How does the aesthetic of Fascist architecture reflect the nature of fascist political ideology in Italy during the years of Benito Mussolini’s regime from 1922-1943?

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“Consistency is not a characteristic of either Italian politics or Italian architecture.”¹

Unlike other fascist regimes such as the Nazi regime, Italian Fascism never officially endorsed a particular style of architectural design. Rather, under Benito Mussolini a range of different buildings were commissioned with no coherent stylistic preference. However, despite the apparent lack of official definition, Italian Fascist architecture was in no way devoid of political meaning.² Through examining a range of examples of Italian state sponsored architecture, it will be argued that the apparent incoherency of Fascist architecture is reflective of the plural nature of the ideology of the movement. The aesthetic of Fascist state sponsored architecture embodied and reflected the dual vision of its political ideology, with its architectural program being simultaneously an attempt to reinforce its status as the revolutionary and dynamic progressive party of the future, manifest in the use of a modernist aesthetic, whilst also equating Fascism with the power and prestige of the ancient Roman Empire, primarily exampled in the use of a classicist aesthetic. Hence, it will become clear that although never endorsing or developing any coherent policy in regard to the arts, the plurality of Fascist ideology and tension between conservative and progressive visions that the party embodied, was clearly echoed within the sphere of design and architectural expression.

Political ideology of Italian Fascism

In order to examine the political rhetoric within the architectural aesthetic of the fascist

² Author Note: For the purposes of this research, the term ‘Fascist Architecture’ will be used to refer to state sponsored building projects between 1922-1943, as this defines a scope for research, and avoids broad generalisations about Italian architecture during the period.
regime, it is prudent to briefly consider some aspects of the political ideology of the movement. Historiography surrounding the nature of Italian Fascism has often puzzled over the quandary surrounding whether it was a traditionally based reactionary movement of the conservative right or whether it was genuinely revolutionary seeking a total renewal of Italian life through a focus on modernization and rejection of the liberal democracy.\(^3\) It must be noted that this discussion of Italian Fascist ideology is vexed, being “not one but several realities”.\(^4\) From its beginning Italian Fascism was without a distinctive programme or clearly defined ideology, making it quite possible to cite policies and pronouncements that seem conservative, at the same time as others that appear progressive.\(^5\) This was the result of the somewhat ‘hyphenated’ nature of the movement, which subsumed multiple ideologies under the one banner of nationalizing, moralizing and centralizing Italian politics. At the centre and genesis of the Fascist ideology were the national syndicalists, who promoted that worker and union organisations (syndicates), rather than socialist organisations, should form the basis for proletarian revolution.\(^6\) Although Mussolini was never himself a syndicalist, he became heavily involved in their politics, revising socialism in combination with extreme nationalism. Importantly for this paper, at the core of the national syndicalist ideology was a forward thinking revolutionary vision, in which Italy would break from its past, destroying the old Italy of decadent liberalism and democracy in order to give birth to a “young, virile, new Italy”.\(^7\) As well as the national syndicalists, Mussolini also drew upon the ideology of an entirely different group, the ‘modernist rebels’.\(^8\) Alexander DeGrand notes that the cultural critique promoted by these ‘rebels’, comprised largely of intellectuals and artists, contributed significantly to Mussolini’s own political ideology by


\(^7\) Philip V. Cannistraro, “Mussolini’s Cultural Revolution: Fascist or Nationalist,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 7 (1972): 117.

their conception of politics as holding a modernist aesthetic.\textsuperscript{9} By this politics was to be governed by progressive ideology, instinctive and even violent reaction and a rejection again of decadence and degeneration associated with ‘old’ Italy. Likewise a third element of the progressive Fascists were the technocratic Fascists, which, through the publications of Giuseppe Bottai, aimed at controlled modernization of the Italian state in an extensive challenge to the existing Italian order.\textsuperscript{10} Drawing upon the progressive modernism of these fascist groups Mussolini framed Fascism as the forward thinking party that would lead Italy into the future, stating in one treatise that the “nation, as expressed in the State, is a living, ethical entity only in so far as it is progressive.”\textsuperscript{11}

