

'Il Fascismo È Una Casa Di Vetro': Giuseppe Terragni and the Politics of Space in Fascist Italy

Simona Storchi

To cite this article: Simona Storchi (2007) 'Il Fascismo È Una Casa Di Vetro': Giuseppe Terragni and the Politics of Space in Fascist Italy, *Italian Studies*, 62:2, 231-245

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/007516307X227686>



Published online: 18 Jul 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 19



View related articles [↗](#)

'IL FASCISMO È UNA CASA DI VETRO': GIUSEPPE TERRAGNI AND THE POLITICS OF SPACE IN FASCIST ITALY*

ABSTRACT

This article examines the conceptualization of space in the Casa del Fascio di Como, designed by the rationalist architect Giuseppe Terragni and inaugurated in 1936. It explores Terragni's reconfiguration of the notion of monumental space as a space in which the individual was forged daily as a national subject and as part of the phenomenon of the Fascist collectivity. In the architect's conception this was achieved through a visual and sensory spatial experience which united notions of the house, the temple and the monument. This effect was to be obtained through the creation of a new sense of the classical that encompassed signifiers of tradition and modernity and made history present through its spatial symbolic visualization. The article focuses on the textual explanation of the building in the magazine *Quadrante* and draws out the connection between its specific construction of space and debates about public and private in Fascist Italy.

In October 1936 the monthly periodical *Quadrante*, edited by the writer Massimo Bontempelli and the journalist and art critic Pier Maria Bardi, devoted a whole double issue to the newly completed Casa del Fascio in Como, planned by the rationalist architect Giuseppe Terragni. The presentation of the building was enthusiastic. The paragraph that introduced the issue described the building as 'un'opera d'architettura tra le poche veramente degne di rappresentare nel tempo l'epoca di Mussolini'.¹ According to Pier Maria Bardi, the Casa del Fascio was 'il segno certissimo di un'epoca propizia', and 'il più bel risultato delle lunghe e appassionate lotte per inaugurare in Italia la buona stagione dell'architettura del tempo di Mussolini'.² Terragni's building was seen by the editors of *Quadrante* as the successful culmination of a battle for the affirmation of modernist architecture, which the magazine had been supporting since its first issue in 1933. *Quadrante* did not present itself as a specialist publication, but, as Cesare de Seta has noted, an experimental forum for all the arts that were undergoing a process of transformation implying the rejection of orthodox tradition. These were identified in literature, music and the visual arts, but of all the arts, architecture occupied a position of primacy in the magazine.³ Such a view corresponded to a concept of architecture that Bontempelli had been theorizing since the 1920s and which he famously expressed in the first issue of *Quadrante* with the following statement:

Oggi [...] il centro espressivo della nostra vita è l'architettura. In verità l'architettura è l'arte ora in maggior fiore. Quella in cui abbiamo il maggior numero di buoni operatori, il senso di un'azione collettiva pronta a creare e imporre il linguaggio di tutta un'epoca; e nessuna

* I wish to thank the British Academy for a Small Research Grant which facilitated the research on which this article is based.

¹ '28 ottobre XV', *Quadrante*, 35–36 (1936): 1.

² Pier Maria Bardi, 'Prima conclusione di una polemica', *Quadrante*, 35–36 (1936): 2–4 (p. 2).

³ Cesare De Seta, 'Gaddus. Oltre l'architettura degli anni Trenta', in Renato Barilli et al., *Gli Annitrenta. Arte e cultura in Italia* (Milan: Mazzotta, 1983), pp. 213–16 (p. 213).

carriatide riconosciuta come maestro. [...] Oggi l'architettura (quella che conta) ha inventato l'aggettivo razionale. Ha anche inventato l'aggettivo funzionale. [...] Ho avuto altra volta l'occasione di definire l'unità del nostro tempo; ripeto qui la definizione: il massimo della espressione, il minimo di gesto, terrore del lento, disprezzo per il riposo, edificare senza aggettivi, scrivere a pareti lisce, la bellezza intesa come necessità, il pensiero nato come rischio, l'orrore del contingente.⁴

The support given by the editors of *Quadrante* to modernist architecture, culminating with the *Documentario sulla Casa del Fascio di Como* (as the issue of October 1936 was entitled), was meant to celebrate the role of modernist architecture in the redefinition of Italian cultural identity under the regime.

The aim of this article is to read Terragni's Casa del Fascio di Como, and especially the supporting textual apparatus that appeared in *Quadrante*, within the context of a poetics of space that emphasizes the interrelationship between space and politics. Terragni's intention was to employ a newly elaborated notion of modern classicism to express Fascist spatial practice. I would like to suggest a reading of the Casa del Fascio that does not focus on the architectural character of the building, but rather on the problematization of spatial representation that Terragni's project entailed. As far as the Casa del Fascio is concerned, the construction of space was a rhetorical as well as an architectural exercise. As Richard Etlin has pointed out, ideas used in Terragni's Casa del Fascio — particularly the extensive use of glass and the integration between interior and exterior — had already featured in two projects: Hannes Meyer's submission to the League of Nations competition of 1926–27 and Le Corbusier's project for the Palace of the Soviets competition of 1931. Whether Terragni was influenced by either of these two competition projects is not certain; however, Terragni applied to the Casa del Fascio architectural ideas and symbols which were ascribed to the Fascist cause, but had already been used earlier in very different political contexts.⁵ Models for the Casa del Fascio have been identified, as well as in Le Corbusier, in traditional Como courtyard houses, in Italian Renaissance (Roman-Florentine and Venetian) palaces, and in nineteenth-century institutional buildings.⁶ These associations have established links both with international Modernism and the Italian architectural tradition, which have implicitly tended to question or problematize the Fascist credentials of the building.⁷ Yet, through the *Quadrante* dossier, Terragni claimed his building for

⁴ Massimo Bontempelli, 'Principii', *Quadrante*, 1 (1933): 1.

