

1933:

One or Several Rationalisms

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In the years between the two world wars, Italian architects, critics and historians vigorously debated the proper role and form of architecture. The stakes in these debates were high – polemicists from all camps saw architecture as part of a broader project of cultural renewal tied to the political program of fascism, and argued that architecture must represent the goals and values of the fascist regime. As such, they addressed the issues of modernization, technology, functionalism and structural expression raised by international modernism alongside specifically Italian concerns, such as the tradition of classicism and architecture's relationship to the urban fabric.

This paper is part of my ongoing dissertation research into the role of the magazine *Quadrante*, one of the key vehicles of interwar Italian architectural discourse, and its relationship to other journals, such as *Casabella*. *Quadrante* was published in Milan and Rome from 1933 to 1936 by the art critic and gallery owner, Pietro Maria Bardi and Massimo Bontempelli, a novelist and playwright.

Bardi and Bontempelli published the first issue of *Quadrante* in May, 1933, with the financial assistance of Giuseppe Terragni and the painters Mario Radice and Virginio Ghiringhelli. *Quadrante* combined coverage of architecture with articles on the fine and applied arts, literature, music, theater, technology, engineering and – especially – politics. While *Quadrante*'s broad scope distinguished it from contemporary architectural magazines (most notably *Architettura* and *Casabella*), the publication's polemical vigor and consistency differentiated it from the eclecticism that marked *Domus* and similar "culture" magazines.

Over the course of three years, *Quadrante* printed critical appraisals of bellwether architectural and urban design projects, such as the competition for the Palazzo del Littorio, the Milan Triennales of 1933 and 1936, the planning of the Pontine marsh towns and Terragni's work in Como (from the Novocomum to the Casa del Fascio). Many issues of *Quadrante* printed statements on cultural production by Mussolini, presented in a heroic typography not used in other articles. Terragni's Casa del Fascio was juxtaposed against the Duce's famous proclamation that "Fascism must be a glass house into which everyone can see."¹ *Quadrante* published (and commented on positively) works by international figures like Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and Fernand Leger. Bardi himself covered the 1933 CIAM conference aboard the *Patris II*. Most notably, *Quadrante* defended the Rationalist position of the Gruppo 7 against criticism from numerous quarters, including the more functionalist Rationalism of *Casabella* and the traditionalist orientation of *Architettura*.

Taken as a whole, Italian architectural discourse reveals diverse interpretations of modernism, linked by a web of shared concerns and transformed by a host of exigencies. Architectural historians have frequently divided architects and critics into opposing camps according to their membership in various organizations (such as MIAR, and the Accademia d'Architettura) and their association with specific journals

(*Architettura*, *Casabella*, *Quadrante*, *Dedalo*, etc.). Such classification, however, is misleading. The major polemical figures of this period often found themselves collaborating with the same people whom they had, or would later, criticize strongly. A prime example is Pagano's and Piacentini's work together at the City University and E'42. Though the former's functionalist modernism and the latter's stylized neoclassicism seem incompatible, both architects shared an expressed interest in developing an appropriate architectural expression of *Italianità*. Eventually, however, Pagano would join the attack on Piacentini's persistent use of classical ornament.²

To some degree the level of collaboration in interwar Italy was also the result of a pragmatism among its architects, who were practitioners *as well as* theorists, and thus found compromise a necessary step toward testing their ideas in practice. Collaboration among architects also reflected the fascist ideal of consensus, which in turn influenced the Gruppo 7's rejection of individualism. Above all, this atmosphere of collaboration reveals the experimental urge that drove many of these strange bedfellows (Pagano and Piacentini, Persico and Bardi) as they strove to reconcile the forces of modernity and tradition in an architecture that would appropriately represent the Fascist state.

Bardi was a well-known art critic and gallery owner in Milan and Rome. In 1926, he launched a review called *Il Belvedere* to publicize his second gallery, the Galleria Bardi in Milan. By 1930, he had turned over the gallery to Edoardo Persico – later to be editor of *Casabella* – who renamed it the Galleria del Milione. The Galleria del Milione immediately became the center for a circle of modern painters and architects, including Ghiringhelli, Figini, Pollini and Pietro Lingeri, as did the Bar Craja, a café designed the same year by Luciano Baldessari with Figini and Pollini, and the sculptors Fausto Melotti and Marcello Nizzoli. This circle of architects and artists would become a key constituency for *Quadrante*.

