

# Destructive creation: fascist urban planning, architecture and New Towns in the Pontine Marshes

Federico Caprotti

*St. Peter's College, New Inn Hall Street, Oxford OX1 2DL, UK*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the construction, architecture, planning and design of New Towns in the Pontine Marshes, south of Rome, in the 1930s, analysing the discourses which contributed to their shaping and settlement. It focuses specifically on the plans and architectural characteristics of the city of Sabaudia as the best example of fascist urban utopias in the area. The paper also moves beyond an analysis of architecture and planning to consider the human beings who were slated for occupying what were viewed as ideal, utopian fascist spaces. This is done through an investigation of Italy's ruralization and internal colonization policies, which aimed to tackle a 'demographic problem' defined through recourse to statistics and sociological analysis. These policies were animated by colonists, and their families, chosen by the regime's institutions to take part in the Pontine Marshes project. Italian fascism's structuring of a new urban environment, which stretched from grand systemic designs to the measurement of mosquito net dimensions in colonial houses' bedrooms, justified the attempted social and political control of fascism's experimental urban subjects.

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## Introduction

It is 1930. The Pontine Marshes look much as they would have looked before the onset of civilization. Swampy, malaria-ridden, and prone to extremely high summer temperatures, the

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*E-mail address:* [fcaprot@ouce.ox.ac.uk](mailto:fcaprot@ouce.ox.ac.uk)

only people who dare venture into the large uninhabited area are seasonal buffalo herders who labour down from the bordering Lepini mountains, leaving many of their peers behind, victims of malaria, when they retreat back to the mountains in the winter. Until 1930, the marshes swallowed and spat out any attempt at habitation, drainage, or even transit. The Romans tellingly called any life in the marshes a *miraculum*. Later on, the Popes tried in vain to drain the area. Italy's post-unification liberal governments passed over 50 laws and sank millions of lire into projects aimed at bringing the marshes to heel. All to no avail. Just 30 miles south of Rome, and bordering the Mediterranean Sea, the marshes were, until the 1930s, an empty space on the map, at the gates of Rome.

It is 1932. Endless columns of trucks roll out along Rome's Appian Way, headed for the marshes. Over 50,000 workers have moved into the area, and construction is well underway in Littoria, a New Town we now know as Latina.<sup>1</sup> Wide avenues and modernist buildings based on rational city plans by leading architects working under the aegis of fascism rise out of the previously uninhabitable landscape. Towers sprout up everywhere to accompany fascist buildings such as local Fascist National Party headquarters, and suddenly the Pontine Marshes gain their first urban skyline. There are plans for four more towns to be built in 1933, 1934, 1936 and 1939. One hour from Rome, the massive building site that are the marshes in 1932 becomes one of Mussolini's favourite destinations, followed by film crews, the press, and foreign dignitaries, from ambassadors to the King of Siam. The *New York Times* and *Le Monde* wax lyrical about the project, devoting acres of print to Italian fascism's New Towns. The Pontine Marshes become the jewel in the crown of the regime's urban interventions. In other projects, Rome's city centre is transformed, and new neighbourhoods are built, the stunningly modernist EUR quarter being perhaps the finest example.<sup>2</sup> In the colonies, the experience of taming and urbanising the Pontine Marshes leads Mussolini to plan new urban utopias, realised in the case of Addis Ababa.<sup>3</sup>

The reclamation of the marshes became synonymous with fascist national regeneration. Fascism, however, was simply the latest in a long series of ideological movements which placed their own spin on the marshes, making nature and the inanimate talk in the language of fascist ideology.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on documents from the Central State Archive (ACS), Rome, and urban plans from the Latina State Archive (ASL), Latina. Statistical census data were obtained from the Italian National Institute for Statistics (ISTAT) and the Central State Archive. Within the Central State Archive, the archives used to support this paper are Mussolini's personal governmental archive, the *Segreteria Particolare del Duce*, *Carteggio Ordinario 1922–1943* (SPDCO); the ministry of agriculture and forests, or *Ministero per l'Agricoltura e le Foreste* (MAFF); and the *Atti del Consiglio dei Ministri: Interno* (Council of Ministers: Interior) (PCM). All translations from Italian are the author's. The author would like to thank three anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The author also expresses his gratitude to Rachele Riva in Milan, and to Luciano Agostoni in Rome.

<sup>2</sup> M. Fuller, Wherever you go, there you are: fascist plans for the colonial city of Addis Ababa and the colonizing suburb of EUR '42, *Journal of Contemporary History* 31 (1996) 397–418.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Italian colonialism and imaginations of Africa, see D. Atkinson, Creating colonial space with geographies and geopolitics, in: R. Ben-Ghiat and M. Fuller (Eds), *Italian Colonialism: The Reader*, New York, 2005, 15–26; D. Atkinson, Geographical knowledge and scientific survey in the construction of Italian Libya, *Modern Italy* 8 (2003) 9–29; C. Burdett, Italian fascism and utopia, *History of the Human Sciences* 16 (2003) 93–108; C. Burdett, Journeys to Italian East Africa 1936–1941: narratives of settlement, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 5 (2000) 207–226. For analysis of the link between EUR '42 and colonial city planning, see Fuller, Wherever you go, there you are (note 2).

<sup>4</sup> B. Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Harvard, 2004; V. Cencelli, *Le Paludi Pontine tra Leggenda e Storia*, Milan, 1934.

The domination of the marshes is an example of a Faustian project, in Marshall Berman's words, which highlights modernity's contradictions and monstrosities as well as its glittering achievements.<sup>5</sup> In the Italian national context, a modern discourse encapsulating the marshes became prominent during pre-unification Italian nationalism. Garibaldi, for example, posited a link between the continued existence of the marshes and a historically corrupt 'bad government', in need of a reclamation of sorts through the Risorgimento, the struggle for Italian national unity.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the reclamation and urbanization of the Pontine Marshes can be seen not only as examples of fascist ruralization or demographic policies, which will be explored below, but as examples of wider socionatural trends within European and Italian modernity. This paper, however, focuses on that particular period of modern Italian history which touched and transformed the Pontine Marshes in its own way: Italian fascism.

The regime's emphasis on the shaping of a 'new man' and a model woman under fascism was an example of what Emilio Gentile has called the 'conquest of modernity' rather than a phenomenon restricted to fascism *per se*.<sup>7</sup> As Herbert Marcuse noted, the effects of totalitarianism are not confined to the economy.<sup>8</sup> It extends to spaces of leisure and everyday life, such as the street, where through the apparent availability of choice, freedom becomes a distant mirage, not worthy of pursuit and blind to alternative theorizations of the link between the city, domestic spaces and the body.<sup>9</sup> In making this point, Marcuse was referring to advanced industrial society. It can however be argued that his theory of one-dimensionality (1964), which considered industrial society's eliding of alternatives and critiques, stemmed from his writings in the 1950s which focused on fascism and communism. Italian fascism's structuring of new urban environments in the Pontine Marshes stretched from grand systemic designs to the measurement of mosquito net dimensions in the newly built colonial houses' bedrooms, in an attempt to justify the social and political control of fascism's experimental urban and domestic subjects.

Lastly, it is interesting to note that the Pontine Marshes have been conceived of as a 'blank space' on the historical–geographical map of Italy. In their study of demography in the Lazio region between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, for example, population historians Sonnino and Parmeggiani consistently ignore the Pontine Marshes.<sup>10</sup> In their analysis of nine detailed maps of Lazio ranging from 1778 to 1931, the marshes are cartographically presented as blank spaces, areas devoid of human colonization, unworthy of the printer's ink. The authors describe the marshes as 'essentially uninhabited'.<sup>11</sup> Zamagni also describes the marshes prior to

<sup>5</sup> M. Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, New York, 1982.

<sup>6</sup> D. Pick, *Rome or Death: The Obsessions of General Garibaldi*, London, 2005, 36–37; see also E. Gentile, The myth of national regeneration in Italy: from modernity avant-garde to fascism, in: M. Affron and M. Antliff (Eds), *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy*, Princeton, 1997, 3–24.

<sup>7</sup> E. Gentile, *Fascismo: Storia e Interpretazione*, Rome-Bari, 2002, 240.

<sup>8</sup> H. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, London, 1991 (originally published 1964).

<sup>9</sup> D. Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, Edinburgh, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> E. Sonnino and A. Parmeggiani, Il Lazio tra XVII e inizi XX secolo: strutture territoriali e dinamiche demografiche, in: L. Del Panta, L. Pozzi, R. Rettaroli and E. Sonnino (Eds), *Dinamiche di Popolazione, Mobilità e Territorio in Italia: Secoli XVII–XX*, Udine, 2002, 131–180.

<sup>11</sup> Sonnino and Parmeggiani, Il Lazio tra XVII e inizi XX secolo (note 10), 132.

reclamation as ‘harmful to the local population’, and characterized by ‘chaotic’ watercourses.<sup>12</sup> This can be compared with 1950s author Milone: echoing the fascist regime’s chief agronomist Arrigo Serpieri, he celebrates the 400 km of aqueducts which intubated water in the marshes, and compares a ‘primitive’ and ‘almost barbarian’ pre-reclamation landscape with a reclaimed, ‘healthy, [...] intensely productive’ agricultural life.<sup>13</sup> This could be read as implying the subsequent placing of the marshes out of the sphere of societal agency and progress. By the mid-1930s, however, the marshes had become a space of civilization on the map of Italy. In 1936, *The Fascist Government of Italy* by Columbia University political scientist Herbert W. Schneider featured a map of Italy in the inside jacket.<sup>14</sup> In a corner was a box, titled ‘The Province of Littoria’, showcasing Italy’s newly reclaimed marshland province. How did the Pontine Marshes evolve from blank cartographic space to prominent features on Italy’s national map?