⁵ Richard A. Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture, 1890–1940* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 446–47.

⁶ See Thomas Schumacher, 'Terragni and Classicism: Fence Sitting at the Barricades', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 41.4 (1988): 11–19; Cesare De Seta, *La cultura architettonica in Italia tra le due guerre* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1983), p. 233; and Etlin, *Modernism*, pp. 449, 462–8.

⁷ Among the many contributions to this very rich debate, see Bruno Zevi, *Storia dell'architettura italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1950) and *Giuseppe Terragni*, trans. by Luigi Beltrandi (London: Triangle, 1989); Diane Ghirardo, 'Italian Architects and Fascist Politics: An Evaluation of the Rationalist's Role in Regime Building', *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 39.2 (1980): 109–27, and 'Politics of a Masterpiece: The Vicenda of the Decoration of the Façade of the Casa del Fascio, Como, 1936–1939', *The Art Bulletin*, 62.3 (1980): 466–78; De Seta, *La cultura architettonica in Italia*; Giuseppe Mantero, *Giuseppe Terragni e la città del razionalismo italiano* (Bari: Dedalo, 1983); Dennis P. Doordan, *Building Modern Italy: Italian Architecture 1914–1936* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Giorgio Ciucci, *Gli architetti e il fascismo. Architettura e città 1922–1942* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989); Etlin, *Modernism*; Thomas Schumacher, *Surface and Symbol: Giuseppe Terragni and the Architecture of Italian Rationalism* (New York and London: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991); Giulio Carlo Argan e Achille Bonito Oliva, *L'Arte moderna. L'Arte oltre il Duemila* (Florence: Sansoni, 2003).

Fascism and attempted to develop and define a notion of Fascist space that went beyond the prescriptions of the Fascist party. The Casa del Fascio di Como, as De Seta has remarked, was conceived fundamentally as monument,⁸ or as the reconciliation of the concept of office building with that of monumental space. Indeed its monumentalism was criticized by some of Terragni's contemporaries. The architect Giuseppe Pagano in an article written for his own architectural magazine, *Casabella*, in 1937, accused Terragni's building of being 'literary', *recherché* and eccentric, and warned architects against the dangers of contemporary monumentalism.⁹

The fact that the building was conceived as a monument implied the absorption and elaboration of the language of the monumental. According to Henry Lefebvre, monumental space constitutes a collective mirror for the members of a society. Everybody participates in the social space of the monument under the conditions of generally accepted power and wisdom. The monument thus effects a consensus, in which elements of repression are metamorphed into exaltation. The use of monumental space — as Lefebvre argues — necessarily 'entails its supplying answers to all the questions that assail anyone who crosses the threshold'. Visitors take part in an ideologization of space, contemplate and decipher symbols, and 'on the basis of their own bodies, experience a total being in a total space'.¹⁰

Terragni had recently been involved in the construction of a space intended as totality of experience. The 1932 'Mostra della rivoluzione fascista', for which Terragni had designed a room, was conceived — as has been recently argued by Claudio Fogu — as a total space, in which the recent past was celebrated through a visual apparatus intended to create a sense of presence, in which the spectator was part of the historic event that was created through visualization. Visualization was therefore a key factor in the creation of historic moments and historic representation.¹¹ The creation of the monumental went through a reconfiguration of symbolic visualization.

Terragni's aim was to create a building that was the spatial representation of a specific aesthetics, ideology and view of history, but also it intended to redefine, through a poetics of spatial experience, the notion of public space under Fascism, in terms of the visualization of the spatial relationship between power and people. The *Quadrante* dossier is particularly relevant, as it was used by Terragni to position his building within debates on modernist architecture and Fascist aesthetics. He outlined what Giulio Carlo Argan has called 'il problema italiano' in architecture, that is the necessity of developing a European style within the specificity of the national context.¹² He declared his intention to visualize a new relationship between art and politics, according to which each would inform the other, and to create a new language of the monumental, capable of reconciling a functional approach with the

⁸ De Seta, *La cultura architettonica in Italia*, p. 234.

⁹ Giuseppe Pagano, 'Tre anni di architettura in Italia', *Casabella*, 10.110 (1937): 2–5 (p. 4).

¹⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 220–21.

¹¹ See Claudio Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2003), and Claudio Fogu, 'To Make History Present', in *Donatello among the Blackshirts: History and Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy*, ed. by Claudia Lazzaro and Roger Crum (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 33–49.

¹² Argan e Bonito Oliva, p. 171.

visualization of a narrative dimension appropriate to a commemorative building and a monumental space for the new nation. As he explained,

un rapporto architettonico nuovo, che pur restando estraneo alle magniloquenze di certi storici periodi di architettura, possa uscire dagli abituali rapporti stabiliti dalla funzione e dall'utilitarieria, diventa indispensabile qualora si voglia raggiungere una commozione poetica con l'esaltazione di fatti politici, di vittorie militari, o di conquiste rivoluzionarie.¹³

