

Politics, Architecture and the Migration of Meaning: The Sanatorium Village at Sondalo, Italy, for the Treatment of Tuberculosis (1930—1940)

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INTRODUCTION

In 1931 the Fascist Regime governing Italy under Benito Mussolini authorized the design and construction of Europe's largest sanatorium for the treatment of tuberculosis. Under the fascist regime, a public building program served five needs in particular: education, sport and leisure, worship, government, and health. Similar to the others, the health program asserted the production of highly visible images and identified the regime as the vital organ to the Italians' well-being.¹ The National Fascist Institute for Social Welfare (I.N.F.P.S.) named Sondalo, a small mountain locality in the province of Sondrio, as the site for the complex. In this paper, I consider three attributes of the Sanatorium complex: (1) the project's scale in relation to its position in an alpine valley and its impact on the local population, (2) the Sanatorium's interior social engineering aimed at production and control, and (3) the dialectic among architectural features that in one respect, characterize the period's national architectural debate and in another, reflect and subvert state hegemony.

I argue that while the site's complexity and social organization sustain state hegemony when viewed from afar, within the village, the embedding of scalar elements and familiar architectural features take on an interstitial role displacing the mechanics that power the monumental scale of a project, dominant technology, structure and social organization. These local attributes embrace the temporal, instead of the just now, as a passage of events across the variegated space of movements within the village and account for the interaction among socio-cultural, political, and architectural domains of experience.

THE PROJECT

At Sondalo the regime intended to build a complex that would rival in grandiosity all of Europe's hospitals and could compete with the sanitary quality of the sanatoriums in nearby Davos, Switzerland.² Sondalo and its province were already the home of several small private clinics built in an architecture style reminiscent of mountain localities where traditional building methods, using wood, stone and mortar promulgated an alpine vernacular blended with "Stile Liberty."³ In 1930 Raffaello Mattiangeli, an engineer for the technical office of the National Agency of Social Insurance in Rome, headed the project of Sondalo.⁴ Mattiangeli interpreted the project as a progressive, rationalist armature that incorporated academic monumentalism and metaphoric classicism associated respectively with Marcello Piacentini and Giovanni Muzio.⁵

Technologically advanced, the project included autonomous water, waste and power stations, and provided living for employees, clergy, and patients supported by social and recreational activities. The result was one of the most colossal construction projects during fascist rule and one of the most modern clinical hospitals in Europe.⁶ The most striking feature was the territory's redesign in a serpentine pattern, terracing roadways forming a dogleg up the steep mountainside hovering above the town of Sondalo and dominating the valley. The construction lasted from 1932 to 1940, realized over 600,000 cubic meters of building volume over a surface area of 450,000 square meters and employed over 1,400 workers. The construction provided work for local workers in excavation, carpentry, ironwork, stone and ma-



The infrastructure and its construction, ca. 1933.

sonry and imported the workers for specialized components—tunnels, dams, hydraulics and mechanics.

The project also initiated a change in the local economy of time from one based on agrarian production correlating with seasonal rhythms to one of industrial production and mechanical rhythms. The latter became a new measure of activity that once taken for granted, felt natural. The change in the economy of time accounts for a reification of the project's conception—a modern laboratory on the side of a mountain.

The visual impact stressed several architectural objectives: the celebration of science through rationalism, the symbolic representation of collective consciousness, and a dependency on the state for social welfare.

ORGANIZATION AND SOCIAL ENGINEERING

Production and control shaped the conceptual and functional design of the sanatorium. The plan links the entry concierge at the base of the Village to nine pavilions, and culminates at the administration building, power station, church and mortuary that cluster around a grand piazza. The formation of the triad around the piazza is a visual reminder of Italian fascism's pursuit of socio-economic independence and preservation of spiritual tradition. Architectural historian Diane Ghirardo points out that for the regime, "mass civic events became a fascist trope, a means of forging a new, post-democratic collectivity and of inscribing the public character of the new political formation".⁷

Social hierarchy ordered the allocation of all structures and their functions within the sanatorium.

Shaped like an axe in plan, (a symbol of the fascist party), and perched at the top of the village, the austere and robust administration building served the political enterprise of fascist ideology as the spiritual and productive hub. Its proximity to the grand ceremonial piazza terraced on two levels accentuated its dominance within the village's body. Each pavilion operated autonomously and was equipped with dormitories for patients and nurses, hygienic services, offices, medical rooms, commons area, refectory and chapel. On the inside, identical, linear and regimented organizational patterns emphasized operational efficiency and hygiene. Each pavilion relied on the administration building's allocation of goods.