Five New Towns were built in the Pontine Marshes between 1932 and 1939: Littoria (1932), Pontinia (1933), Sabaudia (1934), Aprilia (1937) and Pomezia (1939). They were innovative in planning terms as well as in their conceptualization as an integral urban network set within a wider agricultural area. This paper will, firstly, briefly situate the Pontine Marshes project within a broader context comprising the interplay between the regime’s ruralization, land reclamation and demographic policies. The paper will then consider how the New Towns were conceptualised, together with reclaimed land turned to agricultural use, in the socionatural landscape of the marshes.<sup>15</sup> Thirdly, their plans will be examined in order to decipher the ways in which fascism aimed to construct urban areas and mediate meanings through them. The main plan utilised to illustrate our arguments is that of Sabaudia. This is followed, in the final section, by an analysis of New Town architecture, in the light of fascism’s attempt to mediate its contested ideology through the built environment.<sup>16</sup>

### Ruralization, reclamation and demography

The construction of the New Towns in the Pontine Marshes was intermeshed with three wider, intersecting contexts concerning official fascist policy and ideology in the 1920s and 1930s. Firstly, the Pontine Marshes project was situated within the regime’s evolving ruralization policy. Secondly, the reclamation of the area occurred in a period in which the regime (through institutions detailed below) devoted capital, energy and legislation to land reclamation. *Bonifica integrale* (‘integral’ land reclamation), as it was known, was viewed by the regime’s institutions as a national project encompassing the facilitation of agriculture (the Battle for Wheat is a prominent example) as well as the reclamation of ‘fascist’ citizens. The concept of ‘integral’ land reclamation was developed by agronomist Arrigo Serpieri.<sup>17</sup> On an operational level, it materially facilitated

<sup>12</sup> V. Zamagni, *The Economic History of Italy*, Oxford, 1993, 48.

<sup>13</sup> F. Milone, *L'Italia nell'Economia delle Sue Regioni*, Turin, 1955, 611.

<sup>14</sup> H.W. Schneider, *The Fascist Government of Italy*, New York, 1936.

<sup>15</sup> E. Swyngedouw, Modernity and hybridity: nature, *Regeracionismo* and the production of the Spanish waterscape, 1890–1930, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89 (1999) 443–465.

<sup>16</sup> K. Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*, London, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> A. Serpieri, *Problemi della Terra Nella Economia Corporativa*, Rome, 1929; A. Serpieri, *La Bonifica nella Storia e nella Dottrina*, Bologna, 1991; Ministero dell'Agricoltura e delle Foreste (MAFF), *La Bonifica Integrale*, Rome, 1935; F. Marasti, *Fascismo Rurale: Arrigo Serpieri e la Bonifica Integrale*, Rome, 2001.

institutional integration between government and local institutions in the actuation of the regime's reclamation and agricultural policies. Thirdly, the regime's demographic policy fed into ruralization and land reclamation: both the Pontine Marshes and the New Towns were conceptualised in demographic terms.

The Pontine Marshes project was envisaged at a time when the regime was increasingly concerned with the need to achieve the liberalization of the Italian property market, to solve the 'problem' of sustained internal rural–urban migration (especially to Northern industrial cities such as Milan), and to address issues of demographic decline.<sup>18</sup> While the debate over proposed solutions to these issues was heated in the 1920s, a sense of direction arose in 1928 with Mussolini's Ascension Day speech. On this occasion, a twofold solution to demographic concerns was proposed: encourage the depopulation of cities, and stifle rural–urban migration, through the use of coercive methods if necessary.<sup>19</sup> This directional stance resulted in Italy's ruralization policy, legislatively expressed a few days after the 1928 speech. It was embodied in the twin instruments of negative and positive urbanism.<sup>20</sup> The former aimed to intervene directly in the urban environment through the destruction of 'unhealthy' urban zones. The latter attempted to tackle rural–urban migration through legislation instituting a system of domestic travel and migration permits, and through the promotion of rural lifestyles. A law passed on 9 April 1931 formed a new institution, the Commission for Migration and Colonization (*Commissariato per le Migrazioni e la Colonizzazione Interna*, or CMC), which was charged with regulating internal migration.<sup>21</sup> The Pontine Marshes project was, in many ways, a response to this newly established direction in official policy and rhetoric: through land reclamation, it worked towards transforming a marshland into a rural, agriculturally productive area. Through the construction of New Towns, understood as nodes within a wider integrated agricultural landscape, the regime constructed 'fascist' urban areas. Through the coerced demographic colonization of the marshes, the government attempted to tackle Italy's demographic 'problem', and looked further afield to the demographic colonization of Africa.<sup>22</sup>

The second context in which the Pontine Marshes are framed here is that of land reclamation. Reclamation and colonization were actuated by the *Opera Nazionale Combattenti* (ONC) veterans' organization. The ONC was founded in 1917 with the explicit aim of organizing the distribution of smallholdings to war veterans.<sup>23</sup> Its responsibilities, however, were only set out on paper on 31 January 1919.<sup>24</sup> When Mussolini gained power, the ONC was retained and transformed into an organization closely allied to the Fascist National Party (*Partito Nazionale Fascista*, or PNF). This was done by replacing the ONC's board with a commissar, Igino Maria Magrini,

<sup>18</sup> A. Treves, *Migrazioni Interne nell'Italia Fascista: Politica e Realtà Demografica*, Turin, 1976.

<sup>19</sup> Treves, *Migrazioni Interne nell'Italia Fascista* (note 18), 72–73.

<sup>20</sup> D. Atkinson, Totalitarianism and the street in fascist Rome, in: N.R. Fyfe (Ed.), *Images of the Street: Planning, Identity and Control in Public Space*, London, 1998, 13–30; D. Atkinson and D. Cosgrove, Urban rhetoric and embodied identities: city, nation and empire at the Vittorio Emanuele II monument in Rome, 1870–1945, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88 (1998) 28–49.

<sup>21</sup> Treves, *Migrazioni Interne nell'Italia Fascista* (note 18), 76–77.

<sup>22</sup> C. Ipsen, *Dictating Demography: The Problem of Population in Fascist Italy*, Cambridge, 1996, 58.

<sup>23</sup> E. Leoni, *È l'Aratro che Traccia il Solco*, unpublished PhD thesis, Pavia University, 1999; see also Ipsen, *Dictating Demography* (note 22).

<sup>24</sup> P. Dogliani, *L'Italia Fascista: 1922–1940*, Milan, 1999, 135.

closely connected to the regime.<sup>25</sup> From then on, and with an increasingly agricultural remit, the ONC expanded, opening around 200 administrative offices in Italy and abroad between 1919 and 1926.<sup>26</sup> In August 1931, the ONC was assigned the Pontine Marshes concession.<sup>27</sup> Whilst being the main institution responsible for reclamation in the Marshes,<sup>28</sup> it nevertheless operated in conjunction with the CMC. The latter was charged with selecting labourers and colonists, while the ONC dealt with funding, territorial organization, and infrastructure development and maintenance, as well as town-building.<sup>29</sup> As can be seen, the land reclamation and New Town construction project were closely interlinked at the institutional level. Indeed, as Ipsen has noted, ‘The Agro Pontino *bonifica* and colonization were throughout an ONC project. In fact, the president of the ONC, Orsolini-Cencelli, was also the first *podestà* (mayor) of both Littoria and Sabaudia’.<sup>30</sup>

Land reclamation was not solely confined to the Pontine Marshes during the fascist period. Other projects of note included, but are not limited to, Settentrione, near Bolzano (1923), the continuation of reclamation in Ferrara province, reclamation in lowland Friuli (from 1923 onwards), and the significant project in the Tuscan Maremma (1928), as well as in Istria (1929).<sup>31</sup> The Pontine Marshes, however, were the most prominent and wide-ranging project undertaken by the regime in terms of land reclamation and resettlement. The aim was to place Italy firmly in the rank of world-leading industrialized nations in terms of public projects. The landscape of the marshes was to play the part played by the Zuider Zee in the Netherlands, or by the establishment of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in the USA, in fashioning a modern state and disciplining of nature, even though Dogliani has claimed that the ONC came up short in its quasi-New Deal enterprise of creating an ‘internal frontier’.<sup>32</sup>

The Pontine Marshes project’s pre-eminence in 1930s Italy was underlined by the capital expenditure devoted to the enterprise. Martinelli and Nuti state that 7 billion lire was spent in 14 years on nationwide land reclamation projects by the regime.<sup>33</sup> This statement is marginally misleading, as it is not a statement of fact: it echoes the 1928 Mussolini Law’s claim that 7000 million lire would be invested in land reclamation projects over 14 years.<sup>34</sup> The same law also specified that 4350 million lire were to be supplied by the government and 2650 by landowners.<sup>35</sup> Significant expenditure was initiated following the law: in 1928–1936, 6.4 billion lire were spent on reclamation. This can be compared with 3.3 billion lire in 1870–1928.<sup>36</sup> Even though most planned works were not eventually completed (a 1946 study showed that only 58% of planned reclamation

<sup>25</sup> Dogliani, *L’Italia Fascista* (note 24).

<sup>26</sup> Ipsen, *Dictating Demography* (note 22), 136.

<sup>27</sup> Ipsen, *Dictating Demography* (note 22), 109–110.

<sup>28</sup> Opera Nazionale Combattenti, *L’Agro Pontino*, Rome, 1940; Consorzio di Bonifica dell’Agro Pontino, *Agro Pontino: Storia di un Territorio*, Formia, 2000; F. Voching, *La Bonifica della Pianura Pontina*, Lazio, 1990, reprinted from German edition, Berlin, 1942.

<sup>29</sup> Dogliani, *L’Italia Fascista* (note 24), 200.

<sup>30</sup> Ipsen, *Dictating Demography* (note 22), 113.

<sup>31</sup> Dogliani, *L’Italia Fascista* (note 24), 201.

<sup>32</sup> Dogliani, *L’Italia Fascista* (note 24), 204–206.

<sup>33</sup> L. Nuti and R. Martinelli, *Le Città di Strapaese: La Politica di “Fondazione” nel Ventennio*, Milan, 1981, 24.

<sup>34</sup> Marasti, *Fascismo Rurale* (note 17), 67.

<sup>35</sup> C.T. Schmidt, *The Corporate State in Action: Italy Under Fascism*, New York, 1939, 106.

