

# Giuseppe Vaccaro and Fascist Culture: a study in conciliatory form

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Three buildings by Giuseppe Vaccaro built in Italy during the Fascist period are the focus of this investigation into the relations of form and regime. As can be often said of such historical studies, the significance of these projects for contemporary architects is at least as strong as it was at the time of their construction. In this case, these works are lessons in remarkable follow-through from concept to finish. They also embody the values and problems that result from the friction of architecture and dogma.

For these projects it is tempting to use formal characterizations such as “minimal” or “monolithic” to locate their current relevance. Indeed these are now pertinent design qualities ratified by the latest European experiments. They are not new, however. Regardless of the novelty that all popular phenomena must claim in the modern era and the critical amnesia that must accompany such claims, the minimal and the monolithic find historical backing in the arts and specifically in the history of architecture, more specifically in work typified by Vaccaro’s buildings of the ’30s. They, and their kin, do make a compelling argument for the elemental, the reduced and the sublime, but it may be more interesting to view these projects in their political-cultural frame, as the product of a modern architecture severely compelled by the dictates of a totalitarian regime and the presence of an intensely compromised notion of tradition.

Since the publication of these buildings in the journals which accompanied their completion, they, and the works of Vaccaro in general, have not been given the attention they warrant internationally, and more surprisingly, they have not been conclusively covered in the extensive study of their controversial period in Italy itself. The post office and colonia have received little comment and the engineering building none at all. Vaccaro himself has only recently been given a sketchy overview in the journal *Edilizia Popolare*, which focused on his influence on Post-Modernism through Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown who worked in Vaccaro’s Roman office and who maintained a lifelong relationship with him and his family. The lack of attention may result partially from the uncomfortable political associations from which all Italian production of this period suffers, and from which only the work of Giuseppe Terragni seems to have made a proper international recovery. In the case of Vaccaro, the lack of notice also may derive from the relative ideological obscurity in which he himself found shelter. Given that he produced exceptional works, but not exceptional or even consistent explanation of those works, he sits in a nebulous ideological middle-ground that up to now has been a problem. This essay will see this vagueness of declared purpose instead as a blurring out of which can emerge new understandings of the ambiguities that allow reprehensible doctrine to coexist with exquisite form. The slippage between the two, never one-to-one despite intentions, was what allowed the apparently closed sys-

tems of Fascist discourse to generate extraordinarily vivid and varied architectural responses. In Italy between the wars, the demands of authority produced remarkable compromises. The constraints of a political system that desired imagery associated simultaneously with historic might and the most progressive cultural-technical dynamism, generated a conciliatory modern architecture that, in its best manifestations, was far richer and semantically more complex than its northern equivalents: possibly the strongest regional Modernism of the 1930s.

The Italians built a great deal between 1922 and the early ’40s. They had twenty years to do so and the destruction that followed was much less total than in the other countries that formed the Axis. Most regime architecture is still standing but, while materially rich, it is frequently ponderous if not brutal, typified by the works of Piacentini or Muzio. Under Fascism the service required of architecture was clear, if numbingly contradictory. To drastically simplify the complex criteria of Fascist aesthetics, the simultaneous call for the Modern, in its early-20th-century force, and alignment with ancient Rome, in its Imperial promise, led to the tense juxtapositions and mitigations that made the architecture of the period so rich. Despite the evident problems imposed by the aesthetic struggles of the epoch, extraordinary responses were proposed, overcoming constraints which left most Fascist form wallowing in pastiche while attempting to impress leaders and overpower the populace with massively simple form.