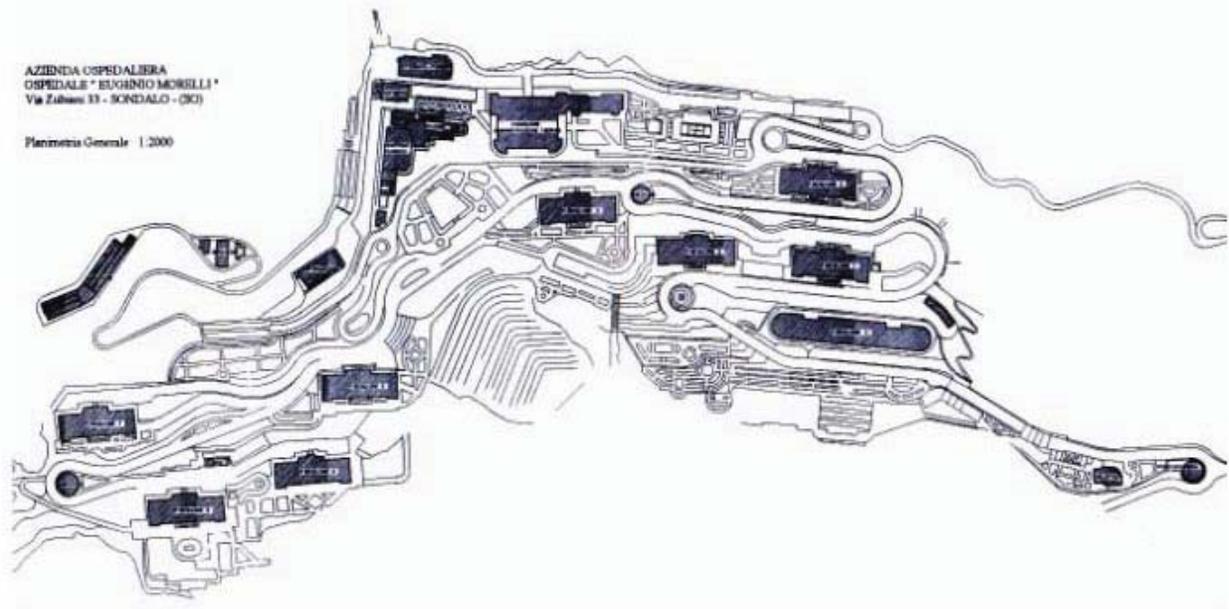
The administration building housed kitchens, the warehouse and laundry in the axe's blade. Within the volume, a light well penetrates the upper

three levels. The well facilitated the use of the deep interior spaces, primarily in the kitchen and dining areas. Originally, laboratories, pharmacy and sleeping quarters for doctors, staff and nuns filled out the remainder of functions in the axe's handle with the top floor, reserved for administrative offices. These organizational motifs illustrate the building's most important function—the daily reception and distribution of all alimentary, sanitary and medical supplies for the entire village.

A cable car system connected the administration to all nine pavilions and choreographed those daily routines into a mechanized spectacle. At the onset of the sanatorium's life, all meals were cooked in the kitchens of the administration building and distributed via cable from the roof deck of the building. After a few years, the central distribution for meals was abandoned as meals arrived



The Sanatorium Village nearing completion, ca 1939.



The Sanatorium Village plan.

cold from the administration to the other pavilions and had to be reheated due to the time needed for their transport and complicated by the cold winter climate. The system continued to be used for the distribution of medical goods, food supplies and the change and cleaning of linens. Dirty linens were transferred to the service building by truck, and the clean linens were sent back on the cable cars.⁸ Although the system partially failed, the visual tie between the administration and each pavilion highlights the symbolic value of the synchronization of the movement of goods through the sky with hierarchical dominance over all activity. The building remained central to all functions and policy for the Village. The Sanatorium became a working, productive symbol of the fascist system—self-sufficient and efficient.

The Sanatorium also served rhetorical objectives: To convince the local populace of a revolutionary program and motivate mass participation in fascist policy.

