

The Restoration of the Historical Real Estate Fonds of the Generali Group Historical Archives

Simone Conversi
Assicurazioni Generali S.p.A.
Italy
simone.conversi@generali.com

Abstract:

The *Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni* (INA) was a public authority founded in 1912 by the Italian government to establish a national monopoly on insurance. Later, in 1923, a new law introduced competition among private insurance companies and the *Istituto*. Following this, the latter began investing heavily in real estate. Over the course of time, many buildings were acquired or constructed in the centre of every major Italian city (as well as in the outskirts, both in Rome and in other cities). A few properties were also to be found in the Italian colonies and elsewhere abroad. INA became a private joint-stock company in 1992, and later on in the same decade, the board made the decision to divest the property division of the company, transferring the majority of its real estate assets to *Unione Immobiliare* (UNIM). This decision marked the end of INA’s real estate activity, after uninterrupted growth since 1923. Such vast real estate activity produced various records – both administrative and technical – which only became available for research in their original form in 2000-2002. The real estate papers were transferred to the Historical Archive of INA, which preserved their existing arrangement in boxes, tracing paper tubes and blueprint folders (with an estimated total of 20,000 repository items). In 2014, the staff of the Archive decided to rearrange these materials and to collect them in what would later be called the Historical Real Estate Fonds. But what was the intended process for this? Was it necessary to undertake a thorough description of all papers and records? Or was it preferable to first outline a general framework? The latter was the chosen path. The project aims to add the entire Fonds to the back-office software of the Historical Archives of the Generali Group to which INA Assitalia belongs since the merger in 2000.

Keywords:

real estate, insurance, state-owned company, Italy, retention, access

1. Introduction

«Well, there's the FIAT garage where we leave the car' the Colonel said. 'You can leave the key at the office. They don't steal. I'll go in the bar while you park upstairs. They have people that will bring the bags.' 'Is it O.K. to leave your gun and shooting gear in the trunk, sir?' 'Sure. They don't steal here. I told you that once.' 'I wanted to take the necessary precaution, sir, on your valuable property'. 'You are so damned noble that sometimes you stink,' the Colonel said. 'Get the wax out of your ears and hear what I say the first time.' 'I heard you, sir,' Jackson said»⁽¹⁾

The FIAT garage on Piazzale Roma, mentioned here by US Colonel Richard Cantwell, the hero of Hemingway's novel *Across the River and into the Trees*, whilst on a visit from Trieste to Venice, was an INA building, constructed in the thirties by the *Istituto* in accordance with the municipality of Venice and AGIP and then rented to FIAT.

On 14th July 1944, in the midst of World War II, a fire broke out, destroying an estimated 5km of celluloids from the famous *Istituto LUCE*, including many movies of the regime. That event took place in the Bonvecchiati Hotel, another INA building, located in Calle Goldoni, Venice, which had been partially confiscated by order of the Prefect to provide repository space for the *LUCE*.

This is to emphasise the historical significance of INA's real estate, and how many stories their records might hold about our country. The more the papers are rearranged, the greater the wealth of information which can be deduced from them.

2. Brief history of the Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni's Real Estate Holdings (1923-1998)

The *Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni* (INA) was a public authority, founded by Law 305, April 4th, 1912 by the government of Italian Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti. The new state-owned company was to have a national monopoly on insurance, but ten years later (after the end of WWI and the annexation of Trieste to Italy, with its major insurance companies *Assicurazioni Generali* and *Riunione Adriatica di Sicurtà - RAS*) the new Law 966, April 29th, 1923 introduced by the Fascist government brought in competition among private insurance companies. At that time, the *Istituto* began investing heavily in real estate, initially through its subsidiary company, the *Istituto Nazionale Immobiliare* (INI) and then directly from 1934 and onwards. During those years:

