

Fascismo abbandonato: Fascism in Ruins

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known of these other schemes was *bonifica agricola*, the programme for the reclamation of agricultural land. By making this connection the regime literally equated the lives of millions of Italians with the environmental conditions of the malaria ridden swamps of the Pontine Marshes. Under the auspices of *bonifica umana*, the fascists reorganised and extended existing provisions for education, health and social care according to industrial principles and on an industrial scale. The regime brought medicine, hygiene, fitness and dentistry to the masses where in other countries good health remained the preserve of the wealthy.

Paramilitary youth organisations, the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB) and later the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* (GIL) were established as a central pier of this programme to manipulate Italian children into active support for fascism. Both organisations were important architectural patrons, erecting *colonie di infanzia* on the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian coasts which were billed as health spas and holiday camps. The *colonia* brought together modern architecture, fresh air and discipline designed to fascistise the body and soul of Italian youth. The *colonie* were far removed from the stagnant towns of Italy's past and away from traditional structures of family and community. Even in the context of massive public works programmes, the building of *colonie* offered unprecedented opportunities for progressive architects. The *colonia* became a distinctive fascist building type that evolved under the directives of the ONB and the GIL. The marching, synchronised exercise and gymnastics, flag raising, saluting and swearing of allegiance to the regime that comprised the dramatic daily programme of



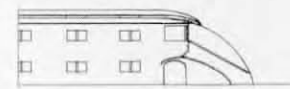
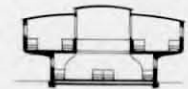
the *colonie* inspired architectural features including towers, ramps and elevated platforms for the parading troupes of fascist youth. In contrast to this spectacle, official regulations declared that luxuries were anti-educational and anti-social and accordingly the *colonia* provided only the most basic of accommodation. Dormitories were intimidating, open plan and stark; each might accommodate several hundred children. Italian parents routinely admonished recalcitrant children with the threat *ti mando in colonia!* (*Behave, or I'll send you to the colonia!*). For a generation of Italians the experience of fascism was a formative one, from which some have never recovered.

As fascism passes from living memory, the fascist regime may appear to many young Italians as an unexceptional part of their history. Italy's current generation of right wing politicians are reviewing the architectural achievements of the fascist era. This represents a major setback for those who would extricate their country's modern architectural heritage from the opprobrium of its historical political association. Looking at fascist architecture from my perspective outside Italy, the abandoned *colonia* appear to be a metaphor for the legacy of the regime in the national collective consciousness; a legacy that is complex, difficult and painful to contemplate, but which is too important to be forgotten. The future of the *colonia* buildings hangs on the resolution of this dilemma. Fascism has not been consigned to history. It cannot be exorcised either by the obliteration of its monuments or by the packaging of them as heritage.

Patrick Duerden

Colonia Marina XXVIII Ottobre Cattolica, 1932 Clemente Busiri-Vici (1887–1965)

Colonia Le Navi (Colonia XXVIII Ottobre) (1932) on the Adriatic Coast at Cattolica (Rimini) was designed by Clemente Busiri-Vici for the male children of expatriate Italians. The Scottish-Italian sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi was a *Balilla* here. The dynamic forms of locomotives and steamships that the remarkable dormitory buildings represent suggest that the children weren't supposed to feel that they had arrived at any destination when they came here; the would-be colonists of the new Roman Empire were to be in continual transit.



1 *Talks with Mussolini*, Emil Ludwig, 1932 p. 70,122
 2 *Vers Une Architecture*, Le Corbusier, 1923, tr. Frederick Etchells
 1927 as *Towards a New Architecture* p. 82
 3 Le Corbusier, op. cit. p. 142

Fascismo Abbandonato: Fascism Abandoned

In 2005, when Dan Dubowitz and I set out to look for the abandoned modernist architecture of fascist Italy it was the apparent contradictions between Modernism – the architecture of ‘progress’ – and fascism – the ‘counter-revolution’ – that made the subject of interest to me. Today the international importance of Italian architecture of the fascist regime (1922–45) is hardly acknowledged. Anti-fascism was written into the 1948 constitution of post-war Italy and remains the founding principle; consequently fascist architecture has been dismissed by a society unable to attribute cultural value to it. The regime’s building programmes were prodigious and internationally acclaimed, yet now, with a few well known exceptions, the buildings are generally forgotten; their architects by and large condemned to obscurity. Key works such as the *Stazione Termini* railway station in Rome have been altered beyond recognition. Others simply abandoned, including a disproportionately large number of *colonie di infanzia* ‘holiday’ camps constructed for the fascist youth organisations. There are a number of reasons why this latter group of buildings has survived. The overarching fascist programmes for which they were designed often made their adaptation for new uses impractical as well as unconscionable, whilst the remoteness of the locations in which they were typically built made them easier to ignore than to demolish.