A subtle and fertile paradox is manifested in the three buildings by Vaccaro. They are urban and metaphysical, exercises in the real and the transcendental, intensely tangible and as intensely ethereal, new and rooted in the Fascist reconstitution of tradition. The regime’s relation to tradition was decidedly ambiguous. Fascism coöpted and reduced notions of Italian culture at the same time that it invoked them. To produce a new society but also to maintain support and allegiance, relations to the past were characterized by what Althusser refers to as interpellation. Tradition served to “hail” and simultaneously consume the individual and, by extension, the networks of nepotism and urban allegiance that sustain the individual in Italy. The past contained and overpowered the Italian tendency toward a family-sustained political entropy and a natural reluctance to submit to the state. Traditional space, form, material and rhetoric were appropriated and reduced to propaganda, transformed into a harmless and essentially meaningless grandiloquence that allowed new interpretations serving new masters. In this, Fascism prefigured globalization and its appropriations which have escalated in the second half of this century. Throughout history, the appropriation of tradition has probably always been an element of any regime activity. However, it has certainly reached a new volume since the Industrial Revolution due to increases in information technology and the multi-na-

tional character of both late-capitalism and modern state-socialist experiments. Both rely heavily on the simultaneous evocation of tradition and the destruction of its value. The notion of the modern, with its implications of progress, cleansing, and conquest through technology, was also commandeered by the Fascists and reduced to convenient propaganda. The most radical of doctrines became instant nostalgia. As was also the case in the United States during the 1930s,<sup>1</sup> the political charge of Modernism was redefined or simply erased.

These three designs comply with an onerous political climate yet are rhetorically multifaceted. Despite the comforting possibility that it is otherwise, history has shown that good politics do not always make good art and likewise bad make bad. Like the effect of radiation on genes, the forms of domination produced some, maybe even a remarkable number, of rich compromises along with many symbolic mutants. Economy and politics always pressure architectural production. This is particularly true now when regimes are just as insistent in their influence, if less overt, than those that framed these three buildings. The exquisite responses of 1930s Italy thus form examples for contemporary architectural action.

The first project is the new Faculty of Engineering at the University of Bologna. Its design began in 1931 and it was completed in '35. In this project, Vaccaro stated themes that continued in the other buildings discussed here and were pursued in his later career, themes that distinguish both the architect and his period and that argue for the pertinence of the work today. All these projects are Modernist in sentiment while incorporating particular place and program, achieved through several devices. The use of materials is uniformly inventive and directly refers to the history of Italian construction and decoration. The buildings are urban in their conception. As civic ensembles, they compress and abstract typical Italian form. This is what makes Vaccaro's buildings, and the ideological mix that was Italian architecture of the period, particularly noteworthy. They apparently adhere to universal Modernist doctrine while they remain particular to their society, its politics and locale.

The Engineering School forms an edge. To its spine are attached several courtyards open to the southern hills and one which is closed to the north and the city. Aerial renderings produced during design stress the building's position between city and landscape and its relation to the ancient walls of Bologna. This long building reconstructs the city rampart that had abutted the site. Location is constantly referred to and spaces of the interior are interlinked by penetrations and apertures. Openings from halls to stairways both bring light from the south and provide views to the landscape. Space flows through the thin edifice linking the wild foliage of the hills and the controlled planting of the city park. Green marble and earthy travertine continue this theme within the building.

The primary entrance faces west. It joins to the long corridor that runs the length of the spine. It is on its smaller western facade that the building's most emphatic rhetorical figures lie. The canopy extending out from the entrance was simplified in

the built project into a single flange set on two metal piers, but the original drawings showed a raised plinth with a two roofs on delicate piloti. These portici, the most characteristic feature of Bolognese streets, would have held a space directly in front of the entrance. This small piazza was dominated by the brick tower that is the major vertical figure of the horizontal and apparently industrial edifice. Bologna is a city of towers and Vaccaro added a strongly figural one to the skyline, employing another element like the rampart and portico to place his project within the particular urbanism of his hometown. This tower sits directly above the entrance on four piers. In this it repeats the unusual structure of the city's central Torre del Podestà, the civic campanile attached to the city hall. While other Bolognese towers are taller, marking churches or family seats, the Torre del Podestà is both physically and symbolically unique. It does not sit on a base but rather rises on piers above the intersection of two passages marking the urban cross-hairs at the exact center of the city. This unusual configuration of tower-above-passage is repeated at the Engineering Faculty, making a new Bolognese campanile of progress, engineering, science and mechanism — all important elements of Fascist ideology, and all essential to Fascist advancement and economy.

