agree that such a hotel ... will definitely spoil Monte Mario's beauty. ... How dare SGI create this place of delights and, who knows, illicit encounters where Constantine, as the tradition goes, had a vision of the cross?" [30] But perhaps the time was not ripe for an anti-SGI campaign yet, because the press cut the company some slack for a few months, allowing the latter to push the scheme through the Rome Planning Committee—with minor revisions, reportedly, thanks to the help of two architects on its payroll: Pasquale Carbonara (who was designing some of the company's *palazzine* in Monte Mario) and Adalberto Libera (who was designing the masterplan of the company's new suburb Casal Palocco). [31]

SGI's public image, however, spiraled downward in December 1955 after the publication of the landmark *L'Espresso* article "Capitale corrotta = nazione infetta" (Corrupt Capital = Infected Nation). The text was an unprecedented attack on the company's influence on Rome's planning, on its suspicious business practices, and on its pursuit of profit at the expense of the public good. [32] Upon its publication, SGI took the magazine to court, a move that backfired on them almost immediately. The trial, long and heavily reported on from the very beginning, attracted even more negative

30 Ibid., 12.

31 "La giunta votò per l'albergo Hilton sotto la pressione dell'immobiliare," *L'Unità*, December 2, 1956, 4. For descriptions of Carbonara's and Libera's work for SGI, see the company's in-house publications *Bilancio* 1956, 26—30; *Bilancio* 1955, 39—45.

32 Malio Cangogni, "Capitale corrotta = nazione infetta," *L'Espresso*, December 11, 1955, 1—3.

media coverage of the company, and eventually marred its reputation beyond repair. In addition, the toxic environment created by this lawsuit only made it more difficult for SGI to get the remaining permissions for beginning construction work for the Hilton hotel. And the clock was ticking.

Pressured by the Hilton top brass, who threatened to abandon the scheme if progress was not made, Mayor Rebecchini tried to get the council's OK during the last meeting of his tenure in April 1956. [33] But the last-ditch effort failed miserably because of rugged obstructionism by the Communist contingent in the town hall, killing Rebecchini's career in the process — the engineer did not run again for the position, returning to construction and to the study of traditional Roman sonnets after nine years in office (1947–1956). [34] The mayor's position, already weakened by years of communist attrition, could not withstand accusations of corruption — "SGI pays good money for these resolutions," was the famous final blow thrown by communist union leader Claudio Cianca. [35] SGI, however, did not despair and fought back immediately, in turn mobilizing the press to support its cause. "American Capital Cannot Wait," thundered the conservative daily *Il Giornale d'Italia*, which, like a number of SGI-friendly outlets, started framing the scheme as an example of virtuous urban entrepreneurialism, as a bait for American dollars ("for every dollar spent at a Hilton, the average US tourist spends nine in the local economy" [36]) and as a solution to the shortage of accommodation in Rome in view of the 1960 Olympics. fig.4 In the following months, the company fired on all cylinders to have its way: in addition to increased press presence, they produced and distributed a documentary praising the merits of the projected hotel and staged an on-site presentation featuring contributions by the entire design team and by HHI's vice president John Houser. [37] But these efforts did not achieve the intended effect of changing the zoning, largely because the new mayor (Umberto Tupini, former Minister of Public Works in from 1947 to 1950) took a cautious stance on the matter, cognizant of his predecessor's fate — "Tupini rhymes with Rebecchini," had warned the Communist daily *L'Unità*. [38]

Only with the appointment of yet another mayor nearly two years later did the planning permission process come to the desired end. On January 8, 1958, Urbano Cioccetti (lawyer, Papal Chamberlain, and manager of the Marquis Del Gallo family

33 Board meeting, March 26, 1956, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 111, 4.

fig.5 "To them, the Campidoglio [the city government] belongs to the Vatican." Launch of the Cioccetti Mayoral campaign, 1958. Source: *Vie Nuove*, September 1960 (special issue on Rome), 3.

34 See *L'Unità* issues of April 6–7, 1956.

35 "Si riparla dell'albergo Hilton al processo dell'immobiliare," *L'Unità*, November 27, 1956, 5.

36 "Ancora nessuna decisione per L'albergo a Monte Mario: Il capitale americano non può aspettare," *Il Giornale d'Italia*, April 21, 1956, 4; Giorgio Salvioni, "Il Giulio Cesare delle camere con bagno," *Epoca*, March 17, 1957, 31.

37 "La Hilton disposta a modificare il progetto per l'albergo a Monte Mario," *Il Giornale d'Italia*, March 1, 1957, 4; G. C., "Torna in Campidoglio l'operazione Hilton," *L'Unità*, February 15, 1957.

38 Luigi Gigliotti, "Perchè l'Hilton Rovinerebbe Monte Mario," *L'Unità*, April 7, 1957, 8.

Manifestazione d'apertura della campagna elettorale di Cioccetti e Moro a Roma.
PER LORO, IL CAMPIDOGLIO E' DEL VATICANO.

estate) rose to the Campidoglio post with the full support of the Christian Democratic Party and the Vatican. At the launch of his campaign, soon-to-be Prime Minister Aldo Moro announced him against a stage backdrop featuring representations of the Palazzo Senatorio and Saint Peter's Basilica, metonymies of the mayor and the pope. **39/fig.5** Cioccetti, a man of a few words, took things into his own hands and was determined to deliver for his masters. Perhaps aware of the inevitability of the Rome Hilton being built under the new administration, opponents to the scheme first asked for it to be (at least) moved to a less conspicuous location, and then proposed that SGI financially compensate the city for disfiguring Monte Mario. **40** But Cioccetti would not hear of it: in the summer the town hall examined the scheme once again (SGI even brought some of its construction workers to the hall to support its case), and on September 24, 1958, after thirteen sessions, the chamber finally approved the change of zoning. **41** SGI then forwarded the file for further checks to the Ministry of Public Works, to the President of the Republic, and to the City Planning Commission, all of whom approved the scheme without delay (respectively, on March 24 and October 8, 1959, and on April 22, 1960). **42** The planning permission was finally issued on July 26, 1960. **43** Now, after five years of battling with the press, the Rome authorities, and the Byzantine red tape of the Italian state, the company started building its own "Hotel in Heaven." **44**

A Cultural Clash

Ground was broken on September 12, 1960 in the presence of Cardinal Vicar Clemente Micara, former head of the Italy Marshall Plan program US Ambassador James David Zellerbach, Rome mayor Urbano Cioccetti, Italian Minister of Tourism Alberto Folchi, and, of course, Conrad Hilton himself. **45/fig.6** In his short speech, the latter proclaimed that he would toss a coin in the Trevi Fountain to ensure his

39 *Vie Nuove*, September 1960 (special issue on Rome), 3.