With his building Terragni constructed a narrative of poetic visual representation, thereby consciously moving away from the functional imperative that had informed the principles of rationalist architecture since these had been proclaimed by the architects of the so-called *Gruppo 7* between 1926 and 1927.¹⁴ In a series of articles published in the periodical *Rassegna italiana*, the *Gruppo 7* had expounded the main principles of their architecture. These architects were inspired by the theorizations of Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe and Walter Gropius. They were particularly inspired by Le Corbusier's volume *Vers une architecture* (1923) in which the Swiss-born architect had outlined his new principles of architecture and the management of architectural space. The main points of their manifesto were the acknowledgement of a tradition of the new, in Le Corbusier, Gropius, and Mies Van der Rohe; their positioning as mediators between the modern tradition and the secular Italian tradition and their consequent interpretation of the Italian artistic and architectural tradition in anti-academic terms; their nationalist position; their disassociation from Futurism and Cubism; and their quest for clarity, revision and order.¹⁵ They identified a 'new spirit' in Italian art that captured the essence of their time and which they aspired to express in architecture, represented by such artists as Giorgio De Chirico, Carlo Carrà and Mario Sironi and writers such as Massimo Bontempelli.¹⁶ From the point of view of form, they invoked a functional architecture, beautified by geometrical regularity and repetitiveness (the so-called 'edificio-tipo') and rejected any form of individuality in architecture. They re-read the notion of the classical as the legacy of Greek civilization absorbed by Mediterranean (particularly Italian) culture, whose essence was interpreted as a sense of logic, lucidity and order.¹⁷ Such a re-fashioning of the notion of the classical allowed the concept to be mobilized and revived as the essence of national identity, and incorporated in discourses of modernity.¹⁸ Within this context, Giorgio Ciucci has observed that Terragni's

¹³ Giuseppe Terragni, 'La costruzione della Casa del Fascio di Como', *Quadrante*, 35–36 (1936): 6.

¹⁴ The architects who made up the *Gruppo 7* were Ubaldo Castagnoli, Luigi Figini, Guido Frette, Sebastiano Larco, Gino Pollini, Carlo Enrico Rava and Giuseppe Terragni. Castagnoli was later replaced by Adalberto Libera.

¹⁵ De Seta, *La cultura architettonica in Italia*, pp. 218–19.

¹⁶ Significantly, Adalberto Libera in 1929 wrote to Bontempelli, regarding the periodical 900, edited by Bontempelli between 1926 and 1929: 'considero il clima di 900 come il più favorevole al [...] movimento di "Architettura razionale" per le moltissime analogie spirituali che legano i due movimenti' (Massimo Bontempelli Papers, 1865–1991, Getty Research Institute, Research Library, Accession n. 910147, Box 10, Folder 4, letter dated 5 April 1929).

¹⁷ See the following articles by the *Gruppo 7*: 'Architettura', *Rassegna italiana*, December 1926: 849–54; 'Architettura. II. Gli stranieri', *Rassegna italiana*, February 1927: 129–37; 'Architettura. III. Impreparazione-Incomprensione-Pregiudizi', *Rassegna italiana*, March 1927: 247–52; 'Architettura. IV. Una nuova epoca arcaica', *Rassegna italiana*, April 1927: 466–72.

¹⁸ On reconfigurations of the notion of the classical in the years after World War One, see Simona Storchi, *Valori Plastici 1918–1922. Le inquietudini del nuovo classico*, supplement to the *Italianist*, 26 (2006).

classicism was not a literal representation of a past model, but an understanding of what he perceived as the classical spirit, which he conceived especially in terms of geometrical order. His buildings aspired to a classical harmony which extrapolated the essence of the classical without recourse to the classicist formal apparatus.¹⁹ The connotations of the idea of the classical in terms of national identity allowed the creation of an architecture of celebration which intended to synthesize the idea of modernity with that of classical tradition so as to create a monument that could be the visualization of the legacy of a millenary tradition and at the same time, through its concept and disposition of space, the spatial synthesis of the achievements of Fascism.

Como's Casa del Fascio was commissioned from Terragni in 1932 and inaugurated in 1936.²⁰ Like all the Case del Fascio, it was a building whose primary function was to be the party headquarters in the city that hosted it. However — as Emilio Gentile has noted — the Case del Fascio were invested right from the start with a cult value, as they all hosted a *sacrario*, that is a shrine devoted to the memory of the martyrs of the Fascist revolution, which in effect turned them into temples. Their structure, location and aesthetics were not only in function of their bureaucratic purpose, but also of their pedagogical and propaganda role. Besides being party headquarters, the Case del Fascio were supposed to be the centres of the political and social life of the Fascist collectivity, places of cult and of educational and propaganda activity. For these reasons, the Fascist party hierarchy insisted on the creation of a symbolic aspect for the buildings themselves. They were, for instance, frequently characterized by the presence of a *torre littoria*, a tower emulating the bell towers adorning medieval towns with their bell towers rivalling those of churches.²¹ As Diane Ghirardo has explained, the model for the Case del Fascio was elaborated in 1932, when they started following the model of the typical municipal building developed in Northern Italy between the 12th and the 14th centuries. Together with the bell tower, as their most important feature, municipal buildings featured an assembly hall, internal or external staircases for use during ceremonies, a balcony from which to address the people (the *arengario*), battlements, and office space within the building. When the Fascist party adopted this general model for the Case del Fascio in 1932, it was meant to be an identifiable and reassuring standard that held out a promise to restore a glorious past. The Casa del Fascio became in this way a feature of the architectural and political history of a town that both blended with and was distinct from existing public buildings.²²

For his building, Terragni rejected some of the most obvious features of the Case del Fascio, such as the tower and *arengario*.²³ Indeed, as Ghirardo notes, his rejection

¹⁹ Giorgio Ciucci, *Gli architetti e il fascismo*, p. 147.

²⁰ See Schumacher, *Surface and Symbol*, pp. 140–70.

²¹ Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1993), pp. 242–44. See also Diane Ghirardo, 'Politics of a Masterpiece'.

²² Diane Ghirardo, 'Terragni e gli storici: vicende nella tipologia e nella politica della Casa del fascio di Como', in *Giuseppe Terragni. Opera completa*, ed. by Giorgio Ciucci (Milan: Electa, 1996), pp. 257–65 (pp. 260–61). See also Flavio Mangione, *Le case del fascio. In Italia e nelle terre d'oltremare* (Rome: Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, Direzione generale per gli archivi, 2003).

