

# Architecture of Leisure: The Strategic Re-Creation of Fascist Italy

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This work examines the enormous building campaign devoted to institutionalizing leisure sponsored by the Fascist regime. From the early 1920s until its collapse in 1943, the regime attempted to systematize the leisure time of the laboring class through recreational organizations, broadly termed “Dopolavoro” (“Afterwork”), and in so doing intended to re-organize these private retreats in the public realm so that member workers could be thoroughly observed and managed. The advancement of this scheme, and the more far-reaching objective of influencing the full scope of the working class population, was contingent upon generating an attendant architecture. The importance Mussolini gave to these social objectives is underscored by the enormous construction budget he earmarked for this architecture, which represented one of the government’s single largest annual expenditures. In 1923 the supervision of this operation was placed officially in the hands of the newly formed Fascist bureaucracy, the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND), which went on to create more than 20,000 discrete organizations as part of a social engineering campaign.

The dopolavoro of the twenties and thirties were vestiges of industrial-labor social clubs, and were organized according to mutual athletic or cultural interests; similarity of employment, employer, or craft; or simply geographic proximity. Occasionally these clubs were associated with a specific industry and a formalized meeting place was provided by the employer, but of the thousands of pre-Fascist dopolavoro, this was the exception. By the middle 1920s with the economy in shambles and workers’ living conditions paralleling pre-war levels, Mussolini, trying to stave off the Left, could not hope to garner worker support by addressing them in the same manner taken by the Communists. Additionally it became clear to Mussolini that an appeal to workers beyond a certain threshold would alienate the monied classes. Although the Fascists viewed the dopolavoro with condescension, they embraced the social clubs in order to tap into the largest segment of the population, thereby establishing a basis of support for themselves, and with this they began to restructure the dopolavoro. By 1927 the Fascists’ legitimate fears that extant dopolavoro would become politically volatile resulted

in the active campaign to consolidate the recreational circles. The Fascist phrase for this process was “rationalization,” a term popular in European industrial jargon of the 1920s. Re-coined here it meant a “State intervention to eliminate those inefficient, class-ridden associations that hitherto had prevented single managements from effective planning; (in addition to) the setting up of new, reliable institutions where government agencies were previously few or lacking; and finally, the consolidation of the corporate organizations of the regime to promote labor-management harmony.”<sup>1</sup> If at times this process meant the erection of a new facility to win over a population, at other times it could mean violence, and destruction of whatever meeting place might exist: club, bar, home, etc.

Mussolini and his government, targeting an ever larger populace through this broad construction program, quickly extended the OND’s reach beyond the re-organization of the Dopolavoro proper. To this end, the working class, previously centered around the nuclear family, was deliberately fragmented into divisions based upon age and gender in order to undermine the autonomous expression of class identity and volatile class alliance that posed a considerable threat to the government’s stability. The regime’s new architecture of leisure gradually came to address formerly disenfranchised Italians: women and children, as well as veterans and the infirm. Each dopolavoro program was administered by a “social secretary”, and of the 20,000 groups, one sixth were maintained as elements within corporations. A still larger number were created within the building programs of new Case del Fascio, and it was these projects in particular that fully disclosed the Fascist intention to equate leisure with Mussolini’s ostensible generosity, while shrewdly avoiding the appearance of his conspicuous surveillance.

It was clear that officials in the regime believed that leisure time must be as efficient and productive to the State as work time. Ever since Mussolini’s approval of the first Eight-Hour Bill in 1923, regime officials had feared a situation where workers could devote their new leisure time to political issues or to the banal imitation of bourgeois vices. This was partly a moot worry, because if leisure was depen-

dent upon “disposable” time and money, the latter was not an option for the labor class. The activity programs sponsored by the *dopolavoro* professed “healthy and praiseworthy pastimes selected according to criteria of practicality, efficiency, and enlightened modernity. Moral, physical and intellectual pursuits were to discourage frivolity.”<sup>2</sup>

