

# THE CITY OF FALSE MEMORY

## PIAZZA DELLA VITTORIA, BRESCIA

**EAMONN CANNIFFE**

*Manchester School of Architecture / University of Manchester*

### Memory, the City and Power

We seem increasingly aware of the layering of history which the city represents, with its manifestation of political conflict and change. But if, as described by M. Christine Boyer, the "City of Collective Memory" embodies the strive for an authentic and resonant public realm and its simultaneous erasure, how might we define those urban spaces where history has been manipulated for political ends, based on memories which are highly selective if not fictional?<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to explore how cultural and typological memories are exploited, and the study of Fascist architecture provides a fertile territory of exploration because of its overt use of historical memory to support the regime's claim to power. It is also possible to question if, at a time when traditional methods of civic design are being revived in the aftermath of the apparent failure of Modernism, it is a sign of political ambivalence or of maturity that examples of urban design which operated fairly successfully, but at the behest of unpalatable political regimes, should now be objects of enquiry?

Urban projects are fascinating examples of direct political influence on building. The size of the projects and the need for considerable coordination requires the sort of collective effort that only a political process can provide. During Fascism the public nature of the projects meant that the state sought to produce architectural embodiments of the prevailing ideology through an often explicit iconographic programme.<sup>2</sup> The pressures, most especially prevalent in the European totalitarian regimes, to manifest aspects of progress while simultaneously relying on recognizable precedents produced curious hybrids whose divergent elements are often badly resolved, balanced between dream and nightmare. In the current confused state of architectural and urban debate, accusations are often made of the same form of discontinuity between intentions and results. However, totalitarian regimes of both right and left have in the past claimed the right to prescribe total solutions to society's problems, while their ultimate lack of sustainable success could perhaps be predicted by the schizophrenic nature of their complex and disquieting urban projects. Are the various products of today's political pluralism any more likely to survive future criticism?

Since antiquity itself, the appeal to a more ancient precedent has been a standard representational technique

for the legitimation of a contemporary power structure. With the shift from Renaissance and Baroque inventive reinterpretation of forms to the Enlightenment cultivation of archaeology, the accuracy and authenticity of antique construction became of primordial interest at exactly the point, with industrialization, that traditional forms of city and society were about to undergo their most severe test. The nostalgia of ruins, despite its quality of *memento mori*, inculcated the idea of a well organized and ordered society whose greatest artifacts were its public structures. However, at a distance of nearly two millennia how could the interpretation of such history be accurate, since political expediency was likely to play a considerable part in the new interpretation? A past which was unquestionable and marvellous provided the strongest form of validation for the activities of the present.

In the Italian situation, of course, the context is especially complex, since the precedents which other powers exploited are often Roman in origin. The achievement of national unification in the 1860s created the first opportunity in modern times for the manifestation of an Italian national consciousness which represented an independent state. This coincided with the work of Camillo Sitte, who produced the first analytical survey of Italian public space and proposed the imitation of his deductions in new imperial capitals such as Vienna.<sup>3</sup> While the redevelopment of Rome as capital of the Kingdom of Italy was generally recognized to be problematic, the energy of the new state could be directed towards the systematic preservation of its heritage, and the remaking of its cities in a worthy manner. Fresh impetus would be given to this process after Italy's territorial consolidation after World War One, and Mussolini's accession to power as a result of the ensuing political crisis. The parallel developments of state archaeology and urban scenography were then combined in the service of propaganda.

Fascism was of course deeply ambivalent about its position in relation to culture.<sup>4</sup> Roman and Italian heritage, insofar as it represented previous periods of political power, was useful as a fig leaf to cover exposed political might but contemporary art with its rival avant-garde groupings did not provide the same service of cultural certainties as the past. The Futurists, with their emphasis on physical action and sensation could have been calculated to appeal to a regime famous for its thuggery,

