

# Spatialized corporatism between town and countryside

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**Abstract.** This contribution deals with the relationship between town planning, architectural design and landscape in the foundation of “new towns” in Italy. In doing so, I shall focus on the Pontine Marshes, giving due consideration to then emerging theories about the fascist corporate state, whose foundation act may be traced back to Giuseppe Bottai’s “Charter of Labour”. This political-cultural “model” purported a clear hierarchy between settlements, each bound for a specific role, for which specific functions were to be assigned to different parts of the city. Similarly, cultivations in the countryside were to specialise. In the Pontine Marshes, Littoria was to become a provincial capital and Sabaudia a tourist destination, Pontinia an industrial centre and Aprilia an eminently rural town. Whereas the term “corporatism” may remind the guild system of the Middle Age, its 1930s’ revival meant to effectively supports the need for a cohesive organization of socio-economic forces, whose recognition and classification was to support the legal-political order of the state. What was the corporate city supposed to be? Some Italian architects rephrased this question: what was the future city in Italy of the hundred cities? Bringing to the fore the distinguishing character of the settlements concerned, and based on the extensive literature available, this contribution discusses the composition of territorial and urban space, arguing that, in the Pontine Marshes, this entails the hierarchical triad farm-village-city, as well as an extraordinary figurative research at times hovering towards “classicism”, “rationalism” or “picturesque”. Composition and figuration are therefore not homogeneous, nor mere expressions of the fascist regime. They show instead a constant research, between aesthetics and practice, of an idea of modern city, of public space, of balance between city and countryside.

## Introduction

The literature on the transformation of the Pontine Marshes and the construction of the “new towns” is very broad and belongs to the different fields of knowledge directly involved in the project of “integral reclamation”, from economy to politics, from agronomy to history of the landscape, from geology to hydrography, from urban planning to architecture. It is therefore difficult to untangle the complex interweaving of

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knowledge available and the many contemporary criticisms made at the time and after the project. Numerous comparisons have rightly been made by various authors among the Pontine Marshes project and other contexts, from the plans of the Tennessee Valley Authority in the United States at the time of the New Deal to the new settlements designed during the early years of Soviet Five-Year Plans, to the extensive land reforms carried out in the Netherlands, Romania, Germany, Czechoslovakia to stabilize as much of the population as possible and avoid immigration into the towns.

Many studies on Italian architecture and urban planning of interwar time (mostly published in the 1970s and 1980s) deal with the intricate political and cultural events of fascist Italy, often criticising projects undertaken in the Pontine Marshes. These authors put into question the actual ability of the Fascist regime to organically plan economy, society and territory, while stigmatising Italian architects who embraced rationalism for compromising “form” and “ideology”, rather than finding real alternatives to regime architecture [1, 2, 3, 4]. However, beyond propaganda, the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes is a key case study to question the relationship between the actual building sites and the ideas behind them, between methods, results and contradictions of the fascist territorial management.

There are still some open questions about the role played by the rural alternative (integral reclamation, internal colonization, expulsion of the proletariat in the semi-rural and working-class suburbs), in accelerating or slowing down the reorganization of cities or in forming integration between town and countryside, rather than in the affirmation of the various architectural theories and poetics.

When considering the relationship between town and country, it is useful to remember how over time attitudes to the landscape have changed. In recent years, the complex distinction between the rural and urban landscape in densely urbanized areas has led geographers to devise terms like “rurban”, “rural-urban continuum”, “peri-urban”, “urbanised countryside”. Terms sometimes with very different meanings, coined mainly in the context of sociological and geographical research.

Precisely for this reason, it would seem appropriate to interpret the story of the Pontine Marshes on the lines set out by Carlo Cattaneo in his studies of Lombardy:

Ever since man's destiny has been to live by the sweat of his brow, every aspect of civil society distinguishes him in this from the savages, civil society being an immense deposit of labour. It was labour that built the houses, the embankments, the canals, the roads. (...) Ninety percent of the land is not the work of nature; it is the work of our hands; it is an artificial homeland [5].