The facades of the tower differ substantially. The western was the proposed position of a large clock and flagpole but these migrated around to the north, leaving the tower almost blank with the faces distinct above the door. Serving to position the building ideologically, the side toward the city now has the clock and flagpole, characteristic Fascist emblems, and strip windows, cardinal Modern elements, that lit the library stacks and reading rooms inside the tower. As inconvenient as the library-as-tower was, its symbolic force and the emblems of regime that adorn the shaft, allow the compression of rhetoric into this one visible icon. The almost medieval south facade is punctured by small windows while the east is almost all glass. The two sides engage in a simple dialogue of tradition and modernity. The brick and bronze around the entrance give way to uniform stucco over the rest of the building. Except for the vertical windows that surround the entrance, the project adopts a vocabulary of strip windows and industrial sash. The verticals accommodate various floors and spaces, for in this ensemble and in Italian work of this period, rhetoric and use need not coincide. While it was probably true for all of Modernism, functionalism was certainly only a symbolic gambit for the Italians. The utilitarian aesthetic of the project was a way to position it within the formats of regime significance. This idealized factory is decorated by the large sundial which joins the other elements facing west. The expressive element, be it tower, sundial or portico, is clipped onto the industrial signifier. The separation of systems of reference is precise while the overall message is complicated, at times paradoxical.

Vaccaro worked on the Colonia Sandro Mussolini in Cesenatico near Rimini from 1936 to '38. A miniature slab, its scale that of its juvenile tenants, forms a line between land and ocean. The morning sea-light floods the dormitories bringing

the “natural” waking that the *colonie* were meant to provide, an awakening to health from urban squalor and, more didactically, the ideological awakening to political force and doctrine. I use the word nature with all the horror that the Fascist experience was able to give to such an apparently harmless idea — a horror that begins with Rousseau or even Virgil but ends with the violent “cleansing” processes that this century has had to endure. While generating an interest in health and exercise, the Pastoral can turn very ugly since it is usually accompanied by self-righteousness, and is often associated with the lure of the primitive, the evocation of the pure, and the alignment of orthodox doctrine with rustic authenticity. Views from the interior frame two horizons, to the east the sea and to the west the mountains, making a simple reduction (and this was a regime that thrived on simple reductions) of the concept of nature and the accepted places of Italian leisure into these two framed ideals.

Unlike the other two buildings that root in park or city center, this one floats, a ship or dirigible—the Modernist icon at the literal brink, reinforced by the refectory that thrusts out onto the shore-line. The saw-tooth of the roof lights and the canopy mechanism give a distinctly nautical dynamism to this horizontal bar tucked beneath the vertical hovering one. But the Modern slab surmounts an ensemble that is, in its language, far from the dictates of Le Corbusier or CIAM. The surrounding building’s vocabulary of arcades and punched windows is decidedly urban if not traditional. An abstracted Italian city lies under the airship. As in an Aero-Futurist painting by Tató, the dynamic mechanism of the dormitory streaks over the somnambulant townscape of support buildings. And the project is symmetrical, defying the insistent Elementarism of Modern composition. The only aberration is the isolation ward added to the north flank of the project where the difference of illness diverges from the strict balance of the ensemble. Here sits a round red-brick utility tower. This is the only use of this material as cladding in the ensemble. A direct reference to De Chirico, the magic-realist tower is framed in the exterior strip window that provides protected views to the invalids of the beach and horizon. The profound surreality of the project is most apparent at this asymmetrical corner. In fact, this city of discipline, a literal example of Foucault’s heterotopias of crisis<sup>2</sup>—train, ship, prison, clinic, is unerringly precise in its indoctrination. Piercingly pure but never abstract, this metaphysical lesson in stone and glass sits on the national horizon.