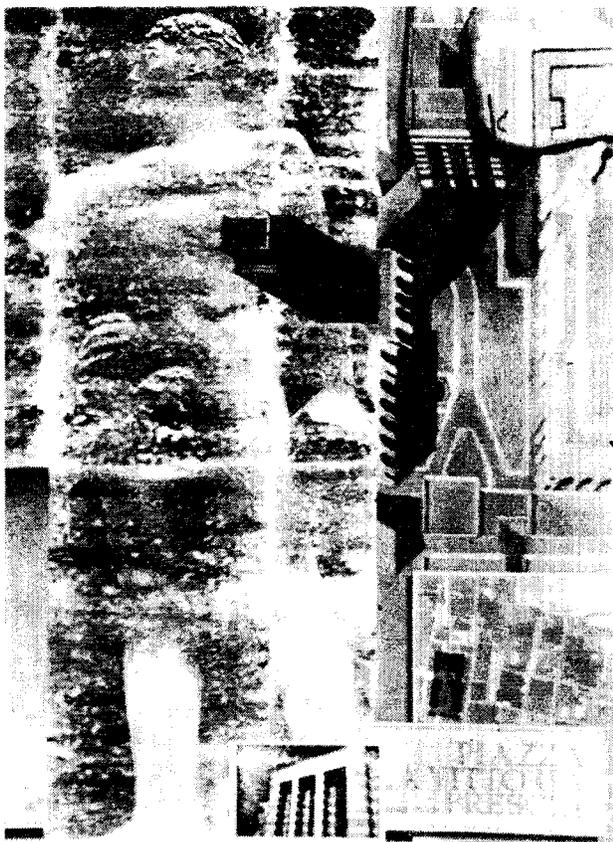


Fig. 1. Piazza della Vittoria, Brescia. Photo by author.

while the Novocento group captured a more subtle form of urban disquiet, but ultimately neither was satisfactory. Mussolini's fantasy as his regime retained power was to see himself not as solely the revolutionary man of action, but also as the heir to the imperial Roman mantle, wielding his pick axe to construct *autostrade* and to expose antiquities. The appeal to Roman cultural continuity would increasingly feature, as public projects became more megalomaniac, but even relatively early in the regime, the exploitation of Roman typologies and forms could serve to suggest the inevitable validity of the regime. However, to take the example of Brescia, an analysis of the principal Fascist intervention can be used to uncover an urban history layer by layer, which exposes aspects of the memory of the city that prove to be false.<sup>5</sup>

#### Four Piazze in Brescia

*Piazza della Vittoria* in Brescia, completed between 1929-32, was the final result of a large planning exercise to improve the functioning of this north Italian city, a rationalization which was abandoned due to expense in favor of the rhetorical monumentalizing of an area of the historic center.<sup>6</sup> Functional planning was thus abandoned in favor of a more overtly representational scheme, though the immediate reason for the site of the new piazza was the demolition of an existing unhygienic quarter. The new public space thus created glorified Mussolini, but the variety of its profile and materiality attempted to obscure the fact that it was entirely constructed within a few years. Paradoxically, despite

the attempt to portray an organic but false history, each element is treated as an individual monument, with peripheral connections through ground floor arcades to form the enclosed civic realm that had been favored by Sitte.

As an exercise in urban and political design, it evoked memories and connections to Brescia's historic spaces, but *Piazza della Vittoria* has a disquieting quality. The lumpen characters of Marcello Piacentini's architecture form subtle connections with the existing urban fabric and the spaces beyond, the new piazza attempting in its geometry and iconography to bring to summation Brescian urban development. Visual connections to Medieval and Renaissance spaces were allied to an orientation and formal typology having its explicit source in the remains of the Roman town of *Brixia*. In both cases a rectangular space running north-south is delineated, with the principal public structure aligned axially at the northern end.

Piacentini, who has become identified as the official architect of Fascism, was originally a disciple of Sitte. A picturesque attitude to geometry, the clear definition of public space, the exploitation of specific vistas and connections with other spaces characterize the Sittesque influence, while the architectural language is much more generic.<sup>7</sup> The purpose of a public forum was signalled by the honorific position provided for the modern means of communication, the post, telegraph and telephone office, but also by the placing of an orator's podium or *aregno* decorated with scenes of Brescian progress up to Fascism, and standing at the foot of the tower ("of the revolution") which was originally adorned with a portrait relief of Mussolini on horseback. Diagonally opposite the *aregno*, a 12-story office tower, the *torrione*, provided the largest single element in the piazza while a figurative connection to this symbol of urban progress was established through the siting of a colossal naked male statue at its base, Arturo Dazzi's *The Fascist Age*.

