

Rationalism, Classicism, Nationalism:

Myth and Monument in the Third Rome

by Martin Thomas Troy

Slow, incessant, inexorable, is the advance of Fascism. Fascism constructs in a Roman way, stone upon stone, its ideal and material buildings, which like the Roman ones, will defy time.¹

Benito Mussolini, 1923

Mussolini's 'March on Rome' in 1922 signalled the final overthrow of the old order in Italy and the rise to power of the Fascists. The symbolic manifestations of this 'March on Rome' were much greater than any imagined military ones. Mussolini's visions of a new Imperial Rome, with *Il Duce* as the new Augustus, would need to have just such a heroic beginning to truly mark the advent of the new spirit in Italy. This new spirit, arising from the political, economic and social theories of Fascism, attempted to express its ideals by assuming a 'cultural dress'. Thus art and architecture became prime vehicles for the national expression of Fascism. These ideals were not of a constant nature, but were always evolving, to match the evolution of the Fascist ideology itself. Mussolini's brand of Fascism was as politically opportunistic as he was himself. Italian Fascism transformed itself from a national 'socialist' movement based on revolutionary theories into a completely reactionary and nationalistic ideology in the later stages of its development. These changes in ideology were paralleled by shifts in the State's attitude towards theories of art and architecture. From an initial attitude of art as an individual expression, and not as an expression of the State, Mussolini was soon in a strong enough political position to be able to dictate which aesthetic would constitute an official Fascist art. Thus the concept of Fascist architecture was spawned.

It is here that the eternal dilemma of how to define the nature of the relation-

ship between ideology and architecture is encountered. Can there be a true Fascist architecture, whereby the ideals of Fascism are truly expressed by architectural form? If this is so, then it follows that ideology can be a generator of form. The other extreme position on this question is that architectural form, used in the service of an ideology, is merely a 'facade' behind which ideology can lurk, its true secrets hidden behind a screen of heroic gestures and monumental myths.

1. Futurism and the Italian Tradition

We will sing the stirring of great crowds... as revolution sweeps through a modern metropolis. We will sing of the midnight fervour of arsenals and shipyards blazing with electric moons; insatiable stations swallowing the smoking serpents of their trains; factories hung from the clouds by the twisted threads of their smoke...²

from Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto 1911

We could define Classical as the spiritual movement in our desires, excluding... every meaning of rhetorical reaction or of the rehabilitation of worn out manners and ideas, which no longer correspond to our sensibilities... Classical, finally, is the sustainer of certain fundamental norms... of a certain political and moral order.³

Ardengo Soffici 1924

The Futurist ideals of the glorification of war, aggressive action, the society of the machine, revolution, and the abolishment of morality and historical culture appealed immensely to Mussolini as he was forming his philosophies of Fascism following the First World War. The Futurists' revolutionary theories of art meshed well with Mussolini's early theories of the 'Fascist Revolution'. So, when the Fascists took power in 1922, they were able to turn to the Futurist movement for a new revolutionary aesthetic as a



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tool of national policy. However, in spite of Mussolini's personal friendship with the Futurist Marinetti, and his admitted enthusiasm for a modern aesthetic, Futurism presented a basic, unresolved contradiction to the main body of nationalistic Fascist theory. Revolutionary and destructive anti-traditionalism ran counter to Mussolini's obsession with a return to the 'Roman Tradition'. To Mussolini, Rome was "...the eternal city that has given two civilizations to the world and will yet give a third."⁴

At this time, in the early 1920's, there was developing a flourishing Classicist movement in Italian painting and architecture. This movement did not have any particular political alignments or pressures as its impetus for development. Rather, it grew from a desire for cultural renewal; as a reaction against what was considered to be the failure of the pre-war *avant-garde*. Making use of the Italian Classical tradition, they sought a new order, reason and regularity in art and architecture.⁵ This new order would aid in defining the nature of the relationship between the present and the past in artistic theory and practice.

Inspired by the powerful metaphysical imagery in the paintings of de Chirico and by the painters of the Novecento movement, the new generation of 'Classicizing' architects from Milan were led by Giovanni Muzio, Gio Ponti, and de Finetti. The stripped Classicism and heavy traditional forms used by this group, known as the 'Milanese 900', owed as much to the internationalism of Austria's Adolph Loos as it did to Italian tradition.⁶ Thus, it can be regarded as a precursor to the architecture of the Rationalist movement as well as to the Monumental neo-Classicism of the following decade.

With the decline of Futurism as an aesthetic force in Italy and its quick fall from favour in official circles, the debate over what would constitute the official Fascist Architecture began to

'Progressions of Classicism: Terragni's intellectual abstraction of the Classical spirit'

rage. The key to this debate was the Fascists' desire for an architecture that would express the greatness of the Third Rome by evoking Italy's Classical tradition. The interpretation of the form of this Classicism would be the major point of contention between the Rationalists and the neo-Classicalists.