40 "I comunisti propongono che l'Hilton sia costruito su un'area di Via Panama," *L'Unità*, July 16, 1958, 4; Antonio Cederna, "Il Monte Regalato," *Il Mondo*, July 22, 1958, 13.

41 Piero Della Seta and Roberto Della Seta, *I suoli di Roma: Uso e abuso del territorio nei cento anni della capitale* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1988), 223; Antonio Cederna, "L'Urbanista Stregone," *Il Mondo*, August 5, 1958, 13; Board meeting, February 20, 1959, SGI Archive, Consiglio di Amministrazione, folder 4, book 13, 246–47; shareholders meeting, May 8, 1959, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 13.

42 Board meeting, February 1, 1960, SGI Archive, Consiglio di Amministrazione, folder 4, book 14, 9; shareholders meeting, April 11, 1960, SGI Archive, Assemblee Azionisti, folder 2, book 12, 21–22.

43 Shareholders meeting, November 16, 1960, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 13.

44 Cederna, "Albergo in paradiso" (see note 29).

fig.6 Conrad Hilton paying homage to Cardinal Micara during the ground-breaking ceremony of the Rome Hilton. Source: *L'Espresso*, September 18, 1960, 1.

45 Board meeting, October 4, 1960, SGI Archive, Consiglio di Amministrazione, folder 4, book 14, 55–56.

46 Conrad Hilton, *The Good Earth of Rome.* SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 45.

47 Shareholders meeting, March 12, 1962, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 13.

48 *Nuovo Albergo a Roma,* "Istituto Luce" newsreel, June 1963, YouTube Clip KA153002 (accessed Feb. 6, 2020); PR brief, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 46, subfolder 18 (pre-opening activities); Frans Schutzman, letter to Paul G. Schreiber, May 13, 1963, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 45, 1.

49 "A Hilton Introduced in Rome," *Special to The New York Times,* June 14, 1963, 47.

50 Board meeting, November 11, 1963, SGI Archive, Consiglio d'Amministrazione, folder 4, book 15, 66.

51 SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 72, folder 29: Clientela italiana, Promemoria: Clientela americana e italiana, 1–2.

52 Emilio Pifferi, letter to Mario Savini Nicci, December 28, 1963, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 72, subfolder 28: Arredi e corredi — 5 impianti tecnici, 1.

return to Rome for the hotel opening in 1962. **46** The Hilton site was arguably the largest in town, with SGI's in-house contractor SOGENE bringing to Monte Mario between 300 and 450 workers every single day and a large design team dedicated to it stationed in the Villino Tronfale across the road, also designed by Ugo Luccichenti. **47** So construction moved forward fast (foundations were laid in February 1961 and the building topped out one year later), but not as fast as Hilton had hoped. The opening of "the most modern hotel in Italy" was announced nine months later than expected, June 5—8, 1963, and would include a four-day program that was expensive to the brink of vulgarity: the some nine hundred attendees would enjoy a nearly unlimited supply of food and drinks, a fashion show, a London Royal Ballet show, a pop gig, poolside activity with "approx. 24 girls ... to give the area an air of activity & fun," peacocks roaming free in the garden, and a treasure hunt at the SGI-owned sixteenth-century Villa Muti in the Alban Hills, which was refurbished for the purpose. "The walls ... still have bullet holes [from World War II]," reported a Hilton executive in the final rush of preparation. **48** But all of this ran into the sand due to Pope John XXIII's untimely death on June 3, which prompted SGI's executives to cancel the festivities as a sign of respect to the recently deceased pontiff. Hence, when the hotel finally opened on June 13, 1963, it did so "without fanfare," an omen of the building's ill-fated existence thereafter. **49**

Although the hotel managed to attract the sought-after American clientele (albeit comparatively less than other luxury hotels in the capital), it proved to be a fiasco with the Italian customers. **50** In 1966 the management reported a ten-to-one ratio between transatlantic and domestic patrons, "a shocking imbalance" resulting from two main factors: first, different attitudes towards holiday planning: "Americans, as a rule, book many months in advance. ... Italians, instead, book last minute or even show up at the hotel without prior booking, thereby finding no available rooms"; and second, "The habits of the Americans are often opposite to those of the Italians. This causes a great deal of discontent among the latter, who, often, not only boycott the hotel but also campaign against it in their own circles." **51** In short, the Rome Hilton did not appeal to the Italian rich. It did appeal, though, to the Roman working and lower middle classes, who, on the weekends, flocked to the hotel's glittering bar, to the dismay of the management: "The level of the [Italian] clientele is sub-par, which runs the risk of turning this place into a suburban honky-tonk," complained company architect Pifferi in a private memo. **52** If SGI had hoped that the Rome Hilton would become a social condenser for the transatlantic jet-set (a "magnet"

in HHI lingo) in the manner of its own Open Gate club near Via Veneto, where the local and the American wealthy had mingled since 1950, it was clear that the hotel was instead becoming the site of a cultural clash of epic proportions. [53] This clash was grounded, deep down, on the difficulty of translating American ideas of modernity, luxury, and decorum into the Italian context—a difficulty that is noticeable from the observation of several features of the building itself.

Camouflaging the Slab

From the outside, the Monte Mario scheme looked very different to the other newly built overseas Hiltons. Whereas the international Hiltons were, for the most part, stark, imposing, white slabs, strikingly indifferent to their surroundings, SGI's Rome Hilton lacked the mid-century modernist confidence of, say, SOM's Istanbul Hilton (1955) or Welton Becket's Cairo Hilton (1959). Formally, the Rome Hilton is not a single block but an aggregation of three blocks arranged in a zigzagging pattern; materially, it is not white-washed but completely clad in brown brick (an oddity in Roman architecture of that time, which was mostly painted bright colors). Looking at it from the opposite side of the old city—the Pincio viewpoint from Villa Borghese—it almost disappears against the dark green mass of the Monte Mario: the building camouflages itself, which, evidence suggests, was a deliberate design choice.