The rhetoric surrounding the *dopolavoro* promoted individual self-improvement and eventual fulfillment. Classes and programs ranged from education (theater, cinema, radio, folklore, hygiene, consumer affairs), to physical education (athletics, and tourism). In addition to this curriculum of popular culture and vocational training, social assistance programs such as housing at times fell under the direction of the OND. Women were perpetually encouraged towards motherhood and hence the home. Therefore, for them, the OND was less interested in “real recreation” than in classes in home economics and in those skills that would support the new Italians they were to produce. Ironically, it was the women who were the majority at the *dopolavoro* sporting events, movies, theaters and outings. This condition suggests two possible short-comings in the regime’s planning. First, despite the Fascists’ intention to reinforce a family based culture, the policy of providing diverse activities away from the home ultimately worked against their particular notions of family life. This condition indicates that women were not manipulated into infant production, and now actually had more non-maternal options opened to them; sponsored by the regime, these options qualified as “legitimate” uses of time. Second, if men were not attending these events in the numbers the Fascists hoped, it is likely that they were meeting elsewhere, fueling a sub-current of political friction.

In standard Fascist style which paired superlatives with rhetoric of general inclusion, Mussolini announced that “the *dopolavoro* is among the most vital and important institutions of the regime.”<sup>3</sup> Although this new institution was greeted by architects with fanfare, the regime in reality did not allow the construction of the all-inclusive-*dopolavoro* to materialize, revealing again the Fascists’ need to reduce opportunities for frequent large-scale gatherings.

The specificity of this political maneuvering, attempting to monitor and limit the working class population, resulted in the generation of three distinct architectural typologies, though programmatic variations within each type were significant. Alongside the re-made *Dopolavoro* (leisure clubs for adult workers), emerged the *Balilla* (clubs resembling gymnasiums for the inter-regional competitions of adolescents), and the *Colonia* (Summer vacation camps for the indoctrination of children). While the *balilla* was an architectural type invented to satisfy a regime necessity, the *dopolavoro*, as explained, and the *colonia*, as will be seen, were existing institutional types, architecturally and politically reconfigured by the Fascists.

## BUILDINGS AND PROJECTS

Because the Fascists adapted these typologies very effectively to local political contexts, each project design was

unique. Following is a very limited review of the spatial and programmatic diversity of the government’s endeavors; my intention is not to provide a survey of this campaign but to underscore its ideological and architectural breadth.

The unbuilt *dopolavoro* project planned for a Genoese insurance company demonstrates the typical attitude taken towards the worker. Employing the building’s section and an oculus-like opening, the observation of workers is maintained. In its austerity the design provides workers with an education in the virtues of frugality. As the author of the “*Casabella*” article where this project appeared explains, the scheme is so efficient that the entire operation can be staffed by a single live-in employee, residing on the upper level.

The spaces cluster around the bar, a gesture contrary to Fascist attitudes on alcohol, but partly explained by the fact that this facility was intended for the company’s higher level workers. Compartmentalized spaces prevent mass gathering which only on the rarest occasion are unified via sliding walls. The images show men and women, but whether the women are employees or the wives of employees is unclear. The building turns its back on the street, ensuring privacy while preventing display to non-participants, thereby fulfilling the architect’s intention to create a “villa.” As a villa, “the *dopolavoro* can be the stimulus to gain a collective mentality without rational discipline.” The author concludes: “What a Soviet *dopolavoro* is to a garage, this building is to a villa.”<sup>4</sup>

The discrepancies between the Fascist rhetoric and reality are exhibited as well in the new office building for Montecatini designed by Gio Ponti. Access to the building is made over the *dopolavoro*, located underground, by two entries: one for the public and executives, and the second for the workers. Despite its inferior placement within the building, the *dopolavoro* is fitted with shops, a small gym and showers (which many workers probably did not have at home). The inclusion of a library and medical facilities, while not architectural achievements, still provide a new level of luxury in workers’ facilities. The greater quality of services found at Montecatini is largely explained by the extremely high visibility that was guaranteed for the office project, resulting from the union of the renowned chemical company with the government.