«The INA benefited from the renovation of Italy's biggest city. Furthermore, in cooperation with the local administration, INA played an active role in the realisation of urban plans for several towns, frequently acting as the pioneer and driving force [...]. During this period, INA's real estate activity included striking and large-scale projects, such as the realisation of an entire arterial road in Rome (Corso del Rinascimento), and of most of another (Via della Conciliazione, also in Rome)»⁽²⁾

Over the course of time, a great many buildings were constructed or acquired in the centre of every major Italian city (as well as in the outskirts, both of Rome and other cities). Before the outbreak of WWII, important properties were also completed in the two biggest cities of Italian-controlled Libya - Tripoli and Benghazi - as well as elsewhere abroad. This building activity continued into the 50s and 60s.

INA attracted famous architects to work on its projects, including Ugo Giovannozzi, Marcello Piacentini, Arnaldo Foschini, Adalberto Libera, Mario De Renzi, Giulio Pediconi, Mario Paniconi, Mario Ridolfi but also Carlo Broggi, Gino Peresutti, Attilio Spaccarelli, Cesare Costantini, Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo, Cesare Valle and others. Gio Ponti (before he found fame) also worked for INA in Austria. This list, in itself incomplete, aims only to provide names and is not intended as any sort of assessment of their architectural merits.

According to the financial statements of 1941, INA had 176 buildings with a total value of approximately £800 million. In the 1963 report, this had risen to 360, with a value of about £97 billion. In 1963, when the *Istituto* celebrated its 50th anniversary (the *Cinquantenario*), the architect and engineer Gino Cipriani, the undisputed *dominus* of technical services for INI and later for INA for over three decades (1924-1955), said in an interview with INA's corporate magazine *Cronache dell'INA*, of the men who built INA's real estate assets:

«I believe that nothing is a more powerful reminder of their job than [...] the great commemorative plaque in Florence, at the end of *Viale dei Colli*, which – paraphrased – reads: “To Giuseppe Poggi - Architect. Look around you, it is all a monument to his memory”. To the office staff, to the engineers on the construction sites, to the foremen [...], to all who gave their all in pursuit of building the biggest complexes in all of Italy, I'd like to say: look at INA's real estate today. You did that!»⁽³⁾