That same year, Bardi opened the Galleria di Roma in Rome with the financial support of Mussolini and the official sanction of the National Syndicate of Fine Arts. In contrast to the Milan gallery, whose exhibitions favored the abstraction of the Gruppo di Como (Rho, Radice, et al), the Galleria di Roma promoted the figuration of the Scuola Romana (especially Mafai and Scipione) and other European painters, such as Dix and Kokoshka. In 1931, Bardi hosted and helped organize at the gallery the controversial Second Exhibition of Rationalist Architecture, which saw Mussolini's appearance at a preview of the show's opening.

Bardi assembled a polemical photomontage called the "table of horrors" (*la tavola degli orrori*) for the exhibition. It juxtaposed historicist buildings by Marcello Piacentini and Armando Brasini (members of the Accademia Italiana and representatives of the architectural mainstream) and illustrations from old fashion magazines. As Bardi explained in an article in *La Tribuna* ("La tavola degli orrori alla Mostra d'Architettura Razionale") and a harshly-toned introduction to the exhibition, *Rapporto*

sull'Architettura (per Mussolini), his goal was to attack the moribund institutions of the Italian architectural profession, the Syndicate and the Academy.

Even before founding *Quadrante*, Bardi had established a reputation among Rationalist architects for his journalism. He wrote weekly columns on architecture and culture for the Milanese journal *L'Ambrosiano*. After the controversy surrounding the Second Exhibition of Rationalist Architecture, he became a foreign correspondent for the publication. He published book-length accounts of his travels in the USSR and Paris on behalf of *L'Ambrosiano* and the Roman journal, *Il Lavoro Fascista*.³ He also served as Italian correspondent for *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*.

Quadrante's prominent political stance, which distinguished it from contemporary architectural journals and the apolitical manifesto of the Gruppo 7, grew out of Bardi's attempts to gain official sanction for Rationalism as the regime's style. Beginning in November, 1930, Bardi used his column in *L'Ambrosiano* to wage a propaganda campaign aimed at winning Mussolini's support of Rationalism as the official state style. Bardi argued that Rationalism should be adopted as the appropriate expression of the Fascist revolution (largely because of their shared interest in technological and social modernization), and that control over architectural commissions throughout the nation should be granted to a MIAR-like syndicate.

Bardi's cosmopolitan orientation was shared by *Quadrante's* co-editor, Bontempelli, a prominent critic, novelist and playwright. After early infatuations with D'Annunzio and Futurism, Bontempelli emerged as a key theorist of Metaphysical art, with close ties Giorgio de Chirico, Alberto Savinio and Luigi Pirandello. Bontempelli's primary vehicle was the journal *900 – Cahiers d'Italie et d'Europe*, which he published with Curzio Malaparte from 1926 to 1929. Originally printed in French, *900* promoted literature produced throughout the continent, which was consistent with Bontempelli's interest in opening Italian literature and culture to the more rapidly developing cultural milieu of Paris.⁴

The polemical atmosphere of the 1930's was primed by two decades of programmatic writing by architects and critics in Italy. Futurism's prodigious production of publications before the first world war provided the first important proclamations on the future of architecture in Italy, both as pamphlets and as small journals (such as *Lacerba*). However, despite an explosion in avant-garde journals throughout Europe in the years following the war, Italian architects did not use publications as an integral part of their polemical practices until late in the 1920's. A key exception is the Rationalist manifesto, "Architecture," written by the Gruppo 7 and published in four parts in *Rassegna Italiana* in 1926 and 1927.

The Gruppo 7 manifesto adapted Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* to local concerns, especially in its argument that modern architecture must be a continuing development of traditional Italian and Roman architecture. The manifesto attempted to reconcile modernity and tradition by focusing on shared concerns, such as typology, geometry, metaphysics and the appropriate use of materials. The classical values of rhythm, harmony, grace and proportion and the modern emphasis on functional requirements and developments in construction technology would together guide the development of new building types and forms. To the Gruppo 7, the careful study of tradition revealed that the historical development of architectural form was gradual and anonymous; they declared that Italy stood on the verge of a new archaic era, one that would quickly lead to a new classical age, but which required the combined effort of artists willing to suppress their individual egos in favor of collective labor.

