

The Ospedale Maggiore - Policlinico of Milan

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The “Ospedale Maggiore” of Milan, traditionally known as “Ca’ Granda”, is one of the most ancient hospitals in Italy, being founded by the Duke Francesco Sforza (1401-1466) in 1456. The aims of the hospital were to provide free medical assistance for the poorest people of the city and to improve efficiency in healthcare by converging patients from the various institutions of Milan on a single “bigger” structure (“Domus Magna Hospitalis”). The initial building project was signed by the Renaissance architect Antonio di Pietro Averlino, known as Filarete (c. 1400-1469), but only the southern portion of the building was executed from his design. Indeed in 1465 Filarete was succeeded in his office of architect by Guiniforte Solari (c. 1429-1481) who was followed in his turn by Giovanni Antonio Amadeo (c. 1447-1522) [1]. The hospital consisted of a square with buildings running through in the form of a cross (*crociera*). Each wing of the cross was reserved for a specific disease, and at the junction of the four arms of the *crociera* stood the chapel, so arranged for allowing patients to participate in the daily celebration of the Eucharistic rite. According to the Renaissance reform of hospitals promoted by the Milanese archbishop Enrico Rampini (1390-1450), only people suffering from acute diseases could be admitted to the structure, while chronic and “incurable” diseases (e.g. syphilis) were treated in hospitals outside of the city [1]. Innovative sewage systems, daily change of sheets and room ventilation allowed to prevent the spread of infectious diseases among the patients. In addition a permanent staff of physicians and nurses, among whom Camillus de Lellis (1550-1614) should be mentioned, was dedicated to providing care and relief to suffering people. The hospital organization, based on rules defined by the prior Gian Giacomo Gilino (c. 1445-1500), served as a model for all other institutions of that period [2].

In the following centuries, the hospital was economically supported by legacies, donations and citizens’ contributions paid during the “Festa del Perdono” (*Feast of Forgiveness*), a special city jubilee celebrated on 25 March of every odd-numbered year. In particular, thanks to the donations of the archbishop of Milan Carlo Borromeo (1538-1584) and of a liberal citizen Giovan Pietro Carcano (1559-1624), the central portion of the hospital was erected in 1624 under the direction of the architect Francesco Maria Richini (1584-1658). Similarly, in 1797 the notary Giuseppe Macchi (1713-1797) left a large donation to the hospital, by means of which the buildings were definitely completed in 1805 [2].

In that period the Ospedale Maggiore continued to play a decisive role in the life of Milan, introducing some innovations in its organization. The director Pietro Moscati (1739-1824) fostered the institution of a chemical laboratory, reorganized the formularies, and promoted free drug distribution to poor of the city. At the same time, the hospital became a centre for education of young physicians, despite there was not a medical school in Milan, but it was actually located in Pavia. The Napoleonic health reforms led to improve the assistance to insane into the hospital and limited the smallpox and pellagra epidemics in the region, respectively thanks to the contributions of the physicians Luigi Sacco (1769-1836) and Gaetano Strambio (1752-1831), who were both directors of the hospital in that period [2].

During the nineteenth century, the “Ospedale Maggiore” expanded itself, including the structures of the ancient convent of Sant’Antonino. So, as stated by the Italian politician Carlo Cattaneo (1801-1869), in that period Milan could provide advanced medical care, mainly thanks to its hospital where all citizens could be freely admitted, regardless of their socio-economic class. Actually, in

the second half of the century, the Renaissance building appeared too inadequate to achieve these purposes. In particular, the director Andrea Verga (1811-1895) evidenced the technological backwardness of the structure and the lack of beds. Indeed, the building, designed for only 288 patients in the fifteenth century, could no longer admit the increasing population of the most industrialized city of Italy [2]. For these reasons, the administration planned to move the hospital beyond the Naviglio, the ship-canal of Milan, creating a modern structure based on a pavilion model. The first building of this new project, a surgical pavilion with 120 beds, was inaugurated in 1895 with the economic support of the Duchess Eugenia Litta Visconti (1837-1914). In the following decades, new pavilions were established and entitled to benefactors or to other distinguished figures in the history of the hospital: Ponti (1900), Moneta (1902), Beretta (1904), Moscati (1906), Riva (1911), Biffi (1912), Pasini (1914), Zonda (1915), Bosisio (1924), Borghi (1928), Monteggia, Sacco and Valetudo (1929), Granelli (1933) [3]. The pavilion “Guardia e Accettazione” was inaugurated in 1914, being one of the first structures exclusively aimed at providing emergency medical assistance and first-aid in Italy. In addition, in the area of pavilions, there were an institute for the treatment of people suffering from syphilis and other skin diseases (1908), dormitories for nuns and nurses (1906, 1934), and a church dedicated to St. Joseph completed in 1938 [3]. At the same time, the Ospedale Maggiore hosted the medical school of the new-born University of Milan, founded by the gynaecologist Luigi Mangiagalli (1849-1928) in 1924. At the beginning of the century, next to the area of pavilions, Mangiagalli had also created innovative clinical structures, named as the “Istituti Clinici di Perfezionamento” (*Clinical Institutes of Specialization*), including three institutions specifically aimed at providing assistance to pregnant women (Clinica Ostetrica-Ginecologica “Mangiagalli”, 1906), workers suffering from occupational diseases (Clinica del Lavoro “Luigi Devoto”, 1910), and children (Clinica Pediatrica “De Marchi”, 1915) [2]. In 1909 the Refuge “Regina Elena” was also founded for providing healthcare to poor pregnant women. Despite these new pavilions and clinics, the “Ospedale Maggiore” appeared still too small for the increased number of hospital admissions and its administration planned to build a new structure in the north of the city; so the Niguarda Hospital was founded in 1939, while the “Ospedale Maggiore” began to be known as “Policlinico” [1]. The buildings of both hospitals were seriously damaged by the Allied bombings of 1943 and the patients had to be moved to structures outside of the city. At the end of the Second World War, the Renaissance buildings of the hospital was assigned to the University of Milan (1958), and the clinical activities were carried out only in the pavilions. In the 1960s, the “Ospedale Maggiore” continued the project of decentralization, inaugurating two hospitals in the neighbouring city of Sesto San Giovanni (1961) and in the west of Milan (San Carlo Borromeo Hospital, 1967). In 1978, the administration of the four Milanese hospitals (Policlinico, Niguarda, San Carlo and Sesto San Giovanni Hospital) was divided up, giving autonomy to the different institutes [1]. Three years later, the “Ospedale Maggiore Policlinico” was recognized as a “Scientific Institute for Research and Healthcare” (IRCCS), so showing its value in clinical and scientific research in Italy. In 2005 the hospital was unified with the Clinical Institutes of Specialization and the Institute “Regina Elena” in one single organization, then named as “Fondazione IRCCS Ca’ Granda Ospedale Maggiore Policlinico” since 2010. In the last decade a renovation process of all the buildings of the hospital has started and it continues nowadays. However, the hospital doesn’t forget its own centenary history, as shown by some recent activities for the protection of artistic and cultural heritage, such as the restoration of the banner of honour, realized by the architect Giò Ponti (1891-1979) in 1935, and the anthropological and forensic study of human remains in the ancient burial-ground of the hospital, recently discovered under the Renaissance buildings.

References

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