<sup>36</sup> Schmidt, *The Corporate State in Action* (note 35), 107.



work had been accomplished),<sup>37</sup> investments were channelled into key projects such as the Pontine Marshes. The total cost for the Pontine Marshes reclamation project is estimated to have been 549 million lire.<sup>38</sup> However, Corner identifies a ‘fundamental difference of interest between government and proprietors’, such that land reclamation or improvement works which did not provide a direct benefit to landholders were either not completed, or left to tenants, settlers (*coloni*), or leaseholders.<sup>39</sup>

### Defining a population problem

The third broad context in which the New Town and reclamation project in the marshes was situated is the regime’s demographic policy. This aimed at increasing births by focusing on ruralization. The State intervened in the authoritarian direction of procreation through modern scientific means on the one hand, and appeals to tradition and rurality (albeit a rurality predicated on modern technology and engineering) on the other. This point highlights Italian fascism’s struggle with modernity. Thus, while Herf’s observations on the need to consider national and nationalist contexts, as opposed to the empty usage of ‘modernity’, can be applied to the marshes project, Zygmunt Bauman’s theorizations on Nazi totalitarianism and the Holocaust as products of a particular, modern worldview – which produces the Hoover Dam and Auschwitz as sides of the same coin – can also be considered to apply to the Pontine Marshes and their place within Italy’s demographic policy.<sup>40</sup> This policy flowed from a wider national project which saw the establishment of sociology (especially urban sociology), statistics and demographics, and the creation of institutions which have become deeply entrenched in Italian political life to this day, such as the National Institute for Statistics, or ISTAT.<sup>41</sup> These authorities, institutions and legions of ‘experts’ in turn played an active role in achieving modern Italy’s rationalizing aims. In the case of the Pontine Marshes, they did this partly through demography.

The regime’s statisticians and demographers helped define a ‘population problem’ in Italy, identified with population decline. This demographic problem was also linked, in part, with the modern industrial city, plagued, in the view of Italian urban sociologists, by the ills of industrial and consumer capitalism and by the temptations of communism.<sup>42</sup> Causality was in part established through reference to emigration, rural–urban migration and industrialization: thus, the regime’s demographic policy was, from the start, closely tied to its ruralization and land reclamation policies. Mussolini’s pro-natalist politics, launched in 1927, was not a purely Italian or fascist phenomenon. Similar policies were widespread throughout Europe in what

<sup>37</sup> P. Corner, Fascist agrarian policy, in: J.A. Davis (Ed.), *Gramsci and Italy’s Passive Revolution*, London, 1979, 239–274.

<sup>38</sup> Ipsen, *Dictating Demography* (note 22), 113.

<sup>39</sup> Corner, Fascist agrarian policy (note 37), 252.

<sup>40</sup> Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, New York, 1989.

<sup>41</sup> Ipsen, *Dictating Demography* (note 22).

<sup>42</sup> Atkinson, Totalitarianism and the street (note 20).

Maria Sophia Quine has termed an ‘authoritarian biological politics’.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, as Ipsen has also noted, Italian pro-natalists and eugenicists rejected measures, championed in Northern Europe and the United States, which allowed for ‘negative’ fertility control, selection, and sterilization.<sup>44</sup>

The regime’s domestic (internal) and foreign (colonial) demographic policies were an example of ‘spatial population management’.<sup>45</sup> As mentioned above, fascist Italy’s demographic and ruralization policies were characterized by several facets, such as anti-urbanism, the attempted control of migration, and eventually, an emphasis on African colonization.<sup>46</sup> While many of the regime’s land reclamation projects were colonized by local settlers, the Pontine Marshes saw settlement from further afield, namely the North and especially the North-East. This was the result of a strategy aimed at reducing the number of landless, often unemployed labourers in regions such as Veneto and Friuli. The argument that colonists were selected according to their supposed political inclinations has also been made. In particular, it has been noted that colonists who emigrated to the marshes originated from areas in the North and North-East which featured the highest incidence of individuals convicted or accused of antifascist activities and organizing.<sup>47</sup> The first 100 colonist families (from Veneto) arrived in the marshes in October 1932; by the end of the year their number had increased to 350 family units.<sup>48</sup> The construction of New Towns was integral to the demographic aspect of the project. New Towns such as Sabaudia and Littoria were experiments in the wholesale internal resettling and authoritarian management of population: Ipsen has thus described them as ‘the most significant, and enduring, aspect of Italian demographic management’.<sup>49</sup>

Scholars have analysed fascist land reclamation and ruralization policies in a critical light. Anna Treves has argued that the regime’s ruralization policy was only rural in propaganda terms.<sup>50</sup> The regime’s pro-rural policies ‘protected, in reality, the interests of industry and in general of the city’.<sup>51</sup> It is ironic to note, for example, that agriculture was subordinated, under the credit and banking system existing in Italy in the 1920s and 1930s, to the industrial sector.<sup>52</sup> Alberto de’ Stefani, a former finance minister, stated in 1928 as he spoke for the *Associazione Nazionale dei Consorzi di Bonifica* (National Association of Land Reclamation Consortia):

<sup>43</sup> M.S. Quine, *Population Politics in Twentieth-century Europe: Fascist Dictatorships and Liberal Democracies*, London, 1996, 132–133.

<sup>44</sup> Quine, *Population Politics in Twentieth-century Europe* (note 43), 27.

<sup>45</sup> Ipsen, *Dictating Demography* (note 22), 90.

<sup>46</sup> Ipsen, *Dictating Demography* (note 22), 90–144.

<sup>47</sup> P. Jacobelli and I. Fasolino, *Agro Pontino tra bonifica e pianificazione integrate*, *Area Vasta: Giornale di Pianificazione Urbanistica e del Territorio* 6/7 (2003) 277–294.

<sup>48</sup> Ipsen, *Dictating Demography* (note 22), 105, 111.

<sup>49</sup> Ipsen, *Dictating Demography* (note 22), 115.

<sup>50</sup> Treves, *Migrazioni Interne nell’Italia Fascista* (note 18).

<sup>51</sup> Treves, *Migrazioni Interne nell’Italia Fascista* (note 18), 71.

<sup>52</sup> G. Gualerni, *Industria e Fascismo: Per Una Interpretazione dello Sviluppo Economico Italiano tra le due Guerre*, Milan, 1976, 57–68; Corner, *Fascist agrarian policy* (note 37).



As long as only 10 per cent of the deposits administered by the banks are employed in investments in agriculture or land, we shall remain isolated [...]. Yet 50 per cent — half of all deposits administered by the banks — come from Italian farmers. The difference [...] constitutes a body of wealth earned by farmers which the banks fail to redistribute among the farmers themselves. Eight tenths of deposits and savings coming from these people is taken up by public loans and goes to strengthen industry and the cities. Even the state, in exercising its financial powers has leaned strongly in the direction of an industrial and urban policy.<sup>53</sup>

While the Pontine Marshes project was partly couched in demographic terms, it was far from a purely demographic enterprise. Indeed, as Ipsen concedes, ‘only a part’ of the regime’s considerable investment in reclamation in the marshes went towards ‘inter-regional migration and colonization projects’.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, while Ipsen’s focus is on population, not enough emphasis is placed on the material, financial and technological capital literally ploughed into the project through investment in machinery, engineering, and technical and agrarian know-how. By focusing almost exclusively on population, the material aspects of the project are sidelined. In contrast, as Corner has noted, government investment in agriculture in 1927–1933 was mainly directed towards land reclamation or land improvement projects. This, in turn, created internal demand: industries such as Montecatini (and others) welcomed the creation of a readily exploitable internal market for chemicals, fertilisers, irrigation plants, and pumping, agricultural and reclamation machinery.<sup>55</sup>

As noted above, the design of New Towns in the Pontine Marshes, and the reclamation project itself, were conceptualised in colonial terms. The marshes were a proving ground for a ‘fascist’ colonial project to be applied in *Africa Italiana*, or Italian Africa. Evidence for this is plentiful. For example, Ipsen and others note that from 1936 onwards, after having cut its teeth on the marshes, the ONC was made responsible for a colonization project in the Ethiopian highlands.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the fact that the regime saw reclamation and internal colonization as closely inter-linked with its demographic policy can be seen through the establishment of the monthly magazine *Bonifica e Colonizzazione* (*Reclamation and Colonization*). The publication was in print from 1937 until the fall of Mussolini’s regime in 1943. With Arrigo Serpieri as one of its main contributors, its focus was on the ‘demographic colonization’ of Africa.<sup>57</sup> However, an analysis of links between the marshes and fascist colonialism lies outside the scope of this paper. The following section analyzes the design and construction of the New Towns within the reclaimed, politicised and transformed marshes.

<sup>53</sup> A. de’ Stefani, 1928, in Corner, Fascist agrarian policy (note 37), 261.

<sup>54</sup> Ipsen, *Dictating Demography* (note 22), 115.

<sup>55</sup> Corner, Fascist agrarian policy (note 37), 262.

<sup>56</sup> Ipsen, *Dictating demography* (note 22), 131; Dogliani, *L’Italia Fascista* (note 24), 262, 418.

<sup>57</sup> A. De Bernardi and S. Guarracino, *Il Fascismo: Dizionario di Storia, Personaggi, Cultura, Economia, Fonti e Dibattito Storiografico*, Milan, 1998, 186–187.

## Integral New Towns

A number of studies have been made of the New Town project as a whole,<sup>58</sup> as well as of specific New Towns<sup>59</sup> and their colonists.<sup>60</sup> English-language accounts include those by Diane Ghirardo and Henry Millon, while Italian scholars who have worked on the New Towns include Lucia Nuti, Riccardo Mariani and others.<sup>61</sup> References to New Towns can also be found in more general texts on urban history, although their usefulness is limited by lack of analytical depth. For example, in their account of the development of urban Europe, Hohenberg and Lees remark that 'Italian planners in the 1920s dreamt of restoring ancient monuments and putting new wine in old bottles with cities built around a piazza flanked by church, party buildings, and a cinema'.<sup>62</sup> Their description of the New Towns as 'agro-villages' is somewhat contradicted by their mention of the Sardinian New Town of Carbonia. As the name implies, the town was devoted to coal extraction, hardly an agricultural function. Many of the New Towns throughout Italy were in fact specifically designed to be non-agricultural.<sup>63</sup> Guidonia, for example, was constructed as a city close to Rome for the Italian Air Force.

