

Towards the contemporary development of modern architecture inherited from the Fascist regime: the city of Sabaudia.

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Abstract Carried out by the Italian fascist regime, the creation of the town of Sabaudia occurred during the draining of the Pontine Marshes in an intervention that was central to efforts in the organization of rural territory. This paper explores the “reinvention” of Sabaudia through an analysis of its town plan and buildings from the 1970s. Recent practices of conservation, preservation and restoration of this modern inheritance were studied. A lack of knowledge led to the modification or the demolition of some buildings. I review how these attempts to consider the legacies of Italian history were met with refusal in the 1970s and 1980s compared to the 2000s when a heritage-making policy was enacted to promote the town. The political question resurfaces here: does “patrimonialization” permit giving this architecture, resulting from a totalitarian regime, a recognition that is incompatible with their political origin? That is to say, can we think about Sabaudia without thinking about fascism? The presentation of some projects of renovation and restoration will highlight several questions regarding modern aesthetics, the relation to landscape, as well as uses and techniques.

Introduction

This paper explores the “reinvention” of Sabaudia, a rationalist Italian town. First, I briefly review the creation of Sabaudia under the fascist regime. Particular attention is paid to the aims and objectives of the architects involved in the construction of the town. Then, I examine post-war Sabaudia and the 1970s reassessment of its town plan and buildings. Finally, I consider some examples of restoration and renovation. Several questions regarding modern aesthetics, the relation to landscape, and uses and techniques are also highlighted.

I further review how attempts to consider the legacy of Italian history met with resistance in the 1970s and 1980s, and were then associated with the promotion of the town and heritage-making policy of the 2000s.

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The founding of Sabaudia, a new town in a rural territory

During the 1920s, the Italian fascist regime began several political and territorial interventions. One of them was the draining of the Pontine Marshes. The original plan for this territory included its amplification and transformation into agricultural land but did not contemplate the establishment of new towns. It was only after pressure from high officials in the regime, and in spite of Mussolini's disapproval, that Littoria was eventually established. On account of this first endeavour achieving much international press attention, Mussolini agreed to launch a larger programme for the establishment of other new towns. Sabaudia was the second town created. It was the subject of my doctoral thesis, defended in 2016 [1].



Figure 1. Giovanni Bortolotti, *The town from the Lake Paola*, 5 March 1938.
Source: Archivio Fotografico di Consorzio di Bonifica di Latina.

Gino Cancellotti, Eugenio Montuori, Luigi Piccinato and Alfredo Scalpelli won the competition to build Sabaudia. Involved in the rationalist movement, they designed a town according to their aspirations. In the town, which was built in 253 days, the architects sought to utilize several design elements borrowed from modernism. These elements underwent a process of hybridization with local architectural approaches. For example, *la piazza*, the Italian square, which allows for large gatherings, remains important to this day. Its inclusion in the town plan of Sabaudia points to the significance of this structure in daily life. Also, although the buildings in the town are varied in height, construction material and design, they nonetheless fit when viewed as a whole composition. Moreover, the architects carefully designed each building, paying particular attention to details such as the contour line and the relation with the surrounding area. Located on a slight promontory, the town dominates Lake Paola, itself separated from the Tyrrhenian Sea by a fine sand dune. On the horizon stands the silhouette of Mount Circeo, the mythological home of the sorceress Circe in Homer's *Odyssey*. The town is also isolated from the rest of the territory by the Circeo National Park, which acts as a physical barrier to the rest of the Pontine area. All these

architectural components played a crucial role in the planning of the town. However, they also influenced its historical evolution and continue to do so today. (Fig.1)

Featuring an open plan, the town includes historical planning references such as the north-south *cardo* and the east-west *decumanus* axes, while its buildings often make reference to other modern structures. This specificity led to heated arguments regarding the rationalist forms of the town, particularly during the political debates of the 1930s. While the post-war Italian Constitution considered the defence of fascism to be a serious felony, it is noteworthy that only the municipalities whose ruling parties emerged out of the Resistenza movement removed all fascist symbols from public space. Other municipalities, Sabaudia included, whose ruling class was connected to the pre-war fascist regime, did not remove such representations. Indeed, at the end of the war, the town was not damaged. While a few symbols of the regime were destroyed, the town's buildings remained in place and daily life resumed, as in cities and towns across Italy. In fact, even today, one can still find the official speech given during Sabaudia's foundation stone-laying ceremony engraved on the tower of the town hall building.