In other words, it would be useful to understand how the construction of this “artificial homeland”, despite the many contradictions inherent in this case study, has contributed to leaving an original settlement footprint and an important heritage of material culture.

Taking these considerations as a starting point, this brief essay aims to delimit the field a reflection on the relationship between architectural and urban composition, functional specialization encouraged by corporate policies, new spatial planning, relationship between city and countryside.

## **International debate in the 1920s and 1930s**

At this point we should remind ourselves of some of the “dominant themes” of the international debate following the catastrophe of the First World War. Everywhere, in various political contexts, the issues of whether and how to promote urban development and the new dimension of planning were being confronted; knowledge tools were drawn

up to study, predict and control population and activities in the area; new theories and new experiences were developed in the fields of architecture and urban planning.

Green spaces, the satellite town, the garden city and, more generally, territorial planning, albeit still seen as a hybrid of the nineteenth century idea of urban expansion and the multiple authority area plan, were debated in 1924 in Amsterdam by government representatives, public bodies and professional associations to the International Federation for Town and Country Planning and Garden Cities. Fritz Schumacher, head of building for the city of Hamburg, supported a design which, instead of proceeding from the city to the surrounding territory, proceeded from the outside in to reconnect the urban area with the countryside, restoring "breath" to the city [6]. Furthermore, the issue of the rural house was part of the more general debate on social housing at the International Housing and Town Planning Congress held in Paris in 1928, while in 1935 in London rural planning was discussed together with the protection of the agricultural landscape<sup>2</sup>.

Among the speakers from Italy at this latter event, Luigi Piccinato sought to overcome the distinction between town and rural planning, especially in countries such as Italy, where agriculture played such an important role. According to Piccinato it was "necessary to organize rural areas through the creation of a new economy for them" and, from this perspective, he considered the reclamation of the Latina area and the Pontine Marshes "the most splendid example" of the work carried out in Italy [7].

Governments and local authorities proposed interventions aimed at restoring the balance between the city centre and the countryside, as an antidote to the ongoing productive, occupational, social recession. Indeed, after the great economic crisis of 1929, quite apart from the different cultural directions taken, the need for centralised planning - or the corporatist organization of the state - was imposed as the rationalization of decision-making processes and management in the face of a remodelling of the agricultural settlement against the uncontrolled growth of cities.

In particular, the housing sector offered a number of possible alternatives in terms of typology and settlement models, proposed directly or implicitly by the architects in the course of their experimentations; alternatives widely debated in the specialised magazines. High, medium or low-rise houses? Social services integrated into the housing or zoning by different functions? Rural villages spread across farmland, self-sufficient neighbourhoods in the outer suburbs or renovation of historic city centres?

### **The Italian question: corporatism and ruralisation**

Whereas in Europe social housing had a very important role, in fascist Italy between 1922 and 1942 there was a drastic reduction in urban social-housing developments. The most active sectors were in rural construction and public works. Between 1931 and 1935 spending on public works was slightly lower than for defence [8]; in addition to the competition for the Florence railway station, these were the years of the plans for the towns in the Pontine Marshes, of the projects for the centres of medium-sized towns and, more generally, of intense activity on works for the regime (local headquarters of the Fascist Party, seaside and mountain holiday camps, post offices, railway stations, etc.).

The ruralisation of the country - through the policy of "integral reclamation" - starting on massive public works, found institutional support in Corporations that were supposed to resolve a fundamental contradiction of capitalism i.e. the conflicting relationship

<sup>2</sup> XIV International Housing and Town Planning Congress.

between employer and workforce. Giuseppe Bottai, Minister of Corporations, tried in as dynamic a way as possible to interpret this institutional tool which was meant to cut right back to the roots and causes of latent conflict<sup>3</sup>. According to Bottai, each social group was to have a role in the corporate state, a role which the political power was to recognize and guarantee. Corporatism was therefore a tool for economic planning, since corporate bodies were setting the State free from the various economic sectors and related constraints.