²³ David Crowley, 'National Modernism', in *Modernism 1914–1939: Designing a New World* (London: V&A Publications, 2006), pp. 341–74 (p. 352).

of a blind repetition of the medieval *municipio* and his critical elaboration of the model proposed by the PNF is evidence of Terragni's belief in the modern character of the Fascist revolution.²⁴ Such a belief was reiterated by Terragni's explanation of his difficulty in dealing with the planning of the Casa del Fascio, a difficulty that was due to the lack of available models for such a building. A new type of building was to be created as testimony to Fascism's absolute originality.²⁵

According to the realization of the final project, the Casa del Fascio was a four-storey building with an almost square base, whose sides each measured approximately 33.2 metres. The height of the building was exactly half this, measuring 16.6 metres. The exterior was entirely covered in white marble and the entrance led on to a courtyard which opened on a square (Fig. 1).

The building featured a large central hall, two storeys high, covered by a ceiling made of concrete and glass tiles. All the rooms were distributed along the four sides and had windows on the four façades, each of them different. The ground floor was composed of the atrium, the hall, the *sacrario*, to the left of the entrance, offices, and the main staircase on the right. On the first floor the main staircase opened onto a gallery overlooking the central hall, along which the most important offices were

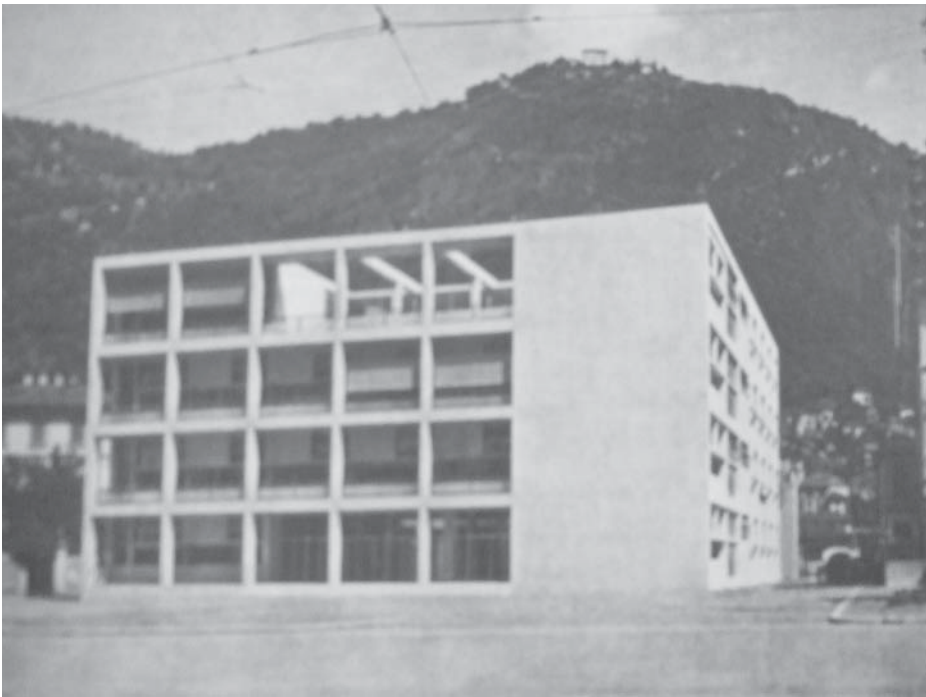


FIGURE 1. Casa del Fascio di Como. *Quadrante*, October 1936.

²⁴ Ghirardo, 'Terragni e gli storici', p. 262.

²⁵ Terragni, 'La costruzione', p. 5.

located: those of the political secretariat, the federal secretary and the hall of the directorate. The second floor followed the same distribution of rooms as the first floor. It hosted offices, the administration and the library. The top floor, only reachable by a secondary staircase, hosted the rooms designated for university groups, the archive and the caretaker's apartment. On the ground floor the entrance was composed of a continuous series of eighteen glass doors, opening up on to the square. On public occasions all the doors would be opened, so as to create a continuous space between the meeting hall and the square (Fig. 2). As Sergio Poretti has observed, the extensive use of glass as well as marble had a symbolic as well as functional role. It stressed the dual character of the Casa as simultaneously a traditional and modern building.²⁶

Antonino Saggio associates Terragni's building, with its compact, symmetrical, shape and the impact created by the completely monochromatic choice of pure white, with artistic Modernism, in particular with the rarefied spaces and pure volumes found in the paintings of De Chirico, Sironi, Carrà and Morandi. He also identifies the major novelty and the symbolic core of the building not so much in the disposition of offices and meeting rooms or in the presence of a *sacrario*, but rather in the creation of the large meeting hall, around which the spaces in the House were distributed. Such a hall, capable of hosting at least 250 people, was meant to celebrate and foster the development of the mass dimension of Fascism.²⁷

The sense of disquiet generated by the all-pervasive transparency of the building, together with its mass characterization, was perceived by Massimo Bontempelli, who visited the building in August 1936 and who initially wrote the editorial meant to introduce the special issue of *Quadrante*. Because of its critical tone, Bontempelli's article was not published and was replaced by an editorial written by Bardi (Bontempelli's piece was subsequently published in *La Gazzetta del Popolo* and included in the 1938 collection of essays *L'avventura novecentista*).²⁸ Beside underlining the detachment from the notion of pure functionalism in the building, in his article Bontempelli highlighted the obliteration of the individual that materials and disposition of spaces in Terragni's Casa del Fascio presupposed. He observed:

L'ultima opera di Terragni e dell'architettura nuova in Italia è la Casa del Fascio di Como. Lo spirito che l'ha generata in modo diretto, è il sentimento e la necessità di una vita collettiva. C'è un'architettura che che vi parla dell'individuo, dei suoi più fondi enigmi o dei suoi più abbandonati riposi. Un'altra, nella quale puoi leggere chiara come in una lapide l'indole e il compiacimento della famiglia. Che sono le due più elementari forme di raccoglimento dell'uomo dal resto del mondo. Qui ogni senso di raccoglimento scompare, lo vediamo davanti ai nostri occhi dissolversi nell'aria.²⁹

²⁶ Sergio Poretti, '1928, 1932–1936. Casa del fascio di Como', in *Giuseppe Terragni. Opera completa*, pp. 391–407. Doordan has noted that other features designed to establish a dialectical relationship hinting at the synthesis of tradition and modernity that the Casa del Fascio meant to represent, in tune with Fascist ideology, were trabeated and mural elements, strip and sash windows, natural and artificial light (Doordan, p. 138).