Eventually, debates and controversies over the rationalist architecture of Sabaudia began to fade. Though Bruno Zevi mentioned the town in his 1950 history of modern architecture [2], it was only in 1976 that architectural historians attempted a more informed appraisal of its heritage [3].

On the policy side, in 1959, local elected officials celebrated the town's twenty five-year history with the presence of Valentino Orsolini Cencelli [4]. As the man whose job it had been to choose a site for the new town, Orsolini Cencelli was an essential agent of the drainage of the Pontine marshes².

The first step related to the reassessment of the town

The presence of the Roman intelligentsia

There were several reasons leading to the initial reassessment of Sabaudia during the 1960s.

First, the town was appropriated by the Roman intelligentsia who viewed Sabaudia differently than did the politicians. In their writings they described the countryside, the atmosphere, and the mythology surrounding the town. There are even images of intellectuals posing in Sabaudia with Mount Circeo in the background. In one short video by Paolo Brunatto, we see Pier Paolo Pasolini on a sand dune discussing local architecture [5].

Bernardo Bertolucci's recollection of his first trip to Sabaudia shows how the perception had changed by then: "In 1958, when I was 17, Moravia called my father and told him: why don't you come with me, I'm looking for a house by the sea near Sabaudia. [...] We went there. Upon leaving, we stopped in Sabaudia to drink a coffee and I remember how Alberto and my father [...] were offended by Sabaudia's ugliness. Flash forward, twenty years later, to 1978: I filmed "La Luna" on the same beach and miraculously, Sabaudia, with its horrible fascist architecture, became wonderful [...]" [6].

Such a reassessment is a sign of the town's renewal. When the subject of the origins of Sabaudia is raised, the town is now judged for its urban and architectural qualities and not for its political origins (Fig. 2). However, questions can certainly be raised about

² 1898-1971, agronomist, politician. Valentino Orsolini Cencelli was a figure of the fascist regime. As President of the Government of *Opera Nazionale Combattenti*, he conducted the draining of the Pontine Marshes. In 1943, he joined the government of Badoglio.

the town's transformation into a seaside resort in the 1960s, particularly for well-off Romans. Is it not significant that its sandy dunes were the closest to Rome to fit with the contemporary ideal of sandy beaches and clean water while at the same time being difficult to access by public transport?



Figure 2. Mimmo Frassinetti, *Alberto Moravia in the streets of Sabaudia*, 1977.
Source: [6: 5].

The 1970s masterplan

The second step of this reassessment happened in the 1970s. Two architects of the original project, Eugenio Montuori and Luigi Piccinato, and an engineer, Martino Taviano, were chosen to design a new town plan³.

Though in 1942 the architects of Sabaudia had already alerted politicians to the risk of uncontrolled development, their suggestions were ignored. As such, Piccinato, Montuori and Taviano designed a plan that recommended enhancing the surrounding landscape, thus protecting Sabaudia and the adjoining areas as much as possible. To preserve the town and its original design, the architects proposed several actions regarding a future which was to be characterized by tourism. Indeed, the agrarian town was to be transformed into a seaside resort. Residential zones were concentrated in specific areas in order to preserve the lakeshore and the dunes. Recreational spaces were to be left untouched, and open to anybody. In a bid to control traffic, a new inner road was designed. The *strada lungomare*, along the coast, was to become pedestrian. Only functional buildings would remain: changing rooms, showers, rescue services, restaurants, etc.

Regarding Sabaudia's downtown, the architects offered to reinforce the structure of the town and add essential amenities: a sports complex, a school, and new housing. The town had grown towards the east and while the architects were not against growth,

³ Piccinato Archives, B. 80/P, Sabaudia – Variante al PRG. Norme – Relazioni - Emendamenti, Eugenio Montuori, Luigi Piccinato, Martino Taviano, *Relazione al piano regolatore di 1972*.

they did wish to limit indiscriminate sprawl. They therefore proposed the use of the old sports field as a separation between the urbanized area and the forest. This zone was to become the new commercial centre of the town, providing shops and services to residents. It was to align with the “old” administrative centre and aid urban development. Green areas were to maintain a fixed development in the town and offer Sabaudia a pedestrian area with playgrounds, schools and a nursery. In this way, the town and its landscape were to achieve a sense of coherence. The master plan of 1971 proposed the extension of the forested area and the creation of a system of connected public parks that could not be built upon. The north of the town was to be dedicated to artisanal and industrial uses, thus preserving residential housing elsewhere.