The diagrammatic quality of this planning strategy is ameliorated by the picturesque massing of elements.<sup>8</sup> The axial view towards the post office is varied by the asymmetrical pairing of the tower of the revolution in marble and the brick mass of the office tower. These three elements then frame and dominate the views of the square, the *torrione* suggesting a certain aggressive power, the tower of the revolution rather unsubtly in conflict with the dome of the cathedral beyond, and the post office portico producing a dull echo of the Roman *capitolium*. It has also been noted by Richard Etlin<sup>9</sup> that the early version of Piacentini's post office had suggested a precedent in the three bayed form of the *Palazzo della Loggia*, whose barrel vaulted roof was visible in profile behind the Post Office in the neighbouring *Piazza della Loggia*.

Dating from the 15th century this space bore evidence of the Venetian domination of Brescia at this time. Running north-south, an arcaded loggia with clock tower echoes the similar feature in *Piazza San Marco* in Venice, while the palazzo itself occupies the central axis on the west of the square and bears a strong similarity to the basilica in Vicenza. Indeed Palladio was consulted regarding the palazzo's completion.<sup>10</sup> A column with a lion of Saint Mark completed the Venetian references,

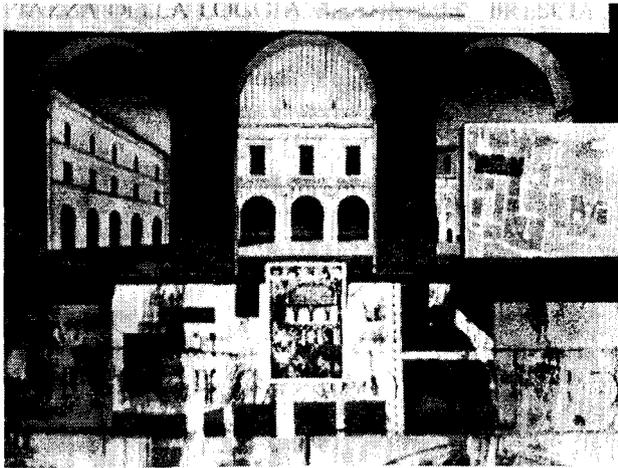


Fig. 2. Piazza della Loggia, Brescia. Photo by author.



Fig. 3. Piazza del Duomo, Brescia. Photo by author.

although in 1797 following the French invasion, when Brescia looked to Paris as a source of iconography, it was replaced by a tree of liberty and phrygian caps were placed on the bronze bell-ringers on the *orologio*. This piazza also witnessed the beginning of the insurrection in 1848, and contains the monument to the *Risorgimento* and that marking a terrorist outrage in the mid-1970s memorialized by Carlo Scarpa. However, its longest surviving mnemonic element, integrated into the structure of the *Monte Nuovo* on the south side of the square is the

fragment of an ancient Roman inscription placed there in 1480 C. IULIUS CAESAR PONTIF, intended no doubt to invoke an antique precedent for the then new square. The volatile history of the iconography of this square serves to underline the traditional importance of such symbols. As we saw in *Piazza della Vittoria*, however, this can also lead to the suppression of alternative histories and the indulgence in monosyllabic public expression.

The route marked by the clock tower in *Piazza della Loggia* leads back further through urban history to the northern end of *Piazza del Duomo* and the Medieval period. *Piazza del Duomo* grew up towards the western edge of the Roman town (the Roman forum still being used as a market). It started as a religious precinct that assumed a civic character as well, in common with other cities in Lombardy, such as Como. Today it presents an apparently casual arrangement of space before a series of monuments. From the south, there is the round nave of the Romanesque *duomo vecchio*, then the Baroque mass of the *duomo nuovo*, itself on the site of a previous Romanesque basilica, and the Medieval *broletto* or town hall, with its crenellated tower. The two cathedrals conform to the type of the double cathedral, and while now largely constituting later building, they are known from excavations to have been built on a pair of earlier structures which can be dated to the fifth or sixth centuries. Their designation from at least 838 as winter and summer cathedrals, and dedication to the Virgin and Saint Peter conforms to the pattern of other double cathedrals both within Lombardy, (in Milan and Paris) and further afield.<sup>11</sup>

The present situation is perhaps the result of the extension of a cleared space between the cathedrals and the baptistery whose remains survive under the opposite long side of the square. A Christian precinct of the first millennium, because of its inclusion of public space grew to include a communal function in the second millennium, and like other communal palaces of its time and date, the *broletto* was a product of a particular Medieval interpretation of *civitas*. However, under Venetian control in the sixteenth to 18th centuries it represented foreign domination. Curiously, when Venice fell to Napoleon, in Brescia it was commemorated with a medal of the storming of the *broletto* on March 18, 1797 in imitation of the storming of the Bastille.

