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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Palazzo Valentini: Archaeological discoveries and redevelopment projects



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Abstract

Palazzo Valentini, a historical site of Rome's Provincial Administration, is located at the heart of the city. The building was purchased in 1827 by Vincenzo Valentini, a banker and consul general of the Prussian Crown. In 1939, with the outbreak of World War II, a fully self-contained, air-raid shelter was built under the courtyard, with an exit tunnel heading onto the Trajan's Forum. Archaeological investigations started in 2005 in view of a simple rehabilitation work of the underground level. As work progressed, the sample-plots brought to light new archaeological findings: relics of a huge temple and what remained of two residential houses with thermal baths. We therefore designed an exhibition space with glass surfaces to allow visitors to appreciate the findings while following a path through historical ages: from the 16th-century courtyard to the underground Roman *domus* (the sumptuous houses of senators and dignitaries of the Roman Empire), with private baths, to the remains of a Roman temple, and all the way to the Trajan's Column pedestal by way of the air-raid shelter. Virtual reconstructions, graphic effects, and movies are the means used to revive the hypothetical original appearance of the environments and the daily life of that epoch in order to help us build a prototype of an on-site museum of the third millennium.

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1. Introduction

This essay shows the museum routes of Palazzo Valentini's *Domus*.

The project has been conducted by the Province of Rome since 2005.

The paper consists of three sections: [Section 2](#) presents the urban historical context, [Section 3](#) illustrates the

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Figure 1 Palazzo Valentini: main facades on piazza SS. Apostoli (left) and the Trajan's Forum (right).

archaeological structures that emerged during works, and [Section 4](#) explicates the criteria and modality of museum design and preparation.

2. Palazzo Valentini: location and historical development

Palazzo Valentini, the historical site of Rome's Provincial Administration and its Prefecture, is located at the heart of the city, rising on a trapezoidal block located on top of one of Rome's most interesting archaeological sites ([Figures 1](#) and [2](#)).

The Palazzo is located in an area that, during Imperial times, was occupied by the northern part of the Trajan's Forum. The Trajan's Column, the only standing remnant of that age, still bears witness today to the original height of the saddle between the Quirinal and the Capitol Hills, removed in ancient times to make room for the huge complex of the Trajan's Forum. After the fall of the Roman Empire from the 5th to the 12th century, the area underwent a process of decay and neglect; subjected to floods, among other decays, the area earned the epithet "pantano" (marsh).

In the early 16th century, the area facing Piazza dei SS. Apostoli was reclaimed and became a sought-after location for Roman noble families who wished to build their sumptuous palaces.

The Palazzo, commissioned by Cardinal Michele Bonelli (1541-1598), a nephew of Pope Pius V Ghislieri (1566-1572), was erected on the site of a previous building of the early 16th century. After renovation works and additions, during the 17th century, the building was leased to the Ruspoli princes and hosted musical events of great importance. From 1707 to 1708, the building was home to the German composer G. F. Haendel. In 1752, the building was sold to Cardinal Giuseppe Spinelli, nephew and executor of Cardinal Giuseppe Renato Imperiali, who renovated and decorated the rooms and built a large public library at the ground floor ([Figure 3](#)).

In 1827, the building was purchased by Cavalier Vincenzo Valentini, a banker and consul general of the Prussian crown. Valentini promoted a number of restoration works

and embellishments and completed the side of the building facing the Trajan's Column, raising a partly independent building designed by the architect Filippo Navone (1800). Vincenzo Valentini's sons, Gioacchino and Giovan Domenico, completed the wing of the building facing via di S. Eufemia between 1861 and 1865 and commissioned the architect Luigi Gabet for the execution of two separate buildings: an independent "palazzetto" and an indistinct extension to the main structure.

In 1875-1876, the ample space of the main courtyard was closed up by a new wing of the building parallel to the main facade, designed by the same Gabet. The body of the building, with the Assembly Hall of Rome's Provincial Council, was erected between 1873 and 1876, to complete the alley along the opposite side of via di San Bernardo, via de' Fornari. This structure was also designed by Gabet, but the task was commissioned by Rome's Provincial Deputation, who shortly before purchased the building in 1873 to host its headquarters.

In the winter of 1939, with the outbreak of World War II, a fully self-contained air-raid shelter was built beneath the courtyard, with an exit tunnel onto the Trajan's Forum and two entrances from the Palazzo—one for the employees of the Provincial Council and the other for those of the Prefecture.

3. Archaeological investigations¹

The works started in 2005 in the cellars of the building and were originally intended to guide a simple rehabilitation of underground spaces, finally freed from waste and archival materials, in order to reuse them as multi-functional

¹The project, which involves a team of archaeologists, art historians, and architects, most of which are officers of the Provincial Administration, is directed and coordinated by Roberto Del Signore, Manager of Service 2, Department II, Province of Rome, with the contribution of architects Rosella Russo and Luisa Napoli. The archaeological excavations have been directed by Eugenio La Rocca and Paola Baldassarri in collaboration with the "Cooperativa Parsifal."

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