For local residents, many of whom worked on the construction, the sanatorium represented a technological monument whose primary mission was research for the cure of its patients. This mission complemented an internal life that contributed a diverse context for social interaction to the townspeople. The village introduced technical training,

artistic, cultural and social activities including cinema, library, games, social assistance to the families, and the traditional religious worship. The sanatorium opened to the local population occasions for official State and religious festivals and community social events. All of these activities augmented a sense of camaraderie and friendship among the townspeople, staff, and the sick. The close habitation of doctors and paramedics relocated to the complex from outside the province with patients and local nurses and technicians reinforced these relationships, creating a social fabric—a communal modernization departing from that of a nuclear family.

The residents of Sondalo, even today, remember with pride their relatives who contributed to the project's construction. The memories also refer to the local nurses, technicians, and cooks who contributed to patient care and the hospital's daily operations and maintenance during the late 1930's and the post-war period.⁹

For the regime, the concept of a new "man" was a fascist solution to the problem of the individual's place in the state and society. And through the building of the Sanatorium, fascist policy came to the defense of the race and the local community offering jobs and a future sanitary service furthering an idea of progress. Mattiangeli affirmed

a venturesome experiment for urban and social structures of that time. He proposed a rationalist architecture promoting progressive values through the Village's grandiosity, technical innovations, and social structure. Mattiangeli's project, however, is also exemplary of the architectural debate of his time.

ITALY'S ARCHITECTURAL DEBATE

The regime in Italy inherited a cultural model based on liberal democratic principles diverse in make up and difficult to dismantle. Entrenched state bureaucracies and eclectic tendencies in literature and the arts made for a set of messy social and cultural circumstances that had repercussions in architecture. The ongoing fascist political debate contributing to the formation of fascist ideology fueled an architectural debate from an array of architectural influences. The influences ranged from Roman, classical, and Mediterranean vocabularies affirming folklore to progressive avant-garde experimentation.

Leading scholars of the period debated architectural form and values. For example, Muzio argued for an architecture stemming from a principle of order, following the faith of a neo-classical tradition. Some advocated Mussolini's agenda with rationalist design principles. Bini in his letter to the Duce, in 1928, (and in conjunction with the first Italian Exhibition of Rationalist Architecture, MIAR, in Rome) on behalf of the newly formed Union of National Fascists Architects, begins to crystallize a concept of nationalist architecture, reinforcing the Duce's famous phrase, "architettura, arte di Stato." In his letter, the members declare their trust to the service of the fascist' State and modern architecture as equal to fascist architecture. Marcello Piacentini, well aware of the national and international scene, advanced his position in Roman politics through the periodical *Architettura e Arti Decorative*, otherwise known as the official written organ for the Union of National Fascists Architects.¹⁰ Piacentini became an unofficial spokesman for the central government in Rome. He both promoted rational architecture and contested the Gruppo 7's rationalist interpretation as lacking historical roots in Italy and responding poorly to local climatic conditions. In contrast, Farinacci, who was the editor of *Il Regime Fascista*, argued that the state's brand of rationalism

was a Bolshevik product and therefore contrary to the regime.¹¹ The above examples illustrate the complexity among architectural positions and politics. The fascist regime never committed to an architectural style. Instead, the regime identified building as a vehicle for the pragmatic application of policy, thereby granting architecture a privileged position among state institutions. In the case of the sanatorium, Mattiangeli favored spatial movements using scalar variation across the site and a multitude of styles stemming from the politics of form.

SITE AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

Seen from the outside, the village's large pavilions sprout between terraced roads, cable systems and bridges carving up the mountainside and reconfiguring the landscape into an image of social and spatial control. Its prominence and status marginalize the town of Sondalo at its foot and is felt throughout the valley.

However, from the inside, scale and form vary, and materiality experienced. Upon arrival to the village, a small concierge building and director's villa act as a prelude before passing through a tunnel leading to the working domain of the village. The passage also signals a change in organization and volumetric scales. The terraced roadway follows stone-faced retaining walls, some with arched niches that thread their way between the pavilions growing in height and receding at the hairpin turns. A garden, pergola or kiosk, each unique in their design, demarcate a transition at each turn—a new moment in the ascension through the village. These changes in scale and organization imply shifts in spatial and temporal forms and cultural values augmenting difference about, rather than convergence towards authority.