The eventual geometry of the *Piazza del Duomo* imitates that of the Roman forum now *Piazza del Foro*, but with the emphasis across the length rather than along it. Although originally on the periphery of the Roman town, the spatial precedent was undoubtedly the remains of the forum which occupied the centre of the *castrum* plan. The axial arrangement of the forum, disposed between capitol and basilica at the crossing of *cardo* and *decumanus* ensured its survival as a public space within the town after the fall of the Roman empire although, as in Verona, Medieval building was to shrink the dimensions of the open area to a form of wide street of irregular limits.

Our knowledge of the Roman remains comes from the first serious excavations in the 1820s. As illustrations from the period show, a fair degree of licence was used to produce a sufficiently impressive silhouette to the *capitolium* so that it could inspire an appropriate awe

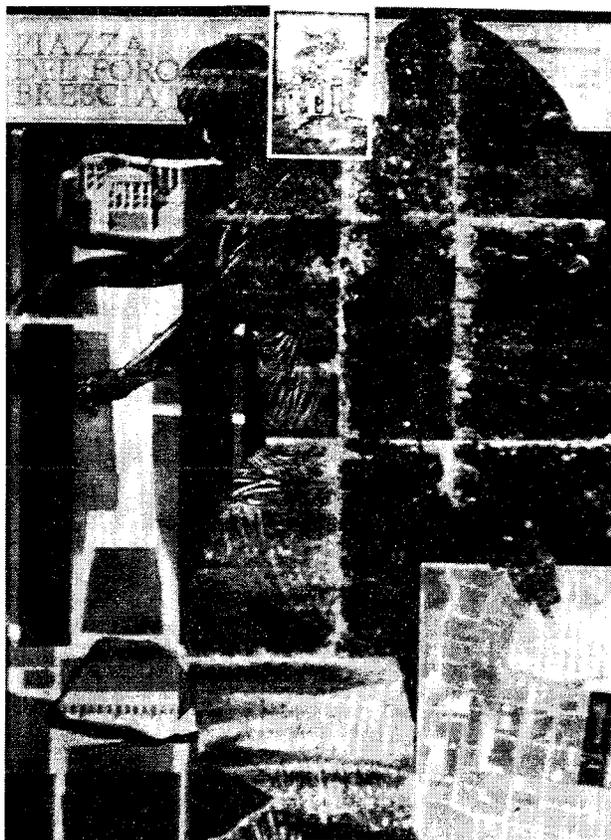


Fig 4. Piazza del Foro, Brescia. Photo by author.

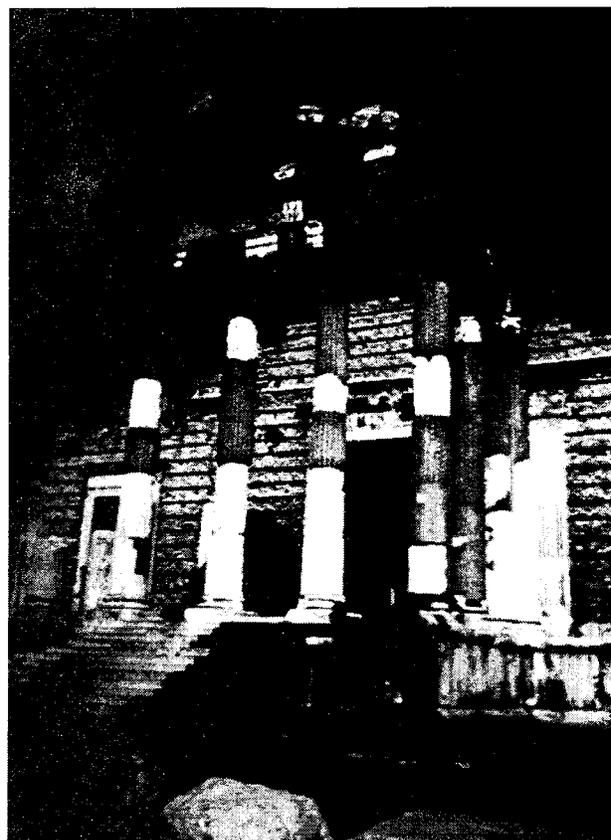


Fig. 5. Reconstructed portico, Piazza del Foro, Brescia.

