

# Italian rationalism -Fascist/Antifascist thoughts, figures and movement

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## English summary

### Introduction

This book is aimed to reconsider Italian rational architecture in relation to the history of European modern architecture. We try to seize the rationalism movement that gets closer to Fascist government from the point view of anti-fascism or that of certain culture which keeps fascism at a distance.

First, to clarify the situation of Fascist culture, we take up Futurism and an art historian Roberto Longhi (1890-1970) as typical examples of art movements and intellectuals before Fascist regime. Secondly, after following the activities of Italian rationalism, we take up the one in northern Italy which continued the avant-garde activities for realizing modern architecture during the Fascist regime, especially Giuseppe Terragni (1904-43) and Giuseppe Pagano (1896-1945) and their works. Finally, in order to understand the relation among architecture, politics and arts in those days, we focus on a journalist P.M.Bardi (1900-99) and a critic Edoardo Persico (1900-36), who served to bridge the gaps among them.

### Chapter 1      Discovery of movement

To comprehend the activities and ideas of the suppressed intellectuals under the Fascist regime, we pay attention to their essays on Futurism, the composite art movement which appeared before that regime.

Piero Gobetti (1901-26), who involved in an ideology 'Rivoluzione liberale' in Turin, criticized most of Futurists' activities and stood by the historian and philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), who was attacked by Futurists. However, he sided with their admiration for science and machines and likened their activities to the cinemas. Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) also took a critical stance on Futurism for the most part, but admitted that their activities are revolutionary in a cultural sphere.

Longhi wrote theses in favour of Futurists. He estimated that their paintings are superior to those of Cubists because Futurists tackled the representation of movement. Concerning Umberto Boccioni's sculptures, Longhi highly regarded the expression of 'Dynamism' in them, as the dynamic structure of Gothic architecture, whereas he praised Carlo Carrà because this artist did not cling to just one art movement like Futurism or 'Metafisica' but continued to search for his original art. If Longhi's thought, which identifies art criticism with art history, could be applied also to his criticism on Carrà's paintings, his estimate of the artist's landscapes as 'Italianità' could be related to Longhi's interest in regional culture in his study on art history.

### Chapter 2      Introduction of Modern architecture

Carlo Enrico Rava (1903-85) and Adalberto Libera (1903-63), who were the members of Gruppo 7 that published four theses on Italian rational architecture between 1926 and 27, left the group by 1930. Rava later insisted 'Mediterraneità' for new architecture while Libera did 'Romanità', and both slogans might suggest imperialism declared by Mussolini in the 1920s.

Antonio Gramsci, who was the leader of Italian Communist Party and imprisoned in 1926

because of the suppression of ideas by Government, was interested in new architectural movement and wrote some theses on it. In 'Architettura nuova', he appreciated the important role of the new architecture in the society, because it involved the people of different professions through the process of its realization, and consequently made them have interest in art. In 'Letteratura popolare', he considered that Rational architecture has an objective of creating 'taste (gusto)' and estimated its artistic character. He also developed his theory on the social role of art represented by 'gusto' and the social significance of Rational architecture into the political issues and public order which he involved in.

### **Chapter 3      Attempt on systematic revolution**

In the 1920s, the Fascist government supported Italian artists giving them opportunities for exhibitions but didn't take concrete measures to promote architectural culture. Following Mussolini's statements of modern art exhibitions such as Quadriennale di Roma, Bardi, a gallery owner and journalist, developed the theme of Duce's address concerning the relation between the Fascist regime and art into that of modern architecture, and requested Duce to accept the latter and to found a national institution for architecture.

In March 1928, the first exhibition of Italian rational architecture was held. After CIAM was organized in Switzerland in June 1928, the rationalists throughout Italy formed MIAR in 1930 in order to expand their architectural movement in a national scale. MIAR has two objectives: one is to fill the role of the Italian branch of CIAM and the other to let Government accept and guarantee Italian rational architecture and their activities. MIAR's main activities were to participate in CIAM and to hold the second exhibition of Italian rational architecture. Bardi also involved in organizing it and caused controversies about architecture using journalism. The second exhibition held in Rome from the end of March 1931 seemed to obtain the approval of Government because of the Mussolini's visit. However, the conservatives in anger against 'Tavolo degli orrori' planned by Bardi, went on counterattack on MIAR and exerted to pressure on them to break up.