Upon moving the hotel site from the city center to the hilltop location, SGI must have immediately realized that placing such a large building in such a sensitive location was going to be much more difficult than sticking to the original plot. Real estate development is a private business in a public arena: the more visible a building is, the more it is liable to criticism. SGI certainly knew this, and that is why the Rome Hilton was, from the very beginning, *not* designed as a bold, bright slab—an inconsistency with the zeitgeist approach of Hilton architectural design. When Pifferi shared his first sketches with Gordon Bunshaft in 1951, the latter was bewildered: "He told me that approaching the problem that way equaled to giving in as an architect." [54] But the SGI man was well aware that the scheme was going to draw "accusations of abusing the Monte Mario ... and the 'sacred' skyline of the city," an issue that, in his view, could be avoided only by "camouflaging the building as much as possible, making it literally blend with the profile of the hill." [55] Deceiving the public, then, was always a design priority with the Rome Hilton, and pursued in numerous ways. [56]

In the spring of 1955, when SGI first presented the project to Mayor Rebecchini, the building was sold as featuring façades

53 Hilton Hotels International Notes, Fall—Winter 1960, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 57, 2. For a description of the Open Gate club, see Andrea Busiri Vici, "Il complesso dell'Open Gate in Roma," *Prospettive* 1 (Dec. 1951), 49—61.

54 Pifferi, Memo 10 (see note 22), 1a parte: Il tavolo di lavoro, 1.

55 Ibid.

56 Annabel Wharton makes a similar point in her own study of the Rome Hilton: Wharton, *Cold War* (see note 23), 132—48. Wharton's study, the only existing one on the subject, is based almost entirely on material from the archives of the Rome Hilton and the Hilton Hotels Corporation. The study does not incorporate information from the SGI Archive, nor from Italian newspapers and magazines of the 1950s and 1960s.

57 Cederna, "Albergo in paradiso" (see note 29), 12.

58 Antonio Cederna, "Monte Mario venduto," *Il Mondo*, April 24, 1956, 5.

59 Antonio Cederna, "Inchiesta a Monte Mario," *Il Mondo*, November 13, 1962, 13.

60 SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 44, subfolder: MUTUO COSTITUTIVO, Copia complete atti, November 7, 1962, section: Descrizione dell'edificio, 2.

61 Presidential Decree, no. 1188 (Giovanni Gronchi), October 8, 1959, Article D, *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1960/01/19/059U1188/sg (accessed June 26, 2020).

62 SGI Archive, Archivio Progetti, Progetti (II Parte), storage tube no. 672.

63 Michael Hill and Peter Kohane, "Site Decorum," *Architectural Theory Review* 20, no. 2 (2016), 228–46.

64 Gianni Rodari, "Il giallo dell'Hilton," *Vie Nuove*, September 1960 (special issue on Rome), n.p.

"entirely clad in glass [so that] it will capture 'the changing weather with its transparent colours, at once blending with the sky and the undulating silhouette of the hill'." 57 On other occasions, it was promised that, thanks to its large expanses of glass, the hotel "would be blue in the morning and purple at dusk." 58 And at times this pursuit (and selling) of the camouflaged building bordered on the ridiculous: at a town hall meeting a few months later, SGI reportedly proposed to cover the entire eastern façade with vine. 59 Luckily for them, the company did not have to resort to such embarrassing expedients: a bit of creative landscaping would do the trick just as well.

In order to achieve a maximum effect of disguise, SGI eventually resolved to shape two artificial hills next to the short sides of the building and fill the leftover spaces with 15-meter-tall stone pines, *Pinus pinea*. 60 The latter was a true *sine qua non* for getting the Hilton built, as stated in the 1959 Presidential Decree issued ad hoc for the hotel: "High trunk vegetation with perennial leaves ... must be planted to the north, to the south ... and in front of the building towards the city, so as to blend with the surrounding greenery," commanded Giovanni Gronchi. 61 Drawings in the SGI archive show that the exact height and location of these trees were based on a study (complete with perspective lines) of the view of the Hilton from the Pincio Hill. 62 In so doing, the company managed to successfully merge the outline of the building with that of its surroundings (the Church of the Madonna del Rosario to the north and Villa Miani to the south), thus minimizing the visual impact of the building on the Monte Mario skyline. All of this was, ultimately, a problem of *decorum* (meaning, of the appropriate relationship between the building and the beholder)—a problem that, as Michael Hill and Peter Kohane have recently explained, originated exactly in Italy during the Renaissance, and one that was felt especially with regard to objects that, like the Rome Hilton, were positioned on elevated sites (mostly churches). 63 One might say that while overseas Hiltons generally avoided any obligation to be "decorous" (Italian writer and Communist Party member Gianni Rodari described their style as "jail-like"), that was never an option in Rome. 64

Indecorous Interiors

SGI's struggle to make the Rome Hilton "decorous" was not only in the sense of "befitting to the site" but also, in its more common meaning, as "in keeping with good taste." In this respect, the problem had to do less with the exterior than with the interior of the building, and was largely a function of contrasts between Italian and American ideas of propriety.

SGI and HHI started talking seriously about interior design whilst earthmoving was underway in the autumn of 1960, and by that time the Americans had a clear idea of how their overseas hotels should look and feel on the inside, an idea that seemed to work well. This was, essentially, a proto-postmodern idea, as Pifferi explained in his memo: "The overseas Hiltons ... had to reference the historical forms and memories of the places where they were located. ... [A]n American on holiday in Hawaii ... had to find Hawaii ... and so the design of the projected hotel in Rome was to draw inspiration from the Colosseum, the Baths, and the Imperial Fora." [65]

Funnily enough, the brains behind this recipe was not (as one might easily think) a born-and-bred American but a Russian architect: Emmanuel Moiseevich Gran. Gran was trained as a navy officer and active in combat against the Bolsheviks during the October Revolution. He had spent the better part of the 1930s and 1940s designing buildings in Shanghai and Hong Kong for large British firms before emigrating to the US and becoming Director of Interior Design at Hilton in 1949, a post that he almost certainly landed on account of his exceptional delivery skills: "I may be not the best architect in the world," he reportedly said of himself, "but I am the fastest." [66] Pifferi, who met with him several times, characterized the man as follows: "An authentic Russian who left the country after Lenin's rise to power ... stocky, with a thunderous voice, and silver hair ... an American-naturalized citizen ... always worried about losing his job, and therefore always anxious." [67] As for the Rome Hilton, Gran envisioned interiors "inspired by the Roman Domus, Pompeii-style, with peristyles, triclinia, and all that," a form of postmodernism *avant la lettre* that did not go down well with his modernist-minded interlocutor: "I systematically objected that in Rome tourists can go see these things for themselves, the real things ... which makes it unnecessary to create caricatures and miniatures of them in the hotel. ... [I]f I followed his advice I would have made a fool of myself in the art and culture circles ... not to mention that I would have surely caused the project to be rejected by the authorities." [68] Gran also wanted the lobby to look like a museum gallery and a bar with a surrealist twist, featuring Roman ruins and antiquities: "It must become the main attraction for tourists in Rome." Pifferi, aware of how ill-disposed many Italians were towards Hilton's entrepreneurialism and bad taste, politely disapproved: "That's difficult ... you run the risk of being ridiculous." [69] The Italian press, in fact, was not always kind to the American magnate. Conrad Hilton, a *L'Espresso* journalist hypothesized, "can turn a mouldy basement into a bar with fake stalactites, call it 'The Grotto Bar,' and make

