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Author

Vadala', Daniele

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A Bundle of Rods: Transmigration of Symbols and Spatial Rhetoric in the Architecture of Modernity¹

Daniele Vadalà

Introduction

During the twenty years of Fascist rule, the diffusion and pervasiveness throughout Italy of the popularized image of the ancient roman symbol of *fasces lictori* reflects well the sense of a political movement that mainly appealed on the symbolic lure of a spatially based rhetoric.

The sequence and connections of these symbolic acts, rather than appearing the outcome of bizarre or extravagant improvisations, were indeed part of a well-orchestrated appeal to a mix of feelings then animating the popular masses of Italy. This strategy could well have been grounded in the current account of the “*vittoria mutilata*” after the First World War and the distress caused by a profound crisis of the liberal state, whose prestige and authority had been perceptibly weakened in the interwar period by the rising action of labor organizations and communist parties during a period of higher unemployment and economic crisis.

This combination of social resentment and uncertainty for the future was an easy target for the emergent regime to emotionally involve Italians through an arsenal of symbols and rites, a well-displayed set of spatially-based dramatizations that in the course of twenty decisive years paved the way to a rising and robust popular consensus.

In his seminal work, *Le religioni della politica*, Emilio Gentile distinguishes two phases in the edification of this “secular cult.”² The first aimed at consolidating the Fascist authority through the reconsecration of symbols and rites of Italian national unity, among these the celebration of the *Statuto Albertino* bestowed upon Italy by the *Savoia* monarchy and the glorification of the First World War. In a different way, the second phase, initially overlapping but finally replacing the first, was intended to display the “atti simbolici di consacrazione della irrevocabilità del potere del fascismo” [“symbolic acts of consecration of the irrevocability of fascist power”].³

It was in the mid-1930s when Walter Benjamin formulated the famous concept that remains the best explanation of what in current terms can be defined as a complex and interrelated “statebranding strategy”: “The masses have a right to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them expression in keeping these relations unchanged. The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life.”⁴ During the *Ventennio*, the straightforward mise-en-scene of Fascism had mainly relied upon architecture, much more than on any other form of media or public art. Yet, despite the tremendous significance that Italian Fascism had in recent history, it remained hindered—in the decades following the Second World War—by a certain reticence, suspicion, and partisanship. In fact, the anti-fascist *vulgata* prevalent in post-war Italy depicted Italians under the *Ventennio* as a mainly poor, ignorant people led by violent and impolite leaders, while artists, intellectuals, and entrepreneurs could easily be depicted as opportunists if

¹ This article is much improved thanks to the anonymous reviewers. I would like also to thank Diane Yvonne Ghirardo and Adrian Sheppard, who generously read the final draft and offered useful criticism.

² Emilio Gentile, *Le religioni della politica. Fra democrazie e totalitarismi* (Bari: Laterza, 2007).

³ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938–40*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 269.

not opponents, disremembering the previous twenty years of consent when they combated the Salò regime and the Germans.⁵

In the specific field of architectural history, it is not easy to explain how a strained people, led by a fraudulent, greedy, and violent ruling class, could have remained for two decades at the forefront of architectural modernity, with results that had a major role in paving the way for more mature spatial visions in following decades.⁶ Thus, for three decades after the fall of Fascism, it had been easier for historians to assume that architectural Rationalism had developed in Italy not so much with the Party but against the Party. In doing so, architectural historians basically avoided “dealing with the relationship between the architecture and the thought of the Rationalists and the prevailing political system.”⁷

Scholarship has been devoted since then in the field of architectural history, as well as in the political and social sciences, to unveiling the multiple connections through which artists and

⁵ The importance, among the higher fascist hierarchies of personalities able to set the path for progressive cultural policies, like Giovanni Gentile and Giuseppe Bottai, is a clear counter-evidence of the wrong belief that the Fascist regime was mainly based on the use of brute force, an interpretation basically rejected by the recent historiography of Fascism. Renzo De Felice ended the preface to his *Le interpretazioni del Fascismo* with these words: “Tutta una serie di problemi è rimasta tuttavia pressoché irrisolta. Ciò che è stato troppo trascurato è stato l’aspetto culturale (soprattutto in senso antropologico), è venuto così a mancare l’elemento veramente unificante di quegli aspetti, la loro cornice, che faceva di tanti uomini comuni dei fascisti” [“A whole series of problems remain substantially to be cleared up. What has been neglected is the cultural dimension (above all in the anthropological sense), so the unifying factors of fascism remain unknown, the cornerstone, what made so many ordinary people fascists”] (Renzo De Felice, *Le interpretazioni del Fascismo* [Bari: Laterza, 2007], XXV). See also Giuseppe Bottai, *La politica delle arti. Scritti 1918–1943*, ed. Alessandro Masi (Rome: Istituto poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 2009).

⁶ Peter Eisenmann was among the first to acknowledge his debt to the work of Giuseppe Terragni which he began investigating as a Ph.D. student in the late 1960s; see Peter Eisenmann, *Giuseppe Terragni: Transformations, Decompositions, Critiques* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2003). A clearly defined link existed between Italian Rationalism and the so-called *Tendenza*, a neo-rationalist movement of the early 1970s, in the rationalist architecture of Gruppo 7 (Figini, Frette, Larco, Libera, Pollini, Rava, and Terragni). It could be easily associated with fascism, even if its main exponents, Aldo Rossi, Giorgio Grassi, Franco Purini, can be considered as leftists (see Andrew Peckham, “The Dichotomies of Rationalism in 20th-Century Italian Architecture,” *Architectural Design Special Issue: Rationalist Traces* 77, no. 5 [2007]; see also Tahl Kaminer, *Architecture, Crisis, and Resuscitation: The Reproduction of Post-Fordism in Late-Twentieth-Century Architecture* [London: Routledge, 2011], 92–93). It remains to understand how much architects such as Rafael Moneo, Carlos Ferrater, Alberto Campo Baeza could have taken from a direct approach to Italian Rationalism or how much the architects from the “School of Oporto” such as Fernando Tavora, Alvaro Siza, and Eduardo Souto de Moura may have been influenced by the work accomplished in their town by Marcello Piacentini and later by Giovanni Muzio. Recent scholarship has focused greater attention on the Italian colonial architecture in Libya, Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia, and the Greek Dodecanese; see among others Sean Anderson, “The Light and the Line: Florestano Di Fausto and the Politics of ‘Mediterraneità,’” *California Italian Studies* 1 (2010); Renato Besana et al., eds., *Metafisica costruita: le città di fondazione degli anni trenta dall’Italia all’Oltremare* (Milan: Touring Editore, 2002); Giuliano Gresleri, Pier Giorgio Massaretti, and Stefano Zagnoni, eds., *Architettura italiana d’oltremare: 1870–1940* (Venice: Marsilio, 1993); Krystyna von Henneberg, “Imperial Uncertainties: Architectural Syncretism and Improvisation in Fascist Colonial Libya,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 31 (1996); Brian McLaren, *Architecture and Tourism in Italian Colonial Libya: An Ambivalent Modernism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); David Rifkind, “Gondar. Architecture and Urbanism for Italy’s Fascist Empire,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 70, no. 4 (2011).

⁷ Diane Yvonne Ghirardo, “Italian Architects and Fascist Politics: An Evaluation of the Rationalist’s Role in Regime Building,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 39, no. 2 (1980): 111. It was with a considerable delay, in a publication for the 1976 Venice Biennale, notes Ghirardo, that architectural historians started revising the complex architectural scenario during Fascism; see also Cesare De Seta, “Cultura e architettura in Italia fra le due guerre: continuità e discontinuità,” in *Il Razionalismo e l’architettura in Italia durante il Fascismo*, ed. Silvia Danesi and Luciano Patetta (Venice: Marsilio, 1976), 10; Giorgio Ciucci “L’urbanista degli anni ’30: un tecnico per l’organizzazione del consenso,” in id., 28–31. The first comprehensive research that presented an unbiased point of view, some years after Ghirardo’s article, is Carlo Cresti, *Architettura e Fascismo* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1986).

architects involved in the transformation of the built environment contributed to shaping mental habits and collective practices under Fascism.⁸

Dealing with that bundle of rods called *fascio littorio*, this study aims to argue that a fascist aesthetic, rather than being peculiar to that historical phase, had an afterlife and not minor role in the making of post-war democracies, the extent and meaning of which need further exploration.⁹ Through an analysis of the work of Luigi Moretti—a brilliant protagonist largely obscured in the ideologically biased post-war cultural debate—an attempt will be proposed here to develop clues to help understand not only the role of the *fascio littorio* in fascist Italy, but its permanence in the existing democratic scenario outside Europe. Uncomfortable as it may appear, this continuity should not be underestimated in an understanding of the underlying factors, aesthetic as much as political, that have led millions of citizens to give up their most fundamental civil rights and put their future in the hands of a despotic minority.