Yet in somewhat contrast to the progressive, dynamic, revolutionary and modernist themes mentioned above, Mussolini also drew upon the imperial past of the ancient Roman Empire as a means of legitimizing the new regime and equating it with the power, wealth and prestige of long lost imperial Rome. This revival of imperial ideology was paralleled in rural fascist \textit{squadrismo} which began to develop ideologically in a very different manner to the syndicalists and modernist rebels. The rural mentality of squadrismo associated with the vision of war veterans, provincial students, small town professionals and businessmen, represented an explosion of anti-urban, anti-modern and anti-industrialist violence aimed at fighting the socialists or ‘reds’.\textsuperscript{12} Whilst not directly drawing upon the image of the ancient Roman empire, the squadrismo represented a Fascism that did not wish to associate with modernity. Standing in opposition to modernity the squadrismo as well as more conservative Fascists, like those from the Italian Nationalist Association who adhered to the Fascist party in 1923, would have found comfort in Mussolini’s focus upon the heritage of ancient Rome and the idealization of its imperial past as embodied in his ideology of romanità (Roman-ness).\textsuperscript{13} In apparent contradiction to Mussolini’s progressive and modernist ideology, considered above, Mussolini’s focus on romanità, which can be traced to writings of his

\textsuperscript{9} Alexander DeGrand, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 142.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid, p. 144.
\textsuperscript{12} Alexander DeGrand, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 142.
as early as 1908,\(^\text{14}\) promoted a harking back to an idealized Roman Empire. Referring to this in a 1926 speech to the Università per Stranieri at Perugia, Mussolini conflated the virtues of Imperial Rome, its power, tenacity and unity, with those the Fascist state would embody.\(^\text{15}\) Mussolini’s emphasis on the heritage of this romanticized version of Roman Empire, and Fascism as the embodiment of its resurrection, did not go unheard, with one educationalist writing in 1929, “Fascism in its entirety... is the resurrection of Roman-ness *(romanità)*.”\(^\text{16}\)

It is here that we begin to perceive a sense of dualism within Mussolini’s Fascist ideology, on the one hand Fascism was to represent the revolutionary, dynamic and modernist party of the future which would be progressive and forward thinking in its political ideology and vision for the nation of Italy. In contrast, yet simultaneously, Mussolini sought to conflate the ideology of Fascism with the ancient imperial virtues of an idealized Roman Empire. It would be easy to see these dual visions as contradictory having both a forward and backward focus. Yet in an apparent answer to this quandary, Mussolini in his 1932 treatise on the doctrine of Fascism, co-written by Giovanni Gentile, states: “The [Fascist] State is not only the present; it is also the past and above all the future.”\(^\text{17}\) Whilst typically general, this statement reveals something significant of the Fascist ideology and politics – its remarkable state of pluralism permeated by a language of compromise. As Jeffery Schapp aptly suggests, “[t]he Italian fascist regime was committed both to restoration and innovation, both to remembering and renewing the past and to building the nation’s future either upon transcendence of the past or even its outright erasure.”\(^\text{18}\) Hence, the Fascist ideology of Mussolini’s regime was by very nature an amalgamation of multiple visions, leading to a dual focus on an idealized past of imperial heritage and lineage in conjunction with an emphasis on progression.

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\(^{14}\) Mussolini’s focus on the history of Italy, particularly the fall of the ancient Roman Empire can be seen in a series of his articles published in 1908 within *Il Pensiero Romagnolo* where he laments over the fall of the Empire. For a discussion of these publications see, Jan Nelis, *op. cit.*, 397-398.


\(^{16}\) Christopher Duggan, *op. cit.*, p. 227.


towards a modern future for the Italian nation.