Figure 1 - INA's Real Estate (1933) ⁽⁴⁾

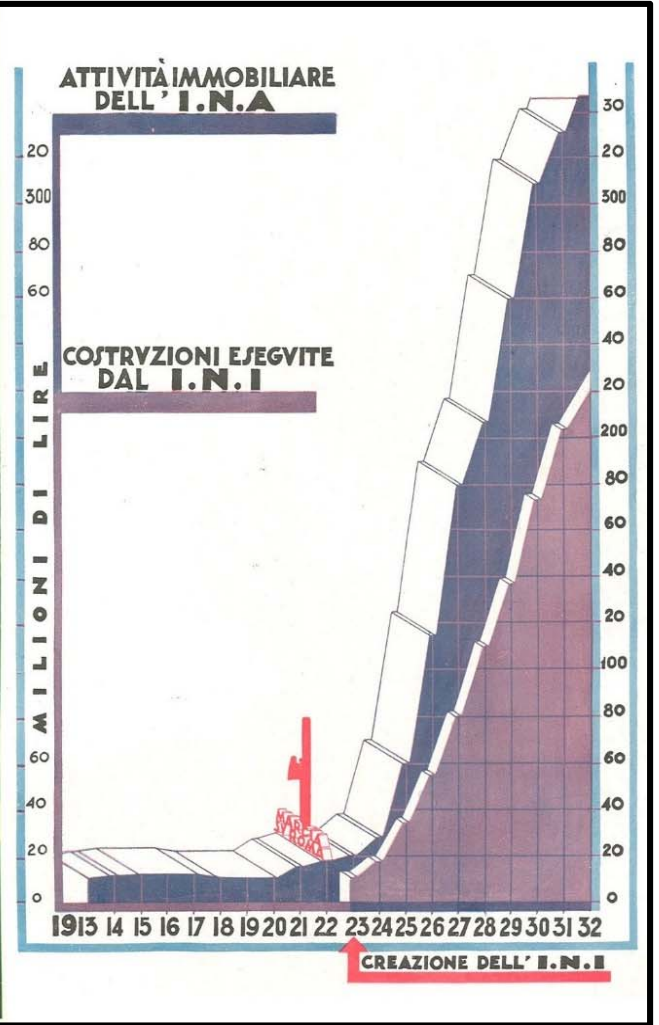


Figure 2 - Growth of INA's Real Estate (1933) ⁽⁵⁾

At the end of the same decade in which INA became a private joint-stock company in 1992, the board of *INA S.p.A.* made the decision to divest the property section of the company, transferring the majority of its real estate assets to the *Unione Immobiliare S.p.A.* (UNIM), a new company only at first 100% controlled by INA. This decision marked the end of INA's real estate activity, after years of uninterrupted growth since 1923.

There is no purpose in reconstructing all the complicated corporate operations following the divestment of INA's real estate assets; we must only express our gratitude to the *Sovrintendenza archivistica del Lazio* (the regional archival authority that safeguards and promotes the local documentary heritage in accordance with the directions of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities) and to our previous colleagues for their work (with a particular mention to Antonio Ratti). Thanks to them, most of the real estate files were preserved and returned to the Historical Archive of INA, with the exception of those records which were still valuable for the day-to-day administration of UNIM.

These records relate to both the buildings transferred to UNIM by INA and to the constructions remaining with INA; the latter now belong to Generali Real Estate. These include the building on Via Bissolati in Rome, designed by Marcello Piacentini (which also houses the Historical Archive of INA Assitalia).

It is also important to note that subsidiaries of INA (primarily *Le Assicurazioni d'Italia* and *Fiumeter*) had their own important real estate, and the documents regarding these are mixed in among those of INA. One of the more remarkable buildings of *Le Assicurazioni d'Italia*, Palazzo Bonaparte, is still part of Generali Real Estate: this historic building is located on Rome's Piazza Venezia (for more on this building, I suggest reading the article entitled "In the Heart of Rome: Palazzo Bonaparte" on our website, available at <http://www.generaliarchives.com/en/in-the-heart-of-rome-palazzo-bonaparte/>).

3. *The Restoration of INA's Historical Archive's Real Estate Fonds: Work in Progress*

When the records of INA's real estate came back to INA S.p.A. in 2000-2002, they were immediately sent to an external outsourcer. Three transfer lists – boxes, tracing paper tubes and blueprint folders – based on repository units, were drawn up at that time. Thanks to them, since then the Historical Archive of INA Assitalia was able to help its users with their research; at the same time, the need to retrieve records for the users was an occasion to verify the nature of different kind of the records.

In 2014, the staff of the Historical Archive (my colleagues Monica Micci, Lilliana Corona and I) decided to have the papers of the Real Estate Fonds restored (about 20,000 repository items). Based on our knowledge, we divided them into five series:

1. Activity of INA's technical department
2. **Properties in Italy**
3. Properties abroad
4. Properties in the colonies
(this series was separated out many years before, as if it were an autonomous fonds)
5. Expert activity for mortgages
6. Miscellany

The biggest (about 85% of the total fonds) and most important series, and the one about which we are going to talk, is the second one, *Properties in Italy*. The papers of this fonds provide a clear demonstration of the scope of INA's real estate business in Italy.

The first thing we did wasn't about the papers, but about the history of INA's real estate. For this purpose, we checked all the financial statements of INA and its subsidiary companies, the minutes of both the Board of Directors and the Standing Committee of the *Istituto*, and all of INA's real estate publications to verify all the properties. This included those transferred to UNIM in 1998 and other properties that either remained with INA or were sold previously, including the real estate assets of subsidiary companies: in total, there are records for 800 buildings.