Ardengo Soffici (1879-1964), who was in the cultural group Strapaese, criticized Italian rational architecture in his thesis 'Bandiera gialla. Architettura razionale' in 1931. He doubted that rational architecture, which has its origin in the northern Europe, was appropriate for Italian life. He added that Italian traditional architecture and houses are much more rational than the works proposed by rationalists from the point of view of the climate conditions and customs.

### **Chapter 4      Restart**

In the 1930s where the Fascist government intensified nationalism, rationalists in Turin, Milan and Como still continued their avant-garde activities. They not only developed their movement into exhibitions or journalism like art movements of their days or precedent such as Futurism, but also tried to go into the capital with participating to the exhibition of Fascist revolution or competitions organized by Government, their biggest client. As regards the competition for Palazzo Littorio, however, they failed in this attempt because Mussolini intervened in judging and confused the committee. He preferred monumental architecture, which would agitate the masses, and didn't highly estimate modern architecture like the proposition B of Terragni group who regarded the function as important.

## Chapter 5 Under the Fascist regime

After the Establishment of Fascist regime, the institution of the Governor General was formed in Rome and Mussolini declared imperialism and announced to make the third Rome, which would expand to the Mediterranean Sea after monarchical Rome in ancient times and pontifical Rome of Middle Age. Marcello Piacentini (1881-1960) took part in reconstructing Rome and a rationalist Pagano also collaborated with him for Città universitaria a Roma and E42. In the latter case, however, the classical architectural style called 'E42 style' was argued and Duce told even the winners of the competitions, such as Libera, to modify or change their propositions into more classical ones with arches and columns, but leaving ornaments out. Concerning the competitions of the railway station of Florence and of the urban project of Sabaudia in Rome, on the other hand, the propositions of modern architecture were selected to realization.

Pagano organized the photographic exhibition of 'Italian rural architecture' in Triennale of 1936. In the introduction of its catalogue, he proposed new architecture based on the aesthetic relation between necessity and form. His proposition doesn't regard any social role that Gramsci considered the characteristics of new architecture. However, his way of seeking for architecture with studying rural houses may have some points in common to the consideration of Gramsci as they took the matters of the people.

## Chapter 6 Suburban city-Microcosmos

Terragni had taken a great interest in Michelangelo's works since he was a student of Politecnico. As regards Michelangelo's theme in the relation of classicism and anti-classicism, Terragni practiced it with the tombs of Stecchini and Pirovano in Como. The original design of the Stecchini tomb is considered to be that of Pirovano in the early stage, in 1928, and he abstracted this classical design for the Pirovano tomb. Finally, he placed face to face the classical tomb and anti-classical one both of which originated from the same project. During his study, Terragni also searched for new architectural elements such as fine slits in Pirovano tomb, breaking down conventional elements such as thick walls and columns.

In the 1930s, Mussolini frequently gave many architects audiences including rationalists and Terragni had opportunities to show him several projects. Although Terragni seemed to believe that Mussolini would support his modern architecture, any project shown to Duce didn't be realized and Terragni has never won the competitions the Fascist regime organized and Mussolini involved in jury.

Concerning Casa del Fascio di Como, whose theme was 'house for people', Terragni followed Mussolini's statement 'il fascismo e una casa di vetro in cui tutti possono guardare' and put 18 glass doors in the entrance so that people in the square in front of Casa could see the atrium inside through them and access there directly. However, following the hierarchic relation Terragni put meeting room on the second floor as the hierarchy would look down the people in the atrium on the ground floor. Therefore, the planning is inconsistent with what he wanted to express 'house for people'. Incidentally, Terragni painted his own portrait as commander of army. Nevertheless, in Casa del Fascio, he seemed not to leave himself as one of the hierarchy. He would probably keep a distance from his project, as an observer of Fascism.