**State sponsored architecture and Fascist ideology**

Having considered the dualism of Italian Fascist ideology, this paper will now turn to a consideration of several state sponsored architectural projects in order to examine the extent to which the architectural aesthetic embodied, reflected and responded to the dual vision of the Fascist ideology. Architecture, as DeGrand notes, was the art form most closely connected in the public mind with the Fascist regime.\(^{19}\) One cannot consider state sponsored architecture during the Italian Fascist regime in a mere typological manner or on the basis of common formal characteristics, as state funded buildings of the period “had patrons with definite political programs, [thus] they could not but serve as vehicles of that political ideology”.\(^{20}\) However, unlike the Nazi regime which coherently utilized its state architectural program as an ideological tool for propagating its intense and totalitarian focus on nationalism through a coherent combination of neo-classist and art deco aesthetics,\(^{21}\) the Italian Fascist regime was manifestly incoherent in its use of architectural aesthetic as a vehicle for political ideology. This was the combination of two conditions within Fascist Italy. Firstly, as discussed above the Fascist ideology represented the amalgamation of the dual vision of progressivism and a harkening back to imperial heritage, likewise as within the Fascist party there existed in Italy considerable diversity between different groups of Italian architects, with the Rationalists who promoted the primacy of functionalism and modernist aesthetic, and the Novecento who conversely promoted a synthesis of a purified classicism and neo-classicism.\(^{22}\) Moreover, Mussolini avoided any explicit statement, either through his rhetoric or act of commission, regarding the question of which ‘style’ constituted the Fascist aesthetic for as Riccardo Mariani suggests, “the

\(^{19}\) Alexander DeGrand, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-159.


\(^{22}\) Diane Ghirardo, *op. cit.*, 112. Moreover, a third group, that of the accademici (academics), constituted majorly by architects involved in the various Italian universities, also accepted unaltered neo-classicism as well as eclecticism, however this paper will not treat this group given its very limited state patronage during the Fascist regime.
definition of a series of architectural and urbanistic canons would have required a
definition of the essence of Fascism... Not by chance, Mussolini avoided defining in any
way any question that could contain the embryonic or explicit formulation of the
ideological system in an unequivocal or absolute way”.\textsuperscript{23} It is within this context that the
motivation for such an eclectic array of architectural projects becomes clear, as
commissioned architects attempted to reflect their interpretation of Fascist political
ideology through the aesthetic form of their respective architectural ‘schools’.

The first of these schools to be considered is that of the Rationalists. From its
inception the Fascist movement claimed to offer a revolutionary, modern and
progressive social program. True to this rhetoric of revolutionary vigor and progressive
aspiration Italian Fascism bestowed official approval upon numerous modernist
architectural projects, designed predominantly by the Rationalists, with Mussolini,
according to Antonio Muñoz, stating at one point “I am for modern architecture, for the
architecture of our day”.\textsuperscript{24} The Rationalists constituted the Italian architectural avant-
garde, emphasizing the primacy of functionalism in directing form, with aesthetic to be
derived from the functional program of the building. This conception of architectural
design was very much in line with the ‘international style’ or modernist movement at
the time, which aimed at replacing the rigid adherence to stylistic canon with freer
experimentation.\textsuperscript{25} Sponsored by a group of seven young Italian architects, the ‘Gruppo
7’, the movement promoted itself as the embodiment of a contemporary expression of
traditional principles, stating in one manifesto “Between past and present there is no
incompatibility”.\textsuperscript{26} It was through this self attested ‘middle ground’, drawing upon
classical architectural principles but presenting them in the new idiom of Modernism,
that the Rationalists movement conceived of itself as embodying Fascist ideology, with
one rationalist pamphlet, entitled “Report to Mussolini on Architecture” by Pietro Maria
Bardi declared that Rationalist architecture was the only true expression of Fascist

\textsuperscript{23} Ricardo Marinari, Fascismo e città nuove, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976), p. 126, as translated in Dennis P.
\textsuperscript{24} Antonio Muñoz, Roma di Mussolini, (Milan: S.A. Fratelli Treves, 1935), as translated in George P. Mras,
\textsuperscript{25} Diane Ghirardo, op. cit., 113.
\textsuperscript{26} Gruppo Sette, “Architecture (1926) and Architecture (II): the Foreigners (1927),” trans. Ellen Shapiro,
Oppositions 6 (1976): 90.
revolutionary principles.\textsuperscript{27}

