

# Temple Armed with Mystical Fortress



Front Façade of Casa del Mutilato  
Source:Giuseppe Spatrisano Archive at Fondazione  
per l'Arte e la Cultura Lauro Chiazzese

## The Project

The idea to build the Casa del Mutilato in Palermo was initiated on February 1925 after the Municipality donated a 450 m<sup>2</sup> plot of land to the National Association of Mutilated and War Invalids. The municipality of Palermo subjected a set of conditions to the land grant: the architectural project should be ready within six months and the building should be completed within two years of approval. Although none of these conditions were ever fulfilled, in December 1933 the Association was able to negotiate for a larger and better located site.

The new (and current) site of Casa del Mutilato is 850 m<sup>2</sup>, between the Rossini Street, Scarlatti and Donizetti in the S. Giuliano neighbourhood; a newly restored area of the city at that time. The regeneration razed many older buildings and created a prime site to place monumental fascist buildings in an already very prestigious position in the city. The neighbourhood was known for its cultural prominence with theaters and cinemas, including the Teatro Massimo, only 300 meters away.

After a series unsuccessful proposals for the building the National Association of Mutilated and War Invalids decided on April 1935 to call for a new competition with a detailed description of what they desired. Casa del Mutilato should be a 'temple for sacrifice where the victory will be constantly remembered for future generations'. Beside two compulsory rooms, a large underground space with easy access from outside and another spacious room to host ceremonies, the project also had to include the office of the association and enough space to accommodate assistance departments for the war invalids.

The competition was announced to the Union of Fascist Engineers and the Union of Fascist Architects of the province of Sicily. To be able to participate the architect had to be a member of the Union.

With a project entitled "*San Sebastiano*" Giuseppe Spatrisano won the competition over four other proposals in 1936. Even though the project respected the competition criteria, Spatrisano's winning proposal had to be amended to satisfy a desire to give even more monumentally to the building.

At that time Mussolini was close to every architectural project all over Italy. He influenced design, supervised new building projects and took part in the process by intervening in architectural competitions as well as laying foundation stones and inaugurating buildings. Mussolini used architecture as a political tool to communicate fascist ideology to the masses, reflecting the important role architecture played in creating the identity of the new Italian Empire.

## Temple of martyr

Casa del Mutilato was designed as a temple of martyr; a monument to honor the Italian soldiers of World War I. Beside the moral and physical assistance it provided to the mutilated soldiers, the building also worked symbolically as a monument to the notion of victory and sacrifice.

The architecture – and the symbols inscribed in the building – are constantly praising the imagined heroes, reiterating that sacrifice for your country is a process of purification that will elevate your spirituality. The architecture of Casa del Mutilato, as many other buildings of the fascist period, used religious symbols to suggest that the country should be a nation of faith. As described by the Italian historian Emilio Gentile fascism embed a process of sacralization of the politics.

Benito Mussolini was personally on site to set the foundation stone for Casa del Mutilato on August 19, 1937. Massive celebrations complemented the event and material was produced for all Sicilian newspapers that framed the day with sentences like: "*The works are a sure testimony of Italian enthusiasm and patriotism in solemnizing the glories and heroism of their sons.*" Not only serving as a quittance for those returning with traumatic war experiences, the monumental building also worked as propaganda tool for the triumph of the Fascist regime.

After two years of construction the building was inaugurated on 21 May 1939 with the presence of the prince of Piemonte Umberto II di Savoia, approximately 1000 ex-soldiers and Giuseppe Spatrisano.

#### **The architect**

Giuseppe Spatrisano was born in Palermo in 1899, and graduated in Architecture in the Fine Art Institute of Palermo in 1918. In the beginning of his career Spatrisano was the artistic director of the furniture company Ducrot, and he also designed two of their head offices: one in Palermo in 1928 and the branch office in Rome in 1929.

Spatrisano participated and won several different architectural competitions in the early stages of his professional life. Nevertheless, the first project to be built was Casa del Mutilato in Palermo between 1936-1939.

His professional career was very active and he worked on projects all across Sicily, such as a Naval School and San Raffaele Church, monuments and the monumental Gate for Via Roma as well as participating in three different Master planning projects: Palermo, Bagheria and Cefalu. After the war he was put in charge of rebuilding the old town of Palermo that had been heavily bombed and particularly the restoration of Palazzo Steri in which he could not complete after disagreements with the rest of team on how to deal with all inquisitions symbols in the building.