65 Pifferi, memo 10 (see note 22), 3a parte: Le discussioni con gli uomini della Hilton, Ezio Pifferi Archive, Rome, 5.

66 "Emmanuel Gran," https://sites.google.com/view/russian shanghai/architects/a-k/e-m-gran (accessed June 26, 2020).

67 Pifferi, memo 10 (see note 22), 3a parte: Le discussioni con gli uomini della Hilton, Ezio Pifferi Archive, Rome, 4.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid; Emilio Pifferi, memo of the meeting with Mr. Gran and Mrs. Beck, June 15, 1961, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 44, subfolder: Verbali degli incontri dal 19/9/1960, 1.

70 Auro Roselli, "Zsa Zsa Gabor gli insegnò a Vestire," *L'Espresso*, April 2, 1956, 3.

71 Italo Insolera, "Minaccia di scandalo," *Epoca*, March 31, 1957, 4.

72 Emilio Pifferi, memo dated February 3, 1961, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 44, subfolder: Verbali degli incontri dal 19/9/1960.

73 Emilio Pifferi, memo of the meeting with Rudy Basler, Emmanuel Gran, and Giuseppe Cuccia, March 18, 1961, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 44, subfolder: Verbali degli incontri dal 19/9/1960, 4.

74 Emilio Pifferi, memo of the meeting with Carlo Mollino, May 30, 1961, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 44, subfolder: Verbali degli incontri dal 19/9/1960.

75 Pifferi, memo March 18, 1961 (see note 73), 4. On Melchiorre Bega, see Stefano Zironi, *Melchiorre Bega architetto* (Milan: Domus, 1983).

76 Pifferi, memo March 18, 1961 (see note 73), 4.

77 Emilio Pifferi, memo of the meeting with Franco Albini, Ignazio Gardella, Melchiorre Bega, Charlie Bell, and Rudy Basler, February 5, 1962, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 44, subfolder: Verbali degli incontri dal 19/9/1960, 2—5; Emilio Pifferi, memo of the meeting with Mrs. Beck, Mr. Basler, and Mr Schutzmann, October 16, 1962, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 44, subfolder: Verbali degli incontri dal 19/9/1960.

a quarter million a year out of it." [70] And again, as rumors about the hotel's vulgar interiors spread in the city, Italo Insolera, a rising star in Italian planning, could not help reacting with a gush of vitriol: "Rome does not need Puerto Rican tricks to keep attracting tourists." [71] Pifferi's task, then, was a delicate one: tempering the bizarre proposals of his American colleague in order to save face, while still acquiescing to HHI's general design policy.

In early 1961, Pifferi, as the lead SGI architect, approached Franco Albini, Franca Helg, and Ignazio Gardella for the Hilton interiors, who accepted the offer on the spot: the Albini-Helg team was to design the ground floor lobby and Gardella the underground ballroom-cum-art gallery. [72] And as to the "surrealist" bar, Pifferi spoke to fellow Turinese and old friend Carlo Mollino: "He is the most creative, skilled, and humorous designer around right now, with a penchant for surrealist expression to boot, all of which would perfectly fit Gran's demands." [73] But the wealthy aesthete turned down the offer: "He is too busy," explained Pifferi. "I insisted, but then realised that he is quite exhausted and discouraged." [74] Hence the choice fell on Melchiorre Bega, another Milan-based architect with a long track record of expensive interior designs. [75] But, considering the project's theme (an American chain hotel in Rome) and the client's wishes ("The character ... of the country must be reflected in the interiors"), why pick three boutique firms from Milan known for their sophisticated designs? [76] Pifferi obviously wanted to counterbalance American kitsch with Italian elegance, a compromise that, unfortunately, was to bring sadly unimpressive results.

Gran and his assistant, interior decorator Inge Bech, systematically rejected the designs of the architects: be it Albini's plans for the lobby ("the general mood is too dark"), Gardella's color palette for the ballroom ("red makes you think of old dinner halls"), or Bega's scheme of the rooms ("not enough mirrors ... paintings too small ... needs more expensive furniture"). [77] Quite evidently, Milanese elegance, predicated on aristocratic restraint, was incompatible with the Hilton idea of elegance, based on popular excess. Near the end of construction,

Gran and Bech made their position very clear: "Elegance here must be understood by everyone, and not just by those conversant with certain conceptual and formal sophistications ... [W]e need to move towards a more traditional idea of elegance as ornament." [78] SGI, and especially managing director Aldo Samaritani, were on the same page: "The work is not ... acceptable for the management, nor for people like me, whose judgement is consistent with that of the prospective clientele. ... I am sure that you will understand our ... embarrassment in having to decide between respecting the work of an artist and ensuring economic success." [79] And so, shortly before opening, the Hilton design team mangled the whole fit-out of the hotel: red walls and floors ("too violent") were turned oatmeal and brown, gray light fixtures ("too dull") became gold-plated, and many other things were changed to attain the desired sense of "softness ... calm ... [and] general happiness." [80] Yet, for all the effort on everyone's part, the outcome of this last-minute makeover was neither Milanese nor Hilton chic. Pifferi had predicted it: "The lack of an agreed plan ... the collective management of the job ... and the will to please everyone are sapping the work of its character." [81] The atmosphere of dejection inside the Rome Hilton was evident to anyone visiting it, and even Los Angeles weekly *Variety* registered "a certain 'sombre' effect" in the interiors of the newly completed hotel, a comment that would prove prescient of the building's cinematic afterlife. [82]/fig. 7

An "Evil" Building
Between 1964 (the year after its opening) and 1984, the Rome Hilton starred in about ninety films, averaging more than four pictures a year for twenty years straight—an impressive record for a single building. Now, nearly half of these films are of the B variety and have a dark plot: crime (24), Eurospy (9), mystery fiction (5), and horror (2, both by cult director Dario Argento), which only shows how the Rome Hilton consistently attracted directors keen on portraying grim deeds. (In this canon the hotel is often the scene of a violent crime, the abode of a mobster, a den of gangsters, and so on.) [83] In this sense, the filmic

78 Aldo Samaritani, letter to Ignazio Gardella, April 29, 1963, SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 44, subfolder: Verbali degli incontri dal 19/9/1960, 1–2.