Thus Rationalism very much reflected the dual vision of the Fascist ideology, by straddling modernity and tradition through its polemics “no less deftly than did those of Mussolini”.\textsuperscript{28} One particularly influential member of the Gruppo 7 was architect Giuseppe Terragni, who designed what Frampton calls “the canonical work of the Italian Rationalist movement”.\textsuperscript{29} Terragni’s Casa del Fascio, or local party headquarters, at Como, designed in 1932 is a prime example of the use of rationalist form as a means of promoting and reflecting Fascist ideology.\textsuperscript{30} In Terragni’s own words, the building is designed such that the “the style, the tendency and the architectural imprint will be the natural consequence and the spiritual tradition of [its] political and social premises”.\textsuperscript{30} Presented in the modernist idiom, similar to that of Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion (1929), the Casa del Fascio was without question designed to present the regime as a dynamic progressive force in Italian life, with its modernist use of material in a monumental and celebratory scale, and its façade designed to be a political billboard for the Fascist regime (Fig. 1).\textsuperscript{31} Moreover, the building decoratively drew upon the symbols of Fascism, integrating the emblem of the fasces\textsuperscript{32} into the structure of the windows, as well as having a highly modernist mural of Il Duce, Mussolini, painted by Marcello Nizzoli in the main meeting room (Fig. 2).\textsuperscript{33} Likewise a submission, so-called ‘Scheme A’, to a 1934 competition sponsored by the regime for the redesign of the Palazzo del Littorio in Rome by Giuseppe Terragni and others,\textsuperscript{34} further examples the extent to which Rationalists attempted a total integration of ideology and aesthetic (Fig. 3).\textsuperscript{35}

In a pamphlet published along side the competition entry the team explained their rationale behind the design, being both a means to “reveal Mussolini the way the Italians see him, hear him, adore him” through the Modernist aesthetic, whilst

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Ghirardo} Diane Ghirardo, \textit{op. cit.}, 114.
\bibitem{Frampton2} Kenneth Frampton, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 205.
\bibitem{Terrangi} Giuseppe Terrangi, “La costruzione della Casa del Fascio di Como,” \textit{Quadrante} 35-36 (1936): 14-15, as translated in Diane Ghirardo, \textit{op. cit.}, 120.
\bibitem{Frampton3} Kenneth Frampton, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 205; Dennis P. Dooran, \textit{op. cit.}, 123; Diane Ghirardo, \textit{op. cit.}, 120.
\bibitem{Frampton4} The bundle of rods tied around a projecting axe, a symbol of civic magistracy in ancient Rome.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid, 110.
\bibitem{Frampton5} The architects involved in the design of ‘Scheme A’ included also, Antonio Carminati, Pietro Lingeri, Ernesto Salvia and Luigi Vietti, along side the painters Marcello Nizzoli and Mario Sironi.
\bibitem{Dooran} Dennis P. Dooran, \textit{op. cit.}, 125.
\end{thebibliography}
simultaneously declaring the “spiritual union” between Mussolini and “the historic continuity of Rome”.  

The most striking feature of the design was its façade, which consisted of an 80 meters long curved wall faced with porphyry (an explicit reference to classical antiquity), from which projected a central rostrum, or arengario, several stories above ground level designed as the focal point for the Palazzo, placing the building as a direct challenge to the dominance of the Coliseum. From this arengario Mussolini would address the public, being “like a God, outlined against the sky”. With its imperial, celebratory and monumental aspirations, and its emphasis on the centrality of Mussolini, ‘Scheme A’ was designed to overtly buttress the equation of the Duce with the Caesars, with its material and rhetorical references to classical antiquity, whilst also portraying the progressive image of the Fascism regime through a modernist aesthetic. A further of the use of this Rationalist modernist aesthetic in State sponsored buildings as a means to reinforce the progressiveness of Fascist ideology can also be seen in buildings designed to house the Gioventù del Littorio, which were progressively modernist in their aesthetic as a means of further transmitting the Fascist image of the ‘party for the future’ to the youth of the movement (Fig. 4).