On this note, Pennacchi has stated that authors writing on the fascist New Towns often tend to 'canonize' a limited set of towns as 'New' towns.<sup>64</sup> For example, Ghirardo analyzes 12 towns.<sup>65</sup> Yet, as Pennacchi argues, architects in fascist Italy were responsible for many more urban initiatives along New Town lines. In the case of the Pontine Marshes, the design and construction of New Towns was not a purely urban exercise: the marshes were envisioned as an organic whole, comprising urban as well as rural areas. This point highlights the fact that authorities such as

<sup>58</sup> D. Ghirardo, *Building New Communities: New Deal America and Fascist Italy*, Princeton, 1989; D. Ghirardo and K. Forster, I modelli delle città di fondazione in epoca fascista, in: C. De Seta (Ed.), *Insediamenti e Territorio*, Turin, 1985, 627–675; E. Mantero and C. Bruni, Alcune questioni di pratica professionale nel ventennio fascista, in: S. Danesi-Squarzina and L. Patetta (Eds), *Il Razionalismo e l'Architettura in Italia Durante il Fascismo*, Venice, 1976, 31–38; H.A. Millon, Some New Towns in Italy in the 1930s, in: H.A. Millon and L. Nochlin (Eds), *Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics*, London, 1978, 327–341.

<sup>59</sup> D. Carfagnana, C. Ciammaruconi and A. Martellini, *La SS. Annunziata tra Palude e Città': Fatti, Documenti, Immagini e Testimonianze per la Storia di Sabaudia*, Sabaudia, 1996.

<sup>60</sup> P. Perotto, *Radici Pontine: Dalla Bosnia I Trentini di Aprilia Ardea Pomezia*, Pomezia, 1990; E. Franzina and A. Parisella (Eds), *La Merica in Piscinara: Emigrazione, Bonifiche e Colonizzazione Veneta nell'Agro Romano e Pontino tra Fascismo e Post-Fascismo*, Abano Terme, 1986; B. Tofani, *Aprilia e il Suo Territorio nella Storia dell'Agro Romano e Pontino*, Aprilia, 1986.

<sup>61</sup> R. Mariani, *Fascismo e "Città Nuove"*, Milan, 1976; L. Nuti, La città nuova nella cultura urbanistica e architettonica del fascismo, in: G. Ernesti (Ed.), *La Costruzione dell'Utopia: Architetti e Urbanisti nell'Italia Fascista*, Rome, 1988, 231–246; Nuti and Martinelli, *Le Città di Strapaese* (note 33); A. Pennacchi, Viaggio per le città del Duce – pozzo littorio, *LIMES: Rivista Italiana di Geopolitica* 2 (2002). Available by request at: <http://www.limesonline.com/archivio>, last accessed 20 March 2006. Specific texts on the Pontine Marshes in Italian can at times be politicised. For example, Stabile's 2002 monograph on land reclamation in the area is dedicated to Mussolini, 'who willed and brought to fruition the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes'. See T. Stabile, *La Bonifica di Mussolini: Storia della Bonifica Fascista dell'Agro Pontino*, Rome, 2002; see also T. Stabile, *Le Bonifiche in Italia e nei Territori d'Oltremare*, Velletri, 2000.

<sup>62</sup> P.M. Hohenberg and L. Hollen-Lees, *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000–1994*, Cambridge, 1995, 340.

<sup>63</sup> Millon, Some New Towns (note 58).

<sup>64</sup> Pennacchi, Viaggio per le città del Duce (note 61).

<sup>65</sup> Ghirardo, *Building New Communities* (note 58).

the ONC understood the New Towns as existing not in isolation from the outlying countryside, but in symbiosis with it. Furthermore, the transformative, technological and deeply modern character of the fascist project in the Pontine Marshes meant that the modern process of creative destruction (identified by Herf with reference to the rise of the Nazi state),<sup>66</sup> might in this case be termed a ‘destructive creation’ of a former environment into a supposedly new one. However, the societal reinterpretation of the marshes through technology and the lens of modernity means that the whole project can be seen as the creation of hybrid landscapes.<sup>67</sup> Even though it has been argued that ‘There is no such thing as modernity in general’,<sup>68</sup> this paper takes the stance that ‘modernity’ is a useful lens through which to capture trends in thought, economy and society, even though it is a term with fuzzy chronological delimitations. Nonetheless, as Herf points out, it is useful to break down the barriers of oppositional dualism (such as between nature and society) found in conceptualisations of modernity, so as not to fall into the historical error of positing a totalitarian and technologically aggressive fascist period as the exclusive offspring of a modern era, in diametric opposition to a distinct, separate and non-negative pre-fascist rural era.<sup>69</sup> This would also lead to the fallacy – exploited by fascist propaganda – of establishing the existence of ‘first’ and ‘second’ nature in the marshes. Rather, the marshes are understood here as hybrids.

As Swyngedouw has argued, drawing on the work of Bruno Latour,<sup>70</sup> a landscape becomes hybridised when it is materially *produced* as a result of an intermeshing of nature (assuming such a category can exist for meaningful analysis to be possible)<sup>71</sup> and society. In the case of both the Pontine Marshes and the Spanish *Regeracionista* waterscape examined by Swyngedouw, this intermeshing is deeply intertwined with modernity’s dualisms.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, the amalgamation of technology, technical knowledge and human labour in the channelling of nature (especially water) into New Towns generated particular ‘urbanizations of nature’ which aimed at the creation of a modern fascist urban landscape.<sup>73</sup>

Sabaudia is the most prominent example of the regime’s attempt to create an alternative to capitalist, industrial urbanization and industrialization. The totality of the territory of the Pontine Marshes comprising Sabaudia and the outlying countryside was conceptualised in an organic, yet hierarchical sense. Farms and the town intertwined as a single unit. Outlying farmsteads

<sup>66</sup> J. Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, Cambridge, 1984.

<sup>67</sup> F. Caprotti, Malaria and technological networks: medical geography in the Pontine Marshes, Italy, in the 1930s, *Geographical Journal* 172 (2006) 145–155; Swyngedouw, Modernity and hybridity (note 15); M. Kaika, *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature and the City*, New York, 2004.

<sup>68</sup> Herf, *Reactionary Modernism* (note 66), 1.

<sup>69</sup> Herf, *Reactionary Modernism* (note 66).

<sup>70</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard, 1992.

<sup>71</sup> Latour, *Politics of Nature* (note 4).

<sup>72</sup> Swyngedouw, Modernity and hybridity (note 15).

<sup>73</sup> M. Gandy, Crumbling land: the postmodernity debate and the analysis of environmental problems, *Progress in Human Geography* 20 (1996) 23–40; Kaika, *City of Flows* (note 67); M. Kaika and E. Swyngedouw, The environment of the city or ... the urbanisation of nature, in: G. Bridge and S. Watson (Eds), *A Companion to the City*, Oxford, 2000, 567–580; M. Kaika and E. Swyngedouw, Fetishising the modern city: the phantasmagoria of urban technological networks, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24 (2000) 120–138; E. Swyngedouw, *Social Power and the Urbanization of Water – Flows of Power*, Oxford, 2004.

(*poderi*), with their fields and animals, were focused on the *borghi*, smaller village-like agglomerations studded around the countryside encircling the New Towns. These settlements featured a chapel, pharmacy, administrative offices, storage areas, and (in selected *borghi* only) a school. As the 1930s wore on, their functions were widened. Post offices, sports fields, churches, and buildings housing local PNF headquarters were added to many *borghi*.<sup>74</sup> On a wider local scale the whole system was to be centred on a New Town, in this case Sabaudia. On a provincial scale, the New Town was to be focused on the central and largest New Town, Littoria (renamed Latina after 1945). However, responsibility for central planning lay in Rome, the national command-and-control centre.<sup>75</sup> As Piccinato, one of Sabaudia's architect-planners explained:

Each group of farms has a 'Borgo' (the elemental urban unit) as their head, in which there was to be an office of the Agricultural Concern of the Opera Nazionale per i Combattenti, chapel, first aid station, school, post office, and grocery store. The office of the Agricultural Concern was to oversee the direction, administration, and assistance of their respective group of farms.

The various concerns (businesses) of the Borghi (including that of Sabaudia) report directly to Rome to the headquarters of the Opera Nazionale per i Combattenti. For matters concerning their urban life (commerce, exchange, political and administrative life) the farmers were to come to the communal center of Sabaudia.

The integrated scheme for the functioning of the reclamation agricultural center demonstrates, therefore, how the agricultural life of the farm develops independently from its political and administrative activity [...].

The building of these institutions should be proportioned to the needs of the entire agricultural center and not only to those of the communal town center itself: this explains the apparent disproportion between the size of the public buildings and the number of houses that, together with the public buildings, comprise the true and characteristic urban aggregate: naturally, one should not tire of repeating it, Sabaudia is seen comprehensively in its territory, or rather as a strongly decentralized building pattern that has its center in a large central district.<sup>76</sup>

The New Towns fell within the broad remit of the integral, supposedly organic character of the whole Agro Pontino project.<sup>77</sup> The key concept was integration, coupled with decentralization in an area which was fascism's experiment in harnessing modernity for the quasi-utopian aims of creating an agricultural landscape in which towns were functionally included, and in which technology played the part of channelling nature's power and productivity into the production of a technologically advanced urban–rural system based on fascist sociopolitical values.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Ghirardo, *Building New Communities* (note 58), 89.

<sup>75</sup> Dogliani, *L'Italia Fascista* (note 24); Millon, *Some New Towns* (note 58), 335; Ghirardo, *Building New Communities* (note 58).

<sup>76</sup> Piccinato, 1934, in Millon, *Some New Towns* (note 58).

<sup>77</sup> Caprotti, *Malaria and technological networks* (note 67).

<sup>78</sup> Kaika and Swyngedouw, *Fetishising the modern city* (note 73).