A Bundle of Men Marching to Rome

The March on Rome of October 28, 1922, the first substantial event orchestrated by the Fascist group in its mutation from a radical minority to a ruling majority, “appears as the opening prologue to fascism’s creation of its own story/history.”¹⁰ With this spatially based act—theatrical as well as political—where popular feast meets unformulated revolutionary action, the construction of that complex system of beliefs and rituals defined by Emilio Gentile as the “Sacralization of Politics” begins.¹¹ Although the insurrectional act did not actually occur, its official account necessarily differed. As Julius Caesar came to power in January 49 B.C. with his progress from Rimini to Rome, so it was through another legendary March on Rome that Mussolini—*Duce degli Italiani* and nouveau Caesar—made his way to “the liberation of Italy.”¹²

It is worth noting that the term *fascio* was already a common expression in Italian political debate by the late 19th century, meaning “group” or “association,” especially linked to leftist movements of peasants and workers, or *fasci dei lavoratori*.¹³ The palingenesis of the term and its adoption by the party of the right was encapsulated when Giacomo Balla, ten years after the March on Rome, portrayed the memorable event (fig. 1) according to a realistic style clearly

⁸ See among others, Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Diane Yvonne Ghirardo, *Italy: Modern Architectures in History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013); Terry Kirk, *The Architecture of Modern Italy: Visions of Utopia, 1900–Present* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005); David Rifkind, *The Battle for Modernism: Quadrante and the Politicization of Architectural Discourse in Fascist Italy* (Venice: Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio and Marsilio, 2012); Medina Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected: Architecture, Spectacle, and Tourism in Fascist Italy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

⁹ As regards the pervasiveness of what can be considered the most flexible of all the fascist symbols, Falasca Zamponi, echoing Gentile, ranked the *fascio* “the fascist dictatorship’s second main symbol, its visual form of self-representation,” just after the image of Mussolini. See Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, 99; Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del Littorio: la sacralizzazione della politica nell’Italia fascista* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1993), 67.

¹⁰ Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, 2.

¹¹ This basic concept was introduced by the Italian historian Emilio Gentile following George Mosse’s pioneering study of the cultural roots of Nazi Germany, See Gentile, *Il culto del Littorio*, op. cit. Also see his “Fascism as Political Religion” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 25, nos. 2/3 (1990), 229–51.

¹² The insurrectional march of supposedly 30,000 *Camicie Nere* was rather the postscript to a political outcome that was already fact, the first government led by Mussolini (legally appointed prime minister by the King). The term “liberation” also recurred through the columns of the *New York Times* (see “Mussolini Forms Cabinet for Italy with Fascisti Aids,” *The New York Times*, October 31, 1922. One year later Mussolini proclaimed: “Like it or not, in October 1922 there was an insurrectional act, a revolution, even if one can argue over the word. Anyway, a violent take-over of power. To deny this real fact [...] is truly nonsense.” Benito Mussolini, *Scritti e discorsi*, 12 vols. (Milan: Hoepli, 1934–1939), vol. IV, 293 (translated by Falasca-Zamponi in *Fascist Spectacle*, 2).

¹³ A complete account of the palingenesis of the term is given in Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, 95.

built upon the *Fourth Estate* by Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo. In this picture, the analogy is perfect between the group of political avant-gardists surrounding their leader in order to inflict a supposedly salutary blow to the fragile Italian democracy and the bundle of equal rods tied together to protect the axe, most eloquent sign of imperium.



Fig. 1. Giacomo Balla, *Marcia su Roma*, 1931–1933, Pinacoteca Gianni e Marella Agnelli, Turin.

The “Performative Power” of Fasces in the Roman Age

A significant description of the *fasces lictoriae* in Roman history is given by Giorgio Agamben:

The fasces were elm or birch rods about 130 centimeters in length, bound together with a red strap into which an axe was inserted laterally. They were assigned to a special corporation, half *apparitores* and half executioners, called *lictores*, who wore the fasces on their left shoulder. In the republic, the period about which we have most information, the fasces were the prerogative of the consul and the magistrate who had imperium. The lictors, twelve in number, had to accompany the magistrate on every occasion, not just on public occasions. When the consul was at home, the lictors waited in the vestibule; if he went out, even if only to the spa or the theater, they invariably accompanied him.¹⁴

From this bare description emerges the character of a public performance that—revolving round the formal acknowledgment of judicial power—constituted a sort of dramatic interplay between a people, the Romans in the republican age, and its civic places. In this case, according to

¹⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory, For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Redwood: Stanford University Press, 2011), 182.

Agamben, “We find ourselves in the presence of a phenomenon that corresponds, even if apparently through an inverse process, to the insoluble interweaving of words and facts, of reality and meaning that defines the sphere of language that linguists call performative. [...] The performative is indeed a linguistic utterance that is also, in itself, immediately a real fact, insofar as its meaning coincides with a reality that it produces.”¹⁵ It seems immediately evident that the performative power assumed by the fasces—as a symbol of judicial and later political authority—would replace the original function they had of inflicting capital punishment in the forms of flogging (the rods) and decapitation (the axe). The use of fasces grew into a complex spatial narration performed in the different institutional seats of the Roman Republic, and the two parts of the system, the rods and the axe, differently combined, articulated different moments of the spectacle. Specifically, the *lictors* removed the axe from the fasces when the magistrate remained within the *pomerium*, the public space where the *ius necis*—the right of putting to death that was the prerogative of the magistrate—was limited by the right belonging to each Roman citizen to appeal against the death penalty. For the same reason, the magistrate had to lower the fasces before the popular assemblies.¹⁶

While initially connected to the public function of the magistrate in the institutional context of the republic, the display of the fasces assumed further significance in the Roman world as an attribute of imperial power. This is particularly the case of the triumphant general, where a more direct significance of the fasces as a symbol of imperium became evident in larger political terms, “The ban on the magistrate’s being able to display the fasces with the axe inside Rome had two important exceptions: the dictator and the triumphant general. This means that triumph implies an indetermination of the difference *domi-militiae*, which from the standpoint of public law distinguishes the territory of the city from that of Italy and the provinces.”¹⁷

The Fasces as a Modern Symbol of Republican Freedom

The birth of a progressive concept of Revolution—beginning as early as the 17th century in both scientific, industrial, and political terms—would not exclude the revival of ancient symbols, well rooted in classical antiquity. Recall that it was Kant himself who, already in the 1750s, had christened Benjamin Franklin, inventor of the lightning rod, a “modern Prometheus” who stole fire from the heavens to give to mankind.¹⁸

This vision emerges in *Au Génie de Franklin* by Jean-Honoré Fragonard in 1779 (fig. 2), the year after the Franco-American alliance against Great Britain in the American Revolution. This popular etching, linking the cause of American republicanism to the power of experimental science, made use of a wide array of rhetorical devices: in the bottom left corner figures

¹⁵ Ibid., 182.

¹⁶ Those who had the role to bear the fasces upon their shoulders upheld the normative and spatial implications of the ritual: “no one could stand between a magistrate and his *lictor*” (except for a prepubescent son who, according to Roman law, was already subjected to the *ius necisque potestas* of the father). For the same reason, in some sense the *lictor* was without an existence of his own: not only did his garments conform to that of the magistrate he accompanied (military sagum outside the pomerium, a toga within the walls), but the very term ‘lictor’ is synonymous with ‘fasces’” (ibid., 182).

¹⁷ It is worth noting how this exception to the general rule of the public law involves, as well, the dramatization of the urban space around the Eternal City. “We know that the magistrate who had asked for the triumph to be accorded him had to wait for the decision of the senate outside the *pomerium*, in the *Campo Martius*; otherwise he would forever forfeit the right to the triumph, which was due only to the victorious general who effectively possessed imperium, that is, who was accompanied by the fasces. Fasces and imperium once again demonstrate here their consubstantiality” (ibid., 182).

¹⁸ James Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders: Electricity and Enlightenment in Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 3.

representing Avarice and Tyranny incarnate Britain while Mars and Minerva—representing France—help Franklin to protect the American republic, significantly shown as a woman bearing fasces.