As a seaside resort, the local council even considered building a marina. However, the architects ultimately set this idea aside as it required digging a new canal into the dunes and would have caused landscape and ecological damage (Fig. 3).

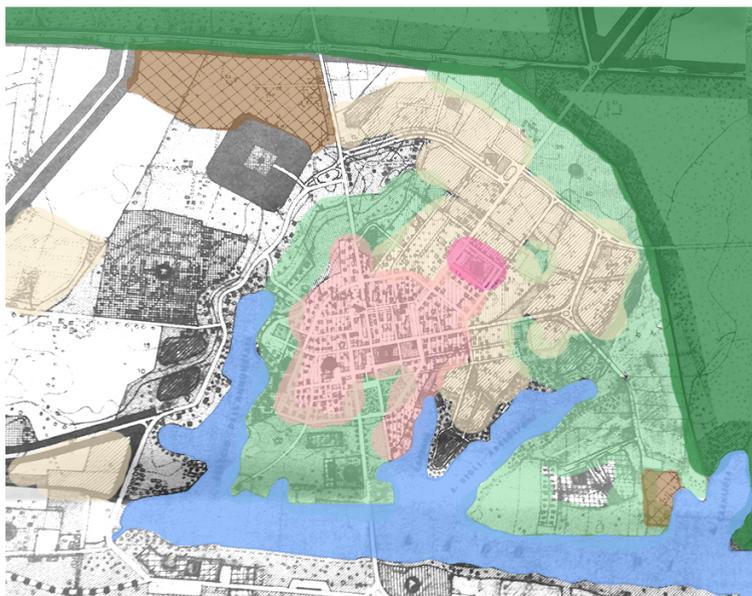


Figure 3. *Town Planning Scheme, 1969-1971.*

Source: Author's original elaboration based on: Eugenio Montuori, Luigi Piccinato, and Martino Taviano plan for the city, 1969-1971 Archivio E. Pellegrini.

This new town plan predicted a population of 26,000, a significant rise from the roughly 10,000 residents during the 1970s. The plan was approved by the mayor, Nello Jalongo, in 1972 [7: 190].

Even so, shoreline traffic restrictions and the abandonment of the marina project were highly criticized. Indeed, the town plan ran counter to the interest of municipal councillors who wished to boost the local economy through the promotion of tourism.

The masterplan, however, was not fully implemented. The shoreline road remained open to motor traffic, the outside districts were only partially built and the town continued to grow. Today, the population has risen to approximately 20,000 people, less than expected by Piccinato, Montuori and Taviano.

Despite having been only partially successful, this project constituted the first sign of interest in guiding the town's development; the masterplan demonstrated the urban value of Sabaudia. However, the town's past was never mentioned and political debates were reduced to economic factors, not to architectural value or fascist origins.

Some insensitive interventions

Despite this initial attempt to guide the town's development, the desire to protect its modern heritage came later. Architects' voices, like that of Giorgio Muratore, a student of Bruno Zevi, were not heard. In a publication from 1985, Muratore mentioned the unity of Sabaudia, based on the typology and morphology of the architecture. This unity was essential to preserve the town: "If we have to talk about quality in the case of Sabaudia [...] it would appear that it comes from, strictly speaking, the precise alignment between the plan of the town and its architecture [...]. Actually, it is this particular unity that gives Sabaudia this unique urbanism [...] we hope that buildings may preserve their original state, which, as we have seen, makes a lot of sense in the panorama of Italian and international architectural culture. We also wish that it remains a model for this as yet unexplored field of research that is 'the restoration of the modern' [...]" [8].