While the urban *dopolavoro* tends to address many specific, necessary components of urban life (shops which are accessible during the workday, for example), it also addresses societal factors which are more easily observed and monitored.

The rural *dopolavoro* proved to be a far more problematic, amorphous entity. The Fascists’ campaign to control the working masses in the country resulted in more sophisticated innovations in the formation of leisure and played a crucial role in expanding attitudes regarding pan-class leisure.

By the late 1920s, the squalor of rural living conditions and services brought about the extraordinary flow of farm workers into the cities, threatening catastrophe. There were two immediate results; first, fear spread throughout the regime over the formation of an explosive urban mob—

explosive because Italy's industries could not absorb such quantities of labor; and second, panic escalated among wealthy landowners who feared the loss of cheap farm labor. Consequently, in 1928 the Fascists initiated "an anti-urbanization campaign under the slogan "Empty the cities." Mussolini urged that "every means, even coercive ones," be used to "promote an exodus from the cities, [and] to prevent the desertion of the countryside." Mussolini himself abandoned the cosmopolitan suit of the "Americanizer" in favor of the sober garb of "First Peasant of Italy."<sup>5</sup> The mission was to create rural pockets of isolation for easier control, while keeping the masses sufficiently distracted without having to expend vast government funds on real improvements, such as housing and extensive infrastructure.

Political rhetoric in conjunction with an enormous graphic advertising campaign (which had itself flourished into a large-scale industry in Europe during the 1920s), began to extol the miracle that was the Italian countryside. By transforming Italian soil into a commodity and facilitating real and conceptual access to the landscape, the public could become consumers without necessarily having to spend. The regime realized that "city/bad, country/good" propaganda would fare still better if fragments of coveted urban recreation became available to the rural areas. Case del Fascio built in these areas provided cinemas and gymnasias. In addition the OND funded traveling amenities such as the Thespian Train Car—a mobile theater, and the Lyrical Car—a transportable opera house. Both relied on kinetic structures, unfolding to satisfy audiences of 10,000. In addition, they also provided about 100 cinema trucks and also proposed mobile restaurants. In a single year the amount the OND spent on the Thespian Car alone was five times that spent on schools.

New tourist publications emerged which lauded the mountains and "peasant" traditions. National holidays, a new variety of vacation time, encouraged rural expeditions. If that journey could take in a new Fascist monument as well, while traveling on a new, efficient (discounted for the holiday) Italian train, so much the better. Tourism became a barometer identifying the success of the rural campaign, monitored through railroad ticket sales.

At times monuments emerged with the capacity to propel a still further desire for Italian exploration. "Sightseeing became a ceremonial ratification," or validation of those places/objects the regime deemed to be of ultimate value.<sup>6</sup> This especially held true in the attempt to resuscitate the glory of Italy's seafaring history, as in the new touristic migration to the sea, an event that quickly became a patriotic gesture commemorating the achievements of the Italian naval republics.

The government especially encouraged the formation of provincial travel groups, but numerous urban based day-trip groups were formed as well. In all cases though they were forced to register with the OND, if they were not already a subset of an extant *dopolavoro*.<sup>7</sup>

Coupling health sciences, i.e. the Fascists' culture of the

body, with the supposed pleasures of rural existence, the Fascists could advance their belief that social problems were better controlled when relegated outside of urban districts. Despite the forced dispersion of the rebellious Squadristi by 1926, Mussolini maintained a facade of support towards Italy's urban youth in order to stem militant sympathies from forming again. Architecturally the strongest manifestation of this strategy was the *balilla*, a building type analogous to a gymnasium. The Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) conducted the building campaign for the *balilla*, which was far more institutionalized than that for the *dopolavoro*.<sup>8</sup> Created to distract youth from preoccupation with politics (i.e. insurrection), the *balilla* ironically, as even the name suggests, functioned, in fact, as boot-camps. Participation in the *balilla* prepared youth for membership in the industrial troops, and if necessary, the genuine military.