79 Aldo Samaritani, letter to Franco Albini, April 29, 1963, ibid.

80 Pifferi, memo 10 (see note 22), 3a parte: Le discussioni con gli uomini della Hilton, 5; Samaritani, letter to Ignazio Gardella (see note 78).

81 Pifferi, memo October 16, 1962 (see note 77), 3.

82 "Vaudeville: Rome Hilton Highly Lauded," *Variety*, July 10, 1963, 231.

83 In chronological order: *Seven Golden Men* (Marco Vicario, 1965), *Fantomas minaccia il mondo* (André Hunebelle, Haroun Tazieff, 1965), *Diamonds Are a Man's Best Friend* (Vittorio Sala, 1966), *Dr. Goldfoot and the Girl Bombs* (Mario Bava, 1966), *Perry Grant: agente di ferro* (Luigi Capuano, 1966), *Seven Golden Men Strike Again* (Marco Vicario, 1966), *Killer 77: Alive or Dead* (Mino Guerrini, 1966), *Operation St. Peter's* (Lucio Fulci, 1967), *Assalto al tesoro di stato* (Piero Pierotti, 1967), *Ok Connery* (Alberto De Martino, 1967), *Segretissimo* (Fernando Cerchio, 1967), *Il sapore della vendetta* (Niels Arden Oplev, 1968), *The Killer Likes Candy* (Maurice Cloche, 1968), *Death Laid an Egg* (Giulio Questi, 1968), *Diabolik* (Mario Bava, 1968), *Machine Gun McCain* (Giuliano Montaldo, 1969), *Human Cobras* (Bitto Albertini, 1971), *The Cat o' Nine Tails* (Dario Argento, 1971), *The Case of the Scorpion's Tail* (Sergio Martino, 1971), *The Fifth Cord* (Luigi Bazzoni, 1971), *The Valachi Papers* (Terence Young, 1972), *Shadows Unseen* (Camillo Bazzoni, 1972), *Metti ... che ti rompo il muso* (Giuseppe Vari, 1973), *The Sicilian Connection* (Ferdinando Baldi, 1973), *The Police Serve the Citizens?* (Romolo Girolami, 1973), *White Fang* (Maurizio Pradeaux, 1974), *Silent Action* (Sergio Martino, 1975), *The Left Hand of the Law* (Giuseppe Rosati, 1975), *The Last Round* (Stelvio Massi, 1976), *Blood and Bullets* (Alfonso Brescia, 1976), *Hit Squad* (Bruno Corbucci, 1976), *Goodbye & Amen* (Damiano Damiani, 1978), *The Last Guappo* (Alfonso Brescia, 1978), *The Perfect Crime* (Giuseppe Rosati, 1978), *L'importante è non farsi notare* (Romolo Guerrieri, 1979), *The New Godfathers* (Alfonso Brescia, 1979), *Tenebrae* (Dario Argento, 1982), *Cop in Drag* (Bruno Corbucci, 1984).

fig.7 Franco Albini
and SGI, double helix
staircase at the Rome
Hilton.
Source: *Vitrum* 141,
(Jan.—Feb. 1964), 32.
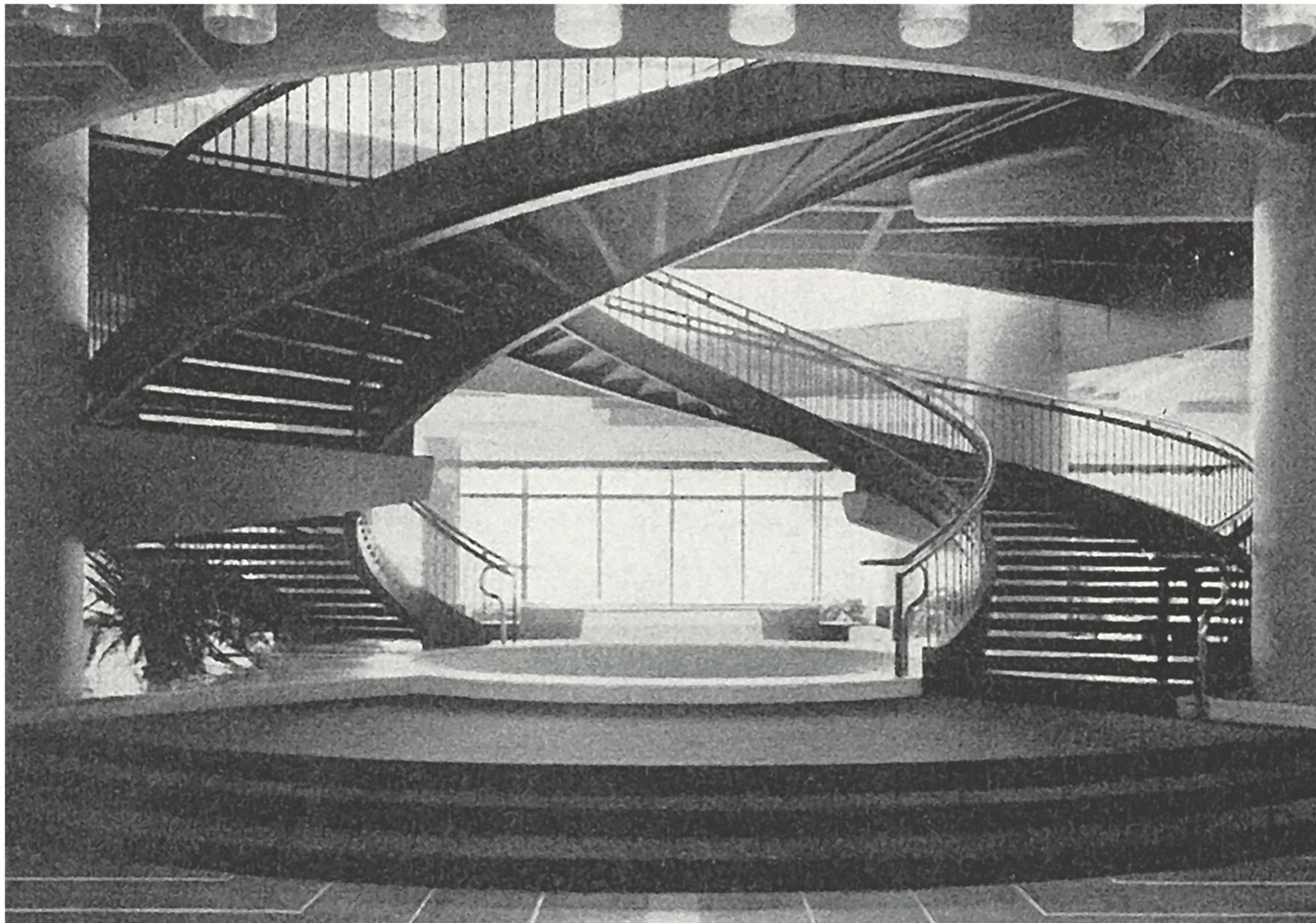
representations of the hotel in low budget crime dramas echo longstanding associations of its locale.