During 1939-1943 Spatrisano was the director of Accademia di Belle Arti e Liceo Artistico di Palermo and until the end of the seventies he taught at the Architecture Faculty of Palermo.

Giuseppe Spatrisano died in Palermo in 1985 with no inheritors of his works. While still alive Spatrisano donated his entire work and library of 2000 books to Fondazione Culturale Lauro Chiazzese for public consultations, and today Fondazione Sicilia Library hosts the archive.



The rite of laying the foundation stone of Casa del Mutilato on 19 August 1937 Source: Giuseppe Spatrisano Archive at Fondazione per l'Arte e la Cultura Lauro Chiazzese



The rite of laying the foundation stone of Casa del Mutilato by Mussolini on 19 August 1937  
Source: Giuseppe Spatrisano Archive at Fondazione per l'Arte e la Cultura Lauro Chiazese



The rite of laying the foundation stone of Casa del Mutilato with Mussolini and Giuseppe Spatrisano on 19 August 1937.  
Source: Giuseppe Spatrisano Archive at Fondazione per l'Arte e la Cultura Lauro Chiazese



Inauguration of Casa del Mutilato on 21 May 1939 with the presence of Piemonte Prince Umberto II di Savoia, plus approximately 1000 ex-soldiers and Giuseppe Spatrisano  
Source: Giuseppe Spatrisano Archive at Fondazione per l'Arte e la Cultura Lauro Chiazzese



Inauguration of Casa del Mutilato on 21 May 1939 Piemonte Prince Umberto II di Savoia greets Giuseppe Spatrisano  
Source: Giuseppe Spatrisano Archive at Fondazione per l'Arte e la Cultura Lauro Chiazzese

## **The Glass House Everyone Can See**

The ground floor of the building originally had a medical clinic to assist the mutilated soldiers, storage of orthopedic objects and the accommodation of the concierge. Nevertheless, those facilities are not functioning in today.

The upper floor contains the monumental atrium, the core of the house that also works as a main entrance accessible through the stairs from the street. The perfectly symmetric atrium receives the mutilated soldier under the sky through a 10 meters diameter wide circle in the roof. The circle element reminds of an oculus; a recurrent element in religious architecture, being the first classic exemplar the Pantheon in Rome.

The lateral façades of the atrium are all covered with glass blocks up to the upper circle, creating a grid of glass which also brings light to the other floors inside the building. Glass was a material widely used in architecture during the fascist period because it could embody the sense of the modern. Mussolini clearly expressed his admiration for the material, saying that “fascism must be a glass house into which everyone can see.”

The front façade leads the visitor to the Sacrarium, the area of grief and honours. The Sacrarium, which is coated with dark stone to reinforce the austerity and religiosity of the space, entails an altar decorated with a cross in the middle and two Frescoes (The Waiting and The Battle by Antonio Santagata ) on each side remembering the soldiers in the battlefield.

On the left side of the altar is a spacious meeting room for the Association ceremonies called ‘Salle delle Adunanze’. On the right hand side of the atrium there were other small rooms dedicated war invalids related institutes. Today the Appeal Court of Palermo is using the spacious meeting room and the second floor is where the office of National Association of Mutilated and War Invalids is located. The wood furniture was designed by Giuseppe Spatrisano and made by the important Palermitan company Ducrot, specifically for Casa del Mutilato, and is still in use. Despite this, half of the second floor is today abandoned while the third floor – entirely dedicated to another war mutilated association – is rented for the offices of the appeal court, while the second half of the floor will be soon occupied by a private university.

As seen, sentences, names and big texts decorate the architecture in a way that the building could be experienced as a reading event. All written material serves to praise the soldier and glorify their sacrifice in the war, additionally to remember the success of Italy in the battlefield. The glorification of war exalted in words reinforce the message that the architecture conveys. The written texts are thus another decoration element that exalts the part of history that the building represents. However that history is not (and never) being told completely. On the two sides of the altar four columns celebrates the history of Italy through different inscriptions. One can find names of places where Italy had so called great battles during the First World War: Piave, Podgora, Doberdo, S.Michele, M. Santo, Bainsizza, M. Grappa, Caporetto, Isonzo, Africa O. and Spagna. The two other more distant columns from the centered cross contains names of Golden medals soldiers that died on the battlefield, six soldiers per column were chosen to have a place of honour in the building.