From the beginning of the fascist era, modernism had appealed to Benito Mussolini, the Duce. He sought to affirm the identity of the new Italy in contrast to the backward looking and liberal pre-fascist past. *Every revolution, Mussolini declared, creates new forms, new myths, and new rites.*¹ Under Mussolini there were official fascist styles of greeting (the Roman salute), walking (the *passo romano*), eating (sparingly), writing, speaking

and thinking. Fascist style in these matters emphasised conciseness and vigour, in contrast to lax and lazy forms of democratic and liberal expression.

The futurist architects who enthusiastically supported the regime exalted the technological achievements of the new machine age; the white telephones beloved of fascist cinema, the *Littorine* railway trains of the *Ferrovie dello Stato*, and the *Savoia-Marchetti* seaplanes. Futurist architects such as Angiolo Mazzoni and Clemente Busiri-Vici designed buildings that were similarly stripped back and streamlined. The futurists’ passion for symbols of the machine age was driven by a fanatic’s belief in the transformative power of an aesthetic. They designed buildings that looked like machines in the belief that the fascist utopia would be bought about by such architectural manifestations.

Fascism was not however unequivocal in its rejection of the past. Historicism retained cultural currency as fascist ideologues co-opted history in their effort to establish legitimacy for new imperial ambition. In Mazzoni’s architecture, for example, machine metaphors were therefore juxtaposed with allusions to Roman antiquity. The ubiquitous *fascio*, the axe bound in a bundle of rods that was the ancient symbol of the rule of law after which the movement was named, became a symbolic architectural element which might appear in the form of a stair tower, a window, a door handle or a column.

A younger generation of modernist architects reacted to what they saw as an emphasis on stylistic alliteration to establish progressive credentials. International in outlook, the rationalism that architects of the Milanese *Gruppo Sette* and their counterparts in Turin propounded was an ideology of pure and liberating technique that through design would



transform society, and bring about the fascist Italy that the Duce had proclaimed. Playing down the notion of a break with history the rationalists evoked the spirit of the past to assert the legitimacy of the new in a manner and in language that bore a striking resemblance to the regime’s assertion of its political legitimacy. The rationalists could however claim a second source for these principles. *A great epoch has begun. There exists a new spirit.*² These are the words of Le Corbusier, written in 1923, the year after Mussolini came to power. Le Corbusier’s influence on the rationalists was profound. *Rome’s business was to conquer the world and to govern it.... If it is brutal, so much the worse, or so much the better.*³ Whilst it might be stretching things to say that Le Corbusier was unquestioning in his fascist sympathies (here he was after all writing of antiquity), the paternal overtones, the latent fear and the utopian delusions to which the leader of architectural modernism gave voice nevertheless found full expression under fascism.

Mussolini announced his support for

rationalist architecture in 1934, and after intense lobbying Le Corbusier was invited to Rome by the regime in the same year. By some fateful miscalculation his visit coincided with Mussolini’s first meeting, in Venice, with Adolf Hitler and the great architect left without having met the Duce. Mussolini later admitted that he was unmoved by art or architecture, and famously couldn’t understand why Hitler’s state visit to Italy in 1938 had to include the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

The result of the Duce’s ambivalence was that fascist architecture was remarkably pluralistic. Fascist architects tended towards a reconciliation of the essentially incompatible positions of modernists and traditionalists, of those who rejected the past and those who sought to establish the future with reference to it. Architectural debate in Italy became a battle ground over which protagonists from both camps, led by Ugo Ojetti on the one hand and Marcello Piacentini on the other, fought to demonstrate their *fascistissime* credentials. The arguments however were never about political or social intentions. There was no questioning of the rectitude of the regime’s social programmes; vitriol was expended on debate that was purely about what form best represented fascism, and never strayed into the arena of what fascism itself was about.