The materials of the project encourage its instructional content. Surfaces and structure change in response to the significance of the elements they cover or support. Brick paves the arcades of the urban out-buildings while the slab and the *piloti*-supported open terraces, the transparent and less traditional spaces of the project, are floored in terrazzo or marble. Tile, laid-up to seem load-bearing in the out buildings, gives way to the exposed and transparent structure of *piloti* and, under the slab, to the rough concrete piers and delicate glass infill repeating Terragni’s metaphor of the ideological lucidity of the regime. Concrete louvers shade the dormitory and encourage its

horizontal dynamism. The chapel is uniquely surfaced in gray, and floored in golden, marble. This choice of textures, colors and degrees of abstraction is intentionally emblematic, but systems of representation become imprecise and multivalent where they appear to be most literal. It is this paradoxical ambiguity that allows the rich readings and abstraction that distinguishes these projects from the ideologically monotonous production of the era. The influence of metaphysical painting of the period, in particular of the former Futurist Mario Sironi and his Scuola Novecento, redefines the priorities and position of elements in this ethereal landscape. This is particularly evident in the series of photographs taken by Vaccaro himself at the completion of the building, photographs that stress an empty intensity, a silent presence accentuated by light and shadow, foreground and horizon, void and mass.

Vaccaro worked with the architect Gino Franzi on the Central Post Office of Naples from 1928 to ’36. This building, given its almost decade-long gestation, most clearly demonstrates Vaccaro’s shift in representational sentiment from the quasi-monumentalism of his first mentor-colleague Marcello Piacentini, to the surreal-modernism of his later collaborator Adalberto Libera.<sup>3</sup> The competition-winning design of 1928, the interim designs of 1932 and the final constructed building of 1936 maintained the plan morphology of the first scheme. All deftly accommodated a site which allowed the curved facade and required the location of a primary entrance at its center, at the cardinal point of the reconstruction of a quarter at the center of Naples. The destruction of the center and its reformation was both an affirmation and negation of urban culture. The post office became the new heart of the ancient town, an exposition of Fascist will within the city, that most emphatic of Italian cultural emblems. The facade bends to the site but also continues the form that Vaccaro adopted with Piacentini in their collaboration on the Palazzo delle Corporazioni on the Via Veneto in Rome begun in ’27. The rendering of the main door of the early postal competition design shoots Futurist rays from the tower at the center of the facade. These rays project the function of the project but also recall the drawings of Antonio Sant’Elia.

The change from ’28 to the projects of ’32 appears radical, but the later designs varied largely in the nature of their surfaces and style.<sup>4</sup> The florid *Novecento* decoration is gone and the elevations and plans are reduced. The grand portal with center column is there by ’32 and the skin of the convex facade is taut stone, not soft brick. Strip windows light the upper floors and a cantilevered roof punctuates the long horizontal facade along Via Armando Diaz. But this design is still a patois, characteristic of the negotiated rationalizations of the work of Piacentini and his circle in the 1930s. This is most evident in the towers with which Vaccaro ended the primary facade and that accentuate the corners of the building with the same emphasis as the design of 1928. It is on these towers that the *faces* and clock were found. Here the obligatory marks of the regime were placed like epaulets and here the uncomfortable linguistic

split between elements was most apparent. The towers were an addition to the body of the pseudo-modern building. With less success than at Bologna, the emblems of progress and the state were jarringly juxtaposed. With the strong running-bond expression of the skin, the designs still mimicked load-bearing construction, hiding the actual frame-with-cladding system. The Modern had not yet found a place in 1932.