However since the inauguration the names written on the honoured columns have slightly changed and disappeared. The missing names raise the question if erasure was made by purpose or not, as well as opening up the imagination to what other names could be inscribed on the columns as part of possible restoration project. Here it is possible to question regarding the future of the building. Can also other heroes be inscribed? Is it possible to go beyond the hero as someone fighting for a nation against an enemy? What other names would open up for new narratives regarding the Italian wars, and maybe even open up for other claims of the building?

## Appendix: Inscriptions

### Texts on bas-relief on facades and oculus

*'Tempio Munito Fortezza Mistica' - Temple armed with Mystical Fortress.*

*'Fu seme il Fante e la Vittoria il Fiore' The soldier is the seed and the Victory is the flower.*

*'Il nostro spirito è Luce che non si spegne' - Our spirit is light that does not go out.*

*'É la perenne Giovinezza del Sacrificio che Infiora il Cammino dell Vittoria'. - It is the perennial Youth of the Sacrifice that flourish the path to Victory.*

### On the left side of atrium

*Regnando . Vittorio Emmanuele III . Re d'Italia . Imperatore D Etiopia . Ad Onorare il Sacrificio dei combattenti . e additare alle giovani generazioni . il sentiero della passione e della Gloria . Questa casa del Mutilato sorge L'anno XVII E.F. 1939*

*Reigning. Vittorio Emmanuel III. King of Italy. Emperor D Ethiopia. To Honor the Sacrifice of the Fighters. and point to the younger generations. the path of passion and glory. This house of the Mutilated rises the year XVII E.F. 1939*

### On the other side atrium

*Regnando . Vittorio Emmanuele III . Re d'Italia e D' Albania . Imperatore D Etiopia All'Augusta Presenza di S.A.R. . Il Principe di Piemonte . Questa casa del Mutilato . ha iniziato la sua vita . di presidio della Vittoria . della Potenza dell'Imperio . XXI Maggio 1939 . XVII E.F. 1939.*

*Reigning. Vittorio Emmanuel III. King of Italy and D 'Albania. Emperor D Ethiopia At the Augusta Presence of S.A.R. . The Prince of Piedmont. This house of Mutilated. Has started its life. of garrison of the Victory. of the Power of the Empire. XXI May 1939. XVII E.F. 1939.*

### At the atrium entrance on the left side: Mussolini declaration of Empire

*IX Maggio MCMXXXVI-XIV  
LA FONDAZIONE DELL' IMPERO*

*Ufficiali, Sottufficiali, Gregari di tutte le forze armate dello Stato in Africa e in Italia, Camice nere della Rivoluzione, Italiani e Italiane in Patria e nel Mondo, ascoltate con le decisioni che fra pochi istanti conoscerete e che furono acclimate dal Gran Consiglio del Fascismo, un grande evento si compie: viene suggellato il destino dell'Etiopia, oggi, 9 Maggio, quattordicesimo anno dell'Era Fascista.*

*Tutti I nodi furono tagliati dalla nostra spada lucente, e la vittoria Africana resta nella storia della patria integra e pura come i Legionari caduti e superstiti la sognavano e la volevano. L'Italia ha finalmente il suo Impero. Impero Fascista, perché porta i segni indistruttibili della volontà e della Potenza del Littorio Romano, perché questa é la meta verso la quale durante quattordici anni furono sollecitate le energie prorompenti e disciplinate delle giovani gagliarde generazioni italiane. Impero di Pace, perché l'Italia vuole la pace per se e per tutti e si decide alla Guerra soltanto quando vi é forzata da imperiose incoercibili necessita di vita. Impero di civiltà e di umanità per tutte le popolazioni dell'Etiopia. É nella tradizione di Roma, che dopo aver vinto associava i popoli al suo destino. Ecco la legge, o italiani, che chiude un periodo della nostra storia e ne apre un altro come un immenso varco aperto su tutte le possibilità del futuro.*

*1 - I territori e le genti che appartenevano all' Impero di Etiopia sono posti sotto la sovranità piena ed intera del Regno d'Italia.*

*2 - Il titolo di Imperatore d'Etiopia viene assunto per se e per i suoi successori dal Re d'Italia.*