²⁷ Antonino Saggio, *Giuseppe Terragni. Vita e opere* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2005), p. 43.

²⁸ Massimo Bontempelli, *L'avventura novecentista*, ed. by Ruggero Jacobbi (Florence: Vallecchi, 1974; 1st edn 1938), pp. 336–38. See Francesco Tentori, 'Terragni e Bontempelli: architettura e letteratura', in *Giuseppe Terragni. Opera completa*, pp. 207–17 (pp. 207–8) and Francesco Tentori, *P.M. Bardi* (Milan: Mazzotta, 1990), pp. 131–34.

²⁹ Bontempelli, *L'avventura novecentista*, p. 336.



FIGURE 2. A crowd gathered outside the Casa del Fascio. *Quadrante*, October 1936.

Bontempelli saw the Casa del Fascio as a building in which the individual as such was not contemplated, since on the one hand he was dissolved into a space designed around the idea of the crowd and on the other he was annihilated through his being what Bontempelli called 'concentration' and 'meditation'. The thinking individual was opposed to the unthinking, anonymous crowd of collective life, experience and politics. This view of the crowd was in tune with an interpretation of mass life and culture (derived from the writings of Gustave Le Bon and Georges Sorel, which had been absorbed by Fascism and on which Bontempelli had been writing since the 1920s) leading on the one hand to a conceptualization of the mass as fundamentally unthinking and manipulable, and on the other to a view of it as a powerful presence of modern public life which artists as well as politicians had to confront in the pursuit of power or artistic success. Both of these perspectives implied a need to understand and shape public opinion.³⁰ In virtue of such an interpretation, Bontempelli identified the Casa del Fascio as a space where people, depending on their role, could not but 'obey and command'; he stressed the totalitarian inclusive character of a building which, because of its nature as a space that defined collectivity, did not conceive of closed spaces, that is of those spaces which were precluded to strangers. The transparency of the Casa del Fascio annihilated the notion of the alien, thereby fulfilling the denial of the possibility of individual estrangement, in tune with the notion expressed by the doctrine of Fascism that nothing existed outside the state. It was a building that, in effect, refused enclosure, so as not to create an outside. As Bontempelli argued, through the elimination of traditional heavy doors and the extensive use of glass, 'in questa casa tutto nasce dall'esterno, dalla piazza, dall'aria; e tutto subito muove e ridiventa esterno'.³¹ As Ciucci has remarked, with his building Terragni made explicit his intention to connect the idea of an external order with that of internal order.³² This was noticeable both at an architectural and at a metaphorical level. Bontempelli observed that the façades belonged both to the building and to the city, and represented a sort of partition, which filtered the transition from one to the other, but at the same time reflected one in the other. He detected a fundamental lack of a dialectical relationship between inside and outside and an implicit annihilation of the individual which that implied, thereby characterizing the building with a totalitarian connotation. He perceived that the space of transparency and readability is in effect, as Lefebvre has also argued, a repressive space, as nothing escapes the surveillance of power. Such a space merges the sphere of private life — which should be enclosed and have a finite aspect — with the opening outwards of public space.³³

Bontempelli's comments on the sense of collective existence and purpose that emanated from the building were certainly acceptable and even positive within the framework of Fascist ideology. However, the idea of the crushing of the individual as a private and, especially, a thinking being, which he had acutely identified, was unpalatable, and led to Bardi rewriting the editorial which was supposed to open the

³⁰ See Simona Storchi, 'Realism beyond Mimesis. Massimo Bontempelli's *Novocentismo*', *Spunti e Ricerche*, 19 (2006): 107–21.

³¹ Bontempelli, *L'avventura novecentista*, p. 337.

³² Giorgio Ciucci, 'Terragni e l'architettura', in *Giuseppe Terragni. Opera completa*, pp. 20–73 (p. 47).

³³ Lefebvre, p. 147.

issue.³⁴ Rather more unproblematical compared to Bontempelli's article, Bardi's editorial was based on the rhetoric of construction that had characterized Fascist culture since the 1920s and which had been appropriated on a metaphorical level by all the artistic fields. The building metaphor was particularly emphasized in the context of the new empire. The necessity to build was not just presented in practical terms, but also as having symbolic and monumental value. The promotion of Terragni's rationalism was identified with the promotion of a truly Fascist style.³⁵

Terragni used the *Quadrante* dossier to expose the nature and intended significance of his project, partly to justify his architectural choices. After introducing the section with an explanation on the nature of the commission he received in 1932, in which he introduced the concept of the building as the architectural equivalent to Fascism's originality, he moved on to the second section, entitled 'Esigenze della pianta', in which he elucidated the distribution of the space in the building. It is in this section that Terragni expounded the ideologization of space that the Casa del Fascio entailed. He explained that the plan of the Casa was based on the idea of a large covered central space on which meeting rooms and offices opened up. The need to create a space which should be accessible by crowds of people was at the centre of the project:

occorre studiare la possibilità di accedere a questo vastissimo ambiente in formazione affiancata di fascisti e di popolo per le grandi adunate: occorre annullare ogni soluzione di continuità tra interno ed esterno rendendo possibile che un gerarca parli agli ascoltatori riuniti nell'interno, e sia contemporaneamente seguito e ascoltato dalla massa adunata sulla piazza. Ecco il concetto mussoliniano che *il fascismo è una casa di vetro in cui tutti possono guardare*, dar luogo anche a questa interpretazione che è completamento della prima: nessun ingombro, nessuna barriera, nessun ostacolo tra gerarchie politiche e popolo.³⁶

