

## *Augustan Propaganda in Late Fascist Italian Architecture*

### *Propaganda augustea en la arquitectura italiana tardo fascista*

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**Lines of research** History of architecture and propaganda in the Interwar period.

**Líneas de investigación** Historia de la arquitectura y propaganda en el periodo de entreguerras.

**Resumen** La Exposición Universal de Roma (EUR) fue la mayor empresa edilicia bajo el régimen de Mussolini. Este complejo conscientemente reusó una política propagandista de la Roma imperial. De hecho, el gobierno fascista italiano realizó un esfuerzo constante para asociarse con el emperador Augusto. Las publicaciones sobre arquitectura fascista en Italia se han centrado en el debate estilístico. En cambio, este artículo focaliza su atención en el reuso de la propaganda augustea. Para ello he cruzado documentación fascista con publicaciones relativas a la arquitectura romana bajo el gobierno de Augusto. Esto permite la afirmación de una conexión más directa y profunda entre el área de la EUR y los foros imperiales romanos. A pesar de que esta relación no aparece reflejada en la documentación contemporánea al proyecto, el análisis arquitectónico y urbanístico del área EUR denota la estrategia mencionada previamente.

**Palabras clave** Fascismo; arquitectura; Roma; Exposición Universal de Roma; Augusto.

**Abstract** The Esposizione Universale Roma (EUR), was the biggest complex built during Mussolini's regime. EUR employed political strategies of propaganda that consciously set out to copy those of ancient Rome. Mussolini's government made a constant effort to associate fascism with the emperor Augustus. Publications regarding Italian fascist architecture focus on the antagonism between Rationalism and classicism or the vast stylistic variety of Italian fascist architecture. To get a deeper insight into the notion of how fascists reused Augustan propaganda, I refer to the work of experts in Augustan architecture, which can be usefully compared to fascist documentation. The findings of this article

highlight a further connection between the EUR area and its link with the Roman fora. Although this connection is not found in the extant documentation, an analysis of the architectural remains denotes the intention of expressing the aforementioned strategies.

**Keywords** Fascism; architecture; Rome; Esposizione Universale Roma; Augustus.

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## *Augustan Propaganda in Late Fascist Italian Architecture*

When Mussolini was still a young journalist, he loved to refer to the Roman Empire and would often compare those times to his own. This was common in Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The country had recently been unified with the ideological help of the *Risorgimento*. This romantic movement used constant references to Roman antiquity. However, when Mussolini gained political power in October 1922, these Roman comparisons were brought to the foreground in order to justify his bid for totalitarian authority. Later this would be justified further thanks to the rector of the university La Sapienza, Pietro de Francisci in his Machiavellian publication “Le basi giuridiche del principato.”<sup>2</sup> The earlier Italian Fascist ideological apparatus had to be readapted to gain the support of pre-existing non-fascist elites, like the church, the bourgeoisie, the monarchy and big business. The glory of Rome was a unifying source of pride which different groups in society could rally around.<sup>3</sup> The different teams in charge of developing the concept of Romanness were led by Gustavo Giovannoni,

1. Joshua Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity: The Roman Past in Fascist Italy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2012), 94-96.

2. Pietro de Francisci, “Le basi giuridiche del principato,” in *Augusto*, ed. Pietro de Francisci (Padua: Collana Ca’ Foscari, 1939), 37.

3. Jan Nelis, “Constructing Fascist Identity: Benito Mussolini and the Myth of ‘Romanità’,” *The Classical World*, no. 100 (2007): 391-415, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/25434050?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/25434050?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) (accessed 1 May 2019), 402.

Antonio Muñoz, Marcello Piacentini and Corrado Ricci, amongst many others.<sup>4</sup> Romanness is a translation of the Italian *romanità*, which means Roman spirit.

It was easy to spot a parallel between Augustus and Mussolini. As with Mussolini, Augustus had been the bridge between a republic and an undeclared monarchy. In Alessandro Bacchiani's opinion, the fascist revolutionary movement saved Italy from pessimism after the First World War.<sup>5</sup> Italians needed a guide to go through this process. On the same line, the fascist minister of culture and education, Giuseppe Bottai, promoted the view that Mussolini was following the model of Augustus in his ambition to save the country from decay in his 1937 book *L'Italia di Augusto e l'Italia di oggi*.<sup>6</sup> In Bottai's view, the country was devastated by wars and by an inefficient government. The dramatic situation required drastic measures and that justified a change of system to achieve a new Golden Age.