Paradoxically, the interest of architects remained distant from the will of politicians until the 2000s; in official speeches, though politicians confirmed the importance of the future, no concrete preservation measures were taken and several buildings suffered damage as a result of the neglect. Sabaudia is no exception in the field of modern architecture. Its conservation would come later. We assume that intervention on the buildings followed the evolution of minds. First, there was a lack of communication between the architects and historians, and the politicians. Collaboration only occurred when politicians began to identify an interest in promoting modern heritage. Such changes are visible in numerous interventions across town buildings.

Destruction of the covered market between 1982 and 1987

The covered market of Sabaudia was built in the heart of the town. It was made of cross-shaped reinforced concrete columns supporting a roof⁴. However, at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, pieces of the building began to fall away [7: 40]. Though these were merely part of the building's coating and while the structure of the building remained intact, municipal councillors from the Christian Democracy political party (CD) took this opportunity to propose a new project: the substitution of this old

⁴ Sabaudia's Municipal Library, Arch. disegni n.78., Gino Cancellotti, Eugenio Montuori, Luigi Piccinato, Alfredo Scalpelli, «Sabaudia, il Mercato», disegno a china su lucido, 37,7x53,5cm.

building with a hotel complex and a new conference centre aimed at improving tourism infrastructure. The covered market was demolished in the 1980s.

It was only afterwards that it was proven that the market building was under no risk of collapse. In addition, the new complex was never built. Today, the square is still used as a market place. The only real objections to demolishing the old building came from the architects. Even the press did not mention it. This absence of reaction shows how, in the 1980s, modern architecture was given very little consideration in the face of the economic imperative.

Enclosing of the *Palazzo del Comune* at the end of the 1980s

More controversial was a new design for the *Palazzo del Comune*, the building that hosts the town hall. The complex is composed of three rectangular U-shaped structures, with an open courtyard facing the lake. The new project was created to host the work of sculptor Emilio Greco⁵. Mayor Saverio Mantova of the CD wished to modify the building and add a partition that would enclose the courtyard [7: 40]. Despite many voices of opposition, the project was completed. However, in this case, the protests originated due to an interest in the building's rationalist architecture. Its value as modern heritage had finally begun to appear [9].

Luigi Iacuzzi, a municipal councillor from the Communist Party, explained: "The destruction of the covered market, the demolition of the mill, the gutting of the school and the disappearance of the old slaughterhouses [...] are the most terrible examples of a logic that seeks the destruction of the original architectural system and the creation of a pseudo-modern reconstruction" [10].

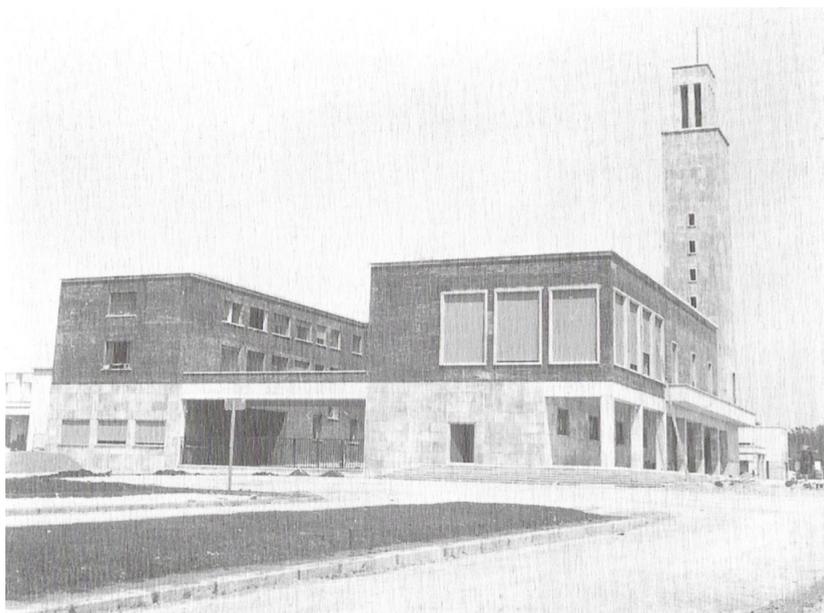


Fig. 4. s.n., *Rear Façade of Palazzo del Comune*, 1930s.
Source: Biblioteca Comunale of Sabaudia, archives, photo n° 206.

