

PORTA PALAZZO. THE THREAD OF MEMORY

Piazza della Repubblica, 30

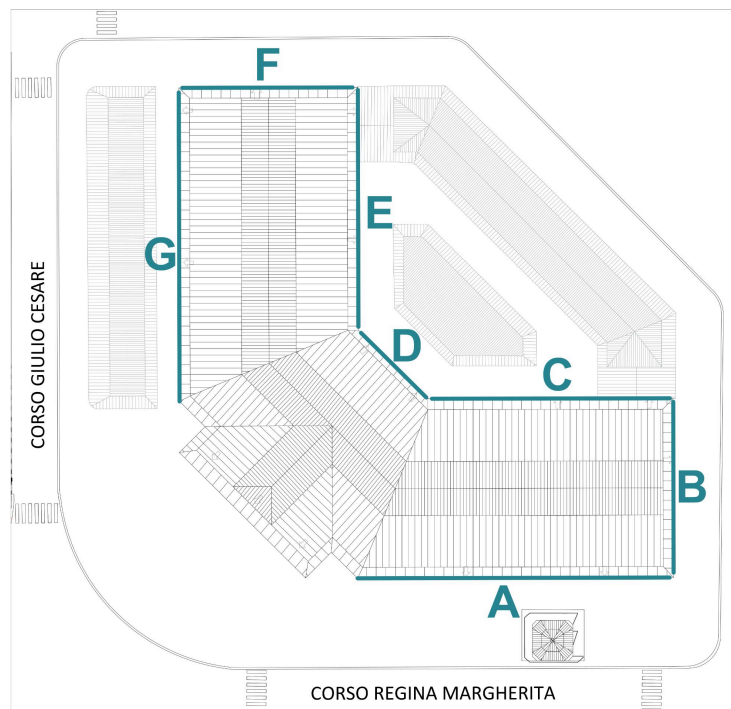
Over the past two years, a major redevelopment plan for Piazza della Repubblica has taken shape. The project includes renovations to the entire architectural setting, the launch of the design phase for the PIA (Integrated Area Plan), maintenance of the adjacent Farmers' and Household Goods Pavilions, and the restoration of a significant portion of the stone paving in the Fruit and Vegetable area —funded through PINQUA (National Innovative Programme for Housing Quality) and PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) projects managed by the Infrastructure Service for Commerce and Sport. Additional improvements include the new scenic lighting on the façades of the Covered Food Market V, along with its new sign and window graphics, as well as the recent placement of 24 planters in various points of the square (funded by the City with earmarked funds, managed by the Commerce Department).

As part of this major general plan, the decision was made to restore the decorum of the Covered Food Market IV (the Clock Pavilion), a building protected by the Fine Arts Heritage Authority that will celebrate its 110th anniversary next year and is frequently spoilt by illegal graffiti. A system of illustrated panels with anti-graffiti treatment was, therefore, designed to cover the perimeter walls. These panels aim to tell the story of Porta Palazzo—from its origins to the present—to everyone who visits the city's most important market: residents, newcomers, and tourists alike.

Retracing its most iconic moments and architectural changes, "Porta Palazzo. The Thread of Memory" narrates both the present and the past. With the use of archival materials, historical photos, paintings, and prints, the project seeks to explore the collective memory of Porta Palazzo, which has long been the cultural and social heart of Turin. A continuous thread runs through these images, like a visual timeline that reconstructs and recounts the history of the neighbourhood, its square and its market. In the same way, the historical figures of the Market Queen and the "Maciste of Porta Pila" merge with the present: from the Luci d'Artista light installations to today's protagonists—the people of Porta Palazzo.

The collected material has been reinterpreted by the artist Hamza Tihouna, with the artistic curatorship of MAO, the Museum of Oriental Art in Turin, retracing the most significant moments and architectural transformations of Porta Palazzo. "The Thread of Memory" tells the story of both the past and the present, aiming to explore the collective memory of Porta Palazzo, forever the cultural and social heart of the city. A continuous red thread runs through these images, like a visual timeline that reconstructs and recounts the history of the neighbourhood, its square and its market. In the same way, the historical figures of the "Market Queen" and the "Maciste of Porta Pila" merge with the present, from the Luci d'Artista light installations to the portraits of today's protagonists.

Each section focuses on a few key aspects.



SECTION A

When does the history of Porta Palazzo and its market begin?

Paintings and historical prints help reconstruct the origin of an area that brings together the Palaces of power and people's daily life, right in the heart of Turin. Porta Palazzo owes its name to one of the city gates. Originally, it was the ancient *Postierla San Michele*, an access point to the market of *Piazza delle Erbe*, today known as *Piazza Palazzo di Città*. Then, Vittorio Amedeo II, as part of his project to transform Turin into a true eighteenth-century capital and make the city's entrance more impressive, decided to have a Gate to the Palace "*Porta di Palazzo*" built, which was inaugurated in 1701. It was probably designed by the court architect and urban planner Filippo Juvarra, who also designed an initial square to connect the city to Borgo Dora, an area that has been hosting a fruit market since the 1700s.