That place is found in the more resolved built version of 1933 to '36. The continuing design effort is visibly effective in the various schemes produced and the results are lessons in synthetic rigor. In this design Vaccaro's own experiments and the association of contemporaries—Libera, Ridolfi, Moretti, Michelucci—result in an extraordinary solution. Its theoretical underpinnings, often arrived at in collaboration with other architects and artists of his generation, integrated with the recursive logic of material development. In the built post office, the corner towers are gone along with all overt Fascist symbols. The grand portal of the final design is a formal reversal of the 1928 version. The solidity of the enclosure around the '28 door becomes a glazed void, while the central opening becomes a solid black column holding the cables that run down from the telegraph floor, continuing the Sant'Elia energy of the '28 rendering. The iconic clock is embedded in the center column and is digital. This half-ellipse column must be a reference to the faces, especially when it is seen as exactly contemporary to the metal-clad oval column-faces that fronted Libera's installation for the tenth anniversary of the Fascist Revolution at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome of 1932. But Vaccaro's own design for a concrete church of 1929 proposes the basic elements of the composition. The church thrusts a convex facade into space, an almost literal model for the void of the great door of the post office. Two hollow semi-oval columns embed in this decorated facade as does the one at Naples in the glass wall of the lobby. The tapering plan of the Naples lobby is that of the nave of the earlier church. The lines of figures on the ecclesiastical facade become the illuminated balconies with their Futurist figures-in-motion: the employees and patrons of the busy post-office. The hypothetical church is a design experiment of an architect who is developing a complex project that is taking a radical direction.

The execution of the post office in Rome's Piazza Bologna begun in 1932 by Mario Ridolfi paralleled the resolution of the Naples project. The influence upon each other of these two Roman architects, of Vaccaro's interim design of '32 on Ridolfi's winning competition entry of the same year, for which Vaccaro was a juror, and then of the development of the Piazza Bologna project as the one in Naples was taking final form is an example of the anti-heroic nature of influence and the general atmosphere of innovation that permeated the Italian architectural scene at the time.<sup>5</sup> The Ridolfi building also faces a piazza with a convex facade. It slides across the space with a Baroque fluidity like Borromini's San Carlino down the Via Nomentana. Like Vaccaro, Ridolfi uses neutral penetrations and a flange on the roof to emphasize the strongly horizontal curving skin. Luigi Moretti too, in his Casa del Gioventù in Trastevere, Rome, like-

wise begun in 1932, was investigating many of the plastic concepts and forms that contributed to the development of Vaccaro's Naples building.

A second clock on Via Diaz has become a window offering, from inside, a metaphysical still-life with whatever appears beyond the clock-hands: the rough facades of the street, tram cables, Neapolitan polychromy. At first, the facade treatment of 1936 may seem more conventional, for the strip windows on the '32 front facade became a regular pattern of deep vertical apertures by '36. But these, in their mute regularity, serve to emphasize the "silent" skin of smooth stone stacked to stress its non-load-bearing surface, further accentuated by the huge windows on the ground floor which here are a non-structural band across the building and by the continuous strip-window that runs uninterrupted around the third floor lighting the telegraph room. The motif of the continuous horizontal, typical of the period, is used here with insistence. The red-marble strip of desks in the main halls, the mullions in the glazed entry and ground-floor windows, the roof flange and glazed bands: all accelerate the building with Futurist animation through the city. The light on the smooth curved surface of the building breaks softly against the hard shifting shadows from windows. This is an urban wall, but also the flank of a steamship or the wing of an airliner. Denying the enclosure of traditional Italian urbanism, the aggressively convex facade of the Post Office becomes a foil for the traditional Neapolitan urban space, the concave embracing Piazza del Plebiscito. Forces of Italian convention that would always vie with the new order are assaulted. The city is denied as it is invoked. The populace, who in Italy will always be identified first with family, second with city and only a distant third with state, found expected definitions and familiar symbols disrupted, reformed and appropriated. The novelty of the regime, the revolutions and reversals of Modernism, the universality of the new Fascist anti-city and the simultaneous affirmation of the Neapolitan, all are deftly executed here without the oppressive single-mindedness typical of the forms and political climate of the era.