Secondly, we determined whether the constructions were a single building or a complex and whether they had been constructed or acquired by INA. We checked their total area and their toponymy, and we studied INA's real estate management structure, based on two identification numbers: the first, an administration number (*Amministrazione*), that corresponded to a city, and the second an accounting number (*Gruppo contabile*), that corresponded to a single building, a complex or to additional adjacent buildings.

At the same time, we checked the secondary creators (of papers) within the *Istituto*; the internal department responsible for handling the real estate. For this purpose, the records schedule (*Massimario di conservazione*) of INA written in 1995 came in highly useful: this historical introduction assisted us in completing the picture of the internal structure of INA, which remained relatively stable between 1912 and 1992.

The main departments with responsibility for the management of INA's real estate were:

1. *Property Department (purchase and sale)*
2. *Construction Department*
3. *Maintenance and Administration Department*⁽⁶⁾

The next step in the process was using our Excel files that had just five columns (even if the data was later exported to a software tool, it remained very simple and rough):

1. *Collocation (outsourcer)*
2. *City*
3. *Address*
4. *Description*
5. *Internal numbers of INA's Real Estate Administration*

These files contained numerous inaccuracies: the names of the roads or streets were often different or incomplete, (e.g.: Via Quinto Sella - Via Q. Sella - V. Sella), many rows related to items regarding several buildings, many items were listed as *NI* (not identified). From this data it would be very difficult to understand, for example, how many copies we possess of a given record.

Then, using our computer software, we joined columns 2 and 3 and made the result the title of every item; the field *title* was also standardised, so that all the units about a building were given the same title. Finally, we created a list of every Italian city where the *Istituto* had a building, and a record for every construction (or area, farmhouse or industrial building). This took the form of a card that we filled with the basic information we had gathered about the building: we called these *Schede immobile* (“real estate cards”, to fill the *Schede* of Roma buildings out we started with the brief historical-archivistic notes written by architect Tiziana Maffei and Antonella Nonnis). For Rome and Milan we also created an additional intermediate frame based on the historic district, owing to the quantity of buildings (over 200 in Rome and over 80 in Milan).

Finally, we created subordinate cards that corresponded to the secondary creator we had previously identified:

1. *Records about acquisition (either area or building and other)*
2. *Records about construction (and renovation)*
3. *Records about maintenance and administration*
4. *Records about purchase*

Thanks to the content description made possible by our software, we could associate every item/record of a building (with simple mass drag and drop) with their section, while the records whose object wasn't recognisable were temporarily associated with the *Scheda immobile*. The physical repository of the items, however, did not change. This made it possible to have a reasonably clear big picture, immediately and permanently, regarding the type and quantity of items we possess for each and every building; this gives a researcher almost immediate access to archival holdings and type of documents. In other word - a basic inventory.