In the Middle Ages, Dante Alighieri tells us, Monte Mario is "Montemalo" ("bad mountain"), apparently because of the famous hanging there of a patrician in the tenth century; in 1527, Charles III gives his *Landsknechten* a pep talk on top of this very hill before unleashing them onto the Sacred City; in the late nineteenth century, a popular myth goes, the English-owned Villa Stuart near the Hilton is a hotspot for European occultism. Add to this that, around the time the hotel is completed, Monte Mario is the milieu of mysterious events: former Mayor Urbano Cioccetti crashes his car next to the hotel just weeks before its opening; shortly after, UFO researcher Bruno Ghibaudi goes on air to report the sighting of a flying saucer hovering above the SGI building. [84] As absurd as it may seem, the combination of these facts speaks volumes of the strange place that the Rome Hilton came to occupy in popular imagination over time.

Yet the broader moral problem associated with the Rome Hilton is that of *the misdeed*, or illicit action. The building, after all, was borne out of a blatant abuse of power by its client, SGI, which

figs. 8 a–c The Rome Hilton as a stealer of jouissance.
Sources: L'Unità, April 8, 1956, 4; L'Unità, July 20, 1958, 4; Il Paese, September 15, 1960, 5.

resorted to extreme means to change the zoning of the site (as we have seen, from the heavy-handed lobbying of the city administration to outright institutional blackmail). It is, therefore, no surprise that the hotel became also a popular backdrop for Italian comedy and sexploitation flicks heavy on "immoral" acts and general fraudulence/indecency. [85] Adultery, sexually predatory behavior, *ménages à trois*, cross-dressing, bribery, gambling, masonic rituals, vulgar display of wealth ... inside the Rome Hilton (and inside the screen) many moral tenets of Catholic Italy are systematically broken. Did SGI ur-enemy Antonio Cederna

84 "Cioccetti contro un'albero," *L'Unità*, April 7, 1963, 4; Cesare Zavattini, *I misteri di Roma* (documentary, 1963), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcKFQ3qH8RI (accessed June 26, 2020).

85 In chronological order: *Primitive Love* (Luigi Scattini, 1964), *Kiss the Other Sheik* (Eduardo De Filippo, Marco Ferreri, Luciano Salce, 1965), *Adultery Italian Style* (Pasquale Festa Campanile, 1966), *Love Italian Style* (Steno, 1966), *Anyone Can Play* (Luigi Zampa, 1967), *The Black Sheep* (Luciano Salce, 1968), *The Sweet Body of Deborah* (Romolo Girolami, 1968), *Normal Young Man* (Dino Risi, 1969), *That's How We Women Are* (Dino Risi, 1971), *Sex of Their Bodies* (Luigi Scattini, 1972), *Colpo Grosso, Grossissimo ... anzi Probabile* (Tonino Ricci, 1972), *The Driver's Seat* (Giuseppe Patroni Griffi, 1974), *Il gatto mammone* (Nando Cicero, 1975), *Conviene fare bene l'amore* (Pasquale Festa Campanile, 1975), *Gambling City* (Sergio Martino, 1975), *The Con Artists* (Sergio Corbucci, 1976), *Emanuelle Around the World* (Joe D'Amato, 1977), *Viva l'Italia!* (Dino Risi, Ettore Scola, Mario Monicelli, 1977), *First Love* (Dino Risi, 1978), *Velvet Hands* (Castellano & Pipolo, 1979), *I'm Photogenic* (Dino Risi, 1980), *Against Each Other, Practically Friends* (Bruno Corbucci, 1981), *Più bello di così si muore* (Pasquale Festa Campanile, 1982), *Sesso e volentieri* (Dino Risi, 1982), *Attenti a quei P2* (Pier Francesco Pingitore, 1982), *An Ideal Adventure* (Stefano Vanzina, 1982).

foresee this critical fortune in his characterization of the Rome Hilton as "a Babylon on top of Monte Mario"? [86] Maybe not—but the phrase became a nickname.

86 Cederna, "Monte Mario" (see note 58), 5.

The Rome Hilton's implicit condition as a "morally deficient" object underpinned its explicit reception as a "traumagenic" object. Bruno Zevi described it as a "perennial scar on Rome," Cederna as a building "whose crushing presence hurts Rome," the preservationist association Italia Nostra ("Our Italy") as "an oversized building that violates Rome." [87] In cartoons, the hotel is still an object inflicted upon the city, but in the narrower sense as a thief of jouissance. Here we find it, in turn, as a monumental slab indifferent to the suffering of the Roman poor, as a massive cube blocking out the sun above the city, and as a gigantic Uncle Sam's hat driving a couple of lovers away from their usual make-out-point. [88]/figs. 8 a—c

87 Bruno Zevi, "Venticinque anni di corruzione," in Cronache di Architettura (Bari: Laterza, 1970), vol. 7, 26—35, here 29; Antonio Cederna, "La foglia di fico," Il Mondo, May 15, 1962, 13; "L'albergo Hilton," Bollettino di Italia Nostra 33 (June—July 1963), 49.

