

# Headquarters of the Società Umanitaria, Milan (1940s)

## Rubble for Sale

### Alessandro Benetti

Politecnico di Torino

The Società Umanitaria was founded in 1893 in Milan, thanks to the bequest of Prospero Moisé Loria, an entrepreneur and philanthropist, with the aim of providing all citizens with concrete assistance through study, education, and work. Over time, it grew to become one of the city's most prominent charitable societies, and it continues its activities to this day. Established in 1902 near the city center, its headquarters gradually expanded to occupy an entire large block, incorporating the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century cloisters of the convent of Santa Maria della Pace, as well as several early twentieth-century industrial buildings, among others. The most prominent of these was the Teatro del Popolo (People's Theatre), formerly a warehouse of the Tecnomasio Italiano Brown Boveri (TIBB) mechanical engineering company, notable for its elegant and functional Art Nouveau steel structure. Heavily damaged in the air raids of August 1943, the Società Umanitaria was reconstructed beginning in 1947, based on a design by local architect Giovanni Romano. Romano restored the ancient cloisters and added a new H-plan complex housing classrooms and workshops. This latter addition, a boldly modernist work featuring a prefabricated concrete structure and curtain-wall façades, was highly praised by critics and included in

Piero Bottoni's seminal *Antologia di edifici moderni in Milano* (Anthology of Modern Buildings in Milan) in 1954. Romano's project for the Società Umanitaria was modified over time and completed only in 1956, largely due to a lack of resources. As architecture historians Maurizio Boriani, Corinna Morandi, and Augusto Rossari have observed: "Romano himself, when discussing the design process of the complex, emphasizes that the issue of available resources represented the greatest constraint on the project." [Boriani, Morandi, Rossari 2006, 200]. This statement is corroborated by a lesser-known aspect of the reconstruction: its funding through the sale of materials and components salvaged from its rubble. The society's archives preserve correspondence with various buyers, including quotations and receipts, mostly dating from 1946. That year, the Comi foundry purchased radiators amounting to 90 metric quintals, delivered in several batches between April and May; two damaged boilers were recovered by the Pietro Albera company in September; and in October, the Cooperativa Lavoranti Muratori acquired more than 10,000 kg of iron windows, frames, and parapets. These are just a few examples of a systematic sales activity, recorded in accounting sheets dedicated to each bombed building. In 1947, demolition work extended to the ruined Teatro del Popolo, which proved to be the most abundant source of reusable materials. A complete inventory compiled in June 1948 attests to their remarkable quantities: a total of 137,800 bricks, 102,976 kg of iron components, and 300 m<sup>2</sup> of cover panels. Interestingly, correspondence with various construction companies shows how coveted these materials were at the time. In October 1947, the Galletti Callisto company sent a heartfelt letter to the society's president, Riccardo Bauer, explaining how perfectly the theatre's remnants would suit one of its ongoing construction sites, and offering a generous deal to obtain them: "We are very interested in the iron frame, which would suit one of our constructions. We would be willing to offer you the sum of £2,200.00. We will also cover all the demolition expenses" [1947]. The documents preserved in the Società Umanitaria archives leave many questions open. First, further research – possibly in other archives – would be necessary to determine how and where the materials sourced from its demolition sites were reused. Second,



Figs. 1-5  
The headquarters of the Società Umanitaria after the August 1943 raids. The steel structure of the *Teatro del Popolo* – one of the most heavily damaged buildings – is clearly visible. Courtesy Fototeca Società Umanitaria.



4



5

and quite intriguingly, no evidence has been found of the on-site activity of the RI-MAT Society, “for the recovery, sorting, and testing of construction materials obtained from demolition or pre-existing rubble” [1945], which the Società Umanitaria itself co-founded in 1945. To conclude, the next step in this research could examine other large private properties – such as boarding schools, factories, and similar institutions – to assess whether this is an isolated case or part of a recurrent approach in managing the demolition and reconstruction of war-damaged structures.

#### **Bibliography and Archives**

“La Società Umanitaria”. In *Milano contemporanea: itinerari di architettura e di urbanistica*, edited by Maurizio Boriani, Corinna Morandi and Augusto Rossari, 199–200. Milan: Clup, 2006.

ASU – Archivio Società Umanitaria, Milan.  
Fasc. 59/1945.

ASU – Archivio Società Umanitaria, Milan.  
Fasc. 42/1947.