The Gate to the Palace "*Porta di Palazzo*" was later demolished during the Napoleonic era, and in 1817 Gaetano Lombardi's architectural project for a large octagonal square dedicated to Emanuele Filiberto completed Juvarra's original design. The gate disappeared, but the name *Porta Palazzo* remained.

The markets—those of *Piazza Palazzo di Città*, *Piazza Corpus Domini*, and the spontaneous markets along the city's access roads—were officially established on 29 August 1835. In 1836 the pavilions for the fish and food markets were built, while the Clock Pavilion was constructed in 1916. During the bombings of the Second World War in 1942 the pavilions suffered significant damage. The clothing market, built in 1963, was demolished in 1998, and in its place the architect Massimiliano Fuksas created a new structure, now transformed into the Central Market, *Mercato Centrale*.

Porta Palazzo has always been in constant evolution— a place for sharing in the heart of the city, unique throughout Europe.

SECTION B

Porta Palazzo is the stalls, the fruit, the vegetables, the food and cookware, the shoes, the fabrics, the clothes—everything that can be sold, bought, or exchanged.

But above all, Porta Palazzo is the people, an extraordinary melting pot of origins, dialects, and languages. It has always been this way, from the farmers coming from the countryside and the hills around the city to the people who today come from all over the world—an evolution that tells the story of a popular and multiethnic Turin from the 18th to the 21st century.

It is a story made not so much—or not only—of written pages, but primarily of images, which can often tell more, and better, than many words. In the absence of a writer like Zola in Piedmont able to portray the “Belly of Turin,” the photographs taken by Mario Gabinio in the 1930s stand as a unique and precious testimony.

Gabinio, who was born in 1871 and lived between the late 19th and early 20th centuries (died in 1938), was a railway worker by profession and a photographer by passion. He photographed mountains, urban architecture, and the Porta Palazzo market: women selling mushrooms gathered in nearby woods, grapes from household vineyards, vegetables and fruit from their gardens. And by magic, thanks to his attention to detail, Gabinio’s black-and-white photographs can even convey the smells, fragrances, and sounds of the square. You can almost hear the voices of those who sell and those who buy—exchanging not only goods, but also news, passions, and opportunities.

The world portrayed in Gabinio’s photographs is especially made of women and is, at times, deeply moving. The bashfulness of young women is caught in a gesture or a glance, as is the confidence of adult women. Always sharing. In Gabinio’s shots, everyone seems to meet here, each with a place destined by fate, and Porta Palazzo once again becomes the heart of Turin—a place of dialogue, encounter, and exchange, of cultures and traditions. From food to second-hand books, “scienssa a otto soldi al chilo” (knowledge at bargain prices). A meeting place for immigrants from the South of Italy and, nowadays, from all over the world – a place that feels closest to home and to one’s memories, profoundly from Turin but, at the same time, distinctively international.

Today, in the age of selfies and colour, photography remains the privileged way of telling the story of a place of meeting and exchange. Following in Gabinio’s footsteps, other photographers –such as Michele d’Ottavio, whose studio is on the edge of the square, or newspaper reporters—continue to photograph people who work and live here, street vendors, artists, characters like Maciste and the Queen, distinguished visitors and strangers alike. There is always someone to meet, something to discover, a story to tell. Those who come here never want to leave.

Porta Palazzo is the place that never stops living, at any hour of the day or night, and on every day of the year.

SECTION C

The Porta Palazzo market is like a large open-air stage, with its “actors.” As early as 1902, the Queen of Porta Palazzo was elected, chosen from among the market’s women traders. The first Queen was Margherita Rosso and lived on Via Borgo Dora. The election—interrupted only during the war—continued until 1983. It was also a ritual of generosity. On the last day of Carnival the Queen, accompanied by her court and the masked figures of Gianduia and Giacometta, would tour the market, collecting donations to be given to charitable organizations.