Fig. 2. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Au Génie de Franklin*, 1779, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

It is not insignificant that the fasces had a resurgence during the French Revolution, when a political movement that went much further in the program of political and social reform than its American predecessor, made use of the successful metaphor of the movement of celestial bodies.¹⁹ The direct claim to the ideals of the Roman republic was a reasonable association of the fasces by the revolutionaries on both sides of the Atlantic, at the end of 18th century, as a direct attribute of republican freedom (fig. 3).

It is not easy to discover all the passages through which the symbol of the fasces made its debut on the stage of modernity. What is clear, however, is that this potent icon—often matched with the Phrygian “liberty cap”—had a primary role at the end of the 18th century in conveying and spreading the ideals of republicanism throughout Europe and the Americas, ushering in what

¹⁹ In continuity with the ideals of the Enlightenment, the metaphor explains the impact of what had to be considered much more than a revolt: “After the French Revolution the word ‘revolution’ itself generally lost any remaining cyclical overtones, save in a purely astronomical sense. The French Revolution not only set the seal, once for all, on the new sense of the word; its events affected thinking about revolutions in a number of ways. First of all, the extremes and violence of the Revolution caused concern about the possible evil consequences of revolutions as well as their accepted beneficial effects. Second, the French Revolution set a pattern in which profound social changes were seen to be a concomitant of political action. Third, it has been argued that this new concept of revolution had important overtones of inevitability, just as there is an inevitability about the revolutions of the planets around the sun” (I. Bernard Cohen, *Revolution in Science* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006], 209).

can be seen as the first clear model of political internationalism.²⁰ Through various channels, including masonic lodges, the success of the French Revolution popularized new political models by means of emblems and symbols that symbolized the “porosity” of thoughts, ideologies, and civic imaging between Europe and the Americas.²¹



Fig. 3. Antoine Jean Gros, *Figure allégorique de la République*, 1795, Grand Palais, Paris.

²⁰ After 1792 in France, the Republic was destined to replace the Monarch as the symbol of national unity. In that same year, according to the Abbé Grégoire’s precise indication, the Convention decreed that “the State Seal should be changed and should bear the image of France in the guise of a woman dressed in the style of Antiquity, standing upright, her right hand holding a pike surmounted by a Phrygian cap or cap of Liberty, her left resting upon a sheaf of fasces; at her feet a tiller—and as an inscription, the words: In the name of the French Republic. This change should be extended to all seals used by all administrative bodies” (Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation Made Real: Art and National Identity in Western Europe 1600–1850* [Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013], 72–73).

²¹ “Tout comme en France, quand la monarchie s’effondre, les sujets devenus citoyens en reviennent à la République (française ou romaine antique) et à sa symbolique des vertus et du pouvoir. Par circulation interne ou par traversée de l’Atlantique, des illustrations voyagent d’une région à une autre; s’ajoutent encore des symboles véhiculés par des loges maçonniques d’Europe ou des États-Unis, ainsi que par des loges locales. Ainsi les insurgés connaissent-ils bien l’allégorie féminine de la Liberté, le bonnet phrygien, dit encore bonnet de la Liberté, le faisceau de licteur, symbole de l’union et de l’ordre public, ainsi que du régime républicain, le triangle équilatéral de l’Égalité, le soleil levant du Progrès, les mains serrées de la Fraternité, etc. On a pu souligner la ‘porosité’ des pensées, des idéologies et de l’imagerie civique de part et d’autre de l’Atlantique” [“Just as in France, when the monarchy collapses, subjects turned citizens embrace the Republic (French or ancient Roman) and its imagery of virtues and power. Either by internal circulation or through the Atlantic, illustrations travel from one region to another; in addition to symbols conveyed through Masonic lodges in Europe or the United States, as well as by local lodges. Thus the insurgents are well acquainted with the feminine allegory of Liberty, the Phrygian cap, known then as the Freedom Cap, the lictor’s fasces, symbol of union and public order, as well as of republican regime, the equilateral triangle of Equality, the rising sun of Progress, the clasped hands of the Fraternity, and so on. It can be underlined the “porosity” of thoughts, ideologies and civic imagery on both sides of the Atlantic”] (Bernard Richard, *Marianne en Amérique. L’emblématique républicaine en Amérique, nord et sud* [2014], translation by the author, <http://bernard-richard-histoire.com/2014/09/30/marianne-en-amerique-lemblématique-republicaine-en-amerique-nord-et-sud/> (accessed February 13, 2016).

Romanità as Aesthetics of Power: The Reinvention of a Symbol in Fascist Italy

The reinterpretation of the fasces proposed by 18th-century revolutionaries, while generally successful, appears unaccomplished when compared with the more ambitious utilization conducted at the beginning of the Fascist rule over Italy. Even if the *fascio littorio* came to be officially declared *emblema di stato* only in December 12, 1926, it was four years before, a few weeks after the March to Rome, that the transformation of this ancient symbol into the distinctive icon of a new political course emerged.²² This diffusion of the lictor's fasces took unpredicted directions, well beyond the intentions of those who ultimately created an afterlife for this symbol. The emblem of the *Fasces Lictoriae*—launched on the new 2 lire coin (fig. 4) like a cognitive missile in the bursting universe of symbols of modernity—soon lost its intrinsically plural nature in favor of a “boundless singularity” that would allow for an effective, but generally superficial, diffusion into all sectors of the Italian society.²³



Fig. 4. The Italian 2 lire coin, circulated from 1923 to 1927 (Salvatori, 2008).

From the humble metal coin to airplane coachwork, from church bells to manhole covers, from the school gates to the public and private facades, the image of the *fascio littorio* was printed on paper, serigraphed on metal, painted on plaster, stamped in cast iron, impressed in concrete, sculpted in marble, composed in glass mosaics, thus providing the consolidation of a fascist seizure of Italy.

²² The journalist and cultural activist Margherita Sarfatti and the archeologist Giacomo Boni had a central role in the reinvention of this ancient symbol. See Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy, 1919–1929* (London: Routledge, 2004), 320, and Paola Salvatori, “Liturgie immaginate: Giacomo Boni e la romanità fascista,” *Studi Storici* 53, no. 2 (2012): 421.

²³ It is with a bittersweet irony that the image of the *Fascio littorio* on the new metal coins was hailed by the socialist newspaper *Avanti* as the first significant example of mass occupation of popular imagery by the new ruling fascist side, implicitly acknowledging the success of what began to be perceived as a pervasive state-marketing strategy: “Il nuovo tipo di sigaretta italiana ‘Eja’ sarà messo in vendita il 21 aprile corrente. Il tipo è in fabbricazione. Esso porterà impresso sulla carta anche il fascio littorio. Sull’occhiello, sui portasigari, sui pasticcini pasquali, sulle fascette che avvolgono i zamponi modenesi, sulle nuove monete da due lire, sui muri, sugli aperitivi, sui cioccolatini, e sulle nuove sigarette. Il lettore è pregato di credere che l’Italia è governata da fascisti ed è tutta fascista.” “Il Fascio littorio anche sulle sigarette” [“The new kind of Italian cigarette ‘Eja’ will be on sale April 21st. The type is under manufacturing. It will get the lictor’s fasces impressed on paper. On the buttonhole, on the cigar boxes, on the Easter pies, on the bands wrapping the Cotechino Modena, on the new 2 lire coins, on the walls, on the , on the chocolates, and new cigarettes. The reader is invited to believe that Italy is ruled by fascists and is wholly fascist”] in *Avanti!*, April 3, 1923 (translation by the author); see also Salvatori, *Liturgie immaginate*, 334.

It was no longer the relative stability and *fixity* of the symbol—described by Agamben with reference to the Roman world—that legitimated its presence within a shared public domain; it was rather a novel *flexibility* within a modern world, a world *un-governed* by a complex array of public and corporate interests, that made the symbol effectual at the beginning of the 20th century on a more immediate and, cognitively, superficial level. In this regard, despite attempts to establish a distance, the fascist appropriation of the fasces seems to have successfully adopted the strategy started by the French revolutionaries: the adoption by a political elite of a suggestive array of symbols whose public value was directly linked to the authority of the Roman Law through a transformation to “simple” objects of mass devotion.²⁴

According to this manifestation, well into the apogee of modernity, the symbol of the fasces was employed without consideration for that “metaphoric distance” that, according to Aby Warburg, should be integral to an ethical use of symbols.²⁵ This basic concept was reflected in a medium especially popular in post-World War I Europe: the postage stamp.