The magazine “Quadrante” [9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15], privileged mouthpiece of Rationalist orthodoxy, soon turned its attention to formulating concepts and pronouncements for the implementation of the “corporate city”, an urban translation of corporative principles whereby each city would grow within a regional and national plan, following a precise functional vocation.

The national plan was to identify a specific role for each city and its countryside, thus fostering the balance between inner immigration, ruralisation, moral and hygienic rehabilitation. At the same time, every urban centre was to pursue its specific “productive” specialization - be it industrial, artistic, educational or agricultural – vis-à-vis the pre-existing “old cities”.

The idea of “corporate city” came to the fore and, in this respect, global spatial planning was seen as tool to correct Italy’s macroscopic economic imbalances. “Anti-urbanism” thus became the official ideology of fascism, although its implications were not such as to change the country’s economic structure, which was founded on industrial development. In fact, while in 1935 some 50% of agricultural land was classified as reclamation land, investments were less than half of those allocated to industrial bailouts and fewer than 3% of the unemployed were deployed in reclamation work. The geographical area in which the regime did have some success was the Pontine Marshes.

The question of farmworkers, and more generally the development and adaptation of the agricultural economy, was part of a historical legacy which was frequently on the agenda of social and political analyses, without the ruling classes being able to develop and implement a coherent policy of interventions. Since 1906-08 there had been measures and plans for immigration by families of settlers into Italy’s southern provinces and islands. To this end in 1917<sup>4</sup> the *Opera Nazionale Combattenti* (ONC) was set up to encourage productive employment for ex-combatants through financial and land allocation measures.

The first important legislative acts under fascism were the law<sup>5</sup> of 1923, which brought together previous legislation regarding land reclamation, and the law abolishing use requirements<sup>6</sup> of 1924, regulating thousands of acres of land and affecting

<sup>3</sup> In 1927 the “Charter of Labour” established the general principles of the legal system of the State and the guiding criteria for interpretation and enforcement of the law. In 1929, Bottai was appointed Minister of Corporations and completed the long and difficult passage of Law 206 of 20 March 1930 on the National Council of corporations, which was opposed by manufacturers. In 1930 Bottai founded the “Archivio di studi corporativi” magazine, in which many articles were devoted to Soviet planning and Soviet economy, national socialism, the mixed economy, collective law, the relationship between politics and economics, State intervention in USA, Germany and Italy.

<sup>4</sup> Ministerial Decree 11 December 1917, n. 1970.

<sup>5</sup> Royal decree 30 December 1923, n. 3256.

<sup>6</sup> Royal Decree 751 of 22 May 1924, converted into law 1766 on 16 June 1927, sets out definitive use requirements. The law required intensive cultivation, provided the means for the

thousands of people. This was land in collective ownership, some dating back to Roman times others to feudal times, often badly exploited, located mainly in mountain areas, marshlands in the Po flood plain, Central Italy, the South and the Islands.

The period of integral land reclamation was inaugurated by the 1928 Mussolini Law, which laid down a financial plan for the sector to extend over 14 years starting from 1930<sup>7</sup>. Agricultural policy took a new direction; the concept of “integral reclamation” involved land drainage, but above all, and this is key, it prioritized the different distribution of agricultural land, regional organisation, settlement and resettlement. The theoretical, programmatic and legislative framework was the work of Arrigo Serpieri, who in his capacity as Under-secretary for reclamation, together with others, drew up a general plan of areas to be reclaimed [16, 17, 18].

Serpieri’s “roots” date back to the early decades of the 20th century, first in the *Società Umanitaria* and *Società Agraria* in Milan, then in Florence’s *Accademia dei Georgofili*. Milan was where he received his technical and vocational training through an intense period of teaching and research, and it was here that he made his first connections with the world of agriculture in the context of agrarian reform [19].