⁵ 1913-1995, Sculptor. Greco trained some of the artists who came to Sabaudia in the 1970s. His donation of a large part of his works to the Sabaudia, on the occasion of the 50-year anniversary of its founding, required the enlargement of the town's existing museum.

In March 1987, the magazine *L'Architettura: Cronache e Storia* fiercely criticized the plan. Arguing that the municipality's approach was unacceptable, they claimed that "The work of Piccinato, Cancellotti, Montuori and Scalpelli cannot be falsified. Integration is plausible only if it respects and develops its organic quality" [11]. (Fig. 4)

The courtyard was enclosed with a glass wall. With time, the glass has become opaque, thus altering the overall sense of the building. The perspective drawn by the town's architects was broken and the intended relationship with the landscape was terminated. (Fig. 5)



Fig. 5. *Palazzo del Comune's* enclosing structure. Photo: Constance Ringon, September 2014.

Despite the completion of the project, we may consider this event, and the debate it generated, as the key moment giving rise to a common awareness of heritage.

Between the museumification and the reinvention of Sabaudia

However, an awareness of heritage only became concrete in 2001, about ten years after the degradation of the *Palazzo del Comune*. Before then, historical and cultural structures were protected under law n°1089 of 1 June 1939 titled *Tutela delle cose d'interesse artistico o storico* [Protection of items of artistic and historical interest]. Modern heritage was part of a vast group of artefacts [12].

On the 20th of November 2001, regional law n° 27 was enacted. Titled *Interventi per la conoscenza, il recupero e la valorizzazione delle città di fondazione*, it concerned Latium and aimed to promote the knowledge, reinvestment, and evaluation of the new towns built during fascism. It can be summarized in four main aspects:

- Researching the region's architecture, history, art and anthropology
- Creating an inventory of cultural objects
- Developing cultural services to aid in research
- Linking and promoting cultural services already operating in the area

The new law allowed for the identification of a particular modern heritage and, as such, would be likely to be more effective. As a fresh legal framework, it generated renewed considerations about Sabaudia.



Fig. 6. s.n., *Post Office*, 1930s.

Source: *Casa dell'Architettura di Latina*, collection Angiolo Mazzoni.



Fig. 7. *Post Office after renovation*. Photo: Constance Ringon, September 2014.

Renovation of the Post Office in 2009

In Sabaudia, the main outcome of this law was the restoration of the post office. This building was designed by Angiolo Mazzoni and its futurist forms and Savoie blue colour

gave the building an emblematic status. Over the years, the post office building had been abandoned and become damaged. In the early 2000s, the building was transformed into the Multimedia Centre of Sabaudia [13] which guides visitors through the history of the Pontine Marshes. Construction work began in 2009.

In this case, the restoration did not give rise to debate; the building was damaged and it was necessary to act quickly to preserve it. Moreover, the new project sought to maintain the original design. After a careful analysis of Mazzoni's building, crews worked with original construction techniques even while performing structural restoration. Local authorities paid attention not only to the outer appearance of the building but also published a brochure explaining the need for this restoration project and the care with which it was being undertaken. In 2014, a second brochure was published to showcase the structure of the Multimedia Centre [14] (Figs. 6 and 7).

2010-2014: The restyling of *Piazza del Comune*

Despite legal progress, continual attention must be paid to the town's development. The 2010 proposal for Sabaudia's central square provided such an opportunity. In the plan, the L-shaped square opens towards the lake and into the sea. It functions as a pivot for the urban form of Sabaudia. Over the past century, as with the post office, this public space has been damaged; some urban equipment was added, materials changed, etc. In 2004, a new design was decided upon. But the first project planned six years later by Luca Conte, Oreste Coluzzi and Laura Culmone, three architects from Latium, was strongly rejected.

Indeed, the appearance of the square would be completely changed: the roadbed would be elevated, posts installed to prevent cars from parking on sidewalks, new alignments of trees created, and the use of new materials and colours would help create a unified whole⁶. (Fig. 8)



Figure 8. Luca Conte, Oreste Coluzzi, Laura Culmone. Proposed rehabilitation of *Piazza del Comune*, February 2010. Source: City Planning Department of Sabaudia, public works.