The idea of progression towards a Golden Age was palpable in all sorts of cultural productions from philosophical treatises and mass consumption novels to poetry. But how could this Golden Age be translated into architecture? Augustus reflected his new order in an architectural style directly inspired by the Golden Age of Athens as this was a prevalent reference that everyone was able to understand. But Mussolini could not copy Augustus literally because the vast majority of the population would not be able to understand such references. Instead, Fascist architects had to find an alternative way to communicate the idea of a new Golden Age. The reference selected by the government was an oversimplified neoclassicism called Littorio style. The best example of this style is the EUR.

The EUR was going to be the new centre of fascist Rome, surpassing the glory of the age of Augustus. This article explores the references of EUR to Rome and particularly to the Forum of Augustus. The Forum of Augustus was a multifunctional complex now barely preserved. The functions of the Roman Forum were not a source of inspiration for twentieth century architects, but they did a clever reinterpretation of history. The reference is direct in the urbanism of the complex and in the location of some outstanding examples such as the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana (The palace of Italian civilization).

4. D. Medina Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected: Architecture, Spectacle, and Tourism in Fascist Italy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 14.

5. Alessandro Bacchiani, "Roma nel pensiero di Benito Mussolini," *Capitolium*, no. 1 (1925): 387-392; 391.

6. Giuseppe Bottai, *L'Italia di Augusto e l'Italia di oggi* (Rome: Istituto di Studi Romani, 1938), 7.

The EUR area was the biggest architectural project undertaken, not only regarding the surface extension of the area (more than four million square metres), but also its vast cost, 1,460 million liras before completion.<sup>7</sup> The primary function of the EUR was to host the Universal Exhibition in 1942, an event that bequeathed its name to the whole area (EUR stands for Esposizione Universale di Roma: Universal Exhibition of Rome). It followed the nineteenth century tradition of temporary commercial and institutional displays which started with the Great Exhibition of London in 1851. However, the EUR was going to be different not only because it was the first time that Rome was going to host this type of event, but also because it was going to take place in a permanent setting. This increased the overall cost, creating financial losses. The pavilions at the EUR were not to celebrate the latest technological discoveries, as was typical at similar events, it was going to be an “Olympics of civilization” representing all evolution in human history. Therefore, the main goal of the EUR was ideological with multi-layered symbolism.

The EUR also responded to the creation of an empire after the conquest of Ethiopia and the beginning of a new Golden Age. This Golden Age was going to be materialised by the expansion of Rome towards the sea. This was seen as reconquering the Mediterranean, meaning imperial expansion around the Mediterranean regions. Italy was going to expand again as Rome did in antiquity. These Roman references also pointed directly to Augustus. The first Roman emperor expanded the capital by incorporating the Campus Martius into the city. Now Mussolini was expanding Rome again by adding the EUR area.

Finally, it is important to consider the influence of the axis alliance. Mussolini had to compete with Germany for international prestige. The rise to power of Hitler made many fascist organisations across Europe align with Germany rather than Italy. The EUR was designed to be used for fascist parades, following the Nuremberg model, when the universal exhibition was over.

### *Golden Age structures of propaganda*

A new Roman Golden Age under the Fascist government was the cornerstone of Italian institutional propaganda. Conveniently matching the Augustan strategies, Mussolini's government justified imperialistic expansion under

7. Tullio Gregory, *E42 Utopia e scenario del regime* (Venice: Cataloghi Marsilio, 1987), 22-23.

the pretext of civilizing supposedly inferior cultures. The moral reform based on values from the past made Romans superior citizens called on to export culture and evolution to the rest of the world. Therefore, the new values and manners in Rome not only justified a new architectural style able to reflect the new age, but also explained the necessity of territorial expansion.

This is not just a characteristic of Italian fascism but a key element of Fascist ideology according to the work of Roger Eatwell. The metaphorical rebirth encapsulated in the concept of a Golden Age is a characteristic that defines fascism. It is not unusual to hear about the creation of a new man whose values are traditional. This helps to dissimulate whether something is old or new, giving flexibility to the government to operate freely.<sup>8</sup> Other key ingredients are the use of rational arguments to defend irrational propositions and the fusion of collective and individual. This free movement of decisions relies on the absence of programme, which is replaced by a charismatic leader who concentrates solely on power.