For the *Società Agraria* Serpieri did important research into the Alpine meadows of Switzerland and Lombardy, highlighting the problems of collective ownership and forms of state intervention. In Tuscany from 1912 to 1923 Serpieri set up and managed the *Istituto superiore forestale nazionale*, in contact with an agrarian situation very different from that of Lombardy, characterised by sharecropping rather than rent and a capitalist enterprise. Thus, he proposed a new way of looking at agriculture and began to develop his philosophy of agrarianism.

Serpieri, departing from previous ideas, with the concept of “integral reclamation”<sup>8</sup> initiated an interesting debate which sought to reconcile economic theory, Government practice and corporate opinions in a scientific and ideological “unicum”. He was one of a considerable number of technical experts who saw their role within Mussolini’s Government as dynamic reformers. They deceived themselves thinking they activities might be organic to the Fascist political project, expressed by an anti-parliamentary – though legal – Government, anti-socialist and conservative but not against freedom, which promised to eliminate the “disadvantages” of the liberal State actually without threatening it.

## The farm-*borgo*-town

The reclamation of the Pontine Marshes brought together a variety of technical skills: hydro-geological, land economy, demographic, health etc. Such a territorial

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transformation of large estates in private ownership, with the help, technical assistance and protection of the State.

<sup>7</sup> In 1933 the Consolidated law 215 was a systematic ordering of all the relevant legislation relating to the integral reclamation of almost 5 million hectares, sub-divided into regional districts.

<sup>8</sup> Arrigo Serpieri was undersecretary of the Ministry of Agriculture from 1929 to 1935. In the capacity Serpieri passed the Consolidated Act on the complete remediation (Law No. 215 of 13 February 1933). This clarified the role of the state in reclamation works and established different financing rules, defining an integrated plan of works and complementary services. According to Serpieri, complete remediation meant coordinating all works and activities necessary to adapt the land and the waters to a higher agricultural productivity and a better rural cohabitation. Works had to be carried out on the basis of a general plan aimed at obtaining significant sanitary, demographic, economic and social advantages. Albeit fundamental, land improvement works were not actually carried out.

“reinforcement”, that within ten years would lead to the building from scratch of an entire province, was built up step by step in relation to the growing need to procure goods and services. A hierarchical pattern of settlements interconnected the isolated houses, villages and main cities; the latter were generally centrally located in relation to the farms and villages, at the intersection of the main routes of regional communication and close to the railway. An organisation directly related to the traces of previous reclamation attempts - from the earliest efforts to those carried out under the papacy - and in fact in a continuum with the civil engineering interventions between 1918 and 1921.

During and after the work thousands of workers were encouraged to move from all parts of Italy, but particularly the North-east, who became the principal players both in the reclamation work but also in the whole matter of territorial reorganisation<sup>9</sup>. The persistence over time of the results of the entire operation is mainly due to *centuriation* grid land-division, and which led to the definitive alteration of the existing landscape. The territorial transformation of most of the Pontine Marshes, entrusted to the *Opera Nazionale Combattenti* who turned over 54,000 hectares into farmland (plus a further 11,000 by *Università agrarie* and private individuals), provided 25,000 head of cattle, as well as modern equipment and machinery<sup>10</sup>.

The farms were between 5 and 30 hectares; the farm houses, complete with service buildings were constructed along the roads between the farm estates according to clear criteria of regularity. Each group of about 100 families came under a *borgo*, conceived as a business centre and located at the intersection of the new secondary road network, often corresponding to sites established in the earliest stages of reclamation. The *triade* of farm-*borgo*-town, in a varied arrangement of different types of settlement, reflected the intention of creating a stable social and productive structure for farmers, tied to the land by share-cropping agreements and to the institutional regime by a series of public places which together served to neutralize the attraction of the big city.