and melancholy.<sup>12</sup> This nostalgia reached its apogee in the 1930s with the reconstruction of a fragment of the portico, and *Piazza del Foro* therefore has an explicit political meaning in the use of an urban memory which was intended to reinforce ideas of continuity, at a time when a Fascist urban centre was being created at *Piazza della Vittoria*. Moreover, these four *piazze* can be seen to represent different aspects of Italian urban history condensed into a series of adjoining spaces. They also reflect the idea of Rome as the urban exemplar and source of archetypes, in the spatial and typological transformations of a single rectangular form with its local origin in *Piazza del Foro*.

### Fascism in the Past and the Present

The historical sequence that is here exposed is a deceptive one, for the present appearance of *Piazza della Vittoria* and *Piazza del Foro* are not separated by nearly two millennia, they are themselves virtually contemporaneous. The actual state of the ruins of the *capitolium* was integrated into a fictional ruin whose appearance was intended to support the contemporary political order of Fascism as well as display evidence of past glory. The 1th century excavations and subsequent reconstruction continue to reflect Roman precedents in the attempt to produce in Brescia a little Rome which reflects the evocative power of picturesque ruins, while twentieth century construction provided a precedent for the more problematical redevelopment of Rome itself.

*Piazza del Foro* has a complex layering of references, if we are to accept from Joseph Rykwert that the Roman *castrum* plan was itself an idealization of Roman topography.<sup>13</sup> But far from reinforcing continuity to urban origins then the modern condition of *Piazza del Foro* is already a fiction as a point of origin. The representation of its excavated state owes much to the tradition of the romantic views of ruins which conditioned the image of Rome at that time.<sup>14</sup> This publication during the 1820s and 1830s of the recent excavations and discoveries, produced during a period of Austrian rule, presented a pacific and elegiac aspect to these discoveries. The bronze statue of Victory, (see Fig. 4) the most significant find, presents a magnanimous face, but a hundred years later it was the martial aspects of Roman civilization which were seen to be most important. The state's collection of fragments, casts and models which eventually was housed in the *Museo della Civiltà Romana* at EUR, had an explicitly didactic purpose in illustrating the extent of the Roman empire and predicting the benefits of the Italian empire proclaimed in 1937. A model of the *capitolium* of Brescia was amongst them, and therefore parallels between the present and ancient situation were underlined. This collection of simulations and reconstructions of antiquity is merely superseded in the absurdity of Brescia's full scale contribution *in situ*. The reconstruction of the portico and the creation of the archaeological zone produces dead public space, where its importance as a museum exhibit takes precedence



Fig 6. Marcello Piacentini, Post Office, Piazza della Vittoria, Brescia.

over its life as part of the city. This situation, where the new/old portico is itself recovered from the existing urban context of Brescia, is extreme but it took place at the time when archaeological remains in Rome were being freed from their “decadent” accretions. The memory of the city killing its life, similar excavation of a dense Medieval quarter took place in Brescia to “uncover” Piazza della Vittoria.

But far from imitating the forum, the elements of Piazza della Vittoria subvert their antique precedents. The portico of the *capitolium* can be seen to have its parallel in the facade of the post office. The Corinthian order however was too feminine for this robust example of state patronage, and instead Piacentini reduced the members to a blunt banded pier whose profile vaguely resembled a *fascies*, a less obvious form than the literal use of an eagle-headed axe *fascies* that Piacentini had previously employed in his triumphal arch at Bolzano. The personification of Victory after whom the new square was named was herself too delicate in scale and form for the new environment. She is replaced as the presiding figure by the hulking form of Dazzi's *The Fascist Age* (see Fig. 1) with its clenched right fist echoing the raised fist of the *torrione*. Antonio Maraini's historical panels on the *aregno* below the tower of the revolution unwind the thread of the city's history as the blackshirts are shown as the inheritors of Brescian and Roman culture. This flow of time becomes a complete cycle as the Romans worship a representation of the Victory, and fascists greet each

