

Italia '90 World Cup. The Restoration of Oblivion

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Abstract

The 1990 World Cup represented a moment of reflection on the state of Italian stadiums, most of which had been built between the 1930s and 1970s. In some cases, this led to radical and hardly reversible interventions. Today, Italian football clubs are calling on the Government to enact new laws that would facilitate the construction of new, privately-owned stadiums. The contemporary stadium must serve as an architectural model capable of providing services and reflecting economic and socio-cultural values that have evolved since 1990. Football remains a phenomenon of great national interest and is undergoing significant transformation, with a more diverse audience and a search for more inclusive approaches in the design of 'open' facilities that can act as socio-economic catalysts beyond the duration of a single sporting event. However, current analyses concerning the redevelopment of major football stadiums appear to overlook the formal and functional changes these structures already underwent during the preparations for Italia '90. To adapt or regenerate Italian stadiums and make them active elements of urban dynamics – reintegrating them, where necessary, into the fabric of the city and surrounding territory – an intense and comprehensive design effort is needed. This effort should not serve as a pretext for the brutal erasure of the structure's elements created for the World Cup. By means of previously unpublished documents – retrieved from municipal archives and the archives of the designers involved – related to the construction sites of the paradigmatic cases of Bologna and Rome (whose stadiums were completely transformed for the World Cup), this contribution aims to highlight how the study of the construction processes (through images and videos) is essential in the preliminary phase of a 'Knowledge Project', which is indispensable for the operational planning of restoration projects for these stadiums.

Keywords

Italia '90, Soccer World Cup, Sport Architecture, Stadium Renovation, Made in Italy.

On May 19, 1984, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) awarded Italy the organization of the 1990 Football World Cup. It was an event of enormous significance, going well beyond the sporting dimension and engaging the entire country in a major technical and organizational effort. Not only for the construction or renovation of stadiums, but also for the impact that Italia '90 would have in multiple spheres: economic, political, and social.¹ It was therefore not merely a sporting competition, but a truly national-popular event of extraordinary proportions. Italy used the World Cup as a showcase: the international market was to take notice of its economic and industrial potential. Before analyzing the stadiums, it is necessary to dwell on other general aspects that were peculiar to Italia '90. In December 1984, the Organizing Committee of the World Cup (COL) was established under the direction of Luca Cordero di Montezemolo. It included not only leading figures from the sporting and political world, but also project managers from some of Italy's economic and industrial excellences².



Fig. 1 Milano, Stadio Meazza (Fotografia di L. Finzi, 1989), © Leo Finzi.

The organization was self-sufficient: for the first time in the history of the World Cup, the COL enjoyed full autonomy in managing the event. Previously, in fact, local organizing committees were based in Switzerland, at FIFA headquarters, and carried out only promotional activities in the host nation³. Another major difference compared to previous World Cups—and proof of a genuine mass cultural phenomenon for the entire country—was that Italia '90 could rely on multimedia communication, the result of a design, television, and cinematic project that was largely coordinated.

1987 was the year when the twelve host cities for the event were chosen. The average age of Italian stadiums was very high. It was therefore necessary to intervene decisively, both with substantial funding and with organizational structures that inevitably required government decisions. The response of Prime Minister Bettino Craxi—head of the government during the crucial years for the organization of the World Cup (1984–1987)—and of Nicola Capria (Socialist Minister of Tourism and Entertainment) took shape in Decree-Law No. 2 of January 3, 1987, later converted into Law No. 65 of March 6, 1987⁴. The financing of the stadiums was therefore state funded, but the administrations of the individual cities were subsequently responsible for managing the funds allocated to construction works. The period from the approval of the law to the first half of 1988 was marked by intense debate within each municipal administration: should a new stadium be built, or should the existing one be renovated?⁵ The COL acted as a neutral organizing authority and had no decision-making power regarding the choices of the individual administrations. Each city therefore decided independently which path to follow; the final word rested with CONI (the Italian National Olympic Committee), which could approve or reject the proposal.

When the central government's construction plan was launched in 1987, it involved not only the building of stadiums but also the development of other infrastructures needed to ensure easy access to the venues hosting the event⁶.



Fig. 2 Genova, Stadio Luigi Ferraris (foto Studio Gregotti, 1989) © Fondazione CASVA Milano.

