

The new towns in the *Agro Pontino*: a literature review and critical bibliography

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Abstract. This literature review intends to focus on how the settlements system of the *Agro Pontino*, newly designed in a geographic area contiguous to the capital city and directly connected to the integral reclamation project elaborated by the agricultural economist Arrigo Serpieri starting from 1923, is narrated. The reclamation of the *Agro Pontino* is one of the most important territorial transformations carried out by Fascism under direct public control. Also, this case study is particularly significant due to the relationship between the capital city, Rome, as large urban centre, the new medium size cities, villages and the morphological structure of agricultural holdings, into a historical context where the concept of agricultural property is defined. Today we have an enormous number of books, paper and documents written in different historical period that can help us to understand the evolution of the Italian new towns but at the same time the large number of these materials can also make it difficult for understanding the project and its meaning through time. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to explain how to prepare a critical bibliography able to show the evolution of the reclamation project and the construction of new towns and the changing of its meaning over time. Also, thanks to this bibliography it's possible to extract the main issues related to the Italian case study: the relationship between the existing landscape and the network of roads; the relationship between the plans for villages, towns and the architectural features of the new settlements, and finally, the role of public buildings as a system of public facilities promoting new behaviour patterns, and their bold modernist architecture symbolized the conquest of the land.

The background: the case study of the reclamation project of the *Agro Pontino*

In this paper, the case study of the *Agro Pontino* is presented as a background to understand the methodological approach using to draft a critical bibliography. The

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new settlement system of the *Agro Pontino*, newly designed in a geographic area contiguous to the Italian capital and directly connected to the land reclamation was a project elaborated by the agricultural economist Arrigo Serpieri starting from 1923, and also is the most important territorial transformation carried out by Fascism under direct public control.

Firstly, we have to know that the reclamation project promoted by the Fascist government during the 1930s includes the *Agro Romano* and the *Agro Pontino* area. In fact, as we can see on any maps, two of the new towns constructed during the reclamation project are inside the *Agro Romano*. These two cities are Aprilia and Pomezia.

However, it is inside the *Agro Pontino* that we can find the main interesting aspects of the reclamation project. Here we can find some historical road sections like the Appian way (The linear road over *Pontinia* and *Latina*) the parallel roads of the pontinia street and the coast road; the perpendicular roads called the *Migliare*, based on an ancient roman system and finally the more recent highway that connects Rome and Naples. There are also important territorial elements like the Lepini Mountains, where the historical villages near the Marshes were established; the three main Lakes, the Fogliano Lake, Caporalace Lake, and Paola's Lake and in the south of this region, the Circeo Mountain which is inside the National Park of Circeo extending up near Sabaudia.

Zooming inside the *Agro Pontino* area we can also see the close relationship between the new towns and the road grid; also, the relationship between new towns and the rural villages as well as the main important historical settlement over the Lepini Mountain, that of Sezze. However, the main aspect is the importance between the new towns and the rural villages, because the whole reclamation project was based on a particular system determined by the strong relationship between the division into farms, the rural villages and the main cities. In fact, these three entities had to work together like a big agricultural factory. Also, to understand the importance of this project, it is very important to know the condition of the land before the reclamation. These conditions are showed by some of the most beautiful pictures of the historical archive of the *Consorzio di Bonifica dell'Agro Pontino*. These photographs, taken by Giovanni Bortolotti during the 1930s, show us the lifestyle of the mountain people who in summer descended into the marshes with their herds, living for some months in special huts called *Lestra*.

Knowing the starting point is important because it helps us to understand the main urban planning choices made during the project, so, as we can see from the historical map, we can divide the land in two different ways: the first one wants to divide the territory into vertical (north-south) sections that follows the development of the river that are divided in turn into High Water, Middle water and Low Water. The second one wants to divide the territory into horizontal (east-west) sections that are borne out by the Appian way, the Sisto River, and the coast. This split also provides the explanation for the division into farms. So, the patches were smaller closer to the Appian Way, since they were more profitable, and bigger towards the coast. In conclusion, to synthesize the reclamation project of the *Agro Pontino* we can divide this project into three specific moments: the drainage of swampy waters, the channelling of river water and the construction of new towns.

The protagonists of the Italian reclamation project were at first Arrigo Serpieri with his law promulgated in 1923 in which he tried to start the opposition to the

latifundium. He promoted small modern companies and also tried to justify the expropriation of private land. He was also the father of the concept of “Integral Reclamation” a term that means not only the hydraulic reclamation but also the work related to agricultural transformation. A second protagonist was Benito Mussolini, with his law promulgated in 1928. From that moment, the state undertook to finance not only drainage but also works of agrarian transformation.