Quadrante adopted a variant of the Gruppo 7 manifesto as its own "Un Programma di Architettura," signed by Banfi, Belgioioso, Bottoni, Cereghini, Griffini, Lingeri, Figini, Frette, Peresutti, Pollini and Rogers.⁵ *Quadrante* expanded on the Gruppo 7 program, acknowledging that while modern architecture would necessarily share international traits (such as those forms associated with the development of new

construction technologies), modernism in Italy would remain unique and exclusive to the peninsula, just as modernism retained unique local qualities elsewhere in Europe. The truly Italian qualities of architecture would emerge through the spirit of classicism and *mediterraneità*. Terragni, the most visible link between the Gruppo 7 and *Quadrante*, would insist on geometric and proportional principles as the touchstone to tradition. As the Gruppo 7 had written, "There is no incompatibility between our past and our present. We do not want to break with tradition; it is tradition which transforms itself, and assumes new aspects."

The Gruppo 7 faced two key blocks of opposition, which would help spur the formation of *Quadrante* six years later. One came from Piacentini and other conservatives (such as the art critic Ojetti and the academician Giovanonni) who were concerned about the lack of emphasis on beauty and the elevation of rationality to a value of the highest order. Piacentini, though often sympathetic to modernists (whom he supported in projects like the Florence train terminal and the Città Universitaria), felt the Rationalists were too quick to dismiss the formal attributes of Italian architecture whose long development had endowed them with universal meaning.⁶

The Gruppo 7 (and later, the architects associated with *Quadrante*) also faced opposition from another branch of Rationalists, represented by the pioneering journal *Casabella*, whose editors were Giuseppe Pagano and Edoardo Persico. In contrast to that of the Gruppo 7, Pagano and Persico argued in *Casabella* for a Rationalism marked by *aggiornamento*, a process of modernization in which architecture would be developed by a rational consideration of technical, utilitarian and material concerns. Above all, Pagano believed that architecture's necessity to speak universally required the reduction of formal vocabulary and syntax to a bare minimum. He argued against the "lyrical" individualism of Terragni, which he felt could not transmit universal qualities, and thus limited his own architectural vocabulary to an almost journalistic prose opposed to Terragni's poetic turns.⁷

Pagano's support of Fascism came from a deeply-held conviction that Italian society needed to be redeemed from cultural decay, and that this renewal of society needed cultural forms – above all architecture – that were truly rational, as opposed to the veneer of rationality he identified in the Gruppo 7. The new architecture had to eschew the seduction of individual artistry in favor of a collective labor continuing the project of Italian tradition, yet cognizant of the new building types and construction methods arising from the modern era. In this respect, his polemics were in large part consistent with those of the Gruppo 7's manifesto of 1926-7.

The development of Rationalist thought through journalism and criticism magnified when Pagano and Persico joined the staff of *La Casa Bella* in 1931, under the direction of Arrigo Bonfiglio. While Pagano and Persico were passionate modernists and avowed Rationalists, they still criticized the Gruppo 7 and their peers for their conceptual contradictions. Nonetheless, their harshest criticism was reserved for Piacentini and the forces of *Italianità*. Pagano began his campaign against Piacentini's monumentality with his 1931 article "Del «monumentale» nell'architettura moderna,"⁸ in which he lambasted those who confused columns and bombast with the nobility of ancient monumentality. He juxtaposed "genuine" monumentality – that of Trajan's aqueduct at Segovia and the ruins of Great Zimbabwe – with the pompous display of Behrens's embassy in St. Petersburg. Alberto Sartoris, who in 1932 published one of the first broad histories of modern architecture, wrote about the new principles of urbanism and housing development espoused by CIAM and practiced in Frankfurt, Stuttgart and elsewhere.

In the last issue under the name *La Casa Bella*,⁹ Pagano proclaimed a new venture to unite the divergent strands of Italian modernism ("la vecchia guardia dell'«gruppo 7» milanese e dei gruppi di Torino e di Roma") under the banner of the renamed journal, *Casabella*. Pagano took over the direction of the journal in 1933, with Persico as editor-in-chief. *Casabella* intensified its coverage of European modernism, yet

paradoxically the magazine paid special attention to architects like Henry van de Velde and Hans Poelzig, who hardly fit the model of Pagano's selfless, anonymous participants in the great current of tradition.