Hilton-Induced Defeatism

The depiction of the Rome Hilton as a vampire physically and morally violating the city became a trope in Rome architectural discourse. Zevi, again, lists the building in his personal triad of "Roman atrocities" alongside the *Vittoriano* (1911) and the *Palazzaccio* (also from 1911). [89] But unlike its predecessors, both products of an authoritarian monarchy of the 1880s, the Rome Hilton was conceived in the 1950s, in a republic that had just displaced a dictatorship and that was then setting up its own democratic institutions. For this reason, the construction of the Rome Hilton came as much more of a shock to the Roman planning community, which, since 1953, had been campaigning for transparent planning practices and for a progressive city plan (i.e., a city plan that would make for the distribution of public welfare and not for the creation of private profit). The approval of the Hilton in late 1958, coupled with the administration's rejection of the progressive plan drafted by the Comitato di Elaborazione Tecnica (Committee of Technical Elaboration, or CET) in the same year, undermined all these democratic dreams. [90] The SGI-funded and built hotel thus became the "shrine of building speculation ... [and the very] representation of the disruptive force of land and property investment ... in a city controlled by private interests." [91]

88 L'Unità, Apr. 8, 1956, 4; L'Unità, July 20, 1958, 4; Il Paese, Sept. 15, 1960, n.p. Newspaper cuttings stored in: SGI Archive, Società Controllate, Serie H/30, Società Italo Americana Nuovi Alberghi — IANA, folder 56, subfolder: Ritagli di giornale.

89 Zevi, "Roma senza politica" (see note 1).

In short, to the Rome community of leftist architects and planners, the Rome Hilton became synonymous with the idea of defeat. This characterization of the hotel, and the very use of the defeat/victory dualism to retroactively assess this or that building venture in the city, is particularly central in the narrative of Italia Nostra, an association extremely active in Rome from 1955 on, whose mandate was to fight battles for the pres-

90 Within CET were some of the most respected figures in Roman architecture and planning at that time: Enrico Del Debbio, Enrico Lenti, Roberto Marino, Vincenzo Monaco, Saverio Muratori, Giuseppe Nicolosi, Luigi Piccinato, and Ludovico Quaroni.

91 L'Unità, May 19, 1963, 4.

ervation of historical buildings or districts. The "Battle of Monte Mario" was the most burning defeat ever for the association, a key event in the history of conservation in modern Rome whose repercussions were to spill over to the neighboring (and then-nascent) field of modern architectural history. [92]

Italia Nostra, in fact, was not only the haunt of progressive urbanites resolved to protect their cities from "barbaric" developers like SGI but also the breeding ground for an entire generation of future architectural historians, all students or recent graduates of the Valle Giulia school in Rome. Among them were Leonardo Benevolo and Italo Insolera (bearers of the "Italia Nostra ideology", a form of obstinate conservationism), and Vieri Quilici, Mario Manieri Elia, Manfredo Tafuri, and Giorgio Ciucci—that is, the core group of what was to become "the Venice School" of architectural history in the 1970s. "We all came from the Italia Nostra circle," Ciucci explained in a recent interview, and indeed echoes of the association's Manichaean language of good-versus-evil permeate the group's early work, especially that of Manfredo Tafuri. [93]

Like many of his colleagues, at this time Tafuri was invested in unraveling the urban history of Rome since its designation as the capital of modern Italy in 1870.

More than his colleagues though, Tafuri was drawn to exploring the continuities in the planning of the city across administrations, and to the role of private actors and architects in this process. His first piece ever—on the making of the Via Nazionale, the main thoroughfare of liberal Rome, by a churchman, Monsignor Giuseppe De Merode—already contains all these elements. [94] And in three contributions that followed, all in the *Italia Nostra* journal, the young historian shifts his aim to the Roman urbanism of his time, and therefore to the influence of the Vatican on the expansion of the city. He laments the Rome administration's giving in to SGI's demands in matters of road planning, condemns the government's plans to sell parts of the state-owned Villa Savoia to real estate developers—including, ostensibly, SGI, which had always been active in that area, as his readers knew all too well—and partakes, as a planner, in the Italia Nostra-funded campaign and exhibition against the proposal to cut a major road across the Villa Doria Pamphilj—a scheme that, in Insolera's words, "had been clearly designed to favour the expansion of the city towards the west," that is, where SGI and the Vatican owned the lion's share of land. [95] Subtext to all these attacks is the bitter acknowledgement of a connivance between architects, planners, and the forces of property speculation—"in 1950s Rome one

92 Manlio Lupinacci, "La battaglia di Monte Mario," *Epoca*, May 12, 1957, 83.

93 Giorgio Ciucci, interview with the author, Rome, April 5, 2019.

94 Manfredo Tafuri, "La prima strada di Roma moderna: Via Nazionale," *Urbanistica*, 27 (1959), 95–109.

95 Manfredo Tafuri, "I lavori di attuazione del P.R. di Roma," *Bollettino di Italia Nostra*, 18 (May–Aug. 1960), 6–11, here 10; Manfredo Tafuri, "Villa Savoia. I precedenti storici. Cronache di una distruzione," *Bollettino di Italia Nostra* 23 (May–June 1961), 13–15; "La mostra della Villa Doria Pamphilj a Roma," *Bollettino di Italia Nostra* 33 (June–July 1963), 28–33, here 32; Insolera, *Roma moderna* (see note 2), 244.

witnesses ... a veritable impotence of the designer," he would say many years later. 96 This theme, that of architecture's "selling out" to capital, would remain central in his work both as a writer and teacher (see the closing chapter of Architecture and Utopia, classic Tafuri). "The ideology presented to us by ... Manfredo Tafuri ... was that ... no one should be part of the process of building speculation," as Massimo Scolari, one of his first pupils, put it. 97

Now, to Tafuri this odious consorting of architects with capitalists is perfectly epitomized in the building of the Rome Hilton and the contemporaneous rejection of the progressive city plan of the CET. Both events are recounted as "defeats" nine times in the text of "La vicenda architettonica romana 1945—1961" (Roman Architectural Events 1945—1961), his lucid analysis of architecture and planning in postwar Rome. 98 And there is no doubt that both events were viscerally resented by the young historian: upon hearing of the rejection of the progressive city plan in June 1958 (as the Hilton planning process was coming to fruition), Tafuri, we are told, "cried because of the defeat in a battle that he had strongly championed." 99 But in this he was not alone: the Rome Hilton is bundled up with the idea of defeat also in the early work of another intellectual heavyweight of the Roman left, director Nanni Moretti, whose first picture ever, a 1973 short film entitled precisely *La sconfitta* (the defeat), sees the protagonist deliver an ironic monologue on the failure of the Italian left against the backdrop of SGI's Villino Trionfale next to the hotel, which functions as the cinematic stand-in for Christian Democratic hegemony. 100/figs. 9 a–b