Ardent, determined and indomitable, *l’uomo nuovo del tempo di Mussolini* would be the elite soldier of the new Roman Empire. In order to transform Italians in this way, the fascists embarked on an immense project for a new social state intended not for welfare but for war. Engineering, science and medicine provided models for a massive programme for *bonifica umana* or human reclamation, which paralleled other *bonifica* schemes for national improvement. The term *bonifica* implied contempt for the unreformed. Perhaps the best

**Colonia marina 'Amos Maramotti' di Reggio Emilia
Riccione, 1934**
Constantino Constantini

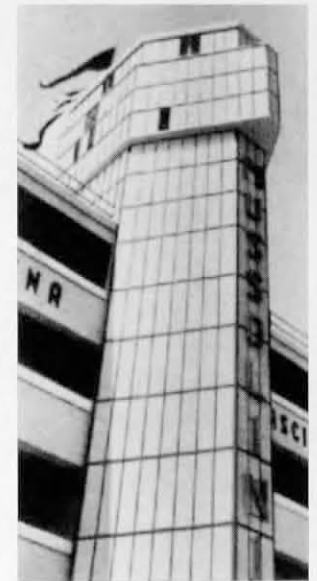
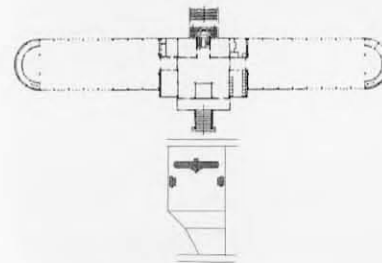
Colonia Amos Maramotti in Riccione (Ravenna) was named after a student 'martyr' to the fascist cause killed in a clash with communists in Turin in 1924. Constantino Constantini also designed the famous *Duce* obelisk in the Foro Mussolini in Rome.



**Colonia marina della Federazione Fascista di Novara
Rimini, 1933–34**
Giuseppe Peverelli

Colonia Novarese (1934) was designed by Giuseppe Peverelli. The functions of the building were combined in a single structure like a miniature version of the Lingotto Fiat factory in Turin, with strip windows added. The tower which is the principal feature of the front of the building was originally clad entirely in glass, and was modelled as a gigantic illuminated *fascio*.

Mussolini appointed Peverelli Minister of Communications in July 1943. He was arrested and put on trial in 1945 as a consequence, but acquitted. He subsequently emigrated to Argentina.



Colonia elioterapica Maria Pia di Savoia
Vercelli, 1936

The *Colonia Maria Pia di Savoia* was built as a non-residential Colonia Elioterapiche (sun therapy colony). In 2005, part of the building was the Alpini veterans' association; a gymnastic club and an archery club occupied other areas.



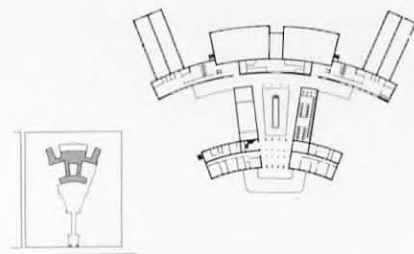
Colonia Marina Rosa Maltoni-Mussolini
Tirrenia 1925–35
Angiolo Mazzoni (1894–1979)

Colonia Rosa Maltoni-Mussolini is the architectural masterpiece of the futurist Angiolo Mazzoni, who is well known for the many railway stations and post offices that he designed in his capacity as architect to the Ministry of Communications. One half of the *Colonia Marina Rosa Maltoni-Mussolini* has recently been converted to holiday apartments, and proposals are in place for the conversion of the other half as well.



Colonia marina 'Costanzo Ciano' del Comune di Varese
Milano Marittima, 1937–39
Mario Loreti (1889–1968)

Colonia Costanzo Ciano (1937–39) was occupied for only a single summer (in 1939, the year of its completion) and was dynamited by the Nazis in 1945.



Colonia marina delle Montecatini
Milano Marittima, 1938
Eugenio Faludi (1895–1981)

The *Colonia marina di Cervia del Gruppo Montecatini* accommodated five hundred *Balilla*. A huge tower with ramps rose 55 metres above ground level. It was rebuilt to less than half its original height in the 1940s after the original construction was destroyed at the end of the war. The arch at the gates was designed as a miniature version of the Arch Adalberto Libera planned but never built for the abandoned *Esposizione Universale di Roma* (1942).





Cover image: Colonia marina 'Costanzo Ciano' del Comune di Varese, Marittima

All images courtesy the artist

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