II. Rationalism as Classicism

...New architecture, true architecture, must emerge from a strict adherence to logic, to rationality...there exists a Classical foundation and spirit of tradition (not the forms, which is something different) that is so profound in Italy, that evidently and almost automatically, the new architecture will preserve a stamp which is typically Italian... We do not want to break with tradition. It is tradition which transforms itself and assumes new aspects...'
Gruppo Sette 1926

The formation of the Gruppo Sette in 1926 signalled the birth of the Rationalist movement in Italy. As the group's spiritual leader, Giuseppe Terragni was indisputedly the most important individual within the pre-war Rationalist movement. It is not necessary to describe here the details of the rise and fall of Gruppo Sette and their brand of Rationalism. However, it is important to realize how and why Rationalism initially appealed to the Fascist regime, and why the movement eventually lost the support of the Fascists.

From the time of the movement's inception, the Rationalists realized that the only way they would be able to receive building commissions of any significance within the Fascist system was to gain the official sanction of the regime. To this end, direct appeals were made to Mussolini through various manifestos, publications, and exhibitions, declaring the close ideological alliance between Rationalism and Fascism. By presenting a theoretical synthesis of a modern aesthetic with the Classical tradition of Italy, the Rationalists were able to attain some degree of success and official recognition in the early years.

Declaring themselves to be against both "the vain destructive fury" of the Futurists and the "false historicism" of the Monumentalists, the Rationalists tried to present a moderate position. This position was, however, based on a left-wing interpretation of the 'Fascist Revolution'. A rational, modern ar-

chitecture, they believed, could embody Mussolini's rhetorical enunciations of the need to rejuvenate, the triumph of youth, and "the revolution in action."⁹ At the same time, this architecture could embody the national spirit of Italy by invoking the spirit and essence of Classicism. These polemical announcements were replete with ambiguities in meaning and intent. It was not until the actual realization of several projects that this concept of Rationalism as Classicism was clarified.

Perhaps the most obvious link between these two can be seen in the similarities between Rationalism and the Classicist Novecento group.¹⁰ Both movements called for a return to order and logic. Although approaching it from different directions, both movements tended towards a monumentalism and formalism that can be considered to be an expression of a Classicist ideal. The abstraction of formal tectonic elements also tended to move Italian Rationalism into an almost metaphysical mode of expression.

These abstractions of Classicism can best be seen in the work of Terragni. With commissions such as the Novocomum Apartment House in Como, and the Casa Rustici in Milan, Terragni established a language of Rationalist architecture and gave the movement its early credibility.

Terragni's Casa del Fascio, built in 1932 in Como, is, in Kenneth Frampton's words, "...the canonical work of the Italian Rationalist movement."¹¹ He goes on to state that the rational geometry, the structurally codified and layered surfaces, the metaphysical spatial effects, Terragni's use of materials, and the siting in the historic urban core all combine to make the building "...tectonic, meticulous, and monumental." Planned around a double-height meeting hall, the spatial organization is an abstraction of the traditional palazzo with a central courtyard. This embodiment of the spirit of Classicism represented Rationalism's claim to be

the true architecture of Fascist Italy. The Casa del Fascio, designed as a symbol of 'Fascism in Action', featured a direct connection between the meeting hall and the exterior piazza, permitting the flow of mass political rallies from inside to outside.

The Rationalist symbolization of a 'Revolutionary Fascism' eventually and inevitably succumbed to the forces of political reaction within the regime. Over a period of time in the 1930's, the movement lost its internal cohesiveness and its political support. The shift towards the right implied a shift towards the neo-Classic as an expression of the Fascist State. Rationalism's bid to represent the aspirations of Fascism through an abstracted national Classicism had failed, amid reactionary cries of 'Internationalism' and 'Bolshevism'.

III. Classicism as Nationalism

Mussolini wishes to resuscitate the material vestiges of ancient Rome because they are beautiful and invaluable, but also and mainly because, in doing so, he hopes to revive the old virtues of rugged men who under iron discipline once fashioned Roman Power.¹²

*The New York Times,
March 19, 1933*

Freeing the monuments of Imperial Rome from the 'inferior' medieval fabric that surrounded them was merely the first step in reviving the glories of Rome. In addition, Mussolini wished to build a new set of monuments to 'The Third Rome'. It was left to Marcello Piacentini — Mussolini's 'official builder' — to mediate between the neo-Classical and Rationalist movements, to find a suitable architectural expression for the glory of Fascist Italy. The resulting 'Official Architecture' was a stripped neo-Classicism, combining a Rationalist and a simplified neo-Classical vocabulary of architectonic elements, composed in a Classical manner.



