New settlements and territorial domination in the '30s

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metropolitan colonies

1923
Serpieri law
(Regio Decreto
n° 3256 del
30.12.1923)

Mine settlements
Arsia 1937 (Croatia)
Carbonia - 1938

Veneto
Ferrara - Comacchio

Agro Pontino 1932-1936
Littoria – Sabaudia - Aprilia

Sardinia 1928-1936
Mussolinia - Fertilia

Puglia - Sicilia 1934-1939
Segezia - Incoronata

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This text talks about urban and landscape planning in Italy and in its Mediterranean possessions during the period between the two world wars.

The Italian unification dates from 1860 and the capital, Rome, was acquired from the catholic Vatican state after a short war in September 1870. Up to this date, the country - involved in a series of independence wars – had no colonial vision abroad.

The first experience was the Assab acquisition by the shipping enterprise Rubattino in 1869. A private venture clearly helped by the government. That practice was, in reality, limited to just a port of call in the Red sea; the 1881 census showed 160 inhabitants on six square kilometres (Labanca, 2002, p. 56).

During the 1880s the Italian government decided to participate to the colonial adventure, of course as the last and the smallest participant. Assab was bought by the government in 1882, after the political defeat within the sovereignty over Tunisia, considered quite an Italian dominion because of the number of Italian residents.

In 1885 the Italian army, shipped to Assab dominion, invaded Eritrea – that remained a colony up to 1941 – and in 1889 two other countries in the extreme east Africa: Somalia and Ethiopia. The first one was a dominion up to 1905 when it became a colony as Somalia Italiana to distinguish it from British Somaliland, and the second one made her free winning the Adua battle in 1896.

The 20th century started with an important chance for the colonial lobby: due to the Ottoman Empire crisis, some territories were not under a real Turkish control. A pretext allowed the invasion of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania in 1911 (land that was later named Libya, re using the old Roman Empire name) and the Greeks Islands of Dodecanese in 1912. Finally, the ambition of a Mediterranean colony was achieved.

Between the two world wars, the country slipped into the fascist regime that officially detained the power from 1922 to 1943. During this period Italy tried to enlarge its land possession, even through ridiculous proposals as the request to the French colonial government to leave a large corridor from the southern Libyan border to the Atlantic Ocean; just to allow a territorial continuity from Mediterranean to Atlantic shores.

During the '30s the regime betted on colonial expansion, directing the effort to all the Italian colonial fields: Dodecanese islands got the legal status of colony in 1930, the Libyan "rebels" annihilation started with the general Graziani actions, Ethiopia was conquered in 1935 and finally Albania was

military occupied in 1939. While the other colonial nations were consolidating their territorial presence, Italy was still in expansion phase.

Even architecture and urban planning reflected the myth of the territorial conquests and the regime used the mythical power of the town foundation and building activities as a really rich area of action and a space of propaganda. The dictator himself played a direct role:

"*Mussolini è il costruttore, il regime fascista un cantiere e questa è l'età nella vita del mondo della ricostruzione italiana. La mente del Duce non s'arresta alle fasi intermedie nello sviluppo del pensiero; va immediatamente alla soluzione costruttiva. Egli è l'architetto.*" (Oragno, 1937, p. 7).

In the '30s, the fascist urban planning and architecture were mature and able to propose a new language to realize new settlements. The structuring myths of conquest and fascism created singular architectural and urban artefacts and similar planning and building paradigms all over the fascist controlled areas, inside and outside the country, can be identified.

The rhetorical process of Italian colonisation was stressed by the regime that amplified some of the expansion myths developed during the first phase of colonisation (from 1880s to the 1920s). To reduce the emigration abroad, for example, it supported colonies dedicated to a massive Italian population, proposed for the first time in 1889 during the liberal Crispi's government, re considered by the Giovanni Giolitti's one in 1911 during the invasion of Libya and realised, *in fine*, during the 1930s.

The representation of the new-Italian-fascist way of life organized the social structure and the material realizations all over the colonies. But the area of action of the "fascist land control" wasn't limited to the external colonies, a part of the Italian territory and Italian population was considered as a colonisation field too.