A crucial factor in the appearance of fascism was war as crisis. A crisis that not only undermines the economy, but also impacts the prestige of elites and values. For that reason, fascism criticises the previous regime. Other values such as religion are also undermined and, in many cases, fascism replaces religion or readapts its concepts to create a new laic religion so that political power becomes a form of religious power, too.

This description of fascism matches well with the government of Augustus. Although it is easy to trace a parallel between fascism and the first Roman emperor, it is essential to bear in mind that fascism is a political movement that first appears in the twentieth century. Its roots and origins can be found in the past, in Rousseau's thought or Nietzsche's philosophy, for example, but as a political movement it came to bloom after the First World War. The fascist rereading of Augustus is intentionally partial. It was an uneducated idealisation of Rome which consciously avoided confronting Roman prostitution, the regular massacres in festivals for citizens' amusement, slavery and other matters that can be considered morally problematic. Moreover, the past was never treated by Italian fascism as an independent entity but was seen in the light of the current affairs of the moment. It is thus a twentieth century interpretation of the Roman past, different from the real Roman past.

8. Roger Eatwell, *Fascism: a History* (New York: Allen Lane, 1996), 13.



1. Model of the Forum of Augustus. Photography Gennaio, 2009, CC BY-SA 2.0

In the age of Augustus, the concept of a Golden Age was recycled from a previous Republican idea. The Republican golden age was best expressed in Virgil's fourth *Eclogue*<sup>9</sup> in which he wrote about the age of Saturn, an age where human intellect and physical work were not required. Not surprisingly, Virgil's philosophy changed after Octavian's victory at Actium (31 BC). This is evident in the *Georgics* (29 BC), where he expressed the idea of the Augustan golden age by criticising the age of Jupiter since a lack of effort could make men stupid. Karl Galinsky interpreted the Golden Age in the *Georgics* as based in constant and regular agricultural work. Therefore, the emphasis is not on the end, but on the process.

This new type of golden age is related with the age of Saturn, god of agriculture.<sup>10</sup> This ideology is rooted in the sophist conception of the Roman social situation in the fourth century BC.<sup>11</sup> According to Virgil's view, this context "symbolized the purity and simplicity of early Italian life, the ways that had made

9. Virgil, *Eclogues*, 4:19-21.

10. Anthony Everitt, *The First Emperor: Caesar Augustus and the Triumph of Rome* (London: John Murray, 2007), 251.

11. Karl Galinsky, *Augustan Culture: An Interpretive Introduction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 122.

Rome great.”<sup>12</sup> The historian Ettore Pais almost literally copied the same idea in his speech of 1929.<sup>13</sup> He also emphasized the value of constant effort. Here vitality comes from using the past to transform the present and the future. Thus, incessant labor sublimates Romans and makes them part of a superior civilization. This moral superiority achieved through work justifies Roman imperialism.

The moral superiority of Romans was not a natural feature of their society and Augustus had to impose it by force with his laws of 18 BC. These laws actively persuaded Romans to get married and procreate by giving tax relief to women with three or more children, banning unmarried people from attending games and spectacles, etc.<sup>14</sup> Fascism paralleled these social reforms through various laws and other strategies. Augustus founded the *Iuventus*, a youth association like the fascist Gioventù Italiana del Littorio (Young Italians of the Littorio) an organisation with four million members and a focus on sports.<sup>15</sup> Augustus was also a great admirer of Roman religion, and Fascism in turn made a decisive covenant with the Catholic Church in the Lateran pacts of 1929. The fascist government also approved laws restricting birth control and illegalizing abortion. While couples with more than ten children were subsidised by the state, there was a new tax on celibacy.<sup>16</sup>

After his forced social reform and conquest of the Cantabrians in 19 BC, Augustus had everything in order for the declaration of a new Golden Age—a return to the reign of Saturn—in 17 BC. Like Augustus, Mussolini waited to put everything in order before the declaration of the Golden Age, that in the latter case took the form of the declaration of empire in the aftermath of the conquering of Ethiopia. On May 9th, 1936, Benito Mussolini proclaimed from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia the rebirth of the empire on the Roman hills:

Italy has finally its empire [...] An empire of civilization and of humaneness for all Ethiopian people. This is in the Roman tradition, which after defeat, associates the conquered peoples with its own destiny.<sup>17</sup>

12. R.G. Austin, cited by Karl Galinsky in *Augustan Culture*, in reference to Virgil, *Georgics*, 2.538.

13. Ettore Pais, “Significato politico della storia di Roma,” in *Annuario dell’Università di Roma, 1929-30* (Rome: Sapienza Università di Roma, 1929-1930).

14. Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, 130.

15. Medina Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, 170.

16. Medina Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, 173.

17. Benito Mussolini, Edoardo Susmel, and Duilio Susmel, *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, 27 (Florence: La Fenice, 1951), 268.



In the words of an eyewitness present that day, the events of May 9th were a spontaneous manifestation in which the Romans entered into communion with fascism.<sup>18</sup> This collective reaction is likely to have also affected architects, historians and academics. The high expectations of an Italian society possessed by a blind faith in its *Duce*, supported any of Mussolini's ideas.

To create the Golden Age, Augustus opted for the prestigious Greek form of Classicism with a dash of Roman tradition to express the new age in art and architecture. His forum was like the acropolis of Pericles built after the Greek victory over the Persians of the east in Salamis.<sup>19</sup> Augustus' forum was not a mere copy of the Athenian acropolis, but a new creation with direct references to it. For instance, the lower pitch of the temple pediment was a Greek citation as was the white marble used in its construction. This was a remarkable contrast with the massive traditional Roman wooden roofs, as was the copy on a smaller scale of the caryatids of the *Erechtheum*, which were dancing at the funeral of the king Cecrops, the founder of Athens. In the same way, the caryatids in the forum of Augustus were dancing over the founders of the empire or the *Summi Viri*.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the Mars Ultor's column bases were copied from the Acropolis Propylaea, while the ceiling coffers and ornamental bands were copied from the *Erechtheum*. This was easily achieved by hiring architects and sculptors from the Greek world. Besides this, and to avoid any possible doubt, Augustus paid for a mock sea-battle in order to reproduce the Greek victory in Salamis to link it with his victory at Actium.<sup>21</sup> With the intention of surpassing the Greek golden age, Augustus initiated the construction of several Greek theatres in the Campus Martius as well as a Greek gymnasium and an open museum of classic Greek sculpture.

In relation to the Latin influence, the new Augustan style was applied only to late Republican building types, avoiding the creation of new typologies. This created a conscious continuum with the past. These traditional forms were enhanced by larger proportions, richer materials and an increase of verticality. For instance, the temple of *Mars Ultor* in the Forum of Augustus used the Corinthian order, whose height is ten times the diameter of the column. Furthermore, a tall Latin podium gave further verticality to the whole struc-

18. Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo di pietra* (Rome-Bari: Laterza), 128.

19. Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, 203.

20. Favro, D., "Making Rome a World City," in Karl Galinsky, *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Augustus* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 245.

21. Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 55:10-7

ture. The axuality and symmetry of the forum were also based on traditional Roman influences.

Mussolini was aiming to create his golden age at the EUR. This project was a display of luxury by the use of expensive materials like travertine, marble and granite, which were appropriately durable materials as the project was intended to last forever. This was also a link with ancient Rome.

Stylistically, the EUR adopted the form of the late Littorio style, whose name came from the lictor, the official who carried the *fascio* (a double-edged axe set within a bundle of rods) behind the Roman magistrates as a symbol of the power to punish. The bound rods also symbolised the strength of unity.<sup>22</sup> In form this architectural style was another “last breath” of classicism in the twentieth century. According to Spiro Kostof, there were simultaneous examples of this style all around the world. However, it is more commonly found under other European totalitarian regimes. The particular case of the Italian branch was a derivation of rationalism influenced by vernacular Mediterranean architecture, the discoveries in the Ostia archaeological site and the architecture of Albert Speer.<sup>23</sup>

The style consists of basic geometric shapes, finished with a simple straight edge, lack of decoration, flat walls, plain arches without moldings and the near total removal of temple-front elements, which are relegated to doorways. The overall result creates a dramatic contrast between light and shadow. This is an over-simplification of imperial Roman architecture, which is reduced to a set of basic elements. It was the fascist translation of the Romanness concept of architecture, that is to say, a simplification of Rome. This style was trying to achieve a “criteria of grandiosity eternal and universal [...] in the inspiration and execution of buildings destined to last, so that in fifty or one hundred years their style will not be dated.”<sup>24</sup> This fixation with overcoming time was reflected in the style of the EUR complex, whose chief architect Piacentini affirmed that the EUR’s style was “classical but also modern, a modern vision [...] of the Latin and Fascist civilisation.”<sup>25</sup> This was the monumental

22. David Watkin, *The Roman Forum* (London: Profile, 2011), 205.

23. Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 717-718.