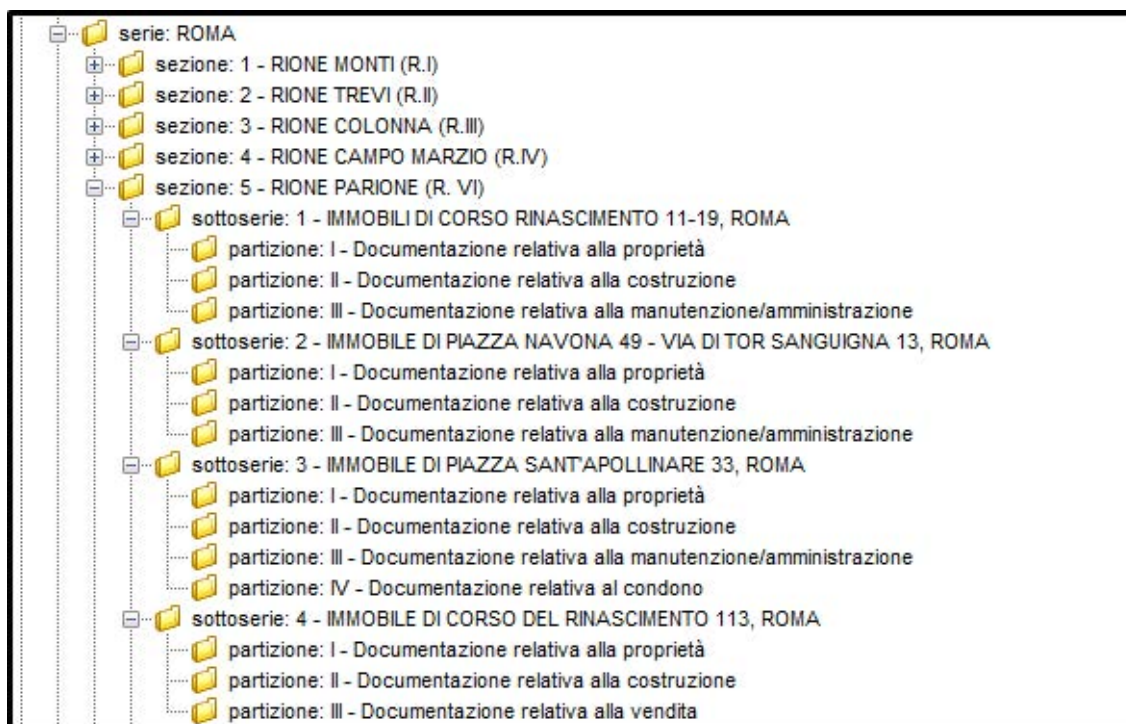


Figure 3 - Section of tree structure of Rome series from our back office software. Since 2014, the Historical Archives of the Generali Group have used a shared back office software, allowing them to research all their database both by word and by hierarchy.

Then, unlike before, every bit of research became an opportunity to improve the archival description of the card and of the records of the requested INA building and to focus on the old problem of duplication disposal (every archivist knows how many duplicates are in the twentieth century's historical archives, but it's only when you see it directly that you realise how many there are!).

In addition, in order to avoid the risk of eliminating the wrong items, we started out by concentrating solely on getting rid of one type of document: the heliography made from 1985 to 1995 after an extensive building amnesty. Usually we would have the original tracing paper too, and we decided to save at least three copies of the respective heliography, to be on the safe side. In this way, we were able to free up a lot of repository unit numbers that we kept for new items.

For example, in our miscellaneous fonds, we found a great deal of items regarding war damages (over 330 boxes). These contained very simple, basic indications regarding their contents. We called them in from the outsourcer repository, ten at a time, and quickly assessed which building (or sometimes city, as in the cases of Bolzano or Milan) they belonged to, so as to include them within our frame of INA's real estate and to send it back to the outsourcer repository with the freed repository unit numbers.

In this way we could, on the one hand, reduce our *Miscellanea* and, on the other hand, improve our understanding about the life story of the building. As a brief aside, it is possible to read about these war damages items in the article entitled "War Stories, Testimony from the INA Buildings" (available on our website at <http://www.generaliarchives.com/en/war-stories-testimony-from-the-ina-buildings/>), where we show never-seen-before images of war damages in Messina, Milan and Verona.



Figure 4 - Messina, Cortina del Porto, Via I Settembre (1945)

Another case study: it sometimes happens that sections of fonds arrive in a historical archive only later. In the year 2016, the real estate company of the Generali Group, Generali Real Estate (GRE), transferred thirty large boxes with records about INA subsidiary companies' real estate to the Historical Archive of INA

Assitalia: these records mostly relate to the sales of buildings in the late nineties.

We didn't send them to the outsourcer repository immediately, but instead we kept them in our own small storage room. As mentioned before, for every reference activity within the historical real estate fonds, we call on all the items about a building and free up several repository units either through elimination of heliographies or through restoration of the items (often we found a box with just a drawing or a paper). So far, we have been able to manage 2/3 of the new arrivals in the archives with these freed numbers.