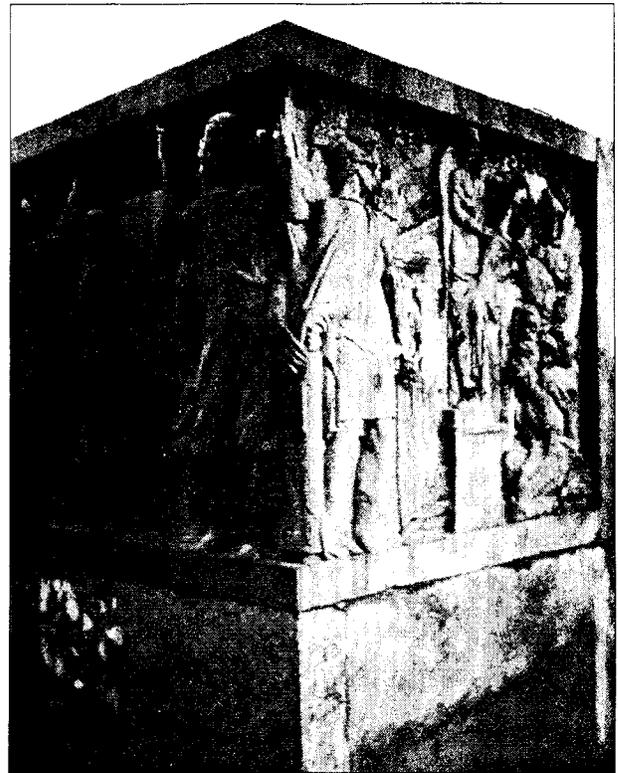


Fig. 7 Antonio Maraini, *Aregno* (detail), Piazza della Vittoria, Brescia.

other with the Roman salute and both modern and ancient figures grasp the *fascies*.

### False memories, political fictions.

One significance of these squares in Brescia is the method by which each of the Medieval, Renaissance and Fascist examples described reflects the Roman precedent by misinterpreting it. The urban type of a rectangular space dominated by a principal monumental building or complex goes through a series of transformations where a longitudinal axial arrangement in the Roman and Fascist examples can be compared with the latitudinal arrangement in the Medieval piazza and the cross axial plan of the Renaissance square. Geometries can be identified so that the framework of the spaces and their connections can be mapped, and an order be discerned for the distribution of historical fragments and forms. However, Piazza della Vittoria was not built up like Piazza del Duomo by layers of continuous construction, although that illusion was attempted, nor could Fascism allow any multiplicity of rival iconographies as Piazza della Loggia had witnessed. This culminates in a situation when not only the new piazza referred iconographically to the Roman era, but the genuine remains of that period were re-fabricated to underscore the connection to the present.

The self-conscious referencing of historical precedent reached its present crisis in the early Modern period because of the divorce between the architectural clothing and contemporary engineering. Piacentini's response in Brescia had been to reduce the complexity of traditional



Fig. 8. Marcello Piacentini, *Tower of the Revolution*, Piazza della Vittoria, Brescia.

architectural languages to the bluntly emblematic, while blurring the connections into the existing urban fabric. Mussolini was on the point of abandoning the trappings of Futurism in favor of a wholesale self-identification with Augustus. The representation of the regime would then largely employ a traditional language, even when it was representing tanks, armored cars and aeroplanes in marble mosaic pavements, as at the *Foro Mussolini*.

Historical reference can create rich urban experiences over time as both *Piazza del Duomo* and *Piazza della Loggia* demonstrate, but Piacentini sought to overcome 2,000 years by a thin veneer of allusion. Although the insertion of the new piazza into the existing fabric owes its origin to an interpretation of the Sittesque phenomenological method, the publication of the square on its completion in 1932 betrayed the attempt to recast the scheme in the manner of a technological advance. Piacentini's work enabled authoritarian power to be validated through the appeal to specific urban memories, resting on foundations which are archaeologically speculative, reconstructed for propagandistic purposes. Such memories are themselves simultaneously invalidated by the representation of this cultural excavation as itself progressive and advanced, when it systematically subsumes the future to a highly selective interpretation of the past. Genuine Roman archaeological remains, uncovered during the clearing of the densely built-up

Medieval quarter, an authentic urban memory, were not allowed to disturb Piacentini's chill reinterpretation of an *atrium* as the tower of the revolution. Similarly the organic process of historical decay in *Piazza del Foro* could not be allowed to give witness to the true fate of empires. Instead history had to be reversed and a false memory constructed. Surely, this is a warning to those today whose readings of history manifests itself as a facile imitation.