The regime's focus on the usefulness of athletics is further demonstrated by their frenzy of stadium building, but as with the *balilla*, the emphasis was more upon distraction and spectatorship than participation. Private sports promoters or independent government organizations were far more likely to support athletes for international competition. The *balilla*, like the *dopolavoro*, remained in the low-brow world. Given the political premise for the *balilla*, it is understandable that it was depicted with far more frequency in Piacentini's *Architettura e Arti Decorative* (changed to *Architettura* in 1931)—the arm of the national architects' association—than the other more liberal architectural publications.

The graphic and textual descriptions of the *balilla* underscored the Fascists' interest in the machine: the machine of hygiene and machine for exercise. Something as static and low-tech as a gymnastic ladder was referred to as a "modern appliance," while ventilation and plumbing were described in terms of breathing and fluid circulation. Low building budgets often led to unadorned sanitary fixtures and exposed mechanical systems, but these were aestheticized simultaneously, in accordance with the desire to avoid growing bourgeois perceptions of the bath-as-luxury. As aesthetic environments, the *balilla* also served effectively to indoctrinate youth for industrial environments, where order and efficiency were paramount. If at times the regime portrayed the body as Nature, at other moments the regime transformed the body into Machine.

Architectural journal accounts describe the buildings as "all in harmony and well-proportioned,"—terminology which became descriptive of a re-made, re-enforced body. Especially in regards to class, both terms implied successful coexistence of unequal parts.

The earliest *balilla* did not achieve the modernist image of an architecture replete with light and ventilation that emerged in later recreational structures. As with other schemes for working class "clients," *balilla* often incorporated mobile walls, creating highly flexible spaces thereby reducing governmental expense.

An example of the Fascists' intention to distract youth by encouraging physical development is illustrated by the *Balilla*

*Madre*. While grander in scale than typical balilla, the general programming of spaces and *raison d'être* are precisely the same as earlier, more humble projects. The specific program for the Balilla Madre called for a gymnastics display campus where nearly 400 young athletes could compete for regional titles.

The desires of the regime are reiterated by *Architettura's* editor who reviewed this project: "We know that the physical and moral education of masses is of primary importance ... The problem (to be addressed) is organizational, educational, and the disciplining of the masses. This building operates in view of collective exercises and extraordinary exhibitions, which aim to create in the participants and spectators a sense of unity, order, power and beauty... The life of these youths must not be limited by the absence of space, air, and light."<sup>9</sup>

Architects designing public structures for the regime were compelled to include elements in their schemes that would advertise the building, and the social welfare project contained therein; most often rhetorical towers fulfilled this requirement. In the graphic representation of these projects the architects adopted the unconventional practice of cutting sections through the towers (rather than showing them in elevation); while underscoring the presence of the tower, this revealed nothing of particular spatial interest.

The *Palestro del Duce* typifies the situation where the Fascists' leisure campaign, intended solely for the purpose of controlling the laboring class, ultimately influenced the upper class—this structure is especially important because it demonstrates that this influence extended up to Mussolini himself. Gymnastics per se were identified as an inferior sport by the regime from the 1920s; by 1940 the participation in gymnastics, originally forcefully induced, resulted in its tremendous growth in popularity among all classes. This is not to imply that facilities shared fully by multiple classes resulted; in fact, when a single complex was constructed to house a certain activity for several social classes, plans were arranged so that each group remained spatially segregated.

The regime's architectural response to the recreational needs of the youngest members of the labor class was the colonia. Not exactly a new Fascist institutional typology, colonia were an adaptation of nineteenth-century models developed to quarantine children with tuberculosis within healthful, natural surroundings. The premise for the colonia echoed that of the balilla, the essential difference being that balilla were located in urban contexts in order to siphon off political variances, while colonia were located in the countryside where isolation was seen as more conducive to Fascistic indoctrination.

Working class children, up to the age of twelve spent four weeks per year at a colonia. Separation from the family was total; if during the child's stay a family insisted upon a visit, it could only take place on the property of the institution. As with the balilla, gender separation was usually the rule, with higher quality facilities designed for boys.