"*La hiérarchie des populations colonisées n'a aucune signification sans les Italiens, dans la mesure où ce sont eux qui donnent son orientation à leur échelle de représentation. Dans cette perspective, il convient de considérer les Italiens eux-mêmes comme une des populations cible des techniques coloniales. Le narcissisme du colonialisme italien procède directement du besoin de soumettre à de nouvelles normes, en cours d'élaboration, des sujets considérés comme pré-modernes ou pré-nationaux - des individus dépourvus de droits civiques, devant être façonnés par le moule étatique, vivant le plus souvent hors d'un logement civilisé et habitant de préférence des huttes de paille ou des cavernes. Parmi toutes les populations à coloniser, les Italiens étaient véritablement, pour les colonisateurs, la plus problématique.*" (Fuller, 1997)

Those political acts needed a material reference field, a tangible manifestation of the ideas. Architecture and urbanism were charged to carry out an important role: they materialized the "fascist order". Architecture was the new order set; shapes and forms paradigms were spread all over the future Empire.

Justified by this vision, we can find a similarity in the building conceiving and realization processes. Some of the similitudes across buildings and town plans are also due to the employment of the same professionals through the "*Impero*". In the last occupied territory, Albania, the evidence of this question is particularly clear.

We can take as an example, the engineer Luigi Luiggi, a specialist of harbours and harbours neighbourhoods. He used to live and work in Italy, but he was in charge of the first study and urban plan for the port and the old town of Tripoli in 1912 (he sketched the first urban plan, systemized by M. Albino Pasini on a Turkish map, plan approved during September 1912) and, in 1929, he had the same charge for the Albanian port of Durazzo.

The architect Gherardo Bosio was in charge of the Gondar (Ethiopia) town plan in 1936 and the Tirana one in 1939, updating the Brasini first one. Brasini himself, worked in Rome (the Ministry of Colonies for example), but also in Libya. Bosio realized the Gondar theatre in 1940; on a form really similar to the Rhodes' one.

Also enterprises had different bases, like the ETAL (Ente Turistico Alberghiero della Libia) that started an Albanian strategy after the Italian occupation realizing and managing some hotels in Durazzo, Scutari and Tirana.

Due to those links, we can observe and estimate the planning similarity or dissimilarity between Italy and its colonies.

The core of the fascist rule integrated territorial domination. The modern discipline of urbanism in Italy developed itself during the years between the two World Wars, a period that was particularly rich in architectural experiences. The national institute for urbanism (INU) was founded in 1930 and his first director was the well-known town planner Alberto Calza Bini, several other architects produced arguments relatives to a modern way of town planning. The most famous were Marcello Piacentini, responsible of several urban master plans and Gustavo Giovannoni, one of the fathers of the nowadays thinking about architectural and urban heritage. The aware of town planning knowledge permitted the regime to trust in the future and on their skills in setting up a new country.

"*Per fortuna i segni della rinascita sono quanto mai chiari e promettenti. è infatti in questo momento negli studi urbanistici italiani un magnifico risveglio, che, se nasce dall'opera fervida di pochi, si diffonde rapidamente nella viva massa dei giovani e trascina spesso con sì anche le amministrazioni comunali che fanno a gara a bandire concorsi pei piani regolatori delle città.*" (Giovannoni, 1931, p.5)

New "fascist" territories were "created" mostly enlarging colonial useful surface, recovering reclaimed lands in Italy and beginning a new agrarian property structure. New towns and new settlements were founded and used as media to show and communicate the "new order". Nowadays we are assisting to a quarrel about the number of these new towns founded during the fascist period. About the Italian reality, the number is in between the 12 considered by Diane Ghirardo and Kurt Forster in 1985 and the 130 listed by Antonio Pennacchi in 2003.

Both the estimations look like inexact, the first one because it observe only the bigger and well known ones and the second one because of the too large range used to calculate the number, each small place is considered as a town. However, it doesn't exist a global estimation, considering all the colonies and Italy that we can completely trust on. In the fact, the strategy, even in its minimal configuration, was fundamental and produced an enormous "propaganda sermon" over the importance of towns and settlements foundation.