Warburg was then completely at ease in explaining the distance between political regimes through their profoundly different ways of dealing with the symbolic: to “die Briefmarke von Barbados (mythisch, griechisch, metaphorisch)” [“the postage stamps of Barbados [showing George V riding a] (mythic, Hellenic, metaphoric)” chariot, the art historian intended to juxtapose “d[en] italienische Faszistenmarke (heroisch, historisch, römisch, tropisch)” [“the Italian Fascist stamps (heroic, historical, Roman, tropical)”].²⁶



Fig. 5. 1/2d stamp of Barbados, c. 1925; 30c stamp of the Reign of Italy, c. 1923.

Ernst Gombrich remarked upon the two images (fig. 5) explaining that whereas in the first case “the symbol does not want to be real: it is shown in *grisaille*”—thus marking an adequate distance between the metaphor (Neptune) and the object of its exertion (his Majesty’s power)—

²⁴ For a wider discussion in terms of political philosophy of this para-religious attitude of modern revolutions and the functional use of symbols in modern politics, see especially Gentile, *Le religioni*, and Agamben, *The Kingdom*.

²⁵ This cultural drift should have been felt by the great art historian, who defined himself “Ebreo di sangue, Amburghese di cuore, d’anima Fiorentino” [“Jewish by blood, German by birth, Florentine at heart”] (quoted in Gertrud Bing, “Aby M. Warburg,” *Rivista storica italiana* 72 (1960): 113).

²⁶ Aby Warburg, “Gesammelte Schriften” 258, trans. Christopher Johnson in “Meditations on Tafel #61–64: Part II,” *Bilderfahrzeuge: Aby Warburg’s Legacy and the Future of Iconology*, July 4, 2015, <https://iconology.hypotheses.org/1142> (accessed February 13, 2016).

in the second case “fascies with the axe have classical origins, but Mussolini’s stamp is not nearly a metaphorical symbol—the axe is real and a real threat.”²⁷

It was through such straightforward manipulation of symbols that fascist Italy made a decisive step in the construction of a particular form of political landscape, where the autocratic facet of the regime would be, in a certain sense, “mitigated” by a wide cultural consensus. This could be enacted by a population that, for many reasons, was ready to respond more to emotionally enthralling Fascist myths than to rational political arguments, according to Cassirer: “It is beyond the power of philosophy to destroy the political myths. A myth is in a certain sense invulnerable. It is impervious to rational argument; it cannot be refuted by syllogisms.”²⁸

The *Fascio Littorio* in the Public Space: A Successful Element of State-Marketing Strategy

Thus relocated to the realm of modernity, the magnification of the Fascist Axe operated as an integral part of the “direct and immediate concern with the public urban spaces of the city and the need to appropriate these areas for Fascism in a very public and visible manner.”²⁹ To put it in the words of Diane Ghirardo, “In fascist Italy, much of the battle for hearts and minds of Italians took place in the public arena, in the streets and squares of the peninsula’s cities [...] Propaganda campaigns carried out in newspapers, books, conferences and parliamentary speeches, and even radio broadcasts, paled in comparison with fascist activities in the streets. Mass civic events became a fascist trope, a means of forging a new, post-democratic collectivity and of inscribing the public character of the new political formation into the urban realm.”³⁰ The most powerful emblem of the renewed Romanità systematically invaded the public space in all the Italian cities, especially with the consolidation of the Fascist regime in the 1930s: schools, hospitals, tribunals, railway stations, and the local headquarters of the party (*Casa del Fascio*) hung this powerful element of spatial rhetoric, easily perceptible on the facades or subliminally concealed among railings, fences, or other decorative elements.

Architects and building engineers found the shape and proportions of the *fascio littorio* a significant element to add value, in terms of public communication. In some cases, a chance for a proposed project would be more positively welcomed by the fascist authorities, even though the relationship between the designer and the Patron State was never simply bounded by an obedience to the latter’s will.³¹

In main public and celebratory buildings, the sign of the *fascio littorio* often underwent a gigantic change in scale, with a range of solutions, from the allusively symbolic to the rhetorically bombastic. The most relevant among these is the Triumphal Arch built in Bolzano in 1928 celebrating victory in the First World War (fig. 6): fourteen marble columns enveloping the monument were shaped by Marcello Piacentini in the form of gigantic *fasci littori*.³²

²⁷ Ernst H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986), 246–47. According to Warburg, “The style of simulated classical sculpture (grisaille in an engraving or drawing) confines the coinages of the *revenants* in the distant shadowy realm of the explicit metaphor.” Aby Warburg, Introduction to *Mnemosyne*, 3, quoted in Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 246–47.

²⁸ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1946), 296.

²⁹ David Atkinson, “Totalitarianism and the Street in Fascist Rome” in *Images of the Street: Planning, Identity and Control in Public Space*, ed. Nicholas R. Fyfe (London: Routledge, 1998), 15.

³⁰ Dianne Yvonne Ghirardo, “Città Fascista: Surveillance and Spectacle,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 31 (1996): 347.

³¹ See the account of the façade decoration on the Casa del Fascio in Como between Giuseppe Terragni and the local Party Secretary Carugati in Diane Yvonne Ghirardo, “Politics of a Masterpiece: The Vicenda of the Decoration of the Facade of the Casa del Fascio, Como, 1936–39,” *The Art Bulletin* 62, no. 3 (1980).

³² Denis P. Doordan “The Political Content in Italian Architecture during the Fascist Era,” *The Art Journal* 43 (1983): 122.



Fig. 6. Marcello Piacentini, Monumento alla Vittoria, Bolzano, 1928.

Yet it should be noted how the straightforward use of the *fascio littorio*—rather than being exclusive of those with a direct appeal to a certain rhetoric such as Ogetti or Piacentini—was adopted, often with more convincing results, by the young supporters of Rational Architecture, whose role in the construction of the “Fascist spectacle” was not secondary.³³

³³ Ghirardo, when considering the complex interrelation of different groups of Italian architects in the *Ventennio* and with the ruling party, noticed how the relationship of Rationalist architects with Fascism “was not so weak or plainly opportunist as much as some scholars would like to have us believe. It was indeed much more intense and integral to the development of modern architecture than those scholars, heavily hampered by the rhetoric of antifascism, were ready to admit” (Ghirardo, *Italian Architects*, see especially 109–11). As noted by Mia Fuller, Ghirardo’s current thoughts on this subject push the discussion to a new level of both inquiry and synthesis: “Even if some architects may have ‘cynically adopted’ fascist political affiliation, most of the scholarship fails to explain [...] the extraordinary flowering of high-quality design. No other twenty-year period, either before 1922 or after 1943, saw such a prodigious output of overall architectural originality and excellence on the peninsula” (Ghirardo, *Italy. Modern Architectures in History*, 76.). Her explanation rests on three factors: the government commissioned a great many works, and was open “to a wide range of architectural languages” (Ghirardi, *Italy*, 89); many of the architects in question were financially comfortable and could afford, literally, to experiment; and, finally, collaboration across the spectrum of the arts, from graphic design to the theatre, literature, and music, created a powerful environment of dynamic exchange and experimentation. The synergy of political and artistic discussions across all of these fields (as exemplified, in fact, by the *Quadrante* circle) helped “trigger the outburst of creativity that characterized all of the arts” (Ghirardo, *Italy*, 90); Mia Fuller, “Fascist Italy: Architectural and Urban Histories,” in *Architectural Histories* 3 (1): 5, 3 (2015).

Especially in a series of important temporary buildings, Rationalist architects consistently appealed to the most popular among the fascist symbols. Huge *fasci*, 25 meters tall, were prominently featured in the false façade on the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome (fig. 7) by Adalberto Libera and Mario De Renzi, that introduced the *Mostra del Decennale*.³⁴



Fig. 7a. Mario De Renzi, Adalberto Libera. Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista, temporary façade, Roma, 1932;
Fig. 7b. A contemporary image shows the real façade of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni.