The most usual senior official at the colonia was a doctor.

Given the provenance of the colonia, that was not surprising, but, in fact, the Fascist colonia only accepted healthy children. Implicit was the axiom that health begins in the home, and only those families who could preserve the "health" of their children could reward the children with a vacation at the colonia. A healthy body stemmed from a healthy mind, and subscription to Fascism was all-in-all the best way to stay healthy. As was the case with the *dopolavoro* and balilla, which included medical facilities placed in these institutions, compliance with the Fascists could mean the sole opportunity for working class children to receive medical attention.

While colonia were built in both the mountains and at the seaside, the marine colonia in particular show a re-adjustment in class relations triggered by leisure activity. The Fascists equipped the Roman and Tuscany coasts, glamorized not least of all by tourist publications extolling the sun and sea's curative properties, with an infrastructure of rail and services, which could aid colonia building. The same factors which precipitated colonia building (new awareness of physical health, touristic propaganda, and available infrastructure), allowed these regions to become prime sites for more lucrative real estate development. Rivalry over seaside land became sufficiently extreme to warrant the creation of a separate Fascist bureaucracy to sort out hostilities. Land disputes became further complicated by anti-working class sentiment, causing developers to pressure the regime to have colonia built only on the extreme edges of potential sites. Developers feared that desirable bourgeois tourists would avoid the very presence of children, and this was compounded by the belief that especially labor class children carried contagious diseases. Both of these reactions indicate that the Fascists' campaigns, ostensibly promoting youth and health, did not necessarily convince every contingent of the population.

The Fascist program extended to other issues regarding infrastructure and leisure vis-a-vis class differentiation. At the city of Cervia for example, a vast scenic route patterned upon that of Nice was planned so that the sea view might be taken in from the car, a new bourgeois product that required consideration before developing these vacation communities. Conversely, in Catalonia, "the City of Rest and Holidays," roads and particularly rails were pulled far inland allowing for the broadest tracts of seaside land, accessed only by walkways, to serve a maximum number of proletariat users.

Like the *dopolavoro* and balilla, the colonia became introverted, compartmentalized, and functionalized in their planning. The design intention was to achieve general public visibility, as the regime insisted on recognition of its generosity. Simultaneously each colonia was designed to shield its specific activity to avoid the interference of outside dissenters and thus further assert its control over the children. Following this same philosophy and advancing possibilities for autonomy, architects and officials conceived the colonia as islands within their own farmland, with children at times

participating in the farm's operation. Thus, still another layer was added to the regime's attempt to "cultivate" a peasant landscape. Because programmatically the colonia became so large, included such visible symbols as towers, and had introverted plans, they represented idealized landscapes, exposing the Fascist's attitude towards the land to be mere rhetoric.

Among the most publicized colonia was that of *Marina XXVIII Ottobre*, achieving wide notoriety and publicity because it succeeded in executing numerous regime doctrines. The idiosyncratic design was a response to the importance the government placed upon that colonia's particular population: the children of Italians abroad. A new attitude towards design arose here, as it did at every intersection between Italy and other nations. A writer for *Architettura* described this colonia, where children came to enjoy the Italian sea, by stating: "Nothing can serve the national propaganda better than the love we give to these children—only if they see the beauty of Italy will they learn to adore it. All the illuminous memories of their infancy will bear in the soul of these future men a psychological importance deeper and longer lasting than any later propaganda. Therefore, when we build, we need to consider the architectural aspect that will psychologically most influence these children."<sup>10</sup>

While the architectural design—a landlocked fleet of ships housing 1100 "sailors"—pleased the regime, some architects remained skeptical. In the same article the writer concluded by saying, "Only [by considering these psychological influences] can we justify the architectural objectivism and symbolism employed." In this he addresses the severe criticism the project received from progressive members of the architectural community who were outside of the immediate regime.

Nonetheless, rhetoric and strict discipline notwithstanding, the surely magical impression that such an environment would have sustained for a young boy cannot be quickly dismissed.