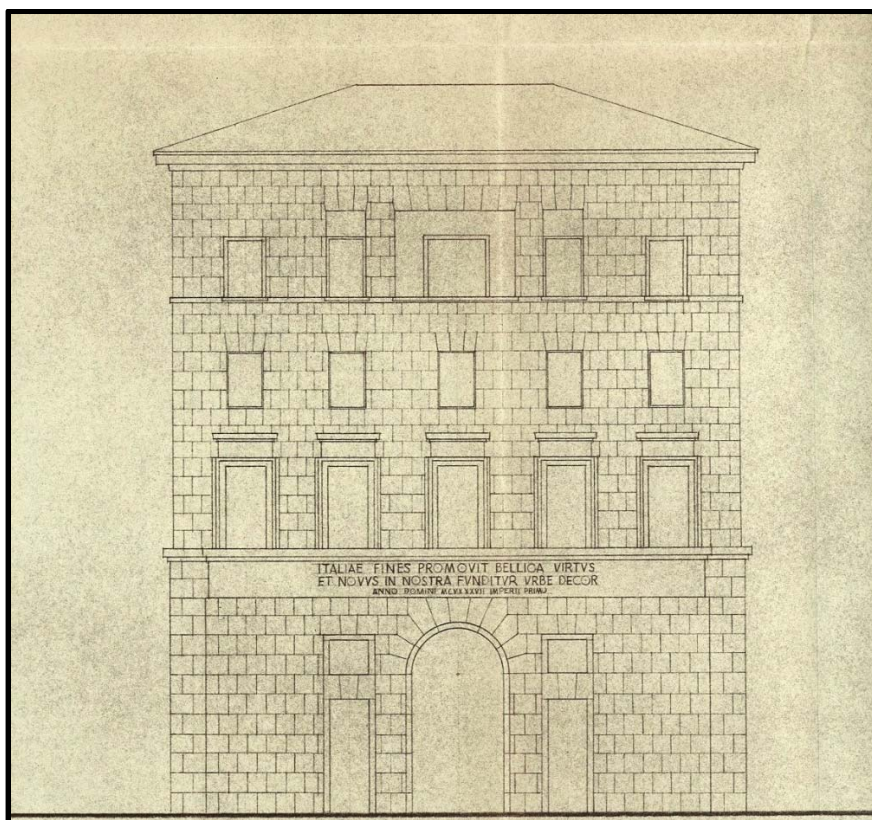


Figure 5 - Detail of the prospectus of the building on Corso del Rinascimento, unrealised (c.1940)

4. Conclusion

The restoration work aims to make the entire INA's historical real estate fonds available on demand via the back-office software and later on the website of the Generali Group's Historical Archives. To achieve this purpose, there are two primary challenges ahead: one is the improvement of the inventory of INA properties from synthetical to analytical; on the other hand, preparing for digitalisation, after a more comprehensive disposal is carried out, including also types of documents other than heliographies.

In our case, I believe that mass digitalisation would not be the right solution, owing to the huge bulk of records and, above all, drawings, not to mention the duplicates. I also think that, in the architectural archives, it is essential to start with archival science. The inventory is always the preferred tool to guide the researcher and to help the archivist to choose, for example, what is to be digitalised.

To conclude, I wish to underline once more the value of the architectural archives; not only for architects, engineers and other construction professionals, but also for researchers in many other fields. On this subject, I'd like to provide with a few statistics regarding our reference activity: from 1998 to 2018, references regarding historical real estate fonds made up 42% of all reference activity. 56% of this historical real estate fonds reference activity had an administrative purpose – users looking for a specific record such as, for example, the construction license – while the remaining 44% had a historical objective regarding building construction and/or restoration, incomplete projects (on this topic, I recommend the article “The INA Building

in Piazza Barberini Disputed in the Fascist Era: a Journey Through Archive Papers” available on our website at <http://www.generaliarchives.com/en/the-ina-building-in-piazza-barberini-disputed-in-the-fascist-era-a-journey-through-archive-papers/>), territory, city or block development history, historical leases, persons (technical and not), politics (national and local), church construction history, business history, history of old shops, archaeological findings, artwork (paintings and statues), poets and Latin (on this subject, I recommend the article “Latinitas of INA: from Providentiae Munus to Novus Decor” available at <http://www.generaliarchives.com/en/latinitas-of-ina-from-providentiae-munus-to-novus-decor/>), to name a few.

