

04-Piazza del Duomo

As the visitor climbs up from the subway station he is suddenly confronted by the enormous impact of the Piazza del Duomo, the very heart of Milan. Always full of people, this piazza is the background for tourist photos, surrounded by the ever-present crowds of pigeons .

The piazza we see today, is the version built in the 19th century and designed by the engineer from Bologna, Maurizio Mengoni. The huge project began in 1865 and a whole row of buildings: il Rebecchino, was demolished at this time. The same end was destined for the 15th century building, "Coperto del Figini", a Renaissance loggia, replaced by the triumphal archway entrance into the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele Secondo, also designed by Mengoni.

The imposing buildings on the longer northern and southern sides of the piazza fronted with arcades, date back to the 1870's, as does the Galli and Rosa building, on the western side facing the cathedral. The bronze monument of Vittorio Emanuele Secondo on horseback, by Ercole Rosa, located in the centre, was erected in 1896. Lastly, the Arengario building on the southern side, was begun during the Fascist period, in 1939, designed by the architects Portaluppi, Magistretti, Griffini and Muzio. One of its two buildings, parallel and symmetrical, was built to replace the right hand wing of the Palazzo Reale. Bombed during the second World War, it was completed only in 1956: today it is destined to become an important museum following its long period housing the Tourist Office.

The tourist office has been moved to the southern arcades, to a building which was formerly the first public bath house in Milan: the Cobianchi. The luxurious beauty salon has been transformed but without sacrificing the architectural style, between the Liberty and Art Deco periods, of which a typical example can be seen in the beautiful entrance.

However, the history of the area where the piazza is currently located dates back to well before the 19th century, and even prior to the construction of the Duomo, and is closely linked with the history of Milan. Four centuries before the birth of Christ, when the Celtic Gallic tribes of Insubria came to Italy to found a new city, after having consulted the oracles, they chose this very point to dedicate a temple to the moon goddess, Belisàma.

In the same place, a couple of centuries later, the Romans built a temple to Minerva, and later, once again in the same place in the fourth century of the Christian era , the Baptistery of san Giovanni alle Fonti and the small church of Santa Tecla were erected, more or less in the centre of the current piazza. Facing these two buildings, where the Duomo now stands, the church of Santa Maria Maggiore and the Baptistery of Santo Stefano were built in the ninth century. Finally, in 1386, the never-ending story of the construction of the Duomo began.

However, on the right hand side of the monument under construction, there was already a very old building: built in the middle ages to house the Broletto vecchio, it was the first seat of the Milan city council, later belonging to Milanise nobility: the Torriani , followed by the Visconti and the Sforza families.

After several renovations and different owners, it was completed in its current form in 1772, by the Austrian governor. The work was entrusted to the architect, Piermarini, who at the same time opened up the small piazza in front.

Following the unification of Italy, the building became the Royal Palace: Palazzo Reale, and today as well as housing International art exhibitions, it is also the seat of the Superintendence of environmental and architectural heritage of the Region, and the museum of contemporary art of Milan.