Street performers, fortune tellers, and buskers have always been part of Porta Palazzo. The most famous character of the 1960s and 1970s was Maciste of *Porta Pila*. Porta Pila was the market’s other popular name, a reference to the game of *pila o croce* (heads or tails) played with old doubloons, and more generally to the money spent at the market. Maciste, whose real name was Maurizio Marletta (born in 1935), a native of Catania who emigrated to Turin and worked as a second-hand dealer, would transform himself every Sunday into a hero capable of lifting a one-hundred-kilogram stone with one hand. The performance, staged with great theatrical flair by Maciste/Marletta, literally mesmerized the audience. In old photographs, one can sense the suspended, admiring atmosphere of spectators gathered in a semicircle around Maciste, as he stood outside the Fish Market, arm raised above his head, lifting the enormous boulder. Marletta became so famous that film director Ettore Scola invited him to play himself in the 1973 film *Trevico–Torino*, and Giacomo Ferrante—who had seen Maciste’s performance as a child—made him the protagonist of the 1992 short film *L’uomo della pietra* (the Man of the Stone). Today, Marletta rests in the Monumental Cemetery as a “historical figure.”

Porta Palazzo is also a place of profound religious devotion and social commitment, surrounded by churches that have shaped the city’s history, the most important of which is the Santuario della Consolata. In 1980, the year of his first visit to Turin, Pope John Paul II also came to this area to visit the patients of Cottolengo, the Little House of Divine Providence founded by Saint Joseph Cottolengo in 1828 and officially recognized by King Charles Albert in 1833.

Porta Palazzo has always been a hub of energy.

SECTION D

If there is one place in Porta Palazzo that has crossed an entire century, but kept pace with modern times, it is the Clock Pavilion, perhaps the most emblematic building in the square. This structure was erected in 1916 under the name Pavilion IV which was added to the masonry buildings that had been constructed since as early as 1836.

The Clock Pavilion was immediately “something else” as it looked toward the future, drawing inspiration from the iron-and-glass architecture that spread across Europe during the era of Universal Expositions, from the great railway stations of Paris and London to the first shopping arcades, opening the way to a new style —luminous and airy.

Yet in 1916 the world was in the midst of a global war, and steelworks were busy producing weapons. All except one small factory in Borgo Dora, near the market, which continued to serve the city and worked tirelessly to build Pavilion IV, the Clock Pavilion. This is confirmed by an inscription that forever marks the year of its construction, 1916, a sign of hope and trust beyond wars.

More than 100 years have passed, and that Pavilion remains a symbol. Inside, the food stalls are strictly numbered; outside, colorful lights installed by the renowned artist Michelangelo Pistoletto weave the phrase “Amare le differenze” (love differences), translated into 39 languages, reminding us of the diversity that Porta Palazzo has long embraced.

Next to it stands the Farmers’ Pavilion, recently restored in a way that preserved its history while giving new brightness to the glass and renewed strength to the iron, which brings us back to the original spirit of the market’s spontaneous beginnings and the importance of the local territory.

Some older residents of Turin still refer to the area suspended between the Clock Pavilion and the Farmers’ Pavilion as *mercà dij busiard*, the market of liars, because it once hosted improvised vendors selling goods of sometimes dubious origin. Old urban stories that linger only in remembered names. The Pavilions, however, are fragments of the past that have never lost their vitality.

The soul of Porta Palazzo lives on through past, future, and differences.

SECTION E

What is Porta Palazzo today? The largest open-air market in Europe, certainly, with impressive figures: a total area of 51,300 square meters, a retail surface of 4,991 square meters, over a thousand street vendors, 800 mobile stalls, dozens of rotating pitches, and more than 100,000 people who come here every week—to shop, browse, and watch. But these are only numbers. Porta Palazzo is much more than that.

It is a place of meeting, exchanging, sharing, and diversity, where unexpected discoveries continue to unfold. An inscription commemorates Francesco Cirio and his “invention” of canned tomatoes, which would later revolutionize twentieth-century cuisine. The area also includes Umberto I Shopping Gallery housed within the corridors of the historic Mauriziano Hospital founded in 1575; the Balôn flea market, evocative of a film set; and the *Ghiacciaie* (ice houses), resembling some mysterious spaceships landed here from some distant planet—once essential for preserving food, now vibrant spaces for encounters and social life.

Porta Palazzo is precisely this, above all else: a place of encounters. Since the post-war period—when the square officially took the name *Piazza della Repubblica*—everyone has met here. First came workers from southern Italy, Sicily, Sardinia, and the North-East, bringing customs, products, and traditional dishes. Then, gradually, came migrants from across the world: North Africa, South America, the East, and Eastern Europe. Porta Palazzo welcomed them all with its customary openness to difference. Today the square hosts a melting pot of ethnic communities, writing new chapters in the story of a multiethnic and multicultural Turin and its social transformations.

Porta Palazzo is a mirror of a changing Turin—an intercultural identity that may be unique in the world. The Olympic torch for the Turin 2006 Winter Games passed through here, and today the historic Fish Market building of 1836 may become the headquarters of Turin, European Capital of Culture 2033, nearly two hundred years later.

Porta Palazzo is far more than a place or a market, it is the realized utopia of a new Turin in constant evolution, the beating heart of the city of tomorrow.

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