As Attilio Terragni reports, the Casa del Fascio had 572 square metres of façades and 315 square metres of openings. Inside the building, glass covered almost all of the vertical and horizontal surfaces, together with other reflecting materials, such as mirror-polished stone, in order to create effects of visual simultaneity and interpenetration, but also to mark 'the timing of the history of a new light, of a new brilliance'.³⁷ Terragni was certainly following the directives of the competition which the newspaper *L'assalto* had launched in March 1932 to define the style of the future Casa

³⁴ Despite Bardi's censorship, Terragni himself held Bontempelli's opinion in great esteem. This is evident from a letter sent by Terragni to Bontempelli, dated 24 January 1937, in which Terragni wrote: 'Sai quanto grande, viva e sincera sia l'ammirazione che ho per te, maestro di contemporaneità a tutti noi; e per i tuoi giudizi sempre obiettivi e sereni; giudizi che se talvolta non accetto che dopo cortese discussione sono sempre per me oggetto di meditata riflessione (sto rileggendo per la 3a volta quel tuo articolo sulla Casa del Fascio di Como)'. In a letter dated 24 November 1939, after the publication of *L'avventura novecentista*, Terragni stated again his respect for Bontempelli's judgement: 'L'onore grande che mi fai di una lunga esauriente citazione [nell'*Avventura Novecentista*] mi ricorda una burrascosa e pur bella giornata passata qui a Como e mi testimonia una volta di più l'affetto sincero e la bella stima che sempre hai voluto elargirmi.

Ti sono grato e cercherò, se questo, come scrivi, ti preme tanto, di far tesoro delle tue osservazioni che allora mi parvero eccessive e di sapore polemico; oggi sono già più vicine alla mia riveduta e spassionata concezione dei problemi che mi hanno tenuto agitato in questi ultimi anni' (Massimo Bontempelli Papers, 1865-1991, Getty Research Institute, Research Library, Accession n. 910147, Box 10, Folder 4).

³⁵ 'Costruire', *Quadrante* 35-36 (1936): 1.

³⁶ Giuseppe Terragni, 'La costruzione', pp. 5-6.

³⁷ Attilio Terragni, Daniel Libeskind, Paolo Rosselli, *The Terragni Atlas. Built Architectures* (Milan: Skira; London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), p. 213.

del Fascio. They highlighted the need for youthfulness, transparency and visibility and the creation of bright and airy spaces.³⁸ However, he had already shown his predilection for reflective materials, such as black polished linoleum, aluminium and copper, in his *Sala O* at the 1932 'Mostra della rivoluzione fascista'. Libero Andreotti has linked Terragni's concern with transparency with a 'sensation of lightness and elation, of literally floating in space [...] that Terragni associated with the "new order" of Fascism'.³⁹ Regarding Terragni's cult of transparent materials, Jeffrey Schnapp observes that in several of Terragni's works the sheet of glass was identified with the new millennium inaugurated by the Fascist revolution and was associated with a politics of transparency, intended as a lack of corrupting mediation, be it visual, physical, moral, political or economical. However, Schnapp also notes, Terragni was not alone in his praise of glass as a building material: his views on glass were part of an established modernist architectural discourse, promoted by such architects as Scheerbart and then by Le Corbusier, Gropius, Wright, Bel Geddes and Van der Rohe, which inscribed the use of glass in the redemptive myth of architecture as civilization and associated glass with luminosity, airiness, versatility, hygiene, health, clarity and honesty.⁴⁰ Terragni himself invested the physical qualities of glass with the spiritual meaning associated with such attributes as brilliance, refraction, transparency, radiance.⁴¹

In Terragni's Casa del Fascio, the overall sense of transparency was also conceived as an elimination of barriers corresponding to what he saw as the physical move towards the people endorsed by Mussolini. The transparency of the building presupposed a physical accessibility which marked its specificity as a building constructed for the people. The Casa, with its transparent walls, was designed as a metaphor of Fascism itself. Fascism was spatially interpreted as a transparent system which invited the people to validate it by giving them access to it, indeed by being part of it; yet — as Bontempelli had noted in his comment — its transparency annihilated any individuality. There was no inside, no private dimension: the system was transparent to the individual as the individual was transparent to the system. Transparency was seen as a quality associated with a sense of the collective. As Terragni commented, 'quello di poter vedere ciò che accade dentro è il miglior distintivo di una Casa costruita per il popolo, in confronto di una reggia, di una caserma, di una banca'.⁴²

The rejection of the private dimension implied by Terragni's building was reiterated by his statement that 'una casa per il popolo non è, e non può essere, una costruzione di "tipo popolare"'.⁴³ Indeed, he explained, if in the planning of 'alloggi popolari' the cost/basic welfare ratio (in sanitary terms and in terms of sufficient living space) was paramount, a house destined for the people had to take into account moral, political

³⁸ Mangione, pp. 35–36.

³⁹ Libero Andreotti, 'The Aesthetics of War: The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 45 (1992), 76–86 (pp. 82–83).

⁴⁰ Jeffrey T. Schnapp, 'Un tempio moderno', in *Giuseppe Terragni. Opera completa*, pp. 267–279 (pp. 272–75).