Finally, I wish to thank my dear colleagues, Roberta Spada, Andrea Mazzetti and Simone D’Ambrosio, for their invaluable help and advice.



Figure 6 - Perspective of small house in Ostia (Rome), project unrealised (1936)

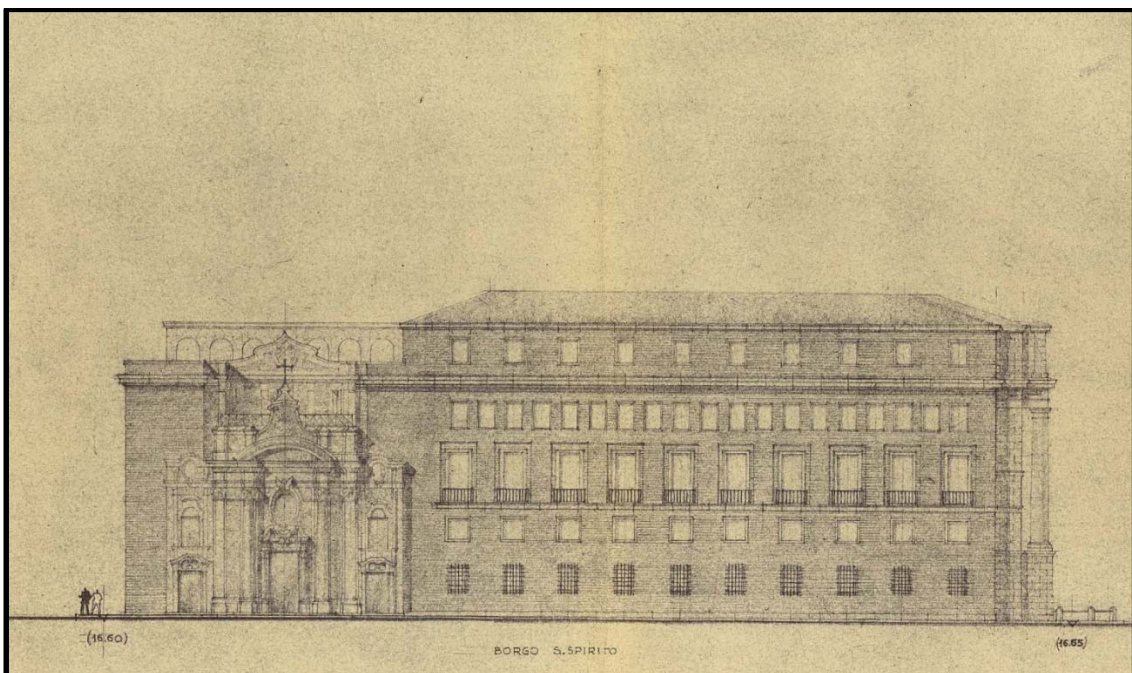


Figure 7 - Prospectus of Building on Via della Conciliazione - lot M - with the Church of Santa Annunziata, reconstructed by INA (1940)

Notes:

1. Ernest Hemingway, *Across the River and into the Trees*, London, 1950 (p. 26 of Arrow Books, 2004).
2. INA, *Attività edilizia dell'INA 1959-1980*, Roma, 1980, p. 53.
3. *Cronache dell'INA*, anno XI - n. 122, giugno 1963, p. 7.
4. Gino Cipriani, *Il patrimonio immobiliare dell'Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni*, Roma, 1933.
5. *Ibidem*.
6. We don't provide the exact names of the internal departments because over the course of time there have been several changes of name.

Rome, 31.07.2019