*Ufficiali, sottufficiali, gregari di tutte le Forze armate dello Stato in Africa e in Italia, camicie nere, Italiani e Italiane! Il popolo italiano ha creato col suo sangue l'Impero, lo feconderà col suo lavoro e lo difenderà contro chiunque con le sue armi. In questa certezza suprema levate in alto,*

legionari, le insegne, il ferro e i cuori, a salutare dopo quindici secoli la riapparizione dell'Impero sui colli fatali di Roma. Ne sarete voi degni? Questo grido é come un giuramento sacro che vi impegna dinanzi a Dio e dinanzi agli uomini, per la vita e per la morte. Camicie nere, Legionari: Saluto al Re! Mussolini.

*Officers, Non-commissioned Officers, Gregarious of all the armed forces of the State in Africa and in Italy, Black Shirts of the Revolution, Italians and Italians at home and in the world, listen to the decisions that you will know in a few moments and which were acclaimed by the Great Council of Fascism, a great event takes place: the destiny of Ethiopia is sealed, today, May 9th, the fourteenth year of the Fascist Era.*

*All the knots were cut by our lucent swords, and the African victory remains in the history of the homeland intact and pure as the fallen and surviving Legionaries dreamed of and wanted it. Italy finally has its Empire. Fascist Empire, because it bears the signs indestructible of the will and power of the Roman lictor because this is the goal towards which during fourteen years the irrepressible and disciplined energies of the young, vigorous Italian generations were re-enacted. Empire of Peace, because Italy wants peace for itself and for all and it is decided to the War only when it is forced by imperious unstopable needs of life. Empire of civilization and humanity for all the peoples of Ethiopia. It is in the tradition of Rome, that after winning, they associated the peoples with Rome's destiny. Here is the law, oh Italians that closes an erosion of our story and opens another as an immense open door on all the possibilities of the future.*

*1 - The territories and people belonging to the empire of Ethiopia are placed under the full and entire sovereignty of the Kingdom of Italy.*

*2 - The title of Emperor of Ethiopia is taken for himself and for his successors by the King of Italy.*

*Officers, non-commissioned officers, Gregarious of all the armed forces of the state in Africa and in Italy, black shirts, Italian men and Italian women! The Italian people have created with their blood the Empire fertilized it with their work and defended it against anyone with their weapons. In this supreme certainty raised up, oh Legionaries, the insignia, the iron and the hearts, to greet after fifteen centuries the reappearance of the empire on the fatal hills of Rome. Will you be worthy? This voice is like a sacred oath of your commitment before God and before the people, for life and death. Black Shirts, Legionaries: Greeting to the King! Mussolini*

#### **At the atrium entrance on the right side: Victory Report from Comander Armando Diaz**

*Dal Quartiere Generale 24 maggio 1915  
Soldati!*

*A Voi la gloria di piantare il tricolore d'Italia sui termini sacri che la natura pose ai confini della Patria nostra. A Voi la gloria di compiere finalmente l'opera con tanto eroismo iniziata dai nostri padri.*

*Vittorio Emanuele  
IV Novembre MCMXVIII  
Bollettino della vittoria*

*La guerra contro l'Austria-Ungheria che, sotto l'alta guida di S.M. il Re, Duce Supremo, l'Esercito italiano, inferiore per numero e per mezzi, iniziò il XXIV maggio MCMXV e con fede incrollabile e tenace valore condusse ininterrotta e asprissima per XLI mesi, è vinta.*

*La gigantesca battaglia, ingaggiata il XXIV dello scorso ottobre, ed alla quale prendevano parte cinquantuno divisioni italiane, tre britanniche, due francesi, una czecho-slovacca ed un reggimento americano contro settantatré divisioni austro-ungariche, è finita.*

*La fulminea arditissima avanzata del ventinovesimo corpo d'armata su Trento, sbarrando le vie della ritirata alle armate nemiche del Trentino, travolte ad occidente dalle truppe della Settima armata e ad oriente da quelle della Prima, Sesta e Quarta, ha determinato ieri lo sfacelo totale della fronte avversaria.*

Dal Brenta al Torre l'irresistibile slancio della Dodicesima dell'Ottava della Decima armata e delle Divisioni di cavalleria ricacciava sempre più indietro il nemico fuggente.