The use of architecture and town planning as a communication *media*became so evident*t*hata artist-writer like Filippo Tommaso Marinetti –the father of the Futurism manifest – used terms as "biblical scene" and "fascist fastness" to describe the inauguration of Littoria (nowadays Latina) by the *Duce*in 1932.

Outside the mainland and in Mediterranean area, the subjugation of new lands was a part of the "new roman empire" myth. Also in this case, the concept was introduced by formers liberal governments and fascism found it and used it, amplifying the activities and exploiting it strongly.

In the aim to establish legitimacyfor the Libyan colonisation, for example, the Italian government had immediately instituted an antiquity service: the Ministry of colonies opened officially the Libyan archaeological service in 1913. M. Salvatore Aurigemma was the first director of the *soprintendenza* and soon started the archaeological digs on Leptis Magna and Cirene sites. A Royal decree (n. 1271 of September 29, 1914) passed quite immediately the Libya' archaeological rules. The most part of the considered patrimony was, of course, ancient Roman Empire ruins, as Sabratha that started to be digged in 1921; while fascist period that took place in 1922.

The *Cesareo* in Cyrene was seriously retouched and rebuilt as it was done with the Rhodes ruins on the hill that dominate the ancient town that were assembled with a large concrete use.

A clear vision of the role of architecture inside the rules appears in the letter wrote by M. Italo Balbo, governor of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, dated December 31st, 1934, to M. Giacomo Guidi *soprintendente* – responsible for antiquities – since 1928.

"*non v'è dubbio che la ricostruzione di opere monumentali colpisce la fantasia della massa dei visitatori più del frammento archeologico che pur forma la delizia degli studiosi, ed Ella comprende agevolmente quale importanza sia dal punto di visto politico che turistico riveste il fatto di poter suscitare così vasta impressione tra tutti coloro, italiani e stranieri, per i quali la visita agli scavi è maggiormente fonte di diletto che non di erudizione*" (Sangiovanni, 1993, p.93)

The political will to use architectural imaginary as a communication support was clear and clearly explicated and new settlements played an important role. Both in communication and propaganda channels: as a product of propaganda and communication but also as a communication and

propaganda imagery producers. New settlements were advertising pads; they showed the way to the new era.

Fascism used, as a lot of other authoritarian governments, communication control as a power lever. At the same time, finally during the same years, Italy produced a strong relationship with monuments. Historical monuments and old heritage were legitimating a part of the new era, so the "new era" restored and rebuilt a part of the historical monuments in the aim to transform at its needs.

At the same time, a new monument construction strategy was established, the new monument that has to mark the fascism. The language of signs and symbols was really powered. In a poor country with a high percentage of population with reading difficulties, the old visual show was boosted, messages passed through iconographical instrument as a new cathedral era. The interest of introducing art product in buildings was really high; it occurred, under Giuseppe Bottai ministerial period to a specific law that considered, for public building, 2% of the building budget to be allocated to the art programme.

AGRICULTURE EMPOWERMENT AND DEMOGRAPHY

Italy is an historical urban oriented country; in spite of that, fascist government considered the agrarian development as a priority.

During the '20s, some areas of the country had been already identified as largely underdeveloped and the poorness of some rural zones pushed to the improvement of productive land surface. Conjugate agricultural needs and territorial expansion interests had, as logical answer, the drainage of extended areas and the foundation of several settlements. The Agro Pontino - a large marshy district immediately south of Rome - was the most important drainage project but others localities were taken into consideration in Italy and in the colonies. Government had to find new agricultural areas; new agricultural villages and new towns all over the future empire was the answer.

Some of the positions of the fascist party on these topics were officially presented during the Mussolini speech to the parliament on the Ascension Day, 1927 named "the Ascension speech". Far to be a real bible of fascist positions, this speech contains some clear references to the priority granted to rural areas, contrasting with the urban and industrial development.