Towns, designed for a population of between 3,000 and 5,000 inhabitants - except in the case of provincial capital of Littoria - were the epicentres of settlement for the entire area and served the preeminent function of administrative, technical and representative hubs; Pomezia, Pontinia and Aprilia, Latina were aligned at the centre of the area of reclamation while Sabaudia was more on the edge, beyond the Circeo National Park, by Lake Pola, in an area destined to become a major tourism development.

The organisation of the territory, which in this case would achieve a consistency unknown elsewhere, aspired to be an alternative to the models of urban life. The dimensions of the agrarian grid pattern and the relative distances between the towns are the expression of the dual presence of the urban and rural, even more evident in the architectural precision of the buildings of the public and communal space par excellence - the piazza, acting as counterbalance to the basic and economic housing types found on the farms.

The apparent contradiction of the term “rural urbanism”, invoked by Bottai at the opening of the 1st National Town Planning Congress in 1937, and clearly aimed at de-urbanisation, masked the search for new balances between city life and the role to be assigned to the countryside. Lasting for almost a century, the colonization of the Pontine

<sup>9</sup> The Royal Decrees 4.3.1926, nr. 440 and 28.11.1928, nr. 2874 set up the Standing Committee on internal migration in order to facilitate the colonization and migration toward less populated provinces and where there was a lack of manpower.

<sup>10</sup> The Royal Decree 1606 of 16 September 1926, awarded the ONC the task of territorial transformation to encourage the settlement of a larger agricultural population.

plain may be considered as a testing ground for national agricultural policies, well beyond the regime's ideological concerns.

## The “magical” year of Italian rationalism

Considering the architectural debate, we should also take into account the cultural context at time of the national competition for Sabaudia, the second new town of the Pontine Marshes. In March 1931, the second exhibition of MIAR (Italian Movement for Rational Architecture) opened at the Galleria di Roma directed by Pietro Maria Bardi. This exhibition aroused a bitter controversy with the official academic architecture. Thanks to the support of the architects' union, the exhibition was inaugurated by Mussolini himself, who showed young architects his very keen interest in rationalist architecture, inviting them to persist in that direction<sup>11</sup>.

But 1933 was the “magical” year of Italian rationalism. In May, in Florence the exhibition of the designs submitted for the new Santa Maria Novella train station tender opened; the first prize was unexpectedly awarded to the “Gruppo Toscano” led by Giovanni Michelucci, giving rise to a major split between Marcello Piacentini, president of the judging panel, and Ugo Ojetti, the unyielding champion of traditional architecture. The decision triggered a heated debate among intellectuals, artists, critics and a large part of public opinion, with echoes even in international architectural publications. In the spring, in Milan, in the new Palace of Arts designed by Giovanni Muzio, the V Triennale, coordinated by Gio Ponti, exhibited major works of Italian and European rationalism. In May, the first issue of the architectural monthly “Quadrante” came out, edited by Pietro Maria Bardi and Massimo Bontempelli, while a year earlier “Casabella” had been re-founded, edited by Giuseppe Pagano, a rehash of the old “La Casa bella” and “L’Architettura”, edited by Marcello Piacentini, as the official organ of the Union of Architects. All this contributed automatically to a consolidation of a kind of Italian leadership in the field of European rationalism, although it is difficult to determine to what extent this hegemony was intentionally sought.

The 1936 6th Milan Triennale focussed instead on the unity between the arts and housing; the real novelty was the interest in “minor” architecture stimulated by the “Exhibition of Rural Architecture in Mediterranean countries” organized by Giuseppe Pagano and Guarniero Daniel. In the spontaneous architecture to be found throughout the Italian peninsula, the exhibition highlighted the aesthetic values of an essential construct, where the architectural solutions correspond to the intended use of every part of the building, according to a conception in keeping with the principles of the Modern Movement. The photos taken all over Italy in the small towns, villages and countryside by Pagano, Daniel and other professionals constitute a wealth of documentation, hitherto practically unknown, that would give rise to a comparison between the various characteristics of regional architecture, taken up after the Second World War by Bruno Zevi and Giuseppe Samonà amongst others [21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26].