In similar ways the redesign of the façade and sanctuary of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome for the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista (the tenth anniversary celebrations of the Fascist ‘revolution’), promoted the progressive and modernist image of the party in an overtly celebratory homage to the revolutionary and modern ideology of the regime as perceived by the Rationalists (Fig. 5, Fig. 6). Thus from the above examples it is clear that Rationalism, with its modernist aesthetic, yet clear imperial rhetoric, reflected the dual ideology of the Fascist movement, simultaneously portraying its revolutionary and progressive aspects as well as to some extent siting the image of the party and its ideology in a lineage born of the ancient roman empire. The Rationalist

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38 Vittorio Gregotti op. cit., 132 as translated in Dennis P. Dooran op. cit., 126.
39 The youth movement of the Fascist party.
41 Diane Ghirardo, op. cit., 113, 121.
movement, despite referencing imperial tradition in a number of ways, placed more emphasis on the progressive ideology of the regime than Mussolini’s ideology of romanità.

Far more overt its equation of Fascism with the power, prestige and virtue of the ancient Roman Empire were the more conservative classicist and neo-classicist Novecento ‘school’ of architectural thought, which like the Rationalists above also received significant, patronage and official approval from the Fascist regime, particularly given the support for the school by Mussolini’s cultural advisor and mistress, Margherita Sarfatti. The Novecento led by Marcello Piacentini, bypassed 19th century eclecticism to revive classicism, and similar to the Fascist rejection of 19th Century liberalism and democracy, the Novecento called for a liberation of architecture from the superfluous. With Piacentini and other classicists being particularly favoured by the regime, D. Medina Lasansky argues that over the course of the Fascist party rule, a symbiotic connection developed between urban renewal projects and Fascist ideology, with numerous classical or neo-classical projects displaying the past “to legitimize Mussolini’s claims on the present”. Mussolini’s resurrection of romanità, discussed above, permeated the fascist party aesthetic, with the fascist symbol of the fasces being an ancient Roman symbol of the civic magistracy; the fascist salute a Roman salute; and the Militia and youth organisations being remodeled on the Roman army. In apparent paradox, as an integral part of the Fascist image, the classical imperial aesthetic was as central to the Fascist architectural program as was modernism, being employed to make explicit the parallel between the Ancient Roman Empire and Mussolini’s Fascism. As Christopher Duggan argues, “It was to the Rome of the Caesars, not of the popes, that fascism looked for its spiritual model; and it was ancient Rome that provided the regime with most of its symbolism.”

Epitomising this equation of the Fascist regime with that of the long lost Roman

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43 Ibid, 112.
46 Christopher Duggan, op. cit., p. 228.
Empire, as well as reinforcing the regimes emphasis on youth and physical fitness, was the state sponsored Stadio dei Marmi in the Foro Mussolini, Rome, designed in 1928 by Enrico Del Debbio (Fig. 7, Fig. 8). In an obvious nod to the Circus Maximus in Rome, the Del Debbio designed a highly classical composition, utilizing marble and travertine in an obvious as well as encircling his athletic stadium with sixty colossal marble statues of males in various athletic poses. The Stadio dei Marmi was a “monument that is linked to the Roman imperial tradition, that wants to perpetuate for the centuries the memory of the new fascist civilization, tied to the name of its Condottiere”. Similarly Piacentini’s Triumphal Arch, designed in 1928 in Bolzano, also inculcated in a more iconographic manner, the link between Fascism and classical Rome transforming the emblem of the fasces into the structure of the columns (Fig. 9). Whilst obvious connections can be discerned between Fascist ideology and the classicist aesthetic in the above works, neo-classicist works likewise utilized form and aesthetic as a means of inculcating the parallel between Fascism and the ideology of romanità.

Perhaps one of the biggest and most important projects of the regime was the design of a new university campus within Rome, just beyond the main train station, Termini. This project, directed by Marcello Piacentini in direct consultation with Mussolini himself, coopted numerous architects from both the Novecento and Rationalist schools to produce a range of buildings, all of which despite their individual differences produced a certain symmetry, monumentality and order. Sited in the most dominant central position of the campus’s axial composition was the most monumental of all campus buildings, Piacentini’s Palazzo del Rettorato, or administration building, which as Dooran suggests came to be the “epitome of the popular notion of Fascist architecture”.