"*Questo ancora non basta. C'è un tipo di urbanesimo che è distruttivo, che isterilisce il popolo, ed è l'urbanesimo industriale*

…

l'urbanesimo industriale porta alla sterilità le popolazioni; secondo che altrettanto fa la piccola proprietà rurale. Aggiungete a queste due cause d'ordine economico la infinita vigliaccheria morale delle classi cosiddette superiori della società.

vi spiegherete quindi come io non ammetta in Italia che le industrie sane, le quali industrie sane sono quelle che trovano da lavorare nell'agricoltura e nel mare"

(Mussolini, 1927)

In the same text, the theme of demographic increment to become a powerful country was also presented. To Mussolini, and his entourage, the number of inhabitants was a direct power indicator. The demographical theorem was translated in an unambiguous politic, an instrument to attain the sought result.

"*I'Italia, per contare qualche cosa, deve affacciarsi sulla soglia della seconda metà di questo secolo con una popolazione non inferiore ai sessanta milioni di abitanti*

…

Se si diminuisce, signori, non si fa l'Impero, si diventa una colonia!" (Mussolini, 1927)

The other Mussolini assumption pronounced in 1928: "*In un'Italia tutta bonificata, coltivata, irrigata, disciplinata, cioè fascista, c'è posto e pane ancora per dieci milioni di uomini*", resume clearly the political context and justify the new settlements strategy. A large legislation[i] and considerable funds boosted the recover of reclaimed land.

This politic represented also a safe base to legitimize the fascism himself; the agrarian politic was a link with a large part of the population, already in crisis because of poorness and difficulty in integrate the new economical structure.

To combine priorities – rurality anddemography – a powerful propaganda machine pushed to the development agriculture. Mussolini appeared in agricultural postures as wheat threshing and harvesting or awarding prizes to exceptionally large rural families - a duty to tax singles was also introduced. In fact, during the 20s and the 30s, demography by direct born rate increased faster in rural area than in urban ones. Some historians consider that the priority to rural area was directly connected with the purpose to limit social riots. Obviously also urban population increased during the fascist period due to the benefits ofindustrial growth.

THE '30S: RIPE PROPOSALS IN ITALY AND ABROAD

The fascist regime realized an enormous number of constructions, new buildings and master plans for the major Italian towns like Rome, Naples and Milan. At the same time, new master plans and large improvements were planned and realized all over the possessions like Addis Ababa, Rhodes and Tirana.

Concerning the new settlements, mainly dedicated to agricultural purpose, the regime realized towns, villages and small service centres. Skipping the numeric discussion due to the polemic on the number and status of realized settlements, I clarify the differences in ranking. The conceptual base of these realizations was new land organization and exploiting system. The political aim was to dominate new territories with new structures; applying new fascist mankind.

Pragmatism suggests considering three different levels in subdivision: town, villages and small secondary settlements. The attribution of a one tier standard produce a confused definition and, at the same time, refuse to consider small settlements as a realized part of the land domination, giving an image that's too restricted and out of sense.

Beside this, the most of the realizations were done during the '30s; in 1940 Italy joinedthe Second World War and the construction activities slowed down. The regime fell down in 1943; that left the development agenda not fulfilled: town and territorial complexity, in fact, can't be fully realized in a decade.

To analyse architecture and urbanism it is necessary to take into consideration two different external elements: development of rationalism and modern style and, starting from 1936, the autarchy established in reason of Society of Nations embargo, reacting to Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

Since most of the best Italian architects and town planners were integrated in the fascist system, the new settlements and architecture enjoyed a high quality of project.

"*Non è mai esistita, di fatto, un'opposizione al regime fascista operata dagli architetti italiani attivi tra il Venti e il Quaranta, anzi, se mai, fu vero proprio il contrario: si attiva una specie di rincorsa per raggiungere … Futuristi, razionalisti, classicisti, novecentisti … una posizione di predominio e di relativo monopolio culturale*" (Muratore, 2002, p. 20).

In the agricultural foundation structures, we can find

"*Gli anni '20 del nostro secolo testimoniano di una profonda cesura rispetto all'architettura tradizionale, ma in Italia la tradizione subì una ben calcolata riformulazione, con una singolare mescolanza di moderno e di tradizionale in architettura e in urbanistica.*

Di tale fenomeno Littoria e Guidonia costituiscono esempi particolarmente efficaci, con tipi storici identificabili, abilmente riadattati per seguire criteri urbanistici moderni, inseriti in nuove versioni di vecchi prototipi.