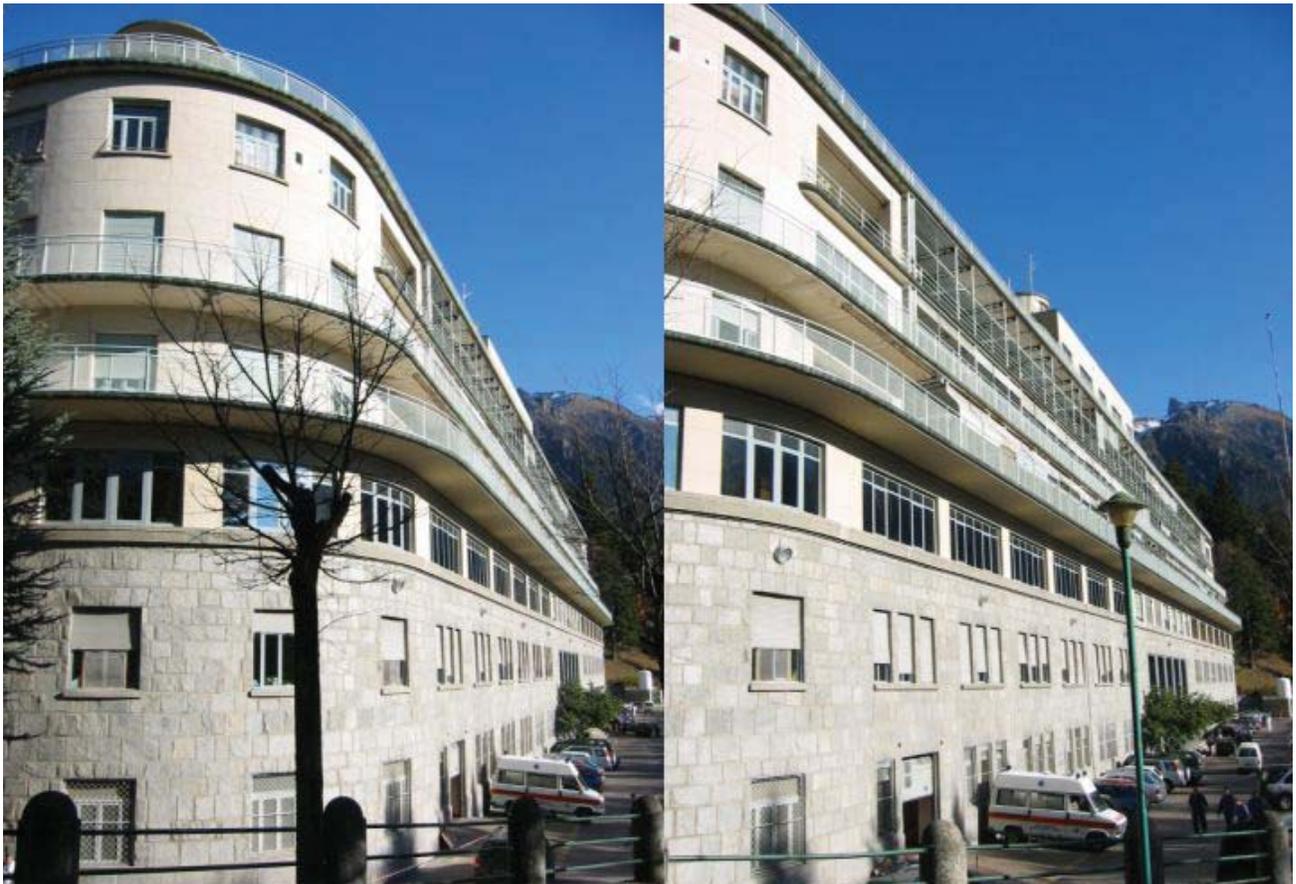
The insertion and articulation of scalar elements extends into the architecture. Mattiangeli incorporated references to the academic tradition from volumetric massing to details recalling Piacentini's stark Mediterraneanism, the spirit of Muzio's analogical return to classicism, and the local tradition of building. These references contribute to the symbolic value of the architecture uncovering an interior perspective of patterns and movements from the monolithic to the petit among diverse architectural features that highlight episodic

thresholds among buildings and outside spaces. The differences in articulation and the use of materials indicate Mattiangeli's use of different structural idioms.