A second renowned colonia, equally pleasing to the government was the project of *La Torre Balilla*. Architecturally, the most conspicuous aspect of this scheme was its resemblance to a fluted column, and as the work was designed by Bonade-Bottino, a collaborator on Fiat's Lingotto plant, one can partly understand why such a tower was used. Though the colonia was mandated by the regime, the architecture still served as advertisement for Fiat. When the same form appeared in mountain colonia and tourist resorts, the architectural justification here became functionality—supposedly the column form better resisted the wind. Regardless of these claims, the form again divulged the shift toward monumentalism.

The tower's interior, a colossal, continuous, ramp-room, successfully achieves the Fascist agenda to suggest unity, and the removal of facade hierarchies also enforces this objective.

Regarding the use of photography and propaganda, it was unconventional for architectural photographs to include

people at all; with the colonia the image of masses of children and the image of the architecture are made inseparable. Further underscoring the extraordinary level of organization which each colonia delivered, it hardly seems chance that the children photographed at *La Torre Balilla* were seated in fluted-column fashion.

The *Colonia IX Mai*, less conspicuous in its form making, illustrates the more typical colonia trait of turning in upon itself, and creating a counter-landscape. This project differs significantly from the majority in that it was programmed for boys as well as girls. Boys were housed in the tower and slab at the front of the scheme, while the girl's dormitory was placed at the site's back.

## CONCLUSION:

Because Fascist policies modified and even reversed their stratagems when not embraced by the masses, it is valid to say that the regime always achieved success. The Fascist position concerning labor was exploitive, but relative to the pre-Fascist period, class divisions and labor's quality of life were not worsened; perhaps conditions even improved. Still, restraint was extreme and the chasm between Italian laborers and laborers elsewhere in Europe widened. While working class life continued to struggle for numerous necessities, the leisure programs contributed to labor's race towards modernity. Despite the regime's appearance of success it did not significantly advance its own political causes however through the promotion of leisure, since the tactics used were often viewed cynically by the masses. Though the Fascists' framework for leisure was generally not in compliance with labor's political ideals, it did ultimately furnish a loophole through which the desire for recreation began to be addressed.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Victoria de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.13.
- <sup>2</sup> Grazia, pp.26-27.
- <sup>3</sup> Grazia, p.91. In light of Fascism's systematic methods of reforming that which already existed, it is relevant that the first official Italian dictionary was printed under the regime. One translator noted that before a translation of Fascist rhetoric could be made, it needed to first be translated back into Italian. By the late 1930s the "Latinization" of the language further complicated an already inherent vagueness. This confusion was worsened by the regime's semantic adjustments. For example, mass rioting was delivered as news of "discontent", and extreme public disdain for a particular regime program would be clarified as "the public was unresponsive."
- <sup>4</sup> "Project for a Dopolavoro". (*Casabella*, August 1934), p.24.
- <sup>5</sup> Grazia, p.98.
- <sup>6</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist*, (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1989), p.14.
- <sup>7</sup> Problems arose at times for the government with this system. Playing into the regime's phenomenal rural promotion mania, the *Association for Anti-Alcohol Proletariat Excursionists* was formed, with the OND's blessing. Subsequent to the group's rapid growth governmental suspicions were raised. Eventually the police learned that the members were in fact those of the

reconstituted Communist Party, meeting more safely in the countryside than was possible in the city.

<sup>8</sup> The term *balilla* came from the name of an Italian boy, transformed into a folk hero. During Austria's occupation of Italy, an Austrian soldier commanded *Balilla* to assist him in moving a mortar. The boy refused, hurled a stone at the soldier,

which, it was said, initiated the Italian movement to expel Austria.

<sup>9</sup> "Progetto di una Casa *Balilla Madre*." (*Architettura*, 1934), p.391.

<sup>10</sup> "Colonia Marina XXVIII Ottobre Per I Figli Degli Italiani All'Estero a Riccione." (*Architettura*, 1934), p.614.