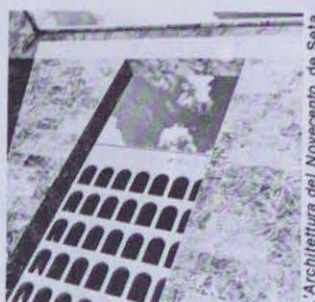
Casa del Fascio, Como 1932-1936

'EUR '42: Monumentality, heroics, and grandeur; The myth of the new Roman Empire'



EUR '42, Rome

The Third Rome, Kostof



Palazzo della Civiltà, EUR '42

L'Architettura del Novecento, de Seta

Piacentini was the architect in charge of planning such representative projects as the Via della Conciliazione, the University of Rome and the Esposizione Universale de Roma (EUR).

The EUR was to have taken place in 1942. The entire world would be able to come and admire the achievements and grandeur of Fascism in this 'Olympics of Civilization'. This vision of a new monumental center for Rome turned into a stark, scaleless reality. The complex can be seen as a monument to the myth of Fascist power and culture. Although hauntingly beautiful in the same sense as is a de Chirico canvas, it is totally separate from social reality and humanist values.¹³

With such diverse states as Germany, the Soviet Union, France, and America using the same reductive language of form, neo-Classicism can be considered to be an 'international style'. This implies that neo-Classicism had lost any significance in terms of specific ideological meaning. The monumentality of the EUR was a compromise between the forces of Classicism and Rationalism to express the nationalism of Fascist Italy. Symbolically, such diverse tools of tectonic language as scale and iconographic references contributed to what was hoped to be an effective communication of the ideals of Fascism.

IV. Architecture as Ideology

What is of interest here is the precise identification of those tasks which capitalist development has taken away from architecture. That is to say, what it has taken away from ideological prefiguration. With this, one is led almost automatically to the discovery of what may well be the drama of architecture today: that is, to see architecture obliged to return to pure architecture, to form without utopia; in the best cases, to sublime uselessness.¹⁴

Manfredo Tafuri 1976

According to Tafuri, there has been a lack of ideological content in architecture in the modern era, dating from the time of Piranesi. This has resulted in a type of 'autonomous architecture', a pure architecture achieved through sterile transformations of historical form.

This concept is perhaps an oversimplification of the role of ideology in architecture today. Architecture can never really be considered out of the context of its ideological base. This ideology inevitably has some bearing on the way architectural form is transformed in an attempt to impart new meaning to it.

This meaning is communicated through syntactical signs, rather than through an actual embodiment of ideology in the form and mass of the architecture. It is both the decision of the architect and the subsequent interpretation of the user which creates these signs. However, the interpretations of these signs can change with time and social context, making it impossible that architecture can serve as the eternal symbol of a specific ideology.

The Rationalism of the Fascist era gleaned its meaning on an intellectual level, whereas Monumental neo-Classicism appealed to human empathy in an attempt to extract a specific emotional response from the user. The image of the Fascist State as bringing about a heroic, ordered, and glorious society was a myth. That the architecture of the Fascist State sought to perpetrate this myth shows that architecture as a symbol of Fascism was based on the suppression of the realities of the Fascist society. The new monumentalism of the Third Rome was nothing short of an attempt at formal propaganda. This architecture attempted to portray the mythical greatness of the Fascist State by the symbolic manipulation of scale. Perhaps inadvertently, it also portrayed the dehumanizing aspects of the ideology. Fascism's adoption of the neo-

Classical as its official stylistic expression proves that ideology is not the sole generator of architectural form or style, since we have seen that neo-Classicism is such an 'international' style. However, the ideological interpretation of architecture through formal signification and symbolization has been seen to provide an otherwise 'autonomous' architecture with a new ideological level of meaning. Reading this architecture in today's context, one can see both the truths and the myths of the Fascist ideology. Thus, the architecture of Fascism is a symbol of both what Fascism was and what it had attempted to become.

Notes

1. Ellen Shapiro, "The Emergence of Italian Rationalism", *Architectural Design*, 1/2 1981. This statement by Mussolini was made at the inauguration of the Fascist Headquarters Building in Milano, 1923.
2. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture*, Thames and Hudson Ltd., London, 1980, p. 84. Excerpt from Point 11 of The Futurist Manifesto, 1911.
3. Leonardo Benevolo, *History of Modern Architecture*, Vol. II, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1971, Chapter 16.
4. Spiro Kostof, *The Third Rome*, University Art Museum, Berkeley, 1973, p. 30.
5. Vittorio Gregotti, *New Directions in Italian Architecture*, Studio Vista, London, 1968, p. 9.
6. Gregotti, p. 10.
7. Bruno Zevi, "The Rise and Fall of Italian Rationalism", *Architectural Design*, 1/2 1981, p. 41. This quote was excerpted from a series of articles appearing between December 1926 and May 1927 in *Rassegna Italiana*.
8. Frampton, p. 203.
9. Zevi, p. 41.
10. Gregotti, p. 17.
11. Frampton, p. 205.
12. Kostof, p. 31.
13. Frampton, p. 215.
14. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1976, p. ix.

Additional References:

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