Frustrated radicalism, crony capitalism, architectural professionalism, SGI, the Rome Hilton ... the notion of defeat, drawn from the Italia Nostra discourse, is the anchor point linking all these elements of Tafuri's early intellectual cosmology. "Study the historian before you begin to study the facts," famously said E. H. Carr — a recommendation that we should take into serious consideration if we are to make sense of Tafuri's trademark and highly influential defeatist attitude in architectural history. 101 That this theoretical leaning owes much to the personal history of its champion might sound ludicrous at first — especially if a core element of this history is the misdeeds of a real estate developer owned by the Vatican. SGI, however, casts a long shadow not only over the early work of the Roman historian but also over his early biography: son of a civil engineer and occasional builder, Tafuri allegedly grew up in an upscale apartment block designed in the late 1930s by Ugo Luccichenti, a long-time collaborator of SGI and the main designer the Rome Hilton itself. 102 Perhaps

96 Manfredo Tafuri, interview, in Claudio Velardi, ed., *Communis patria. Conversazioni su Roma* (Naples: Cronopio, 1993), 11—52, here 17.

97 Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976), 170—182; Thomas Weaver and Lea Catherine Szachka, "Interview with Massimo Scolari," in *AA Files*, 65 (2012), 33—47, here 37.

98 Manfredo Tafuri, "La vicenda architettonica romana 1945—1961," *Superfici: Problemi di architettura e tecnologie edili 5* (Apr. 1962), 20—41.

99 Giusi Maria Letizia Rapisarda, "L'uomo, l'intellettuale, l'accademico," in Orazio Carpenzano, Marco Pietrosanto, and Donatella Scatena, eds., *Lo storico scellerato. Scritti su Manfredo Tafuri* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019), 21—34, here 25.

100 Nanni Moretti, *La sconfitta* (1973).

101 Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (1961), (London: Penguin, 2018), 157.

102 Franco Purini, interview with the author, June 5, 2018. The building in question is Palazzina Mengarini, completed in 1941. Information on the building is found in the Archivio Contemporaneo at the Accademia di San Luca, Rome, Fondo Luccichenti, folder 12.

it would be a stretch to say that Tafuri's defeatism occasions from an unresolved oedipal complex (history is not monocausal, nor are its reasons found in the lives of "great men"), yet it is beyond question that SGI's activities, and especially its Hilton scheme in Rome, played a substantial role in the formative years of the Roman historian. [103] Who would have guessed that the building of an American chain hotel on top of one of the oldest cities in Europe, an act of pure capitalist hubris, would have had such lasting impact on our discipline? It did generate, though, the kind of "total disenchantment," that, as Alberto Asor Rosa put it, "produces great historians" like Tafuri. [104]

Tafuri's signature catastrophizing ("architecture is dead") might be, after all, a form of grieving rooted in his early experience as a young scholar in a city corrupt beyond redemption—"in Rome, more than everywhere else in Italy, you feel a despair, a pessimism of history," said writer Corrado Alvaro. [105] And the failings of Roman planning, of which the Rome Hilton is the crowning achievement, might be at the root of Tafuri's ground-breaking import of critical theory (a philosophy developed to make sense of failure) and of Tafuri's own obsession with failure itself: "Manfredo studied failures all his life … it was a defining feature of his work." [106] In the absence of definitive evidence, the issue cannot (and will not) be settled, but all the signs point there. The ghostly presence of the Monte Mario Hilton, the original sin of architecture in postwar Rome, will keep looming over Tafuri's grand contemplation of architectural debacles. Even at the end of his long 1973 essay on the Via Giulia, the historian could not resist mentioning the irony of it: Bramante's street points straight to SGI's building, which functions as its backdrop. figs.10 a–b In other words, the most utopic scheme of Papal Rome aims at the most dystopic scheme of Christian Democratic Rome: Tafuri's insinuation is that theological absolutism continues in today's corporate despotism. [107]

103 Luka Skansi hinted at, but did not foreground, the influence of building speculation in the intellectual formation of Tafuri. The point is made in two conference papers that he gave in 2015, respectively in Sao Paulo and Zurich. For a transcript of the Sao Paulo paper, see Luka Skansi, "Qualcosa oltre l'architettura. Gli anni formativi," in Adalberto da Silva Retto Jr, Mário Henrique Simão D'Agostino, and Rafael Urano Frajndlich, eds., *Manfredo Tafuri: seus leitores e suas leituras; atas do seminário internacional / His Readers and Their Readings; Proceedings of the International Seminar / I suoi lettori e le sue letture; Atti del seminario internazionale* (Sao Paulo: FAU USP, 2018), 141–61, http://www.fau.usp.br/manfredo_tafuri/LIVRO%20TAFURI.pdf (accessed June 29, 2020). The Zurich paper was entitled "Manfredo Tafuri and Italian Contemporary Architecture: The Roman Years (1959–68)" and was given at the SNF-sponsored conference *Once Upon a Time … Manfredo Tafuri and the Crisis of Architectural History* at the Cabaret Voltaire on March 6, 2015.

104 Alberto Asor Rosa, "Critica dell'ideologia ed esercizio storico," *Casabella* 619–20 (1995), 28–33, here 33.

105 Corrado Alvaro, *Roma vestita di nuovo* (Milan: Bompiani, 1957), 9.

106 Gianni Accasto, "Prima che tutto cominciasse," in Carpenzano, Pietrosanto and Scatena, *Lo storico* (see note 99), 197–211, here 208.

107 Manfredo Tafuri, "Via Giulia: Storia di una struttura urbana," in Luigi Salerno, Luigi Spezzaferro, and Manfredo Tafuri, eds., *Via Giulia: una utopia urbanistica del 500* (Rome: Staderini, 1973), 65–152, here 152.

figs.10 a—b The Rome
Hilton at the vanishing
point of the Via Giulia
(full picture and
enlargement).
Source: Manfredo
Tafuri, "Via Giulia. Storia
di una struttura urbana,"
in Luigi Salerno,
Luigi Spezzaferro, and
Manfredo Tafuri, eds.,
*Via Giulia: Una utopia
urbanistica del 500*
(Rome: Staderini, 1973),
65–152, here 144.