³⁴ The exhibition, celebrating the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome, was supposed to stay open from October 1932 to April 1933, but the closing date was extended to October 28, 1934 when, thanks to a discount policy, it was visited by four million people (Caterina Toschi, “The Power of Symbols in the Duce’s Cult: The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution (1932),” paper presented at the 7th Global Conference “Fear, Horror and Terror,” Mansfield College, Oxford University, UK, 2013, 4–5 September). In addition to this recent contribution, about the *Decennale* exhibition see especially Diane Yvonne Ghirardo and Richard E. McCommons, eds., *Journal of Architectural Education: Front Matter* 45, no. 2 (1992). See also Francesco Tentori, “La mostra della rivoluzione fascista e alcuni progetti romani di Giuseppe Terragni,” in *Giuseppe Terragni*, ed. Giorgio Ciucci (Milan: Electa, 1996); Libero Andreotti, “Riti Oceanici: Mario Sironi e la Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista,” in *L’architettura nelle città italiane del XX secolo: dagli anni Venti agli anni Ottanta*, ed. Vittorio Franchetti Pardo (Milan: Jaca Book, 2003); Massimo Morigi, *Aesthetica fascistica I. Tradizionalismo e modernismo sotto l’ombra del fascio* (paper presented at the conference “Encontros a Sul” conference, Lisbon, September 20–22, 2007, <http://archiviomarini.sp.unipi.it/id/eprint/405> [accessed February 13, 2016]).

Much more than in the postage stamps issued at the beginning of the Fascist seizure of power, the metaphorical distance of the symbol advocated by Aby Warburg is here virtually abolished: the gigantic *fasci* sustaining the razor-sharp axes in bolted copper plates conveyed the idea, according to the poet Ada Negri, of a “war machine [...] sharp and cutting.”³⁵

It was not by chance “whether as a dagger, triangle, flag, or ax,” that the wedge was the single most common motif used in the show. The entire exhibition, according to Mario Sironi, the artist who had the greatest part in its conception, could be compared to “a giant wedge planted into the heart of the capital to sweep away the last remnants of resistance to modern art.”³⁶

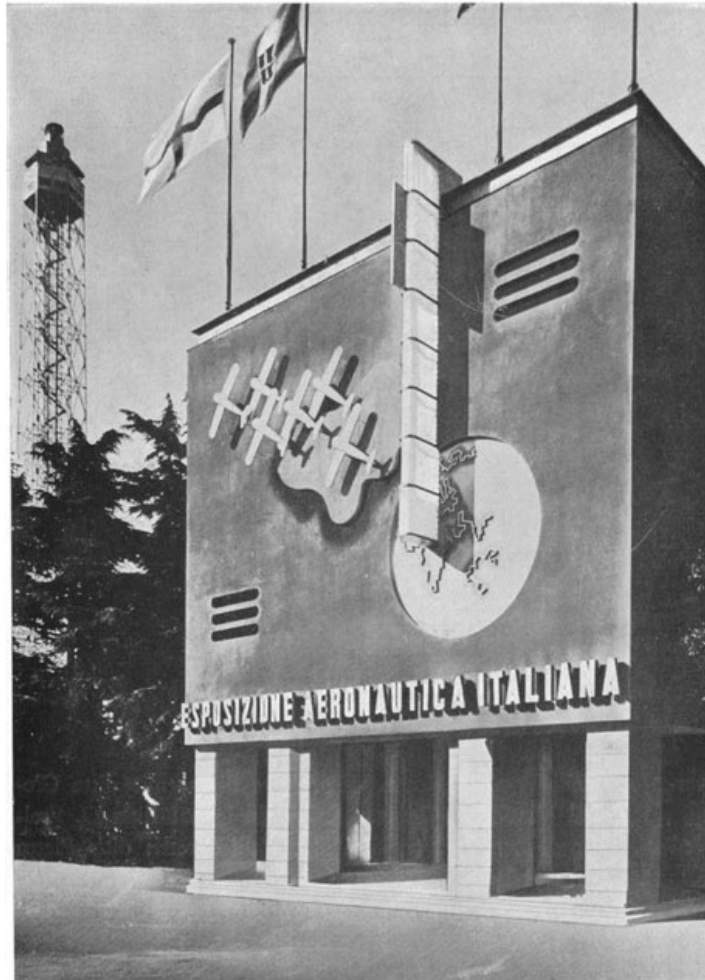


Fig. 8. Erberto Carboni. Esposizione Aeronautica Italiana, temporary façade, Milan, 1934.

³⁵ As cited in Libero Andreotti, “The Architecture of Violence: Mario Sironi and Italian Fascism,” in *Architecture and Violence*, ed. Bechir Kenzari (Barcelona: Actar, 2011), 31.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 41. A similar attitude is reflected by Dino Alfieri, who was commissioned to form the organising committee and edit the official catalogue: “Rome required a similar gesture of healthy violence,” in Dino Alfieri and Luigi Toschi, eds., *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, trans. Caterina Toschi (Rome: Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 1933; Milan: IGIS, 1982).

This outstanding facade was just the preamble to the spectacular narration of the “Fascist Revolution” displayed within the Palace. Within the well-ordered framework planned by Sironi, brilliant Rationalists such as Libera, De Renzi, and Terragni contributed outstanding works, making an event that had resonance outside Italy, which successfully promoted Fascist Italy as a country positioned at the forefront of modernity.³⁷

Evidence for the growing involvement of young Rationalists in Fascist cultural policies, the stylized *fasci* of the *Decennale* established a style and standard for Italian exhibition pavilions in the mid-1930s. A gigantic *fascio* was matched with airplane wings in the pavilion for the Chicago Exhibition of 1933 by Libera and De Renzi; the same stylized symbol was featured in the false façade by Erberto Carboni on the exterior of the *Mostra dell’Aeronautica Italiana*, Milan, 1934 (fig. 8), while a strikingly similar design concept to that of the *Decennale*’s facade was developed again by Libera and De Renzi for the International Exhibition of Brussels in 1935 (fig. 9).³⁸



Fig. 9. Mario De Renzi and Adalberto Libera. Padiglione del Littorio, Brussels 1935.

³⁷ Ghirardo noticed that, “The Decennial celebration of the Fascist revolution in 1932 offered several examples of Fascism linked with entirely new, modern concepts. One of the publicity posters for the anniversary celebration shows the face of Mussolini along with the emblems of modernity: skyscrapers and airplanes, not to mention the American flag merging with the Italian tricolor and Italo Balbo’s airplane.” In her ground-breaking article, Ghirardo especially emphasized the central role the Rationalists had in this event, aimed at celebrating the revolutionary nature of the regime: “Although the façade was not an example of Rationalist architecture, the mere fact that it was designed by leading Roman Rationalists enhanced their prestige” (Ghirardo, “Italian Architects,” 113–14).

³⁸ See Rosario De Simone, *Il Razionalismo nell’architettura italiana del primo novecento* (Bari: Laterza, 2001), 119.

The moderate commentator Ferdinando Reggiori held forth on these buildings in the pages of *Architettura*: “La facciata del Palazzo è stata rivestita da Erberto Carboni con un motivo di caratteristico richiamo, un poco pubblicitario. Vien da domandarsi: è opportuno, ogni qualvolta si tiene una Mostra, mutare così radicalmente la fronte del Palazzo?” [“The Palazzo [dell’Arte] has been enveloped by Erberto Carboni through a motif of characteristic appeal, pretty advertising-like. One wonders if it is advisable, every now and then when an Exhibition is held, transforming so radically the façade of the Palazzo”].³⁹ The caustic remark by Reggiori seems more aimed at raising a discussion against the *radicality* of these undoubtedly Rationalist ephemera than at developing an analysis of Carboni’s work and a dialectic among groups competing to define what characters were supposed to conform to a genuine fascist architecture.⁴⁰ It would seem—while walking the thin line between opposing categories of tradition and modernity, realism and abstraction—that architects could find a common safe ground by relying upon certain images, prominently the *fascio littorio* whose validity had been sanctioned by the regime and made unquestionable in a series of more or less official acts.⁴¹

At times, the deliberate use of the *fascio littorio* aroused bitter criticism from those who saw in the scale of this sign an unwarranted reverence for the ruling party and a disdain for the principles of architecture, which could have been drowned in a surplus of visual rhetoric. This concern was well expressed by the Istrian born Giuseppe Pogatschnig Pagano, among the most progressive Rationalist architects in the interwar period.⁴²

Fervent Fascist as well as sincere modernist, Pagano was disappointed by the acquiescent rhetoric of the fasces that brought modern architecture too far from an inherent progressive and rational expression. He never concealed his disagreement, as when he commented on a proposal for a *Casa del Fascio* in the *Agro Pontino*: “La Casa del Fascio della agreste città di Pontinia si risolve in un’altra esplosione retorica, culminante nei due grandi fasci rovesci che fan da paraocchi all’ingresso” [“The Casa del Fascio of the rural town of Pontinia is resolved into another rhetoric explosion, culminating in the two big inverted *fasci*, binding the entrance to the building”].⁴³ Many aspects of Pagano’s position are understandable: more often than not, civil engineers, rather than architects, were in charge of architectural projects and tended to reproduce conventional buildings that would have been wrapped in a surplus of decorations and “exaggerated symbolisms.”