The road to the planning and eventual construction of the New Towns was not smooth.<sup>79</sup> As Nuti has noted, fascist planners and architects engaged in myriad, often stylistically contrasting urban interventions and new designs, the complex character of which cannot be easily generalized.<sup>80</sup> Debates erupted over chosen styles and specific buildings. This reflected wider clashes in Italian architecture and its offspring, the nascent discipline of urban planning (or *urbanistica*), over a mediation between the rising modern movement and neoclassicism, which harked back to the Roman style admired by Mussolini. Debates over architectural styles in fascist Italy were complex and far from dualistic, and cannot be fully explored here. Nonetheless, conflict among urban planners and adjudicating authorities crystallized around certain city plans. The plans themselves communicate the tensions which existed in Italian architecture in the 1920s and 1930s. Initially, for example, modern stylistic elements in Sabaudia came under heavy criticism.<sup>81</sup> The town was seen as departures from a typical Italian and Roman template. Marcello Piacentini, arguably the regime's official architect, and heavily influenced by progressive modern architecture, stood by the plans and instead criticised the plan for another New Town, Aprilia, which he saw as deviating from a vision of the city as a nucleus integrated within a wider countryside area (the city was, essentially, too large for his liking). However, as Nuti has suggested, the move was also a political barb squarely aimed at the Opera Nazionale Combattenti, the institution responsible for constructing the New Towns.<sup>82</sup> Specifically, the barb was aimed at Giovannoni, president of the committee responsible for selecting New Town designs. The ONC was not affected by this action. Piacentini, however, was later selected to replace Giovannoni as head of the committee charged with the design for Pontinia.<sup>83</sup>

In keeping with the rational approach to urban planning which largely characterized fascist planners' approach to the city, the New Towns were planned to accommodate specific levels of population. Pontinia, Aprilia and Pomezia were to house around 3000 residents each, and each town was to be the main focus of rural areas comprising around 9000 farmers.<sup>84</sup> The New Towns were constructed as administrative centres which could coordinate a utopian fascist agricultural world built on the reclaimed marshes, considered as a planning whole.<sup>85</sup>

As mentioned above, each New Town in the Pontine Marshes was built and developed according to a particular *piano regolatore*, or urban plan. Littoria and Pontinia were the only two New Towns whose plans were not decided following open competitions. Chronologically, Littoria was designed first (in 1932), by architect Orzolo Frezzotti. The competition for Sabaudia's town plan was officially opened on 21 April 1933, and was to last for 33 days. The winners (architects

<sup>79</sup> T. Mirabella and R. Nicolini, *Architettura delle Città Nuove*, Latina, 1989.

<sup>80</sup> Kaika and Swyngedouw, *Fetishising the modern city* (note 73).

<sup>81</sup> G. Muratore, D. Carfagna and M. Tieghi, *Sabaudia: Il Sogno di una Città Nuova e l'Architettura Razionalista*, Sabaudia, 1998.

<sup>82</sup> Nuti, *La Città Nuova* (note 61).

<sup>83</sup> C. Galeazzi, *Pontinia*, Latina, 1998.

<sup>84</sup> Piacentini was influenced by the 'ideal' rural community of Santa Maria di Galera, a much smaller nucleus. See Millon, *Some New Towns* (note 58), 333.

<sup>85</sup> G. Zucconi, *La Città Contesa: dagli Ingegneri Sanitari agli Urbanisti (1885–1942)*, Milan, 1989, 173–174.

Piccinato, Montuori, Cancellotti and Scalpelli) were announced in June. Construction began soon after. Pontinia's plan was elaborated in 1934. Aprilia's (1936) and Pomezia's (1938) plans were both designed by architects Petrucci and Tufaroli and engineers Paolini and Silenzi.<sup>86</sup>

The New Towns had official backing from Rome and were constructed with political dates and aims in mind; each city was held to be an example of the achievements of fascism.<sup>87</sup> Construction was rapid and funds were diverted to the New Towns with alacrity. Most of Sabaudia's urban core, for example, was built in 253 days.<sup>88</sup> Mussolini himself was highly interested and involved in the New Town construction progress. There is ample evidence of the many visits he made to the Pontine Marshes.<sup>89</sup> However, visits featured heavy security, and itineraries were not distributed until the day before the planned visit. For example, on a visit to Littoria on 26 October 1941 (and therefore in wartime, perhaps explaining the emphasis on security), Mussolini was protected by 20 public security officers, 10 motorcycle policemen, 500 plainclothes police, 300 carabinieri and 300 blackshirts.<sup>90</sup> The security personnel alone could almost have populated a new planned settlement.

Mussolini's interest in the projection of fascist ideals on the urban sphere in New Towns is also exemplified by a gift which Marcello Piacentini gave to Mussolini on occasion of one of the Duce's visits to Sabaudia. The gift was an issue of the journal *Architettura*, which focused on Sabaudia. Piacentini wrote that:

I have seen the few recent small towns (especially Dutch and German) built abroad completely ex novo after the War: none can be compared to Sabaudia. They are too arid, too uselessly scientific.

Sabaudia is alive, warm and plastic even though it remains rigorously rational. [...]

Mussolinian architecture is now in full formation.<sup>91</sup>

Mussolini had a clear personal interest in the success of the Pontine Marshes project. On occasion, he personally intervened to hasten the flow of funds to the New Towns. For example, a letter dated 1 July 1935 from Mussolini to the minister of public works stated that 1,100,000 lire had been made available for the construction of financial services offices in Littoria. Mussolini exhorted the ministry to not 'wait any longer'.<sup>92</sup> Likewise, a telegram from Mussolini to the finance minister argued in support of the New Town, stating that the above-mentioned offices were necessary for the positive development of the new province.<sup>93</sup> Mussolini also berated

<sup>86</sup> G. Di Chirico, *Aprilia: Alla Ricerca delle Radici*, Aprilia, 1989; Millon, *Some New Towns* (note 58), 327.

<sup>87</sup> R. Bilenchì, Il problema della stampa: dalle parole ai fatti, *Critica Fascista* 24 (1933) 478–479.

<sup>88</sup> Anonymous, Cronache del partito, *Gerarchia* 5 (1934) 406–407; Ghirardo, *Building New Communities* (note 58).

<sup>89</sup> ACS, SPDCO, B.1267, f.509.831. Di Crollanza to Prampolini, 27 November 1929; ACS, SPDCO, B.372, f.132.862/1. Di Crollanza to Mussolini, July 1935; ACS, SPDCO, B.1267, f.509.831. Council of Ministers note, 6 July 1934.

<sup>90</sup> ACS, SPDCO, B.1233, f.509.742. Rome Security, Interior Ministry, 22 October 1941.

<sup>91</sup> ACS, SPDCO, B.372, f.132.862. Piacentini to Mussolini and Sebastiani, 7 July 1934.

<sup>92</sup> SPDCO, B.372, f.132.862/16. Mussolini to Minister of Public Works, 1 July 1935.

<sup>93</sup> ACS, SPDCO, B.372, f.132.862/16. Mussolini to Finance Minister, 29 June 1935.



Giuseppe Tassinari, the minister for agriculture, because he saw on one of his visits that drainage canals in the Pontine Marshes were badly maintained: he subsequently ordered canal clearance to commence at once.<sup>94</sup> Clearly, the Pontine Marshes project was kept in the highest regard by the fascist regime, as was the channelling and harnessing of the natural environment for the purposes of the modern fascist project.

Official support for the New Towns continued even after they were built. The completion of construction on symbolic dates formed a quasi-religious cadence of fascist days of celebration. For example, in August 1932 the Council of Ministers stated that Littoria's rapid construction was due to the fact that 'the new commune should be inaugurated on the 28<sup>th</sup> day of next October'.<sup>95</sup> The focus on October 28 as a symbolic date is also evident in the fact that land reclamation work progressed with that deadline in mind.<sup>96</sup> The date was the anniversary of the 1922 March on Rome, following which fascism gained power in Italy. The inauguration of New Towns on that date has forced contemporary city governments, over 60 years since the end of fascism, to celebrate the anniversary of their towns' inaugurations on the highly contested date when fascism took power in Italy.

The New Towns were not carbon copies of one another: each is distinctive. They can be viewed, chronologically, as physical embodiments of changes in fascist ideology, reflected in the architecture of these stunning blends of modernism and neoclassicism. In his study of New Towns, Henry Millon argues that 'There are differences in architectural and city plan character among Littoria, Sabaudia, and Pontinia, and a noticeable change in building form in Aprilia and Pomezia from the earlier towns'.<sup>97</sup> This change reflected what Millon describes as an alteration in official policy, from a dalliance with modernism in the 1920s and early 1930s to a return to neoclassicism in parallel with a re-entrenchment of the regime as it drew closer to Germany and shut itself off from the world after the mid-1930s.

Millon's view, reported above, is useful in understanding city plans as embodying struggles within the urban planning and architectural spheres as well as fascist policy and ideology. Modern Italian urban planning was in the process of being forged in the 1920s and 1930s, and projects such as the New Towns, as well as other urban interventions such as the E42 (now known as EUR) quarter in Rome, were central to the development of the discipline.<sup>98</sup> Architects and planners saw their role develop from harbingers of change on a limited scale, to developers of whole urban areas in the social as well as the formal sense. Urban planning, or *urbanistica*, became a distinct discipline separate from architecture after the institution of land reclamation policy in 1928, and urban planners became an independent professional category.<sup>99</sup> However, most early urban planners were architects by training.

<sup>94</sup> ACS, SPDCO, B.1267, f.509.831. Mussolini to Tassinari, 7 November 1941.

<sup>95</sup> ACS, PCM. Note for Mussolini, 9 August 1932.

<sup>96</sup> ACS, MAFF, B.203, II Parte. Report by president of Piscinara land reclamation consortium and the Pontine land reclamation Commissar, 5 November 1930.

<sup>97</sup> Millon, *Some New Towns* (note 58), 332.

<sup>98</sup> G. Ciucci, *L'urbanista negli Anni '50: un tecnico per l'organizzazione del consenso*, in: Danesi-Squarzina and Patetta (Eds), *Il Razionalismo e l'Architettura* (note 58), 28–31.

<sup>99</sup> Ciucci, *L'Urbanista negli Anni '50* (note 98); Zucconi, *La Città Contesa* (note 85), 173–174.