In a stripped neo-classical style the imposing Rettorato portrayed the sense of order, hierarchy, power and grandeur of the Fascist state, as well as utilizing a classical composition stripped of all superfluous decoration, and “sheathed in marble and travertine” (Fig. 10). By combining formal classical elements, with a materiality

48 Borden W. Painter, op. cit., p. 43.
50 Dennis P. Dooran, op. cit., 122-123.
51 Borden W. Painter, op. cit., p. 64.
52 Dennis P. Dooran, op. cit., 122.
53 Ibid, 122.
evocative of classical antique architecture, and a stark clean line aesthetic the building straddled both classicism and to a certain extent modernism, becoming emblematic of the dualism and plurality of Fascist ideology. From these classicist and neo-classicist examples it is clear that by commissioning the architecture of Novecento school, the Fascist state was able to promote Mussolini’s ideology of romanità publicly propagating Fascism as the embodiment of the virtues of the long lost Roman Empire.

**Conclusion**
Though the memory of the Italian Fascism dims, its architectural statements remain. Encapsulated in the diversity and apparent incoherency of its state sponsored architectural commissions, is a picture of a regime whose political ideology was plural from its inception. As examined, Mussolini’s Fascist ideology held a dual focus on the idealized past of Roman imperial heritage, whilst also emphasizing the modern, progressive and revolutionary nature of the movement. Through a consideration of the state endorsement of architecture from both the Rationalist and Novecento schools, it is clear that the pluralism within Fascist ideology was reflected and propagated via both a modernist and classicist aesthetic. Hence, this paper has shown that it was through the aesthetic diversity of state sponsored architecture that such projects came to embody and echo the dual vision of Mussolini’s Fascist ideology.
Figures

Fig. 1 | Casa del Fascio, Giuseppe Terrangi, Como 1932-36. Building as billboard.

Fig. 2 | Casa del Fascio, Giuseppe Terrangi, Como 1932-36. Meeting room with modernist panel including portrait of Mussolini.

Fig. 3 | 'Scheme A’, G. Terragni, A Carminati, P. Lingeri, E Saliva, L. Veietti, with M. Nizzoli and M. Sironi, Rome, 1934.
Fig. 4 | Gioventù del Littorio, Cesare Valle, Predappio, 1938.

Fig. 5 | Façade of Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Adalberto Libera and Mario De Renzi, Rome, 1932.

Fig. 6 | Sanctuary of Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Adalberto Libera and Mario De Renzi, Rome, 1932.

Fig. 7 | Athletes in Stadio dei Marmi, Enrico Del Debbio, Rome, c. 1932.
Fig. 8 | Stadio dei Marmi, Enrico Del Debbio, Rome, 1928.

Fig. 9 | Triumphal Arch, Marcello Piacentini, Bolzano, 1928.

Fig. 10 | Palazzo del Rettorato, Marcello Piacentini, University of Rome, 1932-35.
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Figures


Fig. 3: Dooran, Dennis P., “The Political Content in Italian Architecture during the Fascist Era,” *Art Journal* 43 (1983): 126.


Fig. 5: “Mostra Della Rivoluzione Fascista 2,” available from photobucket, http://s665.photobucket.com/user/AlFront/media/MostraRivoluzione2.jpg.html.

Fig. 6: “Mostra del decennale della rivoluzione fascista a Roma, sacramento dei martiri,” available from Adalberto Libera, http://www.pabaac.beniculturali.it/opencms/approfondimenti/sitonew/ita/biografia/pop_img_03.htm.

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Fig. 8: Dooran, Dennis P., “The Political Content in Italian Architecture during the Fascist Era,” *Art Journal* 43 (1983): 124.

Fig. 9: Dooran, Dennis P., “The Political Content in Italian Architecture during the Fascist Era,” *Art Journal* 43 (1983): 122.