…

architettura e urbanistica sono vincolate a forme e schemi urbani tratti da tipi antichi o medievali … non si può certo parlare di un'autentica modernità

…

Anche le città non erano vere città - nel senso di centri culturali, sociali, politici e commerciali - e non erano nella stessa misura in cui costituivano invece una parte integrante di una struttura amministrativa destinata a collegare i singoli aricoltori od operai alle organizzazioni fasciste e,

attravaerso queste ultime, agli indirizzi razionali del fascismo. (Ghirardo and Forster, 1985, pages 630, 631 and 670)

In this text, Ghirardo and Forster presented the well-known "traditional" view of fascist social interpretation of the rural society. Far from regime rehabilitation, we should consider a new analysis of the theme.

Structures of villages answer to the archetypical idea of small rural municipality in northern Italy, with a central social and service square – with the fascist building as social collector in this case – and a large diffusion of workers independent houses in the agricultural fields.

The formal idea of rural spreading properties produce a territorial conception funded over central nucleus surrounded by arrayed family houses on a large territorial net. The '70s literature, considered that land occupation directly deriving from the regime fear of social and political agglomeration out of order.

During the '90s, due to new references and some personal interview with people who lived in Libyan villages and in the Latina province, I was convinced to re-examine from a different point of view. The diffuse habitat directly on field is something traditional in mixed agricultural and breeding production, large families groups used to live in that way, far to consider themselves as isolated. Small neighbourhood activities acted during the working week and there were weekly general meetings in the "burgs". This created a kind of proximity, of course, less dense than the town and factory one.

There are some concentration areas in the fascist new settlements: three in Italy - Agro Pontino, Sicily and northern Puglie – and one on the northern part of Libya. The same strategy was used in AOI (Africa Orientale Italiana, Italian Eastern Africa), Albania, Greece and nowadays Croatia but these experiences had less inhabitants. The Sardinia' new towns were dedicated mainly to mining activities, so their social and architectural structures are completely different (Mussolinia di Sardegna, now Arborea, is an exception as it was founded before the regime existence).

The Agro Pontino model is the first one and a clearly successful one, due to the interesting and rich actors' structure and strategy and because of his subsequent development,realized after the war.

The most important of the new towns was Littoria; nowadays called Latina is second town in Lazio after Rome. Projected by Oriolo Frezzottiit was inaugurated by Mussolini on June the 30th, 1932. The town is the largest urban result of the ONC (Opera Nazionale Combattenti – Organization for I WW Veterans) activities, with a traditional three squares system and high representative buildings. Littoria/Latina was conceived as the centre of the new reclaimed area and it is still playing that role.

In the same large zone, several other towns and villages were founded; the second most well-known is Sabaudia, which was founded directly by Mussolini, on August 1933, who understood the using foundation mythology importance.

The urban plan of this second town was realized by the establishment town planner Luigi Piccinato, in cooperation with G. Cancellotti, E. Montuori and A. Scalpelli.

Around those two towns, 19 small new towns and villages were born within the same landscape programme. The reclaimed area is inhabited nowadays by nearly 230 thousands inhabitants; in 1921 they were 7.667, so the growth is more than 3.000% (Pennacchi, 2003).

This experience leaded – in town planning and landscape - the others in Italy, as the northern Puglie and the Sicilian one. Really important experiences were realized in colonies.

Libya had a special position in the new settlements reality. Agricultural use of the land was considered immediately as the colony core business and a concession system was realised. Due to the difficulties in conquest and to the installing process, up to the '20s the human presence was not really high and composed mainly by large extensive capitalistic exploitations. Starting from the '20s, a new process was introduced, with really heavy infrastructure investments realised by the colonial government in the aim to make Libya suitable to receive a large population.

The colonization strategy instituted a system where the land property passed from the State to labourer families after several years of work on site. The principal actors of this strategy were the Azienda Tabacchi Italiani (Italians Tobacco Enterprise), the Ente per la Colonizzazione della Cirenaica (Company for Cyrenaica Colonization) and, later, the Ente per la Colonizzazione della Libia (Company for Libyan Colonization).