With the inevitable irony of history, ruination came to Piazza della Vittoria in 1945 with destruction caused by the Royal Air Force bombardment.<sup>15</sup> After subsequent repair and the removal of the more obvious Fascist insignia it too is now only a simulacrum of its original state.

The research for this paper was conducted during the tenure of a Rome Scholarship in the Fine Arts at the British School at Rome in 1996.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> M.Christine Boyer *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), p.19.
- <sup>2</sup> For a recent, comprehensive and well illustrated survey of totalitarian architecture see Dawn Ades et.al.(eds) *Art and Power: Europe under the dictators 1930-45* (South Bank Centre: London, 1995).
- <sup>3</sup> George R. Collins *Camillo Sitte and the birth of modern city planning* (New York: Rizzoli, 1986).
- <sup>4</sup> See Philip V. Cannistraro "Fascism and Culture in Italy, 1919-1945" in *Italian Art in the Twentieth Century*. (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1989).
- <sup>5</sup> See Vanna Fraticelli 'Piazze d' Italia/ Italian Piazze' Bergamo (1906-1926), Brescia (1929-1932), E 42 (from 1937)' in *Lotus International* 39 III / 1983 Electa Milan. Also Ugo Soragni 'La cultura urbanistica a Brescia da piazza del Mercato Nuovo a piazza della Vittoria (secc. XII-XX)' in Enrico Guidoni (ed) *Storia della Città: Rivista internazionale di storia urbana e territoriale* 54/55/56. (Milan: Electa, April-December 1990).
- <sup>6</sup> See Maria rosa Maifrini 'Tecnici e amministrazione: i piani di Brescia fra le due guerre' in Giulio Ernesti (ed) *La Costituzione dell' Utopia: Architetti e Urbanisti nell' Italia Fascista: Casa Città Territorio* 7 Edizioni Lavoro: Rome, 1988. The most extensive publication of the completed project is in Marcello Piacentini 'La Sistemazione del Centro di Brescia' *Architettura* (December 1932), pp. 649-683.
- <sup>7</sup> See Fraticelli *op.cit.* "Piacentini decided to resolve the contradiction of Piazza della Vittoria by handling a paradox in a professional manner: this consisted of tying the clearance to an intervention of reclamation that would stitch the parts of the old city back together according to a functional logic and by means of new architecture. And the sole contribution to the discipline that dealt with this theme was still the precious manual of Sitte."
- <sup>8</sup> "Variety should derive from the movement of the masses; the lively and capricious nature of the buildings profile; the alternation of porticoes, loggias, balconies, and gardens; and from showing to advantage ancient monuments or public buildings and from harmonizing with them." Marcello Piacentini *Estetica regolatrice* (1913) quoted in Richard A. Etlin *Modernism In Italian Architecture 1890-1940* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 124-5.
- <sup>9</sup> Etlin *op.cit.* p. 418.
- <sup>10</sup> Andrea Palladio *The Four Books of Architecture* (New York:

Dover, 1975), p. 76.

<sup>11</sup> See Richard Krautheimer 'The Twin Cathedral at Pavia' in *Studies in Early Christian, Medieval and Renaissance Art*. (New York: New York University Press, 1969), pp. 168-9.

<sup>12</sup> See Giuseppe Saleri (ed.) *Museo Bresciano Illustrato* (Brescia: Tipografia della Minerva, 1838).

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Rykwert *The Idea of a Town* (London: Faber, 1976).

<sup>14</sup> See Carolyn Springer *The Marble Wilderness: Ruins and Representation in Italian Romanticism 1775-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> See Lodovico Galli *Incursioni aeree su Brescia e provincia 1944-45* (Ateneo di Brescia, 1975).