⁴¹ Giuseppe Terragni, 'Il vetro', in Mantero, pp. 152–53 (p. 152).

⁴² Terragni, 'La costruzione', p. 6.

⁴³ Terragni, 'La costruzione', p. 6.

and propaganda factors, resulting in the use of more expensive materials, more freedom in the use of space, and a celebratory character of the rooms destined to the ‘disciplined masses’ — as Terragni calls them — of the party members. This was not the first time, in his dossier on the Casa del Fascio, that Terragni referred to the masses as disciplined. In his description of the assembly hall, he had already envisaged an orderly crowd, both inside and outside his Casa del Fascio, intent on listening to party officials or to the voice of the ‘Capo’. His concept of the mass was orderly, as it was given an order through space. In his building Terragni visualized a space in which, as Lefebvre has put it, ‘the space of (social) order is hidden in the order of space’.⁴⁴ The idea of the disciplined crowd was part of the idea of Fascist ‘new man’, described by Emilio Gentile as ‘collective and organized, educated by totalitarian pedagogy to identify spontaneously with the community and the state.’ It corresponded to the acknowledgement by Fascism of the organized masses as protagonists of modern life and as fundamental forces of the totalitarian state. Fascism envisaged a ‘new man’ freed from an individualist concept of life, who was meant to conceive of his identity and personality as an integral part of the organized mass of the state, ‘conjoined in a community of faith and destiny’.⁴⁵ In Terragni’s Casa del Fascio the crowd, invisible, yet imagined in the construction of the space, responded to an aesthetics of body display, according to which, as Mabel Berezin suggests, ‘the accumulation of bodies in public space created a feeling of emotion and political community’.⁴⁶ It was the counterpart to the photographed and filmed crowds that in those years populated illustrated magazines and newsreels. As the illustrated crowds were geometrically manufactured using the new photographic technology, so was Terragni’s envisaged crowd, inscribed in the geometrical order of the Casa del Fascio, equally constructed to create the illusion, as Schnapp has put it, that ‘under Fascism, oceanic feelings have become an integral feature of everyday life, but a constructive and controlled fact of life, reconcilable with the values of hierarchy and discipline’.⁴⁷

The distinction made by Terragni between ‘casa popolare’ and ‘casa per il popolo’ highlighted the pedagogical function of the Casa del Fascio as a building destined both to host and forge the people and merged the signifiers of the public building with those of the private dwelling. As Lefebvre has noted, in the twentieth century, in cities and especially in the urban fabric proliferating around their disintegration, ‘the House has a merely historico-poetic reality rooted in folklore or [...] ethnology. This *memory*, however, has an obsessive quality: it persists in art, poetry, drama, philosophy. What is more, it runs through the terrible urban reality which the twentieth century has instituted embellishing it with a nostalgic aura’. The dwelling, according

⁴⁴ Lefebvre, p. 289.

⁴⁵ Emilio Gentile, ‘The Fascist Anthropological Revolution’, in *Culture, Censorship and the State in Twentieth-Century Italy*, ed. by Guido Bonsaver and Robert S.C. Gordon (Oxford: Legenda, 2005), pp. 22–33 (p. 30).

⁴⁶ Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self. The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 116.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey T. Schnapp, ‘Mob porn’, in *Crowds*, ed. by Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Matthew Tiewis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 1–45 (p. 35). See also Ciucci, *Gli architetti e il fascismo*, p. 148.

to Lefebvre, becomes invested with a sacred quality, is transformed into a quasi-religious, almost abstract space which is as cosmic as it is human.⁴⁸ In the Casa del Fascio the emphasis on the concept of an almost domestic acquaintance with public space created a dialectics between domestic values and the negation of the private sphere implied by such values, in tune with a regime, which — Victoria De Grazia has observed — at the same time indulged and despised domesticity.⁴⁹ Terragni's statements that a 'casa per il popolo' cannot be a 'casa popolare' bears a truistic quality which highlights the strict dialectical relationship between private subject and public space. The idea of the home was evoked to convey a sense of familiarity and the sacred aura of the domestic but at the same time appropriated the control and definition of subjectivity. The concept of the house was defined in public terms, in order to forge a Fascist subject whose domestic obligations and public duties were reconciled.⁵⁰ The citizen's home was recast in collective national terms. In this sense, in his description of the Casa del Fascio, Terragni emphasized both the notion of the building as 'casa' and the fact that it was organized according to the Party structure. Indeed, the fact itself that the space was organized according to the antibureaucratic character of the local Party, in which most of the work was carried out by volunteers, made the notion of house particularly relevant to the building and led Terragni to emphasize the simplicity and familiarity associated with the idea of 'casa':

Ecco perché tale edificio può maggiormente di ogni altra costruzione del Regime onorarsi del titolo di Casa. Occorre pertanto preoccuparsi che il fascista, il cittadino, la massa degli iscritti, il popolo delle adunate, ricevano già dall'esterno l'assicurazione di entrare in una casa e trovino logica e semplice la distribuzione dei reparti.⁵¹

In the section entitled 'Che cos'è una Casa del Fascio' Terragni proceeded to define his concept of the new political space. What emerges is that the Casa, as envisaged by Terragni, was indeed a monumental space, meant to be the spatial representation of Fascism's achievements. Terragni had already stressed the celebratory function of his Casa del Fascio. He now reiterated the highly symbolical value of the building. From the historical Fascist headquarters, which had the character of unadorned 'covi',⁵² symbolizing the struggles in which the Fascist movement was initially engaged, the new Casa del Fascio was to be conceived as a spatial representation of the new nation; it had therefore to be, in Terragni's words, 'Casa, Scuola, Tempio'.⁵³ The building and the organization of the space had to acquire a symbolic and moral significance: it was a space that acquired moral value by rejecting the notion of a traditional bureaucratic

⁴⁸ Lefebvre, pp. 120–21.