For the proposition B of the competition of Palatto Littorio, Terragni group emphasized the exhibition buildings -space for artists- as a huge glass box, and did not praise Mussolini as did proposition A by Luigi Vietti group

Cesare Cattaneo (1912-43) worked with Terragni and collaborated with artists of 'Gruppo di Como' and was greatly influenced by the thoughts of 'Valori Primordiali' which the group involved in.

Concerning Casa Cattaneo, he dealt with examining possibilities to design and realized the 'synthesis' under the severe shortage of construction materials and strict regulations and then it is estimated as 'masterpiece of poly-dimensional abstractionism'. He deepened his study of the golden section and used the  $\sqrt{\phi}$  rectangle for the façade and plan of Casa Cattaneo.

He also wrote 'Giovanni e Giuseppe' that theorized the concept of poly-dimensionality, based on the principles of Neoplatonic character and he pursued 'façade of synthesis' in architecture.

## Chapter 7 Sphere of traffic

Bardi promoted Rational architecture through journalism and exhibitions, and he was invited to visit the 4<sup>th</sup> CIAM in 1933 to report it on <Quadrante>, architectural periodicals he supervised. In the lecture of Congress in Athens, Le Corbusier cited the line (axis), which runs from the Atlantic Ocean to the south, passing the borders and crossing the Mediterranean Sea. He had proposed the ultranationalist blocs in the European Continent in the thesis published before the Congress. As regard the relation of France and Italy in the Mediterranean bloc, Bardi took up this hypothesis in the report of <Quadrante> and related Le Corbusier, whom Italian rationalists respected, to Fascism which has an imperialistic policy of conquering the Mediterranean, in order to let the situation turn out to the advantage of rationalists in the Fascist regime. Bardi also supported Le Corbusier's visit and lectures in Italy in 1934 and that French architect showed interest in the urban projects of Pontinia and those of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia which Italian government occupied.

In the 1920s, an architectural critic Persico moved from Naples to Turin and collaborated with Gobetti who advocated 'Revoluzione liberale' in publishing and contacted with antifascist intellectuals even in the 1930s. After managing Bardi's art gallery with him in Milan, Persico worked for architectural journal <Casabella> as editor and wrote criticism of art and architecture.

His criticized Italian rationalists as follows: their movement didn't start for the necessity and then lacked of the style. Although the early rationalists had foresight as they tried to relate Italian architecture to European modern movement, they changed their theme of architecture from Europeanism to some slogans that would suggest nationalism or imperialism. They especially used the word 'mediterraneità' ambiguously so as to justify their movement in the Fascist regime. Furthermore, those architects would deny the fundamental theme of rationalism and left their fate into the political matters. Persico considered Italian rationalism an architectural movement of one of the European nations. Consequently, he requested rational architects to pursue to universal taste in Europe and then to establish the expression of consciousness, that is, 'style'.

Those criticisms would be important because Persico wrote them not only with a broad outlook influenced antifascist culture but also with experiences of working with rationalists who got closer to fascism, keeping them at a distance.

## **Conclusion      Convergence to architecture**

We could see almost three types of propositions for new architecture by intellectuals taken up above. Gramsci and Persico thought the social contribution of architecture based on the people-social welfare, that is, aesthetic without form. Pagano proposed to study regional popular houses to search for new architecture based on the aesthetic relation between necessity and form, while Terragni looked for new architecture with concentrating his projects.

Finally, in order to recognize Terragni in the history of Italian modern architecture, it would be possible to compare his attitude toward designing to that of Longhi toward art, with regard to art or architectural works, and history or classicism. First, Longhi tried to establish the history of morphology for the lecture on Italian art given in 1914, while Terragni repeated morphological studies in his projects. Secondly, Longhi started both study of art history and criticism of contemporary art in 1913 as bringing the two domains closer to each other, while Terragni tried to relate classicism to modernism for two tombs and Danteum project. Concerning their ideologies, it would be possible to consider similar attitudes toward Fascism between the two because both of them seemed to compromise with the Fascist regime following the actual activities but stuck to their principles of art theory or modern architecture.