## New Town plans

New Town plans in the Pontine Marshes were the direct result of architectural, political and ideological tensions within Italy during the 1930s. However, they also belonged to a broader period in which planned settlements were conceived, most often in a modernist sense, as solutions to socioeconomic problems. Soviet New Towns such as Magnitogorsk or Tractorstroi were part of around 1000 New Towns planned by Stalin's administration, the Nazi Labour Front constructed rural settlements for factory workers, and the United States in the 1930s experienced the construction of New Towns as well as agri-urban (or Rurban) settlements, homesteads and utopian communities to counter the unbridled growth of industrial cities.<sup>100</sup> Towns in the Pontine Marshes were planned according to particular styles and principles. Plans usually followed orthogonal grids with four quadrants as a template, as in Roman *castrum* plans. The centre of the city typically featured a rectangular piazza.<sup>101</sup> For example, the Sabaudia town plan (Fig. 1) is a good example of the fascist use of Roman planimetry: the quadrant-based *castrum* is built around a civic centre. Sabaudia's plan was highly admired by members of the modern movement, although it was a blend of classical, medieval and modern styles.<sup>102</sup> The plan itself was based around two intersecting roads, leading to the Rome–Littoria main road and to the road to Terracina. Just south of where these two axes met was Piazza della Rivoluzione, Sabaudia's civic and political centre. The axial approach from the Rome–Littoria road, in fact, led directly to the municipal building's (Palazzo del Comune) tower.<sup>103</sup> The Casa del Fascio (which housed PNF headquarters) was also placed in a highly symbolic location, at the intersection of the four major roads in the city, which connect the civic/political centre and the religious centre.

Sabaudia's civic centre echoed Roman forum plans; polar foci were connected by a thoroughfare. Administrative buildings were located at one end of the central axis, facing the partially porticoed piazza. The church was located at the other end of the axis. The religious 'pole' was connected to the civic 'pole' by the central axis, traced from left to right in Fig. 1. In Roman cities, fori were usually rectangular porticoed piazzas, with a basilica and a temple at the extremities.<sup>104</sup> The municipal building in Sabaudia's main square stood separated from other administrative buildings as if to underline its power and importance. The vertical dimension was utilised to organize the poles in a hierarchical relationship. As Ghirardo notes, even though Sabaudia's church was at the centre of the vista framed by the municipal tower and the Casa del Fascio's tower, the church itself was blocked from view by trees running down the centre of the axial approach.<sup>105</sup> The recourse to Roman city planning and the spatial separation of civic, religious and economic functions in the New Towns highlights an attempt to control the city through order and a return to a classical past. The modern industrial city's new, chaotic spatial roles were contrasted with a supposedly clean spatial order in classical and medieval centres:

<sup>100</sup> Ghirardo, *Building New Communities* (note 58), 3–7.

<sup>101</sup> Ghirardo, *Building New Communities* (note 58), 65.

<sup>102</sup> Ghirardo, *Building New Communities* (note 58), 75; see also Muratore, Carfagna and Tieghi, *Sabaudia* (note 81).

<sup>103</sup> Ghirardo and Forster, *I Modelli delle Città* (note 58), 657.

<sup>104</sup> Ghirardo and Forster, *I Modelli delle Città* (note 58), 642.

<sup>105</sup> Ghirardo, *Building New Communities* (note 58), 63.



Fig. 1. Sabaudia's urban plan. Millon 1978; reproduced by kind permission from MIT Press.

Conflicts [...] derive from the politico-administrative set-up of the city, as exemplified by policies and regulations being 'determined for the inhabitants of the city not by them' (Weber, 1960: 74). Politico-administrative power is all the more unpopular because it is intertwined with economic power. In the modern city political power and the power of the market are not as clearly separate as they should be. In ancient Rome, by contrast, the *comitium* and the *campus martium*, respectively symbolizing the political and military power, were situated in locations distinct from the market, where economic power made itself visible. Similarly, in Siena the Piazza del Campo, where municipal power resided, was distinct from the *mercato*. The fusion of the two in the modern city marks a virtual monopolization of life that renders urban life constantly unstable.<sup>106</sup>

Sabaudia's urban plan attempted to avoid problematic urban spatial ordering through clear and delineated administrative, religious and economic roles stamped upon it 'from above'.

<sup>106</sup> Ghirardo and Forster, *I Modelli delle Città* (note 58), 657.

Sabaudia's skyline was low in height. However, if attention is also given to the interplay between the skyline, the urban plan and architecture, more complex tensions begin to emerge. These span the vertical, horizontal and volumetric dimensions. Just as Roman *castrum* planimetry influenced the *piano regolatore* on a horizontal level, mediaeval configurations influenced the vertical dimension. The town housed towers of different heights, reminiscent of images of mediaeval cities. The towers of the Casa del Fascio and the municipal building jutted above the city. Ordinances were put in place to stop other, non-administrative towers from overtaking them in height.<sup>107</sup> Vertical height was, symbolically, directly proportional to the importance of the institution housed in the building and its tower. In the case of the New Towns, the skyline was dominated by the regime's institutions: PNF headquarters and administrative buildings located on central squares. The integration of political meanings in the vertical and horizontal dimensions caused fascist ideology to not only be expressed in the town plan, but in depth and perspective as well. This created a three-dimensional city area, a lived geographical urban landscape in which wherever one looked, the State looked back at you.

### Mediating fascism: New Town architecture and iconography

As mentioned above, plans for New Towns in the Pontine Marshes embody debates and conflicts present in Italian urban planning, architecture, and art in the 1930s.<sup>108</sup> Architecture was highly politicised under fascism,<sup>109</sup> but this does not mean that architects subscribed to unitary, or even similar, styles.<sup>110</sup> Tensions are evident in the architecture of the towns built on reclaimed land, most clearly in the case of the New Towns in the conflict between classical or neoclassical styles and the modernist style. The New Towns reflected conflicts between the tradition-oriented classical style and the emphasis on the rational and the functional which is evident in modernist architecture. A brief background to this debate will be given below, followed by an analysis of fascist conceptualisations of architecture. A closer analysis of neoclassical architecture and modernist architecture will follow, with emphasis on specific buildings in the New Town of Sabaudia. Lastly, we will analyse how these buildings were imprinted with a 'fascist' stamp through inscriptions, symbols and assigned meanings.

<sup>107</sup> Ghirardo and Forster, *I Modelli delle Città* (note 58), 642.

<sup>108</sup> R. Bossaglia, *Ritratto di un'Idea: Arte e Architettura nel Fascismo*, Milan, 2002; J.T. Schnapp, Heads of state, *Art Issues* 24 (1992) 23–28; J.T. Schnapp, Epic demonstrations: fascist modernity and the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, in: R.J. Golsan (Ed.), *Fascism, Aesthetics and Culture*, London, 1992, 1–37; K. Shonfield, The use of fiction to interpret architecture and urban space, *Journal of Architecture* 5 (2000) 369–389. For a discussion of fascism as a societal movement predicated upon the continuous fashioning of spectacle, see S. Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy*, Berkeley, 1997; see also F. Caprotti, Information management and fascist identity: newsreels in fascist Italy, *Media History* 11 (2005) 177–191; F. Caprotti, Articulating hegemony: fascism between ideology and spectacle, *Fast Capitalism* 1 (2005). <http://www.fastcapitalism.com>, accessed 4 November 2005.

<sup>109</sup> D. Ghirardo, Città fascista: surveillance and spectacle, *Journal of Contemporary History* 31 (1996) 347–372; Ghirardo, *Building New Communities* (note 58), 78.

<sup>110</sup> D. Ghirardo, From reality to myth: the politics of architecture in fascist Rome, *Modulus* 21 (1991) 10–33; D. Ghirardo, Italian architects and fascist politics: an evaluation of the rationalists' role in regime building, *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 2 (1980) 109–127.

Developments in architectural thought at the time of the fascists' rise to power broadly tended towards neoclassicism. The *Novecento* movement, for example, aimed to break from recent architecture and art and forge links with the ancient past in order to find values which were 'constant' and 'permanent'. Founded in Milan in 1922 by Margherita Sarfatti, Mussolini's mistress and a critic of fascism,<sup>111</sup> the movement was trapped in a temporal dilemma between the past (classical forms) and the future (modern forms). It exemplified the tendency towards a return to classical architecture and the values supposedly associated with it.<sup>112</sup> The *Gruppo 7* movement developed, in 1926, from the *novecentisti* group of artists who also believed that a break with tradition (which they saw as the basis for a 'national style') was inadvisable. Although aiming to elaborate a new architectural style, they did not intend to break away from 'national' tradition and their architectural solutions were not meant to be overly radical. A basis for comparison had to exist between their constructs and those of the past.

Modernist architecture was not faced with particularly vocal criticism in fascist Italy. Although viewed with suspicion at times, modernists' emphasis on rationality and purity of form, as well as their 'revolutionary' credentials,<sup>113</sup> appealed to fascist ideals of external clarity and austerity. Mussolini's regime was already in power when the modernist movement emerged in Italy. The movement enjoyed a brief predominance in Italy, and was not repressed or constrained as it was in Germany.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, modernist architects gained prominence in 1930s Italy, winning several major commissions, including Sabaudia's *piano regolatore*, three quarters of Rome's post offices (including the notable, still-standing Palazzo delle Poste in Via Marmorata, in the Aventine), and the railway station now known as Santa Maria Novella in Florence.<sup>115</sup>

Architecture in fascist Italy (whether neoclassical, modernist or other) was framed in national terms. The regime did not want to rely on imported styles. It aimed to create a 'fascist style', just as Soviet Russia attempted to develop a 'Soviet style'. The regime's intellectual elite bent classicism, neoclassicism and modernism towards the aim of creating an elusive 'fascist style'. Architecture in the new Italy was supposed to have fascism as its common denominator, fusing modern construction technology, classical and modern styles, and traditional Roman values (embodied in the concept of *Romanità*) in a volumetric architectural product.<sup>116</sup> Thus, as Benevolo recounts, the journal *Architettura* stated that the Rome Universal Exhibition plans of 1937 showed that 'The architects have aimed at giving this monumental complex new and modern values, though with an ideal link with the examples of the great Italian and Roman compositions'.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, an article in the journal *Casabella* on the same subject claimed that 'This complex has been conceived with a new spirit and aim, though ideally it is linked to the example of our glorious past and particularly to the great art of Rome'.<sup>118</sup> Fascism attempted to forge a temporal continuum

<sup>111</sup> I. Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China*, London, 1990, 40.

<sup>112</sup> L. Benevolo, *History of Contemporary Architecture: The Modern Movement*, London, 1971, 563.

<sup>113</sup> De Seta (Ed.), *Insedimenti e Territorio* (note 58), 177.

<sup>114</sup> Benevolo, *History of Contemporary Architecture* (note 112), 561.

<sup>115</sup> Benevolo, *History of Contemporary Architecture* (note 112), 566–567; Bossaglia, *Ritratto di un'Idea* (note 108).