We also have two other groups of protagonists: the technicians and the architects. The technicians were Orsolino Cencelli, president of ONC (An organization for veterans of the first world war) and Natale Prampolini, the engineer who designed the hydraulic project. We can subdivide the architects into two sub-categories: the architects chosen directly by Mussolini to design and build the new towns, and the architects who won a competition. The first group was composed of Frezzotti and Pappalardo who built Latina and Pontinia. The second group was composed at least, of Cancellotti, Muntuori, Piccinato and Scalpelli who designed Sabaudia, and Petrucci, Tufaroli, Paolini and Silenzi who designed Aprilia and Pomezia.

As we can understand, this case study is particularly significant due to the relationship between the capital city, Rome, as a large urban centre, the new medium sized cities, the rural villages and the morphological structure of agricultural holdings, into a historical context where the concept of agricultural property is defined. That is why today we have an enormous number of books, paper and documents written in different historical period that can help us to understand the evolution of Italy’s new towns. But at the same time the high number of these information can also make it difficult the understanding of the project and its meaning through the time. So the aim of this paper is, therefore, to explain how to draft a critical bibliography able to show the evolution of the reclamation project and the construction of new towns and the changing in time of its meaning.

How to write a critical bibliography

So how to write a bibliography able to help us in understanding our research theme? In this case after a first reading of more recent and famous texts related to the reclamation of the *Agro Pontino* [1, 2, 3] it was possible to draft a first summary bibliography. From this summary bibliography, it is possible to understand the main topics related to the case study.

As we know, the project of reclamation and transformation of the agricultural landscape involves all aspects concerning the close relationship between the new cities and the political-cultural climate, the national and international debate on architectural design and urban planning during the Fascist regime, the sociological results of migration policies and finally, relevance the scale of the project in the national and foreign press.

We can extract these topics not only from the texts that we are reading but also from the texts used by the author, so from his or her previous knowledge. Finally, we can say that these main themes constitute the history of our case study. Also, they are a kind of filter that helps us to organize our interest inside the research.

After the drafting of the summary list of books the drafting of bibliography can go on with a second step, that means a second reading of texts related to the main

themes. After this phase, we can extract the related themes, which are topics not directly connect with our case study but that are also important to understand the complexity of our research topics and at least supplement the previous knowledge of the author.

Is in this sense that we can drafting a critical bibliography which is a bibliography drafted following a selection process, that means understanding the research theme in its total complexity.

How to learn from a critical bibliography

At this stage is very important to understand how to learn from this bibliography, so what we can do with our work. It is therefore useful to subdivide texts into main issues and in chronological order. As we can understand from the previous paragraph, the main issues should be composed of the main themes and the related themes, so we can subdivide texts, books and documents as follows:

- History of Italy: political and social history of the country after the Italian unification;
- Politics and economics during the fascist era: a general picture of fascist politics, its organization and the main economic policies [4, 5, 6];
- Art, cinema, photography, propaganda: the influence of Regime's policies within the cultural scenario during the Fascist period [7];
- History of Architecture and History of Italian Architecture: national and international debate on Modern architecture [8, 9, 10];
- History of Urbanism and History of Italian Urbanism: the debate on the emergence of a new discipline [2, 11];
- Architecture and Urbanism during Fascist era: the emergence of State architecture and urban design and the strong political influence on the on Modern architecture and urban planning [10];
- Fascism and New Towns: The new towns conceived and built by the Regime [12, 13, 14];
- Territory and landscape: the importance assumed by the natural landscape in the case of Integral Reclamation [15];
- Agricultural policy-land reclamation-hydraulic system: structured by sub-themes as: health and sanitation issues, reclamation project, hydraulic engineering, agricultural policy etc. [16, 18];
- Housing and rural building policies: house planning policies, that will be fundamental for the choices made by the Regime both in the design of new cities then in the approach to major urban centre [18, 19];
- Migratory phenomena [20];
- The case of the *Agro Pontino*: specific writings dedicated to the reclamation and construction of new towns in the *Agro Pontino* [21, 22].

Also, the chronological order of the critical bibliography, organized in different paragraphs, highlights three fundamental moments within the debate concerning the research topic:

- Texts written during the reclamation and construction of new towns (1923-1936);

- Texts written in the years immediately following the construction of new towns (1938-1945);
- Texts written from the second half of the 1970s onwards.

Conclusions

Using the bibliography as a tool able to give us knowledge, can help us to filter the information and to look at it with a critical point of view that is fundamental for research. In this case, we can understand from the extracted main issues the keywords that will accompany us during our research. From my case study, the keywords are: architecture, politics and propaganda, rural settlement, reclamation, rural buildings, urbanism and new towns. However, the most interesting results come from the subdivision of books and documents in chronological sections.

