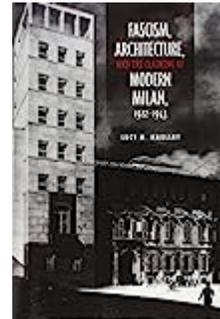


**Lucy M. Maulsby.** *Fascism, Architecture, and the Claiming of Modern Milan, 1922-1943.* Toronto Italian Studies Series. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. Illustrations. 272 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4426-4625-4.



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In his address to the 1937 Congress of Urbanistica, Giuseppe Bottai spoke about the singular status of Rome as a modern city, as a national capital, but above all else as the fount of Fascism's most powerful political myths. When it came to a place that was so central to Fascism's own history, otherwise established priorities and rules could often be interpreted loosely or abrogated if, Bottai noted, this would help the city fulfil, as we all hope, its function of the capital of the modern world.<sup>[1]</sup>

Invested with such an extravagant mission, Rome gradually overshadowed all other cities during the Fascist *ventennio*. Even Milan, the traditional moral capital of Italy, the birthplace of the Fascist movement, and the stage of its crucial early successes, was eclipsed in symbolic significance.<sup>[2]</sup> It is thus not surprising that the Mussolinian 'third Rome,' with its uniquely rich register of urban interventions and ambitious ideas for urban transformation in the twenty years of Fascist rule, has received the lion's share of historiographical attention.<sup>[3]</sup>

Still, Lucy Maulsby's impressive study of architecture and urban planning in Fascist-era Milan illustrates how so much emphasis on this *terza Roma* can create a very narrow scholarly tunnel vision that distorts the bigger picture of Fascist-era architecture and ur-

ban history. Maulsby, for example, reminds the reader that the customary identification of Fascist ideology with *romanità* and the colonial-geopolitical Mediterranean *mare nostrum* had far less purchase in the northern metropolis of Milan—a city for centuries dominated by a superb Gothic cathedral, a strongly commercial-industrial economic profile, and a long tradition of links with central Europe. The point is not just that other cities, Milan included, need and deserve more historiographical attention, which undoubtedly they do. It is also that the Roman 'tunnel vision' has led historians of the Fascist period to derive many of their insights and assumptions about general Fascist attitudes to architecture and urban planning from the otherwise singular case of Rome.

Even if largely overshadowed by Rome, the city of Popolo d'Italia and the 1919 founding meeting at Piazza San Sepolcro continued to occupy a special place in the Fascist collective imagination. It was a fascinatingly singular place too, in its own way. In sharp contrast to Rome, Milan was the city most associated with modernity and the one that expressed most authentically Fascism's futurist cult. The city was the hub of architectural rationalism, the home of the Gruppo 7 and the base of one of the two most significant schools of the Italian modernist avant-garde in the 1930s (the other be-

ing the nearby city of Como); and yet Milan's dominant architectural vocabulary remained a fascinating hybrid of tempered modernist sensibilities and reinterpreted regional traditions, where the tone was set by such singular figures as Giovanni Muzio and Piero Portaluppi rather than by the patriarch of the Fascist *stile littorio* Marcello Piacentini or even northern rationalist child prodigies like Giuseppe Terragni, Giuseppe Pagano, and the younger BBPR (Banfi, Belgioioso, Peressuti e Rogers) group.

Maulsby uses five of the six chapters of her book to discuss how the Fascist Party and regime used iconic civic projects to underline and extend its claim over the city of Milan: Paolo Mezzanotte's Casa del Fascio and Borsa, Piacentini's Palazzo di Giustizia, Portaluppi's Casa del Fascio/Sede Federale, and Muzio's Palazzo del Popolo d'Italia. Each of these projects captures an array of fascinating intersections between international, national, and local agencies; between political, economic, and cultural interests; and between modernity and tradition, innovation and conservation.

In the case of the construction of the new party headquarters on Piazza San Sepolcro, the national party (and Benito Mussolini personally) mandated the construction of the new complex for the party's headquarters in Milan on a site that bore the imprint of that fated 1919 founding meeting inside the rooms of the Renaissance-era Palazzo Castani. However, the site was at the heart of Milan's medieval core and thus subject to a rich national and international debate about rules of conservation and integration of modern life into historic urban centers. As a result, construction took years and involved numerous design and topographical compromises. Still, the trademark tower in Portaluppi's building staked its claim over Milan's cityscape just like Fascism intended the new Sede Federale as yet another powerful marker for its symbolic ownership of the city.