<sup>116</sup> G. Casini, *Motivi*, *Critica Fascista* 20 (1934) 384–386.

<sup>117</sup> Benevolo, *History of Contemporary Architecture* (note 112), 574.

<sup>118</sup> Benevolo, *History of Contemporary Architecture* (note 112).



between an ideal ancient Roman past and the fascist future, using modern and classical forms which supported fascist ideology in different instances.

While scholars have differed on whether modernism or neoclassicism was the more dominant in Italian architecture during the 1930s, most agree that there was a retreat towards neoclassicism as the decade wore on. It would be interesting to investigate if the calcification of the neoclassical style in 1930s Italy coincided with the regime's gradual move towards a more introverted and nationalistic character as it undertook colonial wars, supported Franco's Falangists, faced sanctions and increasing levels of criticism from the international community, and finally signed the Pact of Steel with Hitler's Germany in 1939. Benevolo and Borsi both chart the rise and fall of modernist architecture in Italy in the late 1920s and 1930s, concluding that neoclassicism eventually gained the upper hand because it lent itself to political aims: 'By adopting columns, pediments, symmetry and the focal point, the state authorities had at their disposal a very convenient system of rules which offered no resistance and no surprises, and which was therefore excellently suited to giving a predictable character to state building and town-planning, avoiding any conflict with official directives and their variations'.<sup>119</sup> However, even though the fascist regime attempted to identify a dominant style, the projects it commissioned (such as the New Towns) embody the conflicts within its ideology, notably between neoclassicism and modernism, tradition and modernity.<sup>120</sup>

In the New Towns of the Pontine Marshes, modern and classical styles co-existed in an uneasy whole. As Bottoni stated in 1938, modern planning and architecture were infused with classical influences in order to develop a style peculiar to fascism:

Order as well as hierarchy in the disposition of buildings [...] provide a geometric vision of an orderly architecture, as well as an element of comparison between the possibilities of modern urban planning and architecture, inspired by a healthy classicism, and the disorderly romantic Babel of the skyscraper city.<sup>121</sup>

Fascism's New Town projects reveal the tendency to conserve, in a sanitized manner, traditional agrarian society whilst attempting to elaborate new models for the future, to be imitated in the rest of Italy.<sup>122</sup> This characteristic is what makes the classification of New Towns as either 'modern' or 'classical' so difficult. To escape this dualism, the New Towns can be interpreted as embodiments of a tortured social reality which aimed for the future whilst referencing itself to the past, in order to minimize the present. The New Towns became an *avant-garde* collage which 'used fragments of an existing reality to construct an illusion – an illusion of the unity to come'.<sup>123</sup> At the same time, all was not illusion in the socionatural landscape of the marshes. The concrete, bricks and mortar still in evidence in New Towns today solidify the fragments of the past and the future into an uneasy present.

<sup>119</sup> Benevolo, *History of Contemporary Architecture* (note 112), 576; F. Borsi, *The Monumental Era: European Architecture and Design, 1929–1939*, London, 1987. For a wider discussion of cities, control and resilience see L.J. Vale and T.J. Campanella (Eds), *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*, Oxford, 2005; see in particular, J. Beinart, Resurrecting Jerusalem, in: Vale and Campanella (Eds), *The Resilient City* (note 119), 181–212.

<sup>120</sup> Atkinson and Cosgrove, *Urban rhetoric and embodied identities* (note 20).

<sup>121</sup> P. Bottoni, *Urbanistica*, Milan, 1938.

<sup>122</sup> Atkinson, *Totalitarianism and the street* (note 20).

<sup>123</sup> Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union* (note 111), 50.



Several New Town buildings embody the ideological conflicts experienced on a national scale in Italy during the 1930s. Their architects were aware of the political–ideological background to their work, and the requirements associated with this political–technical role. This awareness, and a certain wish to comply with the regime’s aims, is apparent in New Towns’ urban plans and buildings. As the architects of Sabaudia stated in a telegram to Mussolini (reproduced in Fig. 2), ‘In Your Excellency’s praise Sabaudia’s architects find the highest reward for their work, and the impetus and faith to carry on in the very noble ways of our architecture.’<sup>124</sup> The telegram was sent in response to a personal summons from the head of the Council of Ministers, inviting the architects to a personal audience with Mussolini in Rome’s Palazzo Venezia at 10 am on 10 June 1934.<sup>125</sup>

### New Towns and ruralization

Many of the buildings in the New Towns provide evidence of fascist planners’ attempts to tie architecture to the regime’s rural and agrarian emphasis. The Annunciazione church in Sabaudia (now named the church of the Santissima Annunziata) is a case in point.<sup>126</sup> It could be described as rationalist in style (Fig. 3). However, the church’s resemblance to a grain silo complex points to the agrarian focus of the urban agglomerations built in the marshes, exemplifying the struggle within fascist planning between tradition and modernity.<sup>127</sup> The church, signifying traditional society, volumetrically resembled a large grain silo complex, epitomising modern industrial agriculture. Furthermore, religious meanings and iconography were subverted and assigned political and ideological significance. Fig. 4 shows the large mosaic present on the church’s façade. The mosaic was assembled by Venetian artisans based on a design by Ferruccio Ferrazzi.<sup>128</sup> It shows the Annunciation, with Mary in the foreground. However, the background is clearly non-religious, or, rather, it is non-Christian. It shows the threshing of wheat (with Mussolini participating) in the Pontine Marshes, an episode replete with political and ideological meaning, examined in the following. The politicisation of the church building and its inclusion in the fascist whole in Sabaudia is also evident if we zoom in on the mosaic, and see that just below it the church is ‘signed’ by the architects and planners of Sabaudia: Cancellotti, Montuori, Piccinato and Scalpelli. Although the use of mosaics to project political meanings is definitely not exclusive to the New Towns – the southern approach (facing the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana) to Piazza Marconi in Rome’s fascist-built E42 quarter (now named EUR) features two imposing mosaics, with heads of wheat in the foreground – their use in conjunction with religious meaning is a fascinating insight into Italian fascism’s affirmation of power, presence and concrete achievements through the use of symbolic imagery.

On occasion, Mussolini himself took part in the threshing work, fashioning a ‘new’ nature in the marshes as well as making a point about the successful progression of the Battle for Wheat. This was a propaganda opportunity for the dictator, and was exploited domestically through the

<sup>124</sup> ACS, SPDCO, B.372, f.132.862. Cancellotti, Montuori, Piccinato and Scalpelli to Mussolini, 11 June 1934.

<sup>125</sup> ACS, SPDCO, B.372, f.132.862. Bianchetti to ONC president, 9 June 1934.

<sup>126</sup> H.S. Ofteland, *Sabaudia 1934: Materializing the Fascist Corporate Town*, Masters thesis, University of Oslo, 2002.

<sup>127</sup> Ofteland, *Sabaudia 1934* (note 126); Bossaglia, *Ritratto di un’Idea* (note 108), 59; Carfagnana, Ciammaruconi and Martellini, *La SS. Annunziata tra Palude e Città* (note 59), 112–116.

<sup>128</sup> Bossaglia, *Ritratto di un’Idea* (note 108), 52.

N. \_\_\_\_\_ di recapito - rimesso al fascicolo \_\_\_\_\_

INDICAZIONI DI URGENZA \_\_\_\_\_

A S E IL CAPO DEL GOVERNO BENITO MUSSOLINI ROMA =

Il Governo non assume alcuna responsabilità. Le spese riscosse in via di rimborso per conto del destinatario a favore della ricevuta per conto del destinatario sono a carico del richiedente in caso di mancato recapito.

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ARCHITETTURA = GINO CANCELLOTTI EUGENIO MONTUORI GIGI PICCINATO LEREDO SCALPELLI

FATEVI CORRENTISTI POSTALI - PAGAMENTI E RISCOSSIONI IN TUTTE LE LOCALITA' DEL REGNO - FRA CORRENTISTI PAGAMENTI E LE RISCOSSIONI MEDIANTE POSTAGGIO, SONO ESEGUITI SENZA LIMITAZIONE DI SOMMA ED IN ESECUZIONE DA QUALSIASI TASSA

Fig. 2. Telegram from the architects of Sabaudia to Mussolini. Cancellotti, Montuori, Piccinato and Scalpelli to Mussolini, 11 June 1934. ACS, SPDCO, B.372, f.132.862.

press and newsreels. For example, *Tribuna Illustrata* ran an article in 1938 on Mussolini sweating it out in Aprilia.<sup>129</sup> Newsreels produced by the LUCE Institute, the body responsible for documentaries and newsreels under the regime, focused on Mussolini's labour in the fields as an example of true, rural reclaimed life. In one newsreel from 1935, Mussolini is shown, bare-chested, threshing wheat.<sup>130</sup> In a 1938 documentary titled *July XVI: The Duce Commences the Threshing of Wheat in the Pontine Marshes*, footage opens by showing Mussolini at work at colonial farmstead number 2585, belonging to colonist Ovidio Piva from Ferrara.<sup>131</sup> The documentary follows Mussolini as he moves from colonial house to colonial house, helping four families with the threshing of wheat, symbolic of the regeneration of the marshes, and of Italy, achieved through integral land reclamation and the construction of the New Towns.

Celebrations of such fascist public projects were also found in the foreign press.<sup>132</sup> Writing in 1935, barely 3 years after the foundation of Littoria, Torri chronicled the wide coverage given to the Pontine Marshes project in the international press.<sup>133</sup> By that year, the Pontine Marshes project generally and the New Towns specifically had generated coverage throughout Europe and North America. Particularly prominent coverage occurred in Germany, with 18 newspapers

<sup>129</sup> Anonymous, Ad Aprilia il Duce partecipa alla trebbiatura, *La Tribuna Illustrata* (17 July 1938).

<sup>130</sup> LUCE newsreel B0707, Rome, 3 July 1935.

<sup>131</sup> LUCE documentary, *Luglio XVI: Il Duce Inizia la Trebbiatura del Grano nell'Agro Pontino*, producer unknown, Rome, 1938.

<sup>132</sup> Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle* (note 108).

<sup>133</sup> A.P. Torri, La rinascita dell'Agro Pontino nelle impressioni e nei commenti della stampa estera, in: Istituto di Studi Romani (Ed.), *La Bonifica delle Paludi Pontine*, Rome, 1935, 291–310.