## Attempts at urban composition and new figurations

Competitions for the “new towns” (Sabaudia, Aprilia and Pomezia) and the implementations of the projects were an important laboratory for both architectural and figurative experiments, as well as for the development of a “technical-scientific” method in urban design; they are places where the meeting of “old” and “new”, between

<sup>11</sup> For the entire story of the exhibition, the controversy and subsequent dissolution of MIAR see [19].

“monumentalism” and rationalism, between traditional and modern language, are manifest in all their complexity and interplay. Cancellotti, Frezzotti, Libera, Montuori, Muratori, Piccinato and many others researched the fundamentals of modern Italian architecture and town planning, contributing, through experimentation “on the ground”, to the passing of Italy’s first planning legislation in 1942.

The first town, Littoria, designed by Oriolo Frezzotti answering directly to the Commissioner for Reclamation Orsolino Cencelli, went counter to the opinion of Mussolini, who was at pains to emphasize its character of ‘anti-urban’ rural village; however, the growing attention to new towns, especially by the media, led to the competition for designs for Sabaudia to attract significant nationwide interest. Despite being smaller than Littoria and situated on the edge of the reclamation area, Sabaudia was conceived as a fully-fledged city. The group of young designers who won the competition - Cancellotti, Montuori, Piccinato and others - were also awarded the design tender for many buildings in the town centre, according to a choice intended to underline the ambition of a unitary architectural image.

Among the natural landscape of lakes, dunes, remains of woodland, and the technical landscape of canals, railways, pumping stations, the “new towns” reflected an idea of urban composition capable of conquering the new territorial space resulting from reclamation, give life to a rarefied anthropic environment and physical expression to the relationship between town and country. The foundation towns are “cities of silence”, to use Paolo Portoghesi’s term [27], where you can find the mysterious and romantic squares, the enigmatic theatre stages as seen in metaphysical painting, interpreted in different perspective guided by a variety of figurative processes which are nonetheless grafted onto a unitary palimpsest. A procedure similar to that applied in the new squares of the medium size historical town centres (Brescia, Bergamo, etc.) or in the “E42” unfinished project.

In the sequence of cities, villages, farmhouses, churches and chapels, piezometers and watchtowers which animate the triangulation of the plain, from the mountains to the sea, we find the most diverse cultural references, sometimes veering towards the modern, sometimes toward the past, and with somewhat jarring results.

What I want to emphasize is the persistence of a deeply rooted Italian settlement culture referring back to the city, here interpreted as a settlement spread across multiple points across the territory, where the “city effect” is not so much in the single civic centre as in the system of established nuclei. There is an analogy here with Amos Edallo’s analysis of the territory and rural settlements in the Po Valley after World War Two, both over a broader area and in an urban context [28]. Orographic structure, the system of roads and canals, the distribution and density of settlements combine in the modernization of agricultural production work together in accordance with a new design of *paese rurale*.

Thus, in the case of the Pontine Marshes we see a combination of facts conducive to a lasting settlement based on territorial dimensions (scale) and original and integrated rural hubs (urban sites).

Rather different is the case of the new planned interventions in Southern Italy with the financial support of the ERP (European Recovery Program) to the UNRRA-Casas (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration – Committee for Assistance to the Homeless), under the Vice-Chairmanship of Adriano Olivetti. The most controversial example, inspired once again by the TVA and “Norris Town”, the city built from scratch in the initial and more imaginative stage of Roosevelt’s New Deal, is the village of La Martella. Intended to accommodate the farmers living in the Sassi di Matera, it presupposed new relationships between farm and town, which remained substantially

on paper because it contradicted the settlement pattern of Puglia and of Basilicata, real *agrocittà* where farm workers returned to after a day's work.

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## Short resume

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