Local fascist authorities and professionals were not always prepared to deal with symbols of the past with the same competence of Piacentini, or with the avant-gardist attitude shown by Libera, De Renzi, or Carboni in their exhibition pavilions. As a result, ten years after the March on Rome, a profusion of figurative motifs superficially derived from the symbols of Rome—

³⁹ Ferdinando Reggiori, “L’esposizione dell’aeronautica italiana nel Palazzo dell’Arte di Milano,” (author’s translation) *Architettura* 9 (1934): 538. *Architettura*, directed by Marcello Piacentini and published in Milan from 1931 to 1943, was the official organ of the Fascist National Union of Architects.

⁴⁰ Reggiori can be considered part of the moderate Novecento group, led in Milan by Giovanni Muzio. About the different groups of Italian architect, see Ghirardo “Italian Architects,” 112–13 and, more recently, ead., *Italy: Modern Architectures in History* (London: Reaktion Books), 68–69.

⁴¹ Among less official acts are the recurrent endorsements by Mussolini for this or that project. The final scheme for the Decennale Exhibition was accepted after the rejection of two other proposals, apparently to meet the Duce’s demand for “something very modern and audacious, without gloomy reminders of past decorative styles” (Andreotti, L., 1992. *The Aesthetics of War: The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution. Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-), 45(2), 76). See also in this regard the issue of *Architettura* presenting the project for Brussels 1935, with the caption, “La facciata ripete per volere del Duce il motivo della Mostra della Rivoluzione.” Saverio Muratori, “L’esposizione internazionale di Bruxelles,” *Architettura* 10, (1935): 564.

⁴² Pagano was also director, from 1933 to 1943, of the influential architectural review *Casabella*.

⁴³ My translation, from Giuseppe Pagano, “Architettura nazionale,” *Casabella* 85 (1935), reprinted in *Architettura e città durante il fascismo*, ed. Cesare De Seta (Milano: Jaca Book, 2008). As regards the fascist new towns of Agro Pontino, see Ghirardo, “*Città Fascista*.”

from printed media to military parades—had physically invaded the built environment of the peninsula, invariably featuring the “modernization” of medieval towns along the Apennine to new foundations in the Pontine Marshes and other reclaimed agricultural areas along the peninsula.⁴⁴

Within Fascism: The *Fascio* as Figurative Archetype for the *Torre Littoria*

In general during the *Ventennio*, a spatial model based on the archetypical shape of the fasces became associated with a range of professionals: civil engineers, architects and sculptors, as well as painters and copywriters. All were increasingly involved in celebratory projects in Rome as in many other Italian provinces (*capoluoghi di provincia*) as new towns (*città di fondazione*) or rural villages (*borghi rurali*) developed in connection with land reclamation programs (*bonifica integrale*).⁴⁵

Notwithstanding the excesses denounced by Pagano, the integration of the *Fascio Littorio* in the field of spatial design had a progressive effect, when its symbolism, the result of a verbose rhetoric, had unconscious and more fruitful associations. On this subtle level the metaphor of the *Fascio Littorio* acted as a positive archetype in the modification of public space, especially in the Fascist Party Headquarters, familiarly called *Casa del Fascio*, which hosted a myriad of the activities of various groups and local branches of Fascist associations.⁴⁶

These buildings, beyond any primary functions, were meant to become the civic locus of the fascist state, as was expressed in an unsigned article in *Edilizia Moderna*:

Le Case del Fascio rappresentano l'organo sociale per eccellenza del Fascismo. In queste case 'politiche' il popolo partecipa della vita pubblica, stabilisce i contatti con le gerarchie, trova le sedi più opportune per le riunioni e gli esercizi fisici—infine vi ricorre, nei momenti meno fortunate, per trovare aiuto e conforto. Istituzione originale, dove si sono sapute risolvere le varie sedi della vita civile e politica, la 'Casa del Fascio' è fra le manifestazioni più evidenti e più diffuse del nuovo clima italiano. Da tali presupposti, la progettazione e l'attuazione di una 'Casa del Fascio' deriva un impegno preciso che si deve risolvere in manifestazioni dell'architettura italiana più alta e caratteristica del nostro tempo.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Besides the outstanding intervention, full of symbolic values, in the Pontine Marshes, the wider politics led by the *Sottosegretariato di Stato per la Bonifica Integrale* [“State Secretary for integral land reclamation”] was subject to many contradictions and met with both successes and failures, especially in the Italian *Mezzogiorno*. See Piero Bevilacqua and Manlio Rossi-Doria, “Lineamenti per una storia delle bonifiche in Italia dal XVIII° al XX° secolo,” in *Le bonifiche in Italia dal settecento ad oggi*, ed. Piero Bevilacqua and Manlio Rossi-Doria (Bari: Laterza, 1984).

⁴⁵ See Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, 149–62; Diane Yvonne Ghirardo, *Building New Communities: New Deal America and Fascist Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Bevilacqua and Rossi-Doria, “Lineamenti.”

⁴⁶ In twenty years, a total of 5,000 *Casa del Fascio* were being built, while another 6,000 came from the adaptation of existing public or private buildings. See Flavio Mangione, *Le case del Fascio—In Italia e nelle Terre d'Oltremare* (Rome: Pubblicazioni degli Archivi di Stato, 2003), and De Simone, *Il Razionalismo*, 195–211. A distinctive socio-cultural function assumed by the *Casa del Fascio* is mostly evident in a large urban area such as Milan. See Lucy Mulsby, *Fascism, Architecture, and the Claiming of Modern Milan, 1922–1943* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 106–10. On the outstanding—and rather atypical—solution by Terragni at Como, see Ghirardo, “Politics of a Masterpiece,” 466–78, and Sergio Poretti, *La Casa del fascio di Como* (Rome: Carocci, 1998).

⁴⁷ “La nuova sede del Gruppo Fabio Filzi a Milano,” *Edilizia Moderna* 29 (1938): 26.

[The *casa del fascio* represents the exemplary social organ of fascism. In these “political” houses citizens participate in public life, establish contacts with party leaders, and find a place well suited to meetings and physical exercise. Finally, it is here to which one turns in the least fortunate moments to find help and comfort. An original institution that can resolve the various branches of civic and political life, the *casa del fascio* is one of the most prominent and ubiquitous manifestations of the new climate in Italy. From these premises, the planning and realization of a “*casa del fascio*” derives from the obligation to create an Italian architecture that is the most refined and characteristic of our time.]⁴⁸

Representing the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF) at the most local level, these edifices became the reification of the Fascist state in public life, not only in Rome or Milan where local headquarters mainly acted on a neighborhood level. In fact, this new type of public building acquired a more representative value in medium-sized cities—like Como or Messina (fig. 10)—the civic center of which focused on the new manifestation of the *Casa Littoria* or *Palazzo del Littorio*, as it was often meaningfully called.



Fig. 10. Messina, Casa Littoria, 1936-40. Postcard.

While these edifices, depending on the importance of the city, hosted diverse offices located within a large covered public hall (*Sala delle Adunanze*), the most distinctive parts of the buildings remained their towers (*Torre littoria*) and balconies (*Arengario*). In fact, these two

⁴⁸ Translated in Maulsby, *Modern Milan*, 106.

elements, while having a rather limited function, gained a central role in visual and rhetorical terms in the celebration of fascist rites. It was in particular from the *Arengario* that the local notables of PNF addressed the crowd gathered in the plaza at the foot of the tower. It was there that people would have had the chance to see, perhaps once in their lifetime, Mussolini himself, *Duce degli Italiani*.

Outside of its special importance, or maybe due to it, no attempts to standardize models for this type of building were made; as a consequence, even in the final years of Fascism, an extraordinary variety of spatial solutions was associated with this “institutional” edifice. Despite this variability, with notable exceptions as that of Como, a specific solution often prevailed in the arrangement of the main structural elements of the *Casa del Fascio*, the basic place of public life, as a site for the transposition of the *Fascio Littorio*. This is especially evident in the relationship between the tower and the balcony, as can be seen, among others, in the examples of Messina and Montevarchi (fig. 11).