Italia '90 World Cup Stadiums

For Italia '90, five new stadiums were designed – Bari, Turin, Genoa, Palermo, and Rome (the latter three built on the same site as the previous facilities, preserving some of their elements); five particularly old stadiums (originally built between the 1920s and the 1950s) were modified and their original structures transformed – Bologna, Florence, Milan, Naples, and Verona; and two stadiums constructed in the 1970s – Cagliari and Udine – were adapted with only minor architectural interventions. The volumetric, structural, and formal characteristics of the twelve stadiums turned out to be particularly heterogeneous. Indeed, the range of architectural languages adopted, and the solutions proposed was very broad. This variety stemmed not only from the different sensibilities of the architects and engineers involved, but also from the evolution of design approaches in response to the conditions of the existing stadiums, only one of which – the Bologna stadium

was fully protected by the Superintendency of Cultural Heritage⁷. Although the cases were highly diverse, it is possible to identify some features common to all the stadiums. First, each designer adhered to the guidelines drafted by FIFA and the COL in the document *Preliminary Design. Guide on the Technical Features and Service Requirements for the Stadiums Hosting the 1990 World Cup*⁸, which placed particular emphasis on the distribution of spaces and on the absolute importance of certain requirements considered fundamental to the proper functioning of a stadium – above all, the safety and comfort of athletes and spectators. Moreover, FIFA established that the minimum spectator capacity for each stadium had to be forty thousand. This requirement proved to be



Fig. 3 Bologna, Stadio Dall'Ara, 1989, © Comune di Bologna.



Fig. 4 Roma, Stadio Olimpico, 1989, © Archivio CONI Roma.

a crucial point, especially for those administrations that had decided not to build a completely new facility, since the numbering of seats and the installation of chairs would inevitably reduce the capacity of the original stadiums, which had previously lacked such amenities. Therefore, in most cases, to reach an adequate number of seats it was necessary to create space for new stands. A common feature found in the Italia '90 stadiums was the evident intention of the architects and engineers involved to openly showcase the structural components of the facilities, turning them into distinctive traits of the projects. Technological details and materials were deliberately displayed not only as design choices but also as programmatic elements; in fact, the organizers and financiers of the World Cup wanted the stadiums to reflect the design and cultural qualities of Italy at that historical moment—a country clearly tied to its past, yet also projected toward the future through its supposed industrial strength. Stadiums are therefore characterized by large roofs made with tensile structures (for example, the new Stadio Delle Alpi in Turin) or with deep cantilevers; they are expanded through the enlargement of the seating bowls or by superimposing new tiers of stands. For instance, to renovate the Renato Dall'Ara stadium in Bologna, the Bologna City Council commissioned two full professors from the local Faculty of Engineering – Piero Pozzati and Franco Zarri – who were joined by the architect Enzo Zacchioli⁹. The new metal structure envelops the old Stadio Littoriale – defined by an external wall facing of exposed brick – to support a new ring of prefabricated terraces and the canopy covering the grandstand. The expansion is achieved through a system of iron uprights, aligned with the reinforced concrete ones of the old stadium and connected by decks that form two rings of walkways. This system creates a sort of accessible façade, where the vertical connections become part of the overall design. The solution adopted in Bologna was also applied in Milan, Naples, and Verona, where the

structures were highlighted chromatically as well¹⁰: from the green and yellow of Bologna to the bright red of the Meazza. These cases are particularly interesting because they reveal another recurring feature of world stadiums: they openly display the different construction phases they have undergone over time. The numerous additions, together with the renovations for major events, contribute to the perception of these buildings as a sum of interventions, all easily legible.

As for the cases of stadiums built from scratch, the Stadio Olimpico in Rome is particularly interesting, as it involved demolition and reconstruction. In 1984, the Olimpico, which had already been fully restored for the 1960 Olympics, had a capacity of sixty-five thousand spectators. This was far too few for a city aspiring to host the final match of the event¹¹. After a long public debate, and having rejected the proposal for a new stadium designed by Vittorio Gregotti¹², the Rome administration – under strong pressure from the Olympic Committee – commissioned Annibale Vitellozzi to take on the project and decided to renovate the existing facility with a plan that, in order to achieve a minimum capacity of eighty thousand spectators, called for the demolition and reconstruction of the two curves and one of the two stands¹³. The new supporting structures were entirely made of reinforced concrete; the main framework consisted of beams and columns arranged radially, supporting the tiers that held the seats. Given the limited space available, all the elements were prefabricated: they arrived at the construction site ready-made and only needed to be assembled on site. The entire steel roof was then designed by Massimo Majowiecki¹⁴. After the long debate and the controversies that arose during each phase of the stadium's construction, on May 31, 1990, the new Olimpico was inaugurated. Attending the event were the highest offices of the State – the President of the Republic, Francesco Cossiga, and the Prime Minister, Giulio Andreotti – along with members of the Local Organizing Committee and also Pope John Paul II, who blessed the new facility and, symbolically, the World Cup as well.