The identification of the autonomous building that is simultaneously a defining line, a border as object, becomes a central theme that ties these three buildings, and the work of Vaccaro, together. In the buildings of the '30s it constitutes a delicate ambiguity: at Bologna, where the building forms a metaphysical city wall, and at Cesenatico, where the airship hovers between sea and land, between childhood and knowledge. Heterotopic features are clearly enhanced by position at Bologna and Cesenatico. But at Naples this theme is less clear. The building is an object, compromised by its attachment to the cloister of Sant'Anna dei Lombardi, but emphasized by the radical grafting of the antique loggetta onto the Via Diaz corner. It is the hub of a new urban center but it is also an edge. The taut facade forms an urban spring, a flexing border for the building itself and a tense edge of metropolitan attitude. The "silent" elevations of the palazzo delle poste compress the city into the body of this symbolic structure. This is the border of significance that the metonymic building brings to the city it contains and is contained by.

Whereas the formal responses to the dominant concerns of the period (the pastoral, the progressive, the urban and anti-urban, the brutal and the omnipotent) are individually simple, even simplistic, the overall friction of these simple formal reductions is vastly complex and relies on paradox and juxtaposition to convey overlapping semantics. Perhaps architecture has always relied on simple reductions. Certainly the architects of the Renaissance or of early Modernism distilled complex socio-philosophical mandates into intellectually naive but architecturally powerful responses. While producing many works that were truly lugubrious and from which only one note of power and intimidation was audible, the Fascist era's ideological bonds also provided a fertile field for a talented generation of designers who contrived a semantically rich modernism and a vast range of referential and material innovations. The requirements directed toward Vaccaro and his colleagues seem to have hampered most while clearly forcing a few into complex reactions, the individual components of which may have been quite idiosyncratic but the overall expression of which was singular. From the transgressions of Ponti, Mollino or Moretti, to the metaphysical collage of Libera, De Renzi and Michelucci; from the severe urbanity of Pagano, Daneri or Albini, the mannered reductions of BBPR, Gardella, Figini-Pollini or Vaccaro, the industrial baroque of Mazzoni and Ridolfi, to the exquisite formalism of Terragni and Cattaneo; this group of ideological survivors presented an unparalleled example of architectural invention and development.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The International Style exhibit and publication authored by Hitchcock and Johnson cleansed the Modern of its ideology to make it more marketable in the US. See my "New York Rules, OK?" *Art and Design - April*, 1985, London.
- <sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces - the Principles of Heterotopia" *Diacritic* 16, No. 1 (1985) or in a slightly altered translation in *Lotus international* 48/49 (Milano: Electa, 1986) pp.8-17. Foucault begins his discussion of heterotopia as early as his *Les Mots et les choses* of 1966.
- <sup>3</sup> Francesco Garofalo, in his essay accompanying the exhibition we co-curated ("Giuseppe Vaccaro, 1896 - 1970" in "Conciliatory Figures" first displayed in 1996) clearly argues for the shift from the influence of Piacentini to that of Libera in Vaccaro's work. While an extraordinary practitioner, Vaccaro clearly enjoyed the influence of mentors and thus did not gain the illustriousness of several contemporaries.
- <sup>4</sup> I use this word in its 19th-century sense, as referential and significant.
- <sup>5</sup> Art history has tended to chart influence as a contest of genius. Who came up with that idea or form? Who was the more heroic inventor? This makes a good detective story, but influence seems to be an ether generally inhaled, a collaboration with a field of various communicating individuals and, more typically, groups working closely. Certainly, by the '30s in Italy, more specifically in Rome, a general ideological matrix was undergoing formal research. A process of rich cross-fertilization and personalized interpretation characterized the production of the era and seems to serve as a more accurate definition of art action than the hermetic model.