It was once again compromise that set the tone for the new headquarters of the newspaper *Popolo d'Italia* on Piazza Cavour. Maulsby shows how this project provides a fascinating insight into the constant intersections between architects, planners, municipal experts, conservationists, and speculators. Muzio's initial, bolder proposal for the building, complete with a beacon and a wall panel filled with a hyper-modern kinetic display of letters announcing news and events, makes the final (executed) design seem modest and something of an anticlimax by comparison. Yet the outcome was the result of an overwhelmingly successful compromise with local

authorities and powerful heritage experts over the fate of the whole area of Piazza Cavour.

Unsurprisingly, Maulsby's research brings to light complexities and quirks that were far from uncommon in Rome or indeed elsewhere in Fascist Italy. During the years of the Fascist regime, there was a new, ambitious regulatory framework for the city (in the case of Milan, authored by Cesare Albertini in the early 1930s) that sanctioned extensive demolitions in order to liberate important historic monuments, create new dramatic vistas, and facilitate traffic all resulting in the eviction and displacement of large sections of the urban poor. The regulatory framework in Milan proved as porous as that of Rome, with constant revisions, reinterpretations, and ad hoc initiatives. Architectural competitions served similar purposes of aesthetic pluralism in the two cities, resulting in many cases in paper architecture that had little connection to the eventual project, if there were one, that is. The rationalists were as unsuccessful in winning official high-profile architectural projects in Milan as in Rome in spite of Milan's very special status in the history of Italian modernism. Importantly too, Maulsby's insightful analysis of the complexities and compromises behind each of the projects featured in the book underlines the need for extending this kind of more nuanced approach to the overall history of architecture and urban planning in interwar Italy that still remains in thrall to over-rehearsed, tired polemics about modernism and tradition.

If I have one (minor) criticism, it is one about the mechanics rather than the approach or the essence of the book. Each of these projects provide Maulsby with fascinating opportunities to restate her main argument about the limits of the control that the Fascist regime had in enforcing its decisions about iconic civic projects and transformational planning interventions in Milan, supposedly Fascism's party capital. Yet, taken as an ensemble, the five major projects discussed here remain supremely eclectic and rather loosely connected in the overall economy of the book. What binds them together, beyond their shared status as important Fascist-era civic projects located in the historic core of Milan, is implied rather than stated in the otherwise excellent introduction and the rather more elliptical epilogue. Party and state buildings; realized and paper architecture; the interplay between regional, national, and international aesthetic idioms; projects commissioned and chosen in competitions are so much more than simply interesting fragments of an urban chronicle. In their eclecticism and amid the numerous compromises that their realization involved, the

surveyed projects attest not only to the limits but also to the effectiveness of the Fascist appropriation of spatial, architectural, symbolic of Milan.

This is a fascinating story of two conjoined halves: of a Fascist conquering ambition spearheaded by a series of ambitious architectural projects and urban interventions and of a singular set of regional/local complexities on the ground that intervened between regime intentions and their realization (or not). In the end, through its program of realized iconic civic buildings and transformative urban interventions, the Fascist regime did manage to root itself in the historic core of Milan and partly at least to claim it in a way that failed to work in Rome (where none of the major civic projects destined for the historic core of the city was executed). Yet at least as compelling is Mausby's insightful mapping of the diverse agencies and complex processes that shaped each of the featured projects. The stories that Mausby pieces together, with the help of an impressive array of archival sources and contemporary publications, are thoughtfully supported by excellent photos and illustrations, for which both the author and the publisher should be congratulated. The book marks an important contribution to the historiography of architecture and urban planning not just for its forensic look at the often overlooked case of Milan but also for the alternative perspectives that it offers, per-

spectives that can inform the study of other cities and indeed aspects of the architectural production during the Fascist *ventennio*.

#### Notes

[1]. Giuseppe Bottai, "Discorso inaugurale: politica e urbanistica," in *Atti del I Congresso Nazionale di Urbanistica*, vol. 2, *Discussioni e resoconto* (Rome: Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica), 3-5.

[2]. Steven Gundle, "Mussolini's Appearance in the Regions," in *The Cult of the Duce: Mussolini and the Italians*, ed. Stephen Gundle, Christopher Duggan, and Giuliana Pieri (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 110-128.

[3]. See, for example, the classic studies of Spiro Kostof, *The Third Rome, 1870-1950: Traffic and Glory* (Berkeley, CA: University Art Museum, 1973); and Antonio Cederna, *Mussolini urbanista: Lo sventramento di Roma negli anni del consenso* (Bari and Rome: Laterza, 1979). More recently (in English): Borden Painter, *Mussolini's Rome: Rebuilding the Eternal City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005); Joshua Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity: The Roman Past in Fascist Italy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); and Paul Baxa, *Roads and Ruins: The Symbolic Landscape of Fascist Rome* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

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