1923-1936: the contemporary debate concerning the building of the new towns

To this period belong articles, published in national trade journals (e.g. *Quadrante*, 1933-1935; *Architettura*, 1928-1945; *Urbanistica*, 1928-1945; *Casabella*, 1930-1946/47; *Critica Fascista*, 1932-1945; *Agro Pontino*, 1935-1940), dedicated in particular to the projects of Integral Reclamation and new towns; as well as in-depth studies inside foreign journals, to record the international interests for the Italian case study [12].

Most of the articles written in this period are also by the architects who were directly involved with urban design of the new towns. Luigi Piccinato's writing [22], published in 1934 in *Urbanistica* magazine, is a perfect example. Here, the author does not only describe his project, but he tries to provide a definition of the Fascist City as well. Definition that is still being debated. An overall look at the literature of the articles written in the early 1930s of the 20th century, shows how, within the debate, on the one hand emerges the national and international interest for the case study of the *Agro Pontino*, and on the other is highlighted the comparison between innovation and tradition in searching for an architecture as a state art. The texts relating to the agricultural policy of the nation and the hydraulic project for the reclamation of the *Agri Pontino* and *Romano*, must also be reported in this collection.

1936-1945: the debate immediately following the reclamation project

These writings are different from those written in the first half of the 1930s as they amount the first critical reflections on the reclamation project just completed. These reflections expressing both the first doubts about the general project strategy and the need to still use the "Integral Reclamation" of the *Agro Pontino* as a propaganda tool despite, in these years, the Regime's attention return to address the large cities.

The debate between tradition and innovation in architecture still remains central, within which the figure of Giuseppe Pagano assumes a fundamental role. In fact, with an article published in *Casabella* magazine in 1935 – one of the few related to the theme of the Fascist's new towns present in the magazine headed by him – he uses the case of the city of Sabaudia to describe the Modern Italian architecture:

The thirteenth year, in fact, saw three works that alone would be enough to indicate the maturity of Italian architecture. [...] This architecture was born in an environment of confident expectation, but also in the acidic venomousness of an opposition always alert with its 19th century melancholy. The history of the city of Sabaudia, the history of the Florence Station and the history of the Rome's University Town, are three dramas of modern Italian architecture that have come to a victorious conclusion only because the Man who creates our history, openly defended the Italian and artistic faith of modern architects and silenced the croaking of frogs. Now those frogs applaud and write articles of praise. [But] we remember the parliamentary battle against Sabaudia [...] Even the creators of Sabaudia have cemented a principle of connection and comradeship that the same hostilities of the environment have strengthened. [23]

From 1970 to the present day: the critical debate

In this phase – from the second half of the 1970s to the present day – the case of new towns becomes central again within historiography. After the difficult moment – moral and constructive – of post-war reconstruction, the theme of the *Agro Pontino* returns to be evaluated with the necessary critical detachment, making the Fascist new towns find their own role in the construction of a history of Italian architecture and urbanism of the 20th century.

Two fundamental texts of this period are those of Riccardo Mariani [12] and Paolo Sica [2] that place, within a general historiographical reconstruction, the case of the new town as a testing ground that led to the definition of Law no. 1150 of 17 August 1942 – Urban Planning Law. In particular, Riccardo Mariani, who specifically investigates the case of the *Agro Pontino*, describes the fascist city as “the territorial expression of the state, as the home of a new society based on the New Order, as a phenomenon able to tackle the urban expansion through ruralism, an instrument capable of actively building the new society” [12: 231].

In the text of Paolo Sica, dedicated to the general reconstruction of a urban history, it is possible to understand how:

the reclamation of the Pontine marshes constitutes the most celebrated success of the territorial policy of fascism, on the wave of an effective propaganda work done both inside and outside of the country, in emphatically presenting: the achievements of architecture, the meeting deadlines promised, the industrious and serene life of the settlers on the redeemed land, the economic results, the positive effects on unemployment. In a word, the capacity to plan organically both economics, society and territory. [2: 361]

These two writings represent two milestones within the current literature and have allowed, in the last twenty years, a greater diffusion of the topic.

From 2000 to the present day, we're seeing the production of two types of writings:

- those which are specialized and focused on one side, in the continuous search for models [24] able to identify the fascist city – also through the comparison with the overseas cities – and on the other, they face for the first time the theme of conservation and memory of these places and architectures [28];
- those which have a territorial and communication nature, closely linked to the local identity, which includes the novels of Antonio Pennacchi [25, 26, 27]

who, through the tale, returns the history of the new town from the point of view of the local population.

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Short resume

Emanuela Margione graduated at Politecnico di Milano in 2016 with a thesis entitled “Shenzhen. On the Danan hill, equipment for the U.A.B.B. exhibition and for leisure time”. In November 2017, with a thematic scholarship “Constructing place and community: the complementary relationship between architectural and urban design in towns and villages of the Pontine Marshes”, co-funded by MODSCAPES and the ABC Department of Politecnico di Milano, she started her PhD studies.

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