⁴⁹ Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women. Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), p. 227.

⁵⁰ De Grazia, p. 79.

⁵¹ Terragni, 'La costruzione', p. 21.

⁵² Mangione notes that the term 'covo' was used to indicate Fascist headquarters as of 15 April 1920, when the socialist newspaper *Avanti's* office was attacked by a group of nationalists, *arditi* and trainee officers. For fear of revenge, the *arditi* organized a watch at the office of Mussolini's newspaper *Il popolo d'Italia*, which for this reason was called 'covo' ('hideout'). The term was then extended to all the Fascist headquarters (Mangione, p. 21).

⁵³ Terragni, 'La costruzione', p. 14.

building ('un bello e comodo palazzo per uffici') in favour of a functional yet symbolically planned space. Terragni envisaged a building ethically organized according to criteria of 'organicità, chiarezza, onestà'.⁵⁴ Yet, despite extolling the functionality and simplicity of the distribution of spaces, Terragni also stressed the monumental character of some of the rooms, in particular the *Sala del Federale* and the *Salone del Direttorio*. Besides absolving their functional role, these two rooms were given symbolic value, the first by the vigilant and comforting presence of a portrait of the Duce and of the *labaro* (the local party banner), held in a crystal and black marble casket; the latter by a large frescoed portrait of Mussolini overlooking a long meeting table, representing the vigilant presence of the 'Capo' over the party activities.⁵⁵

The fact that the Casa del Fascio in Como, like all Case del Fascio, was dedicated 'alla memoria dei Caduti per la Rivoluzione' invested the building with further sacred qualities, which the distribution of space aimed to reflect, thereby operating a monumentalization of the house. The spiritual core of the building was the *sacrario*, devoted to the memory of the Fascist martyrs and located to the left of the entrance foyer. The ceiling of the entrance foyer was covered in black marble, to prepare the visitors, in Terragni's intention, to what was going to be the religious experience of the *sacrario*. The *sacrario* itself was formed by three walls of red granite.⁵⁶ Terragni made the floor level of the Sacrario lower than that of the atrium where it was situated. As Richard Etlin explains, in funerary buildings since the eighteenth century, the movement down into the earth provided 'a powerful kinesthetic reminder of mortality'. Terragni's *sacrario* was a variation of this theme; its being located on a lower level removed it from the realm of everyday life. The *sacrario* hosted a monolith engraved with the names of the fallen Fascists of Como. The relics of the martyrs were contained in a block of glass, as objects of devotion.⁵⁷

The monumentalization of the Casa del Fascio corresponded to the inscribing of the building within the sphere of sites of memory, which, as Pickering and Tyrrell note, 'have an epistemological validity, as they validate the beliefs associated with the place. They have a pedagogical role, and they are associated with important collective rituals and practices'.⁵⁸ Yet, it also responded to a Fascist politics of history, which, as Claudio Fogu has argued, 'did not settle for mere sites of memory. Rather, these politics sought to create historic-production sites for the transformation of the idea of a Fascist historical agency into a historic mode of representation'.⁵⁹

The Casa del Fascio, with its conceptualization of space and its configuration as a monument was inscribed into a Fascist narrative of history-making. In this sense it was a sign of a new monumentality, inventing a new narrative of the monument, which was not only legitimizing the new state through a celebration of the past, but

⁵⁴ See Ciucci, 'Terragni e l'architettura', p. 49.

⁵⁵ Terragni, 'La costruzione', p. 22.

⁵⁶ Terragni, 'La costruzione', p. 21.

⁵⁷ Etlin, *Modernism*, pp. 447–48.

⁵⁸ Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, *Contested Sites: Commemoration, Memorial and Popular Politics in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 6.

⁵⁹ Fogu, 'To Make History Present', p. 35.

was inserting the past into a celebration of its present.⁶⁰ It was a site for the production of a collective memory obtained through the creation of a totality of thoughts.⁶¹ Such a totality was created, in Terragni's case, by his re-elaboration of the notion of the classical, combining order, modernity and recognition together with the signifiers of memory, identity and national tradition. In Terragni's building, history was not invoked through the repetition of traditional styles, but through the use of symbolic spaces, elaborating a style in which the historical references emanated, as Schnapp has put it, 'from within the work of art in the form of a stripped-down, archaic universal language. They could arrive already transformed, absorbed into and made one with the living body of the present.'⁶² It was what Antonino Saggio has defined as an 'aura' surrounding the building and its function: its white geometrical shape became the emblem of a new monumentality, profoundly anti-rhetorical, which did not share the most crude and eye-catching aspects of propaganda.⁶³

The 'glass house of Fascism' was not only meant to represent the party's qualities but also to embody and visualize the spiritual values associated with the new Fascist civilization and to insert it into a millenary tradition in virtue of its orderly structure, which was meant to correspond to the legacy of classicism. Finally, with his building, Terragni not only sought to define a space that expressed and contained the myths of Fascism, as Ciucci has argued.⁶⁴ He attempted to transform Fascism into a spatial metaphor, while at the same time trying to provide a definition of a space able to contain, shape, describe and celebrate the collective life and identity of the Fascist subject.

Swansea University

SIMONA STORCHI

⁶⁰ See Claudia Lazzaro, 'Forging a Visible Fascist Nation: Strategies for Fusing Past and Present', in *Donatello among the Blackshirts*, pp. 13–31; and Simonetta Falasca Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: the Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 432–33.

⁶¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 52.

⁶² Jeffrey T. Schnapp, 'Flash Memories (Sironi on Exhibit)', in *Donatello among the Blackshirts*, pp. 223–40 (p. 226).

⁶³ Saggio, p. 43.

⁶⁴ Ciucci, *Gli architetti e il fascismo*, p. 116.