Some striking differences are evident between these two cases, notably in the dimension of the buildings—larger in the medium sized Sicilian town and smaller in the small Tuscan hill-town—but especially in the modernist style of the first and the more traditional style of the second.



Fig. 11. Palazzo Littorio, Montevarchi. 1937–1939.

Despite these differences, the relationship between the tower and the balcony is strikingly similar. Again, it is the archetype of the *fascio littorio* that explains the common features of these edifices. Far from simply an imitative effect, an analogy can be seen between the balcony protruding from the tower and the axe protruding from the rods when lowered in the *pomerium* as a sign of respect.⁴⁹

Beyond Fascism: Modernity of the *Fascio* as Architectural Metaphor

From conclusions drawn in the previous discussions, it can be argued that the symbol of the *fascio littorio*—borrowed from Roman antiquity and singularized as the symbol of national unity during the twenty years of fascist rule—continues to be an emblem of modernity, even after the fall of the fascist regime. It is in its transposition in architectural forms that its value as a symbol has been retained. Largely removed from public buildings throughout Italy, as a symbol it has an afterlife that emerged in the democratic scenario following the Second World War.⁵⁰

A final example, seemingly distant in space and time from the experience of Fascism, is able to demonstrate how a designer could have unconsciously recreated the symbolic form of the *fascio littorio* in the middle of a major North American urban area. The Montreal Stock Exchange (fig. 12), while reflecting a vibrant period when the city of Montreal was at the forefront of urban innovation, bears witness to the personality of its creator, Luigi Moretti (1907–1973).⁵¹

Luigi Moretti, natural son of the architect Luigi Rolland, who introduced him to the study of the Roman past, was among the students of the *Scuola Superiore di Architettura di Roma* led by Gustavo Giovannoni.⁵² Having gained a prominent position under the fascist regime,⁵³ Moretti was given the opportunity to demonstrate an unconventional modernist approach in his well-known building, the Fencing Hall (*Casa delle Armi*) in Foro Mussolini.⁵⁴ Thanks to his confidence in the historic evolution of architecture, Moretti, avoiding rhetoric, was able to develop a sense of form that sublimates the functional and structural aspects of a building.

The distinctiveness of Moretti's position already during the *Ventennio* is well described by Bucci and Mulazzani:

⁴⁹ See note 5 above.

⁵⁰ In the Italian transition to democracy after the Second World War, a significant continuity of architectural design with the former regime cannot be denied. As Michelangelo Sabatino recently argued, “By reinventing tradition, Italian architects, during and after fascism, constructed a hybrid modernity that was at odds with avant-garde radicalism and its insistence on the *eclipse of history*” (Michelangelo Sabatino, *Pride in Modesty: Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010], 7). Among these elements of continuity, the role of the department store must be especially recognized, a commercial and architectural model well developed in pre-war fascist Italy, which gained further success in the post-war democratic scenario. See Daniele Vadalà, “*Unico Prezzo Italiano*: Corporate Consumption and Retail Palaces in Postwar Italy,” in *Shopping Towns Europe. Commercial Collectivity and the Architecture of the Shopping Centre, 1945–1975*, ed. Janina Gosseye and Tom Avermaete (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

⁵¹ Literature has recently begun to focus on this obscure protagonist of modern architecture: Bruno Reichlin and Letizia Tedeschi, eds., *Luigi Moretti: Razionalismo e trasgressività tra barocco e informale* (Milan: Electa, 2010); Cecilia Rostagni, *Luigi Moretti: 1907–1973* (Milan: Electa, 2008); Federico Bucci and Marco Mulazzani, eds., *Luigi Moretti: Works and Writings*, trans. Marina De Conciliis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 213.

⁵² As synthesized by Ghirardo, “Giovannoni wrote the first and most important impassioned defence of protecting Italy's medieval and Renaissance cities, but he did not disdain contemporary building: his vision embraced change as well as protection,” Ghirardo, *Italy: Modern Architectures*, 314. See also Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*.

⁵³ Official commissions grew more numerous after 1933, when he was named director of the technical office of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB), the influential Fascist youth movement (Bucci and Mulazzani, *Luigi Moretti*, 213).

⁵⁴ According to his biographers, Moretti here “seems to obtain a pure relationship between spatial, constructive, and plastic qualities” that will especially characterize his works in the postwar (*ibid.*, 12).

In his search for “signs” founded in reality but capable of transcending it, the “Roman” Moretti followed a singular course. Even though operating in the name of Fascism, the political tensions that pushed other protagonists of his time to confront the “Classical spirit” and the new order through immutable architecture do not seem to have driven him. He is oriented by a confidence in history, possible only for those who feel naturally a part of it to the point of being able to sink into it completely, if not always comfortably.⁵⁵

After the fall of the fascist regime Moretti, while developing a few important projects in Rome and Milan, gave proof of the ability of his position in some notable projects in North America.⁵⁶



Fig. 12. Montreal, Stock Exchange Tower, 1960–1965 (Photo: D. Vadala', 2014).

Adrian Sheppard, having worked in Moretti's studio, gave a detailed account of the Stock Exchange Tower realized with the help of Pier Luigi Nervi in downtown Montreal: “Place Victoria stands alone amongst Moretti's many buildings. The very fact that it deviates

⁵⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁶ The most widely known of these projects is the Watergate Complex. Built in Washington D.C. between 1966 and 1971, it was a successful attempt to contrast the suburbanization process of the federal capital with a curvilinear, six-building cluster of apartments, offices, a hotel, and shopping center.

ideologically and formally from the rest of his oeuvre makes the project significant and revelatory of Moretti's architecture and of the man. The project neither follows the architectural principles of his prewar Rationalist period, nor those of his later expressionist phase [...] the final version of Place Victoria is a remarkably disciplined and controlled work of architecture in which the usual concerns for self-expression and visual exhilaration are absent."⁵⁷ Sheppard seems to overestimate the collaboration with Nervi, whose role constantly emerges in his account: "This new formal clarity and structural logic are in great part attributable to his collaborator, engineer, Pier Luigi Nervi. The concept of Place Victoria is the outcome of a coming together of a radical architect and a conservative engineer."⁵⁸ Given that Nervi's experience in concrete structures was unsurmountable and that the confidence among the two men allowed for collaboration, the design process appears firmly dominated by Moretti's intention to avoid the standard high-rise model through two main approaches: a fragmentation of the tower into small blocks and a specific emphasis on the corner columns. Moretti's firm control of the design process is confirmed by Sheppard: "While the corner columns, in and of themselves, do not represent a *bona fide* structural system, they do constitute a metaphor of the tower's skeleton [...] Moretti used the idea of the powerful corner column as a means to give the towers a readable clarity. He saw the columns as compositional constants, while the rest of the facades could be treated as a variable."⁵⁹ Sheppard's account vibrantly captures the designer's efforts to synthesize the perfect form: "Once the idea of large corner columns was espoused, they became the basis of all further façade studies, and Moretti felt free to explore a number of variants, modulations, punctuations, fragmentations, and articulations of the facades in which the corner columns would play the preponderant visual role. I worked on the development of the shape of the columns for many months. Literally hundred of drawings, models, sketches, and photomontages were prepared. Nervi was often involved in the matter, though the fine tuning of their shape was left to Moretti."⁶⁰

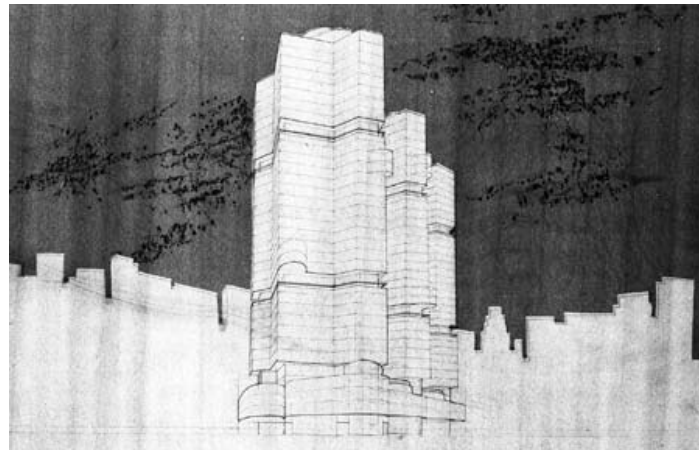


Fig. 13. Luigi Moretti, Stock Exchange Tower, sketch drawing, 1962 (Photo from Sheppard, "Place Victoria").