For example, the cylindrical concierge building incorporates a tripartite division recurrent in the pavilions. Typically, the division is expressed with bush-hammered stone bases set in a random pattern with the ground level finished in rustic stucco and the first level in finer stucco. Entry doors at the ground level are framed with a simple rectangular section in stone. Fenestrations are treated on equal intervals at each level. The second level steps back from the wall plane of the first creating a roof deck around the buildings perimeter. Its parapet is finished with a simple stone curb that doubles as both a cornice and as a sill in elevation for the fenestrations beyond. The stripped down classicism culminates at a small roof pavilion adorned by a glass aedicule supported by six cylindrical columns.¹²

The surgical pavilion, beyond the concierge, resembles an elongated, sleek ship with cylindrical ends, articulated by perimeter walkways and balustrades at the fourth and fifth floors and the roof terrace. Bipartite in division, the volume is finished in plaster on the upper facade and honed serpentino stone at the base floors. Sleeping terraces penetrate into the volume around the perimeter of the fourth, fifth, and sixth levels along the south façade further differentiating structural order from material detail. The building affirms a northern brand of Italian rationalism and incorporates the classically rooted colonnaded atrium reminiscent of Piantentini's academic spirit and Mediterranean surrealism.

For the eight remaining pavilions, vertical fenestrations ordered symmetrically about the stone-faced base dominate the lower third of each volume and refer to a classically rooted language. In contrast, alternating protrusions and extrusions about the circumference of the volume are ar-



The Surgical Pavilion.

ticulated by receding sun decks interlocked between cantilevered balconies at the upper levels. Horizontal fenestrations turn at the northeast and northwest corners of each floor. The eaves and the windowsills are aligned at upper and lower levels and linear, unadorned cornices square off each corner. The division at each floor is scalar. Narrow, cantilevered cornices that recall a horizontal tripartite division along the circumference of the building become subtler with each change in level. This feature contrasts with the marked, classically derived cornices about which the lower levels are delineated. The upper most level is the roof terrace for the reception of food, medicine and laundry. The triangular hip roof on the roof pavilion mimics a pendant, accented by a pronounced cornice at each end. This feature could be read as part of a folly. The cornice sandwiches the glass façade positing a contradictory rationale. Although more sober, it simulates Giovanni Muzio's metaphoric classicism, the allusions that allowed him to be modern without expatriating.

The architectural details recall trade skills—wood window frames and shading devices, variegated stone facing from bush-hammered to polished and ironworks in the form of balustrades and shutter tracks. The two lowest levels, faced in bush-hammered serpentino stone, use a common bond with larger, taller blocks towards the bottom coursings and smaller and lower blocks at the upper coursings. The random bonding testifies to the freedom and know-how of local stonemasons. Sills are all honed stone rectangular in section. Stone cornices cap the stucco facades. Together with the opposing volumetric divisions, the forms and materials perpetuate visual metaphors that struggle to distance themselves from any form of social dominance or reference to state hegemony. Once recognized, they bring into one's purview a dialogue between different experiences; its duration explores the measure of continuity and significance. The buildings and their features seek consensus among their diverse forms of expression utilizing balanced proportions and similar scales of mass, fenestration and detail.

The reading of scalar elements ends abruptly with a return to the austere geometrical patterns of the administrative building. Large scaled niches excavated out of the building's stucco mass and window walls in translucent glass wrap around the

circumference of the blade rendering the volume's internal operations obscure. The blade of the building marginalizes the exterior surroundings, increasing a sense of omnipotence. In contrast, concrete bands circumscribe the blade's handle at each floor level harnessing Roman brick infill celebrating Italy's imperial past.

CONCLUSIONS

Mattiangeli creates a trail of features challenging values layered within a rational armature. He demonstrates that the Sanatorium is not a complex devoted uniquely to the celebration of the empire. It underscores the architectural polemics of the State in the early 1930s that represented dominant discourses. While the structure privileges modern characteristics based on an adhesion to the evolution of technology, what emerges is technology's unification with symbolism. This second aspect is best reflected in the laborious task of making this giant: the memory of an engineering feat resolved by human hands' excavation and positing of scalar artifacts onto retaining walls, gardens, and facades and the enunciation of reoccurring moments and sequential events with the insertion of a garden, kiosk or pergola. These features culminate in an audacious and surreally haunting administration, church, and mortuary. The events created by the architectural and site features wield indifference to political ideology and social function. Instead, they assert values reflected in the form of physical things and not abstract ideologies.



The Administration Building

Every hairpin turn leads to a digression from the classical and the Mediterranean styles and remains anchored in the Italian rationalism of the period. However, the juxtaposition of diverse styles, of small-scale structures and the positing of artifacts recalling artisan trades challenge the pure syntax of closely organized and controlled system of values. The digressive aspect brings into the forefront the conflict within ideology, or any form of authoritarian image making. Authority can be challenged by the same technology that it reveres when human reason and frailty guide technological innovation.