The 1937 agricultural census shows a total of 12288 people composing 2771 families, with more than 80% of them working directly in agriculture and about 700 families located in the new districts developed by the colonisation organisms.

The situation radically changed with the "*Ventimila*" massive operation organised under Italo Balbo governorate mandate.

On the 1938 and 1939 March on Rome anniversary (October, 28th), 30 000 colons arrived in Libya and reached their villages. It was the largest new settlement operation covering a total of more than 133 000 ha.

The number of Italian farmer families passed from 331 in 1930/31 to 6 166 in 1940, while farm cottages passed from 347 to 5 752. In that context natives' families in native' villages conditions were 131 in 1939.

38new villages were founded between 1933 and 1940 (Gresleri, 1993, p. 310): the most of them constituted by a symbolic square, representing the core of the village – usually hosting school, church, basic shops, police station and fascist party building -, and several colonial houses spread all over the agricultural land.

On a quite similar urban structure, we can find similar styles of architecture. The most of the buildings are a combination of modernism, of the myth of fascist order, and of the idea of the Mediterranean house. A reference to the metaphysic aesthetic is quite unforgettable.Only some case differs to those references. D'Annunzio village,for example, is roofed on tiles as a traditional central and northern Italy village.

AFTER THE WORLD WAR

The intersection within the myth of the conquest, the modern style and the *genius historici* recovering, created singular architectural and urban artefacts.

That combination produced some interesting territorial models that, in spite of their similarity, were soon included by different states. The Italian defeat in the IIWW spread those settlements into different countries (Italy, Greece, Libya, Albania, Yugoslavia/Croatia and the former AOI), producing a plurality of nowadays cultural heritage status.

The interest to that heritage was directly connected to political events. The cultural relationship to colonial period and particularly to fascist one, became a large reference of its identity. It was, and it still is, considered as a political container.

Immediately after the war, Italian political situation was not clear. A large part of the political parties were interested in going on with the Italian colonial adventure, so they tried to conserve the former colonies. Only the Communist party decided to condemn colonisation.

During the instable period between April 25th, 1945 – the official end of the IIWW in Italy – and June the 2nd, 1946 – date of the referendum that decided the passage from kingdom to republic – colonial topics were integrated in the national political restructure.

Even if largely cut off from real contacts with the old-colonies, topics related to Africa took part in national political reconstruction. The evidence of the defeat was the Italian territorial resize, the lost of the colonies and the transfer of a part of Italy to Yugoslavia. The territorial domination remained a special issue of fascism.

As a matter of fact, the double defeat – military and diplomatic – was completely assigned to the Mussolini regime and forget it as fast as possible became the easiest solution. The cut off with the former kingdom – a not complete cut off that left a large space to permeability – was done negating a part of the memory.

Relationship with colonial settlements, favourite site of fascist propaganda, became vague, even in scientific fields. The R. Mariani statement, mainly based on the fascist new towns in 1978, could be enlarged to the global panel of new fascist settlements.

"*Tuttavia, mentre lo stato fascista sfruttava al massimo il potenziale propagandistico rappresentato dalle città nuove, gli storici sono stati per lungo tempo riluttanti a strudiarle correndo il rischio persino, di avallare un regime totalmente sureditato. Motivi politici ne decretano la fondazione, e motivi politici ne hanno sancito, per quasi quarant'anni, una pressoché totale misconoscenza*" (Mariani, 1978).

Memory is on going to (re) discover the experience. During the last 20 years of the woth century, interest on colonisations grows up. Archives where finally opened to historians, scientific results started to be published and political events, in Italy and abroad, allowed the rediscovery of some historical "forbidden" and lost passages.

[1]The royal decree 3256/23 (D.R.L. December 30, 1923, n. 3256) and the Serpieri law 753/24 (May 18, 1924, n. 753), the law 3134/28 (December 24, 1928, n. 3134 "bonifica integrale") and the decree 215/33 (R.D.L. February 13, 1933 n. 215).

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