⁵⁷ Adrian Sheppard, "Place Victoria: A Joint Venture between Luigi Moretti and Pier Luigi Nervi," <https://www.mcgill.ca/architecture/files/architecture/PlaceVictoriaMoretti.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2016), 1.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 11.

The succession of strategies employed by Moretti, as the preliminary phase evolved, provides a view of a design process characterized by intrinsic ambiguity and unpredictability. Moretti's sketches illustrate how the elegant and expressive shape of the tower was the result of the progressive clarification of symbolic elements that reflexively emerge in the design process, motivated by Moretti's specific sensibility to the architectural form. In the first of these sketches (fig. 13), the three towers—joined according to the developers' initial objectives—are divided into three polygonal sections bearing a certain resemblance to Frank Lloyd Wright's Price Tower in Oklahoma City. In a successive drawing (fig. 14) the vertical tripartition of the blocks is more accurately outlined, while a square plan is introduced, favoured by Nervi as being the most efficient in terms of stability and resistance to wind and earthquake loads.⁶¹



Fig. 14. Luigi Moretti, Stock Exchange Tower, sketch drawing, 1962 (from Sheppard).

At the same time, elements are introduced whose purely visual function underline development on a symbolic level: giant masts placed on the façade emphasize the verticality of the towers, alluding to the expansive technosphere of broadcasting. One cannot, however, fail to notice how the isolated balconies, protruding from the blocks, directly recall the figurative role of the *arengario* in the *torre littoria*. As it had operated on a conscious level during the twenty years of fascist rule in Italy, the architectural metaphor of the *fascio littorio* progressively emerges with greater clarity in successive drawings (figs. 15 and 16). In this case, the metaphor supports the clarification of the design. As the vertical tripartition of the towers gradually emerged, the figurative strength of the rising pillars becomes more evident: the successive stacks of floors are closely connected to the corner columns just as in the *fascio littorio* the axe is tied to the bunch of rods.

⁶¹ Ibid., 10.

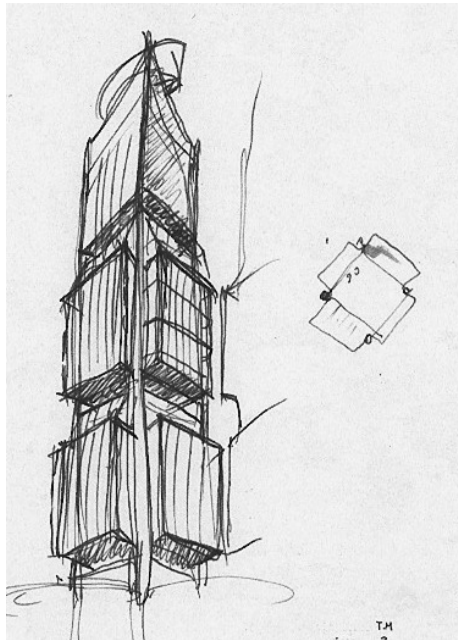


Fig. 15. Luigi Moretti, Stock Exchange Tower, sketch drawing, 1962 (from Sheppard).

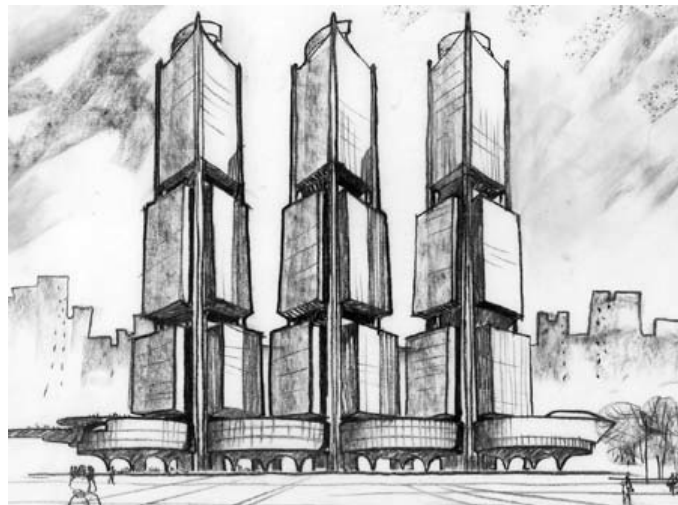


Fig. 16. Luigi Moretti, Stock Exchange Tower, sketch drawing, 1962 (from Sheppard).

A beautiful perspective (fig. 17) represents the final stage of the design process. The tower emerges in a simple, significant shape: verticality is exalted through the white concrete pillars rising above the rooftop; the successive stacks of floors accord to a clear hierarchical principle; the subtly rounded curtain walls are contained by the rising pillars and the balconies of the mezzanine floor, gently protruding from the classic torso in Michelangelesque perfection.⁶² The imposing shape portrayed in this drawing does not fail to express the multifaceted

⁶² *Michelangelesque*, according to Walter Pater's powerful definition, is a combination of "sweetness and strength, pleasure with surprise, an energy of conception that seems at every moment about to break through all the conditions of comely form, recovering, touch by touch, a loveliness found usually only in the simplest natural things." Walter Pater, *The Renaissance, Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: MacMillan, 1873), 559.

Weltanschauung that lies behind the design of the Stock Exchange Tower. In fact, this manifestation of elitism, hierarchy, and grandeur, while expressing the strength of financial institutions in the second half of the 20th century, appears perfectly consistent with the intentions some thirty years before that led many outstanding Italian Rationalist architects to undertake “most of their best work either for or in the spirit of Italian Fascism.”⁶³ What is being portrayed by Moretti—rising high above downtown Montreal—is nothing more than the ultimate incarnation of the *fascio littorio*, perfectly coherent with its creator’s biography.



Fig. 17. Luigi Moretti, Stock Exchange Tower, sketch drawing, 1962 (from Sheppard).

In conclusion, Moretti certainly can be considered the bastard child of Fascism. Due to his personality and professional ability, he remained at the forefront of architectural modernity in the post-war democratic scenario as he was during the pre-war dictatorial regime to which he remained loyal until the end.⁶⁴ This outrageous continuity explains the uneasiness of many scholars who, until recent times, were unable to address the harsh judgment given the day after Moretti’s death by Bruno Zevi: “Egli possedeva un’autentica tempra d’artista, integrata da una

⁶³ The relevance of the principle of hierarchy in Italian architecture during the *Ventennio* is precisely discussed in Ghirardo, *Italian Architects*, 121.

⁶⁴ Moretti supported the Repubblica Sociale Italiana (1943–1945) and renewed collaboration with Renato Ricci, called to preside over the reconstituted ONB. It is then clear how Moretti’s activity in the post-war was given to his human and professional qualities rather than being the result of a political butterfly-ism. “Moretti did not manage to achieve the consensus of those most committed to the Italian architectural culture and could only count as his unweaving supporters Agnoldomenico Pica and Gio Ponti” (Bucci and Mulazzani, *Luigi Moretti*, 213).

notevole anche se asistemica cultura e da una straordinaria capacità professionale. Avrebbe potuto assumere un ruolo determinante nella depressa atmosfera italiana; ma una volontà spasmodica di affermazione individuale, associata ad un intellettualismo di marca dannunziana, ingordo di raffinatezze e di lusso, riportava la sua fantasia nei binari di un insopportabile conformismo. Uno spreco in termini civili e umani.” [“He possessed an authentic artistic temperament integrated with a notable if nonmethodical culture and an extraordinary professional capacity. He could have assumed a determining role in the depressed Italian atmosphere; but a spasmodic desire for individual affirmation associated with an intellectualism like that of D’Annunzio, greedy for refinements and luxuries, reduced his creativity to insufferable conventionality. A waste in civil and human terms”].⁶⁵ It may be argued that Zevi—whose critical acumen paired with (and often hindered by) his political partisanship—had grasped how much the basic values of *gerarchia*, order, and symbolism, perfectly consistent with a fascist worldview, have been conveyed through Moretti’s work to the very core of architectural modernity. Hard as it may be to admit, the axe has remained with us, still inspiring—if not fear and violence—a form of thoughtful respect.

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⁶⁵ Bruno Zevi, “Computer inceppato dal dannunzianesimo,” *L’Espresso*, July 29, 1973, reprinted in *Cronache di Architettura* 2, no. 982 (Bari: Laterza, 1979), 145.

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