From an economic standpoint, Italia '90 turned out to be a resounding disaster for our country: the increase in costs for stadium construction was extremely high¹⁵. The architectural and urban legacy cannot be considered entirely positive either. With a few exceptions – the Meazza, the Olimpico, and the Maradona – the facilities, despite numerous maintenance works, are in problematic condition, both structurally (the Sant'Elia in Cagliari is an irretrievable ruin) and in terms of their inadequacy with respect to current socio-economic standards. Football is, in fact, undergoing significant transformation, with an increasingly diverse audience (in terms of gender, age, background, cultural interests), and is therefore seeking more inclusive approaches in the design of facilities that are not antagonistic to the city but act as catalysts beyond the duration of a single sporting event. To adapt or regenerate Italian stadiums and make them active elements of urban dynamics – reintegrating them, where necessary, into the fabric of the city and territory – would require an extensive and comprehensive design effort. However, this should not become an excuse for the brutal erasure of the structures and the stage settings that were necessary for showcasing the Italian World Cup, but rather mark the beginning of a process whose defining feature is the difficult search for a balance between the memory of the recent past and a forward-looking vision. To completely obliterate the settings purposefully constructed for a film (Italia '90) would, without a doubt, amount to an ideological and censorial act.

¹ Cfr. LORENZO MINGARDI, *Italia '90. La costruzione di una macchina scenica. Lo Stadio San Nicola di Bari e lo Stadio Olimpico*, «Critica d'Arte», 9-10, 2021, pp. 79-95; LORENZO MINGARDI, *Gli stadi per il Mondiale di Calcio Italia '90. Riti, mascheramenti e antagonisti*, «Vesper», n. 9, 2023, pp. 56-71.

² NICOLA SBETTI, «ITALIA '90» vista da Zurigo. La Fifa come attore politico-organizzativo: ruolo e strategie, in Nicola Porro, Stefano Martelli, Giovanna Russo (a cura di), *Il Mondiale delle meraviglie. Calcio, media e società da "ITALIA '90" a oggi*, Milano, FrancoAngeli 2016, pp. 77-78.

³ NICOLA SBETTI, «ITALIA '90» ..., op. cit., p. 74.

⁴ MASSIMO MORISI, *Gli stadi di «Italia '90»: gli attori di un'esperienza di amministrazione locale*, «Amministrare», XXI, 1, 1991, p. 61.

⁵ FRANCO PELLIZZER, *Gli stadi di «Italia '90»: i modelli esecutivi e le scelte procedimentali*, «Amministrare», XXI, 1, 1991, p. 145; LUIGI BOBBIO, *Gli stadi di «Italia '90»: le prestazioni delle dodici città*, «Amministrare», XXI, 1, 1991, p. 5.

⁶ MASSIMO MORISI, *Gli stadi di «Italia '90» ..., op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁷ Archivio Edilizia pubblica del Comune di Bologna (Aecb), Folder 41/32/B/3428 Stadio Dall'Ara, letter from the mayor of Bologna (Renzo Imbeni) to Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, 6 dicembre 1987.

⁸ Aecb, Folder 41/31/D/3390 Stadio Dall'Ara.

⁹ Aecb, Folder 43/31/D/3391 Stadio Dall'Ara.

¹⁰ LORENZO MINGARDI, *Gli stadi per il Mondiale di Calcio Italia '90...*, op. cit., pp. 64-66.

¹¹ Archivio Storico del CONI (Asc), Olimpico '90, Cartella A, comunicazione della Giunta esecutiva n. 594 del 23 giugno 1987.

¹² PAOLO FARERI, *Gli stadi di «Italia '90»: il successo interno*, «Amministrare», XXI, 1, 1991, p. 115.

¹³ ASC, Olimpico '90, cartella Q, variante tecnica ed economica per la demolizione e il rifacimento della tribuna Monte Mario, relazione dettagliata, 7 aprile 1989.

¹⁴ GABRIELE NERI, *Intervista a Massimo Majowiecki*, in Manuel Orazi, Fabio Salomoni, Moira Valeri (a cura di), *Stadi Architettura e mito*, Roma-Modena, Maxxi, Panini 2025, pp. 79-86.

¹⁵ NICOLA PORRO, *Un mondiale delle meraviglie?*, in *Il mondiale delle meraviglie...*, op. cit., p. 8.