Nella pianura S.A.R. il Duca d'Aosta avanzava rapidamente alla testa della sua invitta Terza armata, anelante di ritornare sulle posizioni da essa già vittoriosamente conquistate che mai aveva perdute.

L'esercito austro-ungarico è annientato: esso ha subito perdite gravissime nell'accanita dei primi giorni e nell'inseguimento: ha perduto quantità ingentissime di materiale di ogni sorta e presso che per intero i suoi magazzini e i depositi: ha lasciato finora nelle nostri mani circa trecentomila prigionieri con interi Stati Maggiori e non meno di cinquemila cannoni.

I resti di quello che fu uno dei più potenti eserciti del mondo risalgono in disordine e senza speranza le valli che avevano disceso con orgogliosa sicurezza.

Comando Supremo Diaz.

Il contributo Italiano alla Vittoria risolutiva della guerra mondiale.

Caduti; 750.000

Feriti: 1.200.000

Mutilati e Invalidi: 470.000

Combattenti: 3.000.000

From the General Quarter 24th May 1915

Soldiers!

To you the glory of planting the tricolor of Italy on the sacred terms that nature placed at the borders of our country. To you the glory of finally finalizing the work started by our fathers with so much heroism.

Vittorio Emanuele 4th November 1918

Bulletin/Report of victory

The war against Austria-Hungary, that under the high leadership of S.M. the king, the supreme duce, the Italian army, lower by number and by means, began on 24 May 1915 and with unshakable faith and tenacious value led uninterrupted and righteous for 16 months, is won.

The gigantic battle, hired on the 24th of last October, and in which took part 51 Italian divisions, three British, two French, one Czech-Slovakian and an American regiment against 73 Austro-Hungarian divisions, is over.

The very fast of the twenty-ninth army corps in Trento, barring the streets of the retreat to the enemy armies of the Trentino, swept at west from the troops of the seventh army and at east from that of the first, sixth and fourth, determined yesterday the total collapse of the opposing front.

From the Brenta to the Torre, the irresistible impulse of the twelfth, the octave, the tenth army and the cavalry divisions expelled back the enemy.

In the plain S.A.R. the Duke of Aosta quickly advanced to the head of his third armed invasion. Anxious to return to the positions already victoriously conquered by it, which had never been lost.

The Austro-Hungarian army is annihilated: it has suffered serious losses in the fierce resistance of the early days and in pursuit: it has lost enormous quantities of material of all sorts and almost entirely his warehouses and deposits: he left so far in our hands about three hundred thousand prisoners with entire Maior States and no less than five thousands cannons.

The remains of what was once one of the most powerful armies in the world go up in disorder and without hope the valleys that had come with proud confidence.

Supreme command Diaz.

The Italian contribution to the risolutive victory of the world war.