⁶ City Planning Department of Sabaudia, public works, CONTE, L.; COLUZZI, O.; CULMONE, L. "Riquilificazione della piazza comunale, Relazione paesaggistica", deliberation n 20 / GM of the 12.02.2010.

Ultimately, and despite the architects' assertions about the care with which the project was to be undertaken, the project was cancelled. Many voices were raised in opposition, from those of politicians and inhabitants to, of course, those of architects like Giorgio Muratore. He commented on the quality of the space: "it had a simple sort of dignity, the project changed that [...] it was this quality of simplicity that visitors enjoyed"⁷. In 2010, he was already opposed to this project: "It is no [...] restoration project, it's a pigsty" [15] (Fig. 9).

The Senate examined this case in June 2010 and forced the project to be modified⁸. The consciousness of heritage grew, promoted by the State. Perhaps another sort of conformism was being arrived at through these positions.



Fig. 9. ONC, *Piazza della Rivoluzione* (now *Piazza del Comune*) and Town Hall, 1930s.
Source: *Sabaudia nelle cartoline*, Archivio Iconografico del Lazio, Roma.

Conclusion

From this discussion, it can be seen that these concrete actions led towards a museumification of Sabaudia. In addition, the creation of a walking route throughout the town served to freeze urban spaces in time. Visitors could now explore the town by means of a signposted path that provided additional information about building and spaces.

The public is now informed and attentive but some questions remain: how to manage an entire town's heritage? How to let the town evolve without succumbing to museumification? Does a touristic development necessarily lead to this museumification, and to a negative impact on the population?

⁷ Interview with Giorgio Muratore, 4th September 2015.

⁸ Senato, Seduta n° 392, released on the 8th June 2010. Retrieved from: <http://www.senato.it/japp/bgt/showdoc/showText?tipodoc=Sindisp&leg=16&id=484068> [available on 12 March 2018].

We may perhaps find the beginning of an answer in some new projects on town development in Sabaudia.

During my research, I met local architect Ettore Pellegrini. Born in Sabaudia, Pellegrini has great interest in his hometown and its growth. He worked on an urban and architectural project for Sabaudia: housing and shops. Ettore Pellegrini's goal is to reuse the town's founding principles. In this way, he hopes to bring a harmonious development to Sabaudia. His project returns to the importance of the *piazza*. Buildings are on the edge of the parcel⁹. He proposes the improvement of a central shared space, the interaction with the surrounding environment and particular attention to the contour line. Regarding the architecture, Pellegrini uses distinguishing features of Sabaudia: a portico in front of the shops, regular bay windows, an angle tower for a specific programme (headquarters of the municipal police, etc.). We rediscover here the plan of Cancellotti, Montuori, Piccinato and Scalpelli (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. *Ettore Pellegrini's project, Piazza Ermanno Tomassetti.*
Photo: Constance Ringon, April 2012.

Beyond this project, recent attempts to organize new towns into an association will necessarily imply a return to the political debate. Buildings are not only recognized as a modern heritage endowed with urban and architectural qualities but they also lead the way to the re-emergence of revisionist ideas. The cultural delegate of Latina himself recently claimed that "Impressions on fascism have shifted, and calmer conditions now permit an evaluation. It was not only dark moments" [16].

In the eyes of the historian Giorgio Pellegrini, this consideration of our past requires a political perspective and questions this "conflicting heritage": "Can we see the

⁹ City Planning Department of Sabaudia, public works, PELLEGRINI, E., "Programma di recupero urbano area Corso Vittorio Emanuele III, piano di sistemazione dell'area di intervento", February 2002.

architecture of the new town with new eyes, without feeling the burden of the tragedies that happened behind the façades of each building?" [16].

Short Resume

Constance Ringon is an architect and has a PhD in Architecture. Her thesis, *Une ville dans le prisme des regards, Sabaudia de sa fondation (1933) à ses 80 ans (2014)* [Regarding the reception of a new town: Sabaudia from his foundation (1934) to his 80 years (2014)], was supervised by Enrico Chapel. She was a fellow of the *École Française de Rome* in 2014 and in 2015. Her research works are about the critical reception of rationalist architecture. She is currently Associate Professor in History of Architecture at the *École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Toulouse* (Toulouse School of Architecture, France).

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