Fig. 3. The Chiesa dell'Annunciazione in Sabaudia.

devoting column inches to the project in 1932–1933 alone, the year of the building of Littoria. Britain and the United States also featured high rates of press penetration, defined here as number of newspapers devoting at least one article to the project. Eighteen British newspapers covered events connected with the marshes and New Towns. The *Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* and *The Daily Mail* covered the project, with particular focus on Sabaudia by the latter two sources. More obscure publications such as *The Fascist Week* also reported on the subject, as did more niche publications such as *The Stock Exchange Gazette*. In the United States, the *New York Times* carried a full editorial on Sabaudia in 1934.

Other, less conspicuous aspects of the New Towns' landscape also express the regime's emphasis on rurality. Notably, some of Littoria's fountains were shaped to resemble wheat. The fountain in Piazza XXIII Marzo – erected on 8 November 1937 according to the inscription on its base – clearly represents ears of wheat, each spouting water from its summit. The fountain was symbolic in its location as well as its form. The piazza of which it was the centrepiece was located at the midpoint of the diagonal axis which ran from Piazza del Littorio to the public park. The axis runs through the park to its central point, named Piazza Mussolini. The fountain thus lay on a highly symbolic line of approach, even if it was not the main approach to Piazza del Littorio. Piazza XXIII Marzo, with its governmental buildings, was focused on the fountain which reminded those who saw it that the fascist regime had produced grain where none grew before. The fountain in the piazza is not the sole example of rural, agrarian metaphors expressed through fountains in fascist New Towns in the marshes. The parkway in front of Littoria's railway station, at Littoria Scalo, also features a smaller-scale fountain representing heads of wheat, a clear metaphor for the regime's ruralizing focus, its autarchic Battle for Wheat and the Pontine Marshes' lead role in the rural, agricultural sphere.

Modern as well as neoclassical buildings featured in the New Towns, as discussed above. In Sabaudia, one of the most notable examples of modern-style buildings is the post office. The building incorporates various innovative elements typical of rationalist architecture, such as



Fig. 4. The mosaic on the façade of the Chiesa dell'Annunciazione in Sabaudia.

a mix between rounded and more conventional square edges, and clear lines of the side of the office. Furthermore, the windows, especially the ones at the front of the building, are fluid, following the building around corners like a pair of wrap-around sunglasses. The staircase leading up to the postmaster's office is a recourse to the architecture of the *casa colonica*, or colonial house, thousands of which were built in the marshes' agricultural areas. These houses, largely followed the modern canon, as Ofteland notes.<sup>134</sup> They also comprised external staircases leading up to the first floor. The staircase on the outside of the post office was a reference to the 'rurality' of colonial farmsteads. External staircases, and the use of local building materials as recourses to rural, agricultural meanings, are also identified by Bossaglia in Littoria's post office building, which is characteristic in other ways as well, because it was constructed as an antimalaria building (tall rooms, metal mosquito nets integral to the building's architecture).<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, as Ghirardo highlights, the ONC's commissioned designs for colonial houses allowed for 18 different

<sup>134</sup> Ofteland, *Sabaudia 1934* (note 126).

<sup>135</sup> Ofteland, *Sabaudia 1934* (note 126).

farmhouse models, with the option of flat or span roofs for each of these. This effectively produced 36 different designs, in an attempt to reduce the kind of repetitive monotony which has so often blighted popular housing, especially in the post-war era.<sup>136</sup>

The design of other New Town buildings is not as ambiguous as the examples cited above. The Casa del Fascio in Pontinia, for example, represents a clear-cut modern design. Likewise, the ONB building in Littoria incorporates mostly modernist lines, with the exception of a few neo-classical elements such as columns and statues. These are the exceptions rather than the rule, however. Most of the architectural constituents of New Towns in the Pontine Marshes are constituted by a collage of modern and classical elements.

### Symbols in the urban landscape

Fascism attempted to place its stamp on New Towns in the Pontine Marshes in overt ways: inscriptions were stamped onto buildings and other parts of the urban framework. One such attempt was described above, with the mosaic on Sabaudia's church. More examples of the regime's attempt to make sure that the towns were indubitably linked to their fascist matrix can be found. For example, a plaque set into the paving under the porticoes of the square facing Sabaudia's church is inscribed with the words *Proprietà O.N.C.* ('Property of the ONC'), making it clear that the physical construct of the city, including the public space encapsulated within the square, was the property of the Opera Nazionale Combattenti. The plaque can still be seen to this day. Other New Town buildings bore inscriptions of a more monumental kind. Many of these can still be seen today, having escaped the period during which symbols of fascism were removed from public buildings. For example, Sabaudia's municipal tower bears the inscription, translated below:

IN THE REIGN OF VICTOR EMMANUEL III  
BENITO MUSSOLINI, HEAD OF THE GOVERNMENT  
WANTED THIS LAND REDEEMED  
FROM THE MILLENNIAL LETHARGY OF DEADLY STERILITY  
AND NEXT TO THE VESTIGES OF REMOTE CIVILIZATIONS  
GAVE LIFE  
TO  
SABAUDIA  
WHICH CARRIES IN ITS NAME THE AUSPICES OF THE AUGUST REIGNING  
DYNASTY  
-----  
BUILT IN 253 DAYS  
BY THE OPERA NAZIONALE COMBATTENTI  
CHAired BY  
VALENTINO ORSOLINI CENCELLI  
IT COMMENCED ITS CIVIC MISSION  
ON THE XV OF APRIL MCMXXXIV OF THE XII YEAR OF THE FASCIST ERA

<sup>136</sup> Ghirardo, *Building New Communities* (note 58), 49.



Fascism's aim to represent the solidification of the results of its willpower is evident in the inscription, which points out how the leader of fascism 'wanted this land redeemed' and succeeded in that objective through the ONC. The inscription also brings together many threads of fascist discourse concerning the New Towns. The sterile, deadly nature defeated by fascism is mentioned, together with a clear link to ancient Rome. New Towns such as Sabaudia and Littoria represented new urban centres modelled on but surpassing the old.

Symbolic authority was clearly stamped onto the New Towns through topological signifiers. These grafted an ideological sense of place onto what was until then architectural and planning space: 'Whereas space is open and is seen as an abstract expanse, place is a particular part of that expanse which is endowed with meaning by people'.<sup>137</sup> The New Towns followed in the tradition of naming a street or square after a national historical figure or event. Thus, one could find Piazza Dante in Littoria (named after the poet), as well as Piazza Savoia (named after the royal family). However, place and street names on New Town plans were invariably connected to a particular, fascist take on Italian history. Thus, streets were named after important First World War dates or, more often, after dates seen as important for the development of fascism. For example, a boulevard in Littoria was named Largo XXVIII Ottobre (October 28 Boulevard). The 28th of October was the anniversary of the March on Rome. As the seminal date of fascist history, it was 'planted' in the urban terrain in order to give Littoria's street names definite historical–ideological connotations. As Neill notes, domination by a hegemonic power can be seen through the lack of political controversy over the meanings of place in the *genius loci*.<sup>138</sup> This observation is particularly useful when applied to the symbolic topological meanings attached to the New Towns: no historical archival evidence has been found of controversy over planning authorities' seeding of streets and cities with fascist signifiers derived from the regime's ideological pantheon.

The leader of fascism was also imprinted on the urban landscape: Littoria's outermost road, which circled the city as though to encompass it, was named Viale Mussolini ('Mussolini Boulevard'). The followers of fascism also saw their names commemorated in Pontinia, with the Viale delle Camicie Nere ('Blackshirts Boulevard') to the south of the city centre (Fig. 5).<sup>139</sup> Historic land reclamation efforts and its luminaries were also remembered: in Littoria one could find Via Sisto V (after Pope Sixtus V, who began a marshland reclamation programme which ran in 1585–1590), as well as Piazza A. Celli (the foremost Italian researcher on malaria in the 1920s and 1930s). Roman times (and the supposed continuum with a fascist present) were also celebrated in Pontinia. Viale Giulio Cesare, named after Julius Caesar, can be seen from left to right in Fig. 5, which shows a detail from Pontinia's urban plan. Fascist power and ideology in the New Towns was not only articulated through urban plans and architecture, but also through more subtle and pervasive cultural signifiers such as signs and names, symptoms of a political–ideological power aiming at, but perhaps not quite achieving, hegemony.

<sup>137</sup> A. Mandanipour, *Design of Urban Space: An Inquiry into Socio-spatial Process*, Chichester, 1996, 158.

<sup>138</sup> W.J.V. Neill, *Urban Planning and Cultural Identity*, London, 2004, 13; D. Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Oxford, 1996.

<sup>139</sup> ASL, ONC, B.145. Pontinia urban plan, 193 (number unreadable); ASL, ONC, B.147. Pontinia urban plan, date unknown.







Fig. 6. Fasces on a lamp post, Sabaudia.

### Conclusion: destructive creation

This paper has provided an overview of the Italian fascist regime's New Towns project, which resulted in the transformation of the hybrid landscape of the Pontine Marshes. The Pontine area saw the regime's planners attempt to fashion urban realities consonant with the contested ideals of Mussolini's regime. In so doing, they generated urban landscapes, predicated on a modern mastering of nature. These landscapes embodied not simply fascism's ideals *per se*, but rather the entangled interpretations of such ideals on the one hand, and, on the other, the continuous and dynamic tensions which coursed through Italian fascism in the 1920s and 1930s, making it a complex and deeply modern movement. The New Towns, built on the destroyed and newly reinterpreted and recreated landscape of the Pontine Marshes (swampland until the early 1930s, when they became a utopian agricultural area), were conceptualised as part of a wider rural–urban system with, at its centre, Littoria and then Rome. The desired result was a blend of rurality and urban life on a regional scale, whilst the towns themselves were represented as material

expressions of fascism's urban vision. This urban vision was, however, founded on a highly contradictory view of the city both as the engine of modernity and progress and as an irrational and chaotic entity to be controlled, downsized and brought back to more traditional rural values. Within the New Towns, the regime's problematic relationship with tradition and modernity was expressed through urban morphology in the destructive creation of hybrid landscapes and idealised urban areas, as part of fascism's failed, hegemonic project of modernity in Italy.