Persico criticized the Gruppo 7/*Quadrante* Rationalists in 1933 for their refusal to address the contradiction between a national spirit in architecture and its relationship to international modernism.¹⁰ It was precisely the inability to deal with the dialectic of national and international tendencies that Persico identified as the failure of Italian Rationalism. For Persico, modernism was certainly European, but it was a developmental process in which Italy participated reciprocally.

Persico insisted that the material conditions which spawned modern architecture (the development of iron, glass and concrete) were only a small part of what needed to be discussed by contemporary criticism. He faulted his peers' attempts at architectural history (such as Gustave Adolph Platz and Myron Malkiel-Jirmounsky) which put too much emphasis on material, and too little on the spatial breakthroughs of Frank Lloyd Wright. Materialism left too little room for lyricism, he believed. "Let us collect the data and go beyond it."¹¹

Persico argued that the origins of modern architecture lay not in the translation of cubism into architectural form, but in the work of Wright, whom he identified with Impressionism.¹² Persico described Wright's architecture as being of "a single atmosphere" without dividing partitions, with a horizontality that took in the terraces and extended interior space into the landscape. The massing, roof lines and fenestration all showed the influence of the Far East, an exoticism that raised Persico's suspicion of Wright's Impressionism, since he claimed "giapponeismo" was common to both.¹³

Persico believed that the demands of modern architecture could not be reduced to a "battle of styles" pitting flat roofs against gables,¹⁴ and he criticized both the Rationalists and the "traditionalists" with lacking sound "theoretical foundations" and producing a hollow dialogue "lacking any real content." Instead he argued in favor of a gradual and collective transformation of architecture, much like the Gruppo 7 had demanded, and which he believed was already underway throughout Europe. "Contrary to claims by the most unlikely polemicists, the goal of new architecture is not to be found in the coherence of European Rationalism and salvation does not lie in a return to 'classical' or 'nationalistic' forms, but in a continual faith in true tradition."¹⁵

In 1935, Persico became codirector of *Casabella*; the following year he died. Pagano would continue to edit the journal until 1943, when he suspended publication and joined the military. From 1940 to 1943 the magazine's title was *Costruzioni casabella*, and it was under that name that publication resumed briefly in 1946.

NOTES

¹*Quadrante* 35, March 1936, p.15.

²Giuseppe Pagano, "Potremo salvarci dalle false tradizioni e dalle ossessioni non mentali?" *Casabella* (1941).

³Bardi, *15 giorni a Parigi tra i fuoriusciti*. (1931) and *Un fascista al paese dei Soviet*. (1932).

⁴90's editorial board included Max Jacob, André Malraux, Rainer Maria Rilke and James Joyce.

⁵Two years later, *Quadrante* 23 and 24 (March and April, 1935) revisited the Gruppo 7, reprinting the *Rassegna Italiana* manifesto articles and "Origini del Gruppo 7" by C. Belli.

⁶"Why then, the need to make the entire essence of architecture consist of rationality alone? Why must they equate the two terms: architecture and rationality? [...] In short, the identification of the beautiful with the structural does not exist. Let us leave these arid and metaphysical speculations to the men of the North. Neither puritanism nor protestantism have ever taken root under our sun. We need gesture and form, the touching word and smile. We are basically musical, art for us is always a song" Marcello Piacentini "Prima internazionale architettonica," *Architettura e arti decorative* (August, 1928).

⁷"If we want Italian architecture to continue in a direction that can be developed both aesthetically and morally, and if we want it to express our world, we must not think, act and poeticize with feelings that are aristocratic, eccentric or proudly enamored with rationalized speculation. Rather, we must strive to be anonymous, to free ourselves from rhetorical attitudes. We must not imprison ourselves in an academy of forms and words."

⁸Pagano, "Del 'monumentale' nell'architettura moderna," *La casa bella* 40 (1931).

⁹Programma 1933," *La casa bella* 60 (1932).

¹⁰Doordan, *Architecture and Politics*, pp.30-1.

¹¹Persico, (1933). Translated in AD 51, p.60.

¹²Persico, "Profezia dell'architettura," (1935). reprinted in Barocchi, p.299.

¹³Persico refers to Camille Mauclair's *L'impressionisme* (1904).

¹⁴Persico, "Profezia dell'architettura," p.301.

¹⁵Persico, (1935). Translated in AD 51, p.60.