Death: 750.000

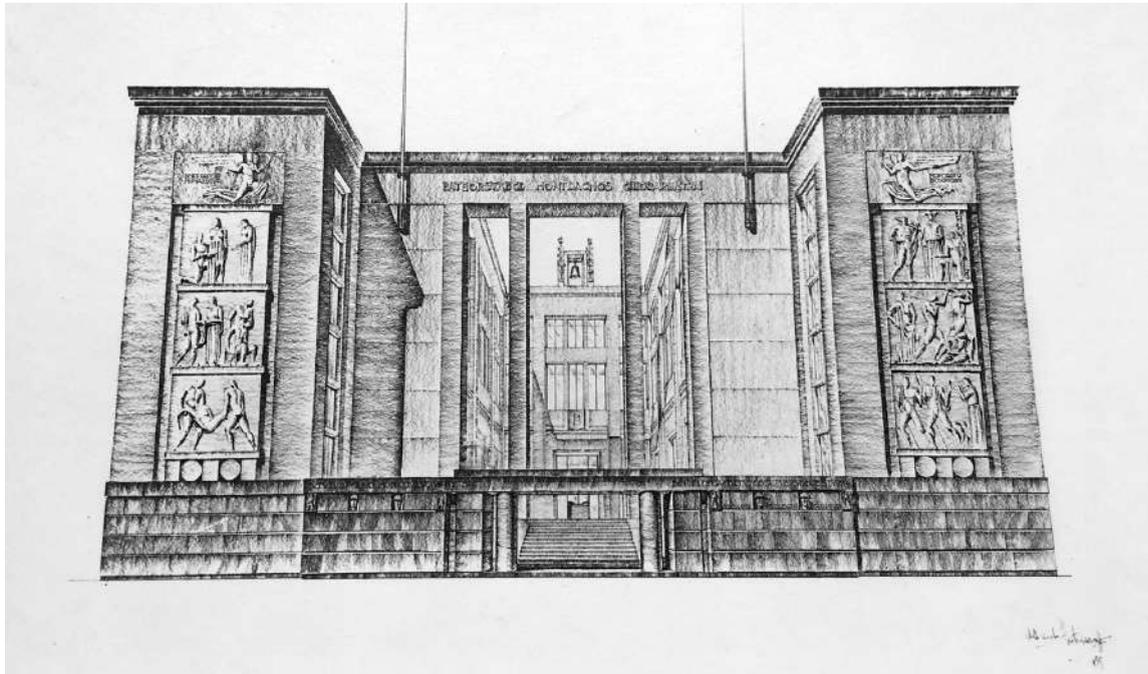
Injured: 1.200.000

Mutilated and disabled: 470.000

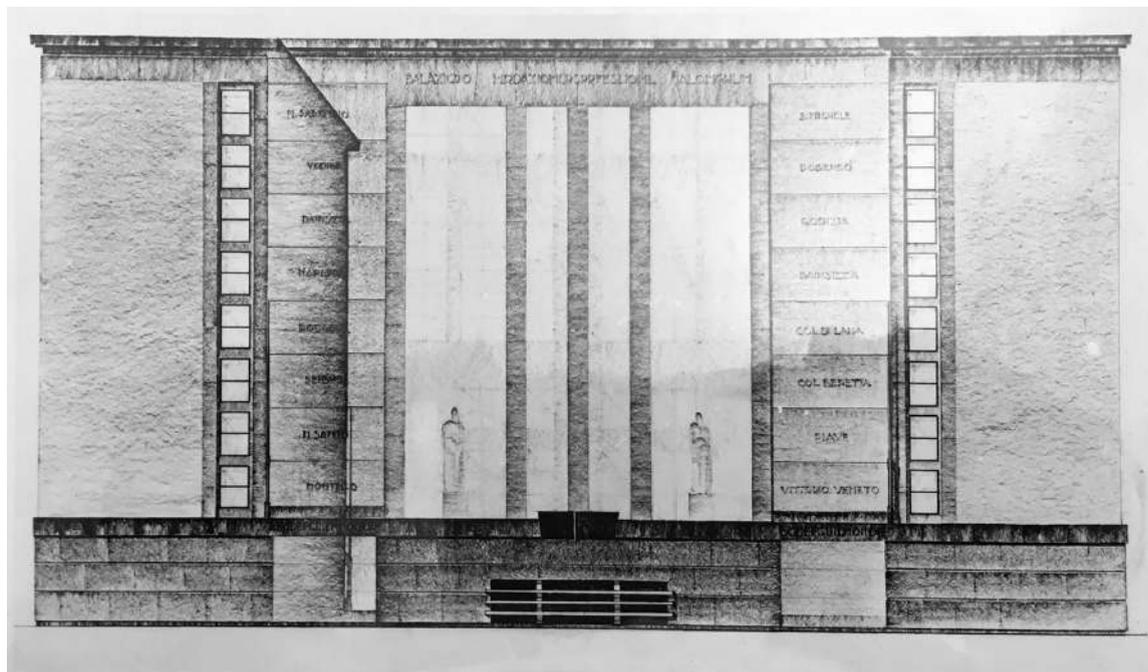
Fighters: 3.000.000

---

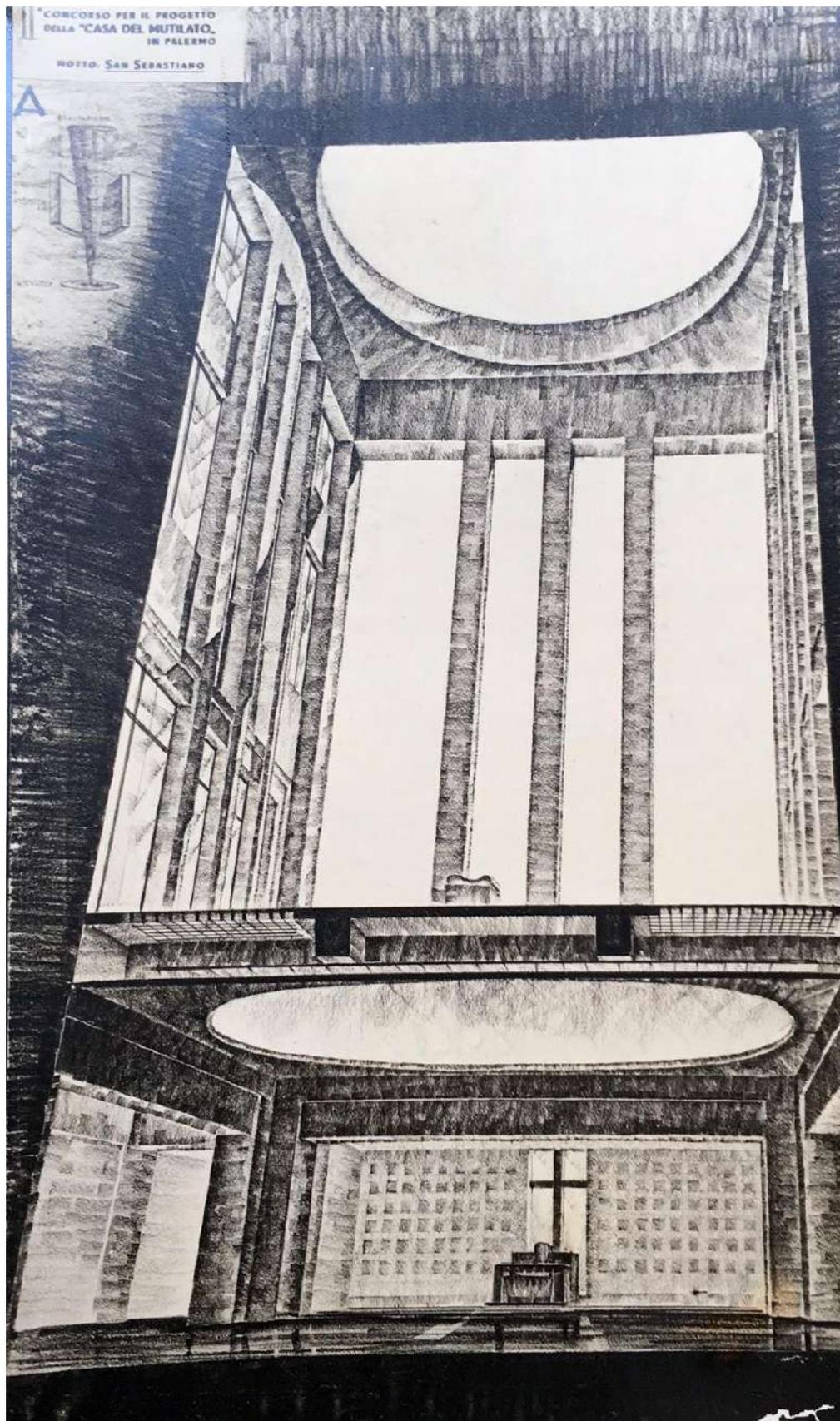
Nicoloso, P., 2011 "Mussolini architetto. Propaganda e paesaggio urbano nell'Italia fascista.", Einaudi  
 Gentile, E., 1996 "The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy", Harvard University Press  
 Balistreri Vincenza, Giuseppe Spatrisano Architetto (1899-1985), Fondazione Culturale Lauro Chiazzese, Palermo 2001



Front Façade - Architecture competition Project 'San Sebastiano'  
Source: Giuseppe Spatrisano Archive at Fondazione  
per l'Arte e la Cultura Lauro Chiazese



Front Façade - Architecture competition Project 'San Sebastiano'  
Source: Giuseppe Spatrisano Archive at Fondazione  
per l'Arte e la Cultura Lauro Chiazese



Sacrarium Architecture competition Project 'San Sebastiano'  
Source: Giuseppe Spatrisano Archive at Fondazione  
per l'Arte e la Cultura Lauro Chiazzese



Sacarium Casa del Mutilato - Image 1939  
Source: Giuseppe Spatrisano Archive at Fondazione  
per l'Arte e la Cultura Lauro Chiazese