What emerges is the dialectic of a Sanatorium's eclectic technological features and authoritarian management, which shows fascist vulnerability in hyperbole. Whether intended or not, the Sanatorium provides a multifaceted image of the fascist state that purported a past and present pride for Italy and a "culture of consent" fostering a public policy of discipline and obedience.¹³ The Sanatorium attests to the memory of social participation in the construction and daily activities of the complex. These memories displace the organizational apparatus and policy, highlighting an opposition between abstract ideological asceticism and the people's values of local artistry and craftsmanship.

ENDNOTES

1. Millions of Italians suffered from scarce hygienic conditions and overcrowding of housing, both aggravating the diffusion of tuberculosis.
2. Switzerland boasted numerous institutions, including over 100 clinics in the Canton Grigione by 1940. The most famous sanatorium was located in Davos, a locality at an altitude of 1,560 m above sea level. Davos, became one of the principle centers in Europe for the treatment of the disease. Both Davos and Sondalo are characterized by a dry and ventilated climate with ample southern exposure.
3. Built in 1903, the first center in Italy specifically for the treatment of tuberculosis was the Pineta di Sortenna, a luxurious private institution work of Antonio Zuberi located in the pine forests above Sondalo. Constructed from the project of Giuseppe Ramponi, the building was in Liberty Style with 63 beds divided among three sections. The house of the royal family Savoia had a case of TBC for which they helped fund the building of the Pineta in 1900. The first public sanatorium, Umberto I was inaugurated in 1910 in the locality of Prasomaso, community of Tresivio near Sondalo. In 1927, a second private clinic, the Abetina was realized in Sondalo, on Mount Sortenna, at the limits of the pine forest. It was structured on six floors and contained 130 rooms. In 1932, 150 beds were added in a new wing in order to accommodate relatives of patients. Rossattini, Stefano, *Un Villaggio Straordinario*, Litostampa Istituto Grafico, 2002, ch. 3.
4. Mattiangeli received medical and scientific consultation throughout the project from Dr. Eugenio Morelli. Morelli was National Secretary for the Union of Fascist Physicians from 1930 to 1938. Rossattini, Stefano, *Un Villaggio Straordinario*, Litostampa Istituto Grafico, 2002, p. 68.
5. Raffaello Mattiangeli graduated from the Faculty of Engineering in Rome in 1925. In 1930, after a few years in a private office, he went to work for the National Fascist Institute for Social Welfare.
6. Cereghini, Mario, *Costruire in montagna*, Il Milione, 1956.
7. Ghiardo, Diane Yvonne, *Citta Fascista: Surveillance and Spectacle*, in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 31, No. 2, Special Issue: The Aesthetics of Fascism. April, 1996, pp. 347-372.
8. Due to the exuberant cost of maintaining the system, the cables were removed in 1965 with the towers left as a visual testimony to an important element of the architecture.
9. In November 2002, sociologist Ivan Fassin realized a series of local interviews focusing on socio-cultural issues during and after the construction of the Sanatorium Village. See also: Rossattini, Stefano, *Un Villaggio Straordinario*, Litostampa Istituto Grafico, 2002, pp. 169-174.
10. Muratore, Giorgio, *Storia dell'architettura italiana, il primo novecento*, edited by Ciucci, Giorgio and Muratore, Giorgio, Electa, Milano, 2004, pp. 78-79.
11. The polemics initiated by Farinacci demonstrate more than anything that the regime had not decided on an architectural image representing the State. Scholars like Farinacci most often aimed their comments at individuals, critiquing their style of architecture as a means of questioning their loyalty to the regime. Bona, Andrea, *Storia dell'architettura italiana, il primo novecento*, edited by Ciucci, Giorgio and Muratore, Giorgio, Electa, Milano, 2004, pp. 156.
12. Directly above the concierge is the director's villa. The villa's geometry is a rectangular "L" plan on two floors featuring rooms that extend from the foyer and connect to one another by interior doors. The vertical fenestrations have a simple profile typical of classical Italian architecture. Its exterior loggia is the most striking element, defined by a quarter round colonnade with four steps above the ground plane linking the two wings of the "L".
13. The term was coined by historian Victoria de Grazia. See de Grazia, Victoria, *The Culture of Consent, Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1981.