24. Handbook E42, “Programmema di Massima,” in MCR MAR loose materials, drawer 40 (EUR Commissariato Generale, 1937).

25. Aristotle Kallis, *The Third Rome, 1922-43: the Making of the Fascist Capital* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 246.



2. EUR, Rome, aerial view, 2007. Photography Marten253, edición Alejo2083, CC BY-SA 3.0.

style wanted directly by Mussolini.<sup>26</sup> Indeed he enquired: “When will these youngsters understand that modern architecture cannot be the architecture of the Empire?”<sup>27</sup>

The EUR’s outcome was highly criticised by contemporary architects like Gio Ponti, who said that the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana was a “phantasm,”<sup>28</sup> and Pagano, who said that Piacentini’s project was an academic banality.<sup>29</sup> Post-Second World War scholars, like Paolo Montorsi and Aristotle Kallis, offered similar sentiments. For instance, the latter called the Littorio style a

26. See Paolo Montorsi, “Il mito di Roma nella pittura di regime (1937-1943): I mosaici del vaile dell’impero e le opera decorative per l’E42,” *Bollettino d’arte*, no. 82 (1993), 97.

27. Giorgio Ciucci, and Ludovico Quaroni, “Giorgio Ciucci intervista Ludovico Quaroni,” *Casabella*, no. 49 (1985): 32-34.

28. Richard A. Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture: 1890-1940* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 498.

29. G. Pagano, “Occasioni miste,” *Casabella*, no. 158 (1941): 1-7.

retrograde style.<sup>30</sup> Catharine Edwards defined the style as “a kitsch Roman style.”<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, there are other scholars like Peter Bondanella, who hold a more positive view of this style, believing that it was able to connect modernism and ancient Rome in an impressive way.<sup>32</sup>

The Littorio style was created through a gradual evolution. Its roots first appeared in the Eclecticism of the Po Valley, in northern Italy.<sup>33</sup> This new neo-classicism found its way to mix with Futurism and Rationalism, the other main tendencies in early Fascist architecture, in the institutional exhibitions. It was fostered and protected by the godfather of Littorio style, Marcello Piacentini. One of these first encounters can be seen at the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* (1932), in which Rationalism became monumental for the first time.

The relevance of exhibitions in the Italian Fascist regime is particularly remarkable. The idea of mounting an exhibition to relaunch a city as the capital of a new empire is a concept purely attributable to Italian fascism. The totalitarian regime used exhibitions as a mass propaganda tool.

The flexible scheme of previous projects was not repeated at the EUR and in 1938 Piacentini imposed the Littorio style. Rationalism was set aside by the government since the declaration of empire.<sup>34</sup> Paolo Montorsi had shown how in this period truly fascist art appeared.<sup>35</sup> The new EUR design was led by Cini and Piacentini, who compromised to create a project with a “uniform style.”<sup>36</sup> They were also in charge of the decorative arts to achieve the required unity and monumentality<sup>37</sup> as well as the organisation of competitions for the most important buildings.

30. Kallis, *The Third Rome*, 256.

31. Catharine Edwards, *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 209.

32. Peter Bondanella, *The Eternal City: Roman Images in the Modern World* (London: University of North Carolina Press Enduring Editions, 2009).

33. Richard A. Etlin, “Nationalism in Modern Italian Architecture, 1900-1940,” *Studies in the History of Art*, no. 29 (1991): 88-109.

34. Diane Yvonne Ghirardo, “Italian Architects and Fascist Politics: an Evaluation of the Rationalist’s Role in Regime Building,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, no. 39 (1980): 109-127.

35. Paolo Montorsi, “Il mito di Roma nella pittura di regime (1937-1943): I mosaici del vaile dell’impero e le opera decorative per l’E42,” *Bollettino d’arte*, no. 82 (1993): 94.

36. Aristotle Kallis, “A miglior tempo...: what Fascism Did not Build in Rome,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, no. 16 (2011): 59-83; 75.

37. Gentile, *Fascismo di Pietra*, 186.

The requirements for the competition's entries enjoined architects to get direct inspiration from "Rome, which is synonym of eternal and universal."<sup>38</sup> Although Rationalism was already filtered by a self-imposed classicism, Piacentini corrected the projects. For instance, he increased the size of the arches at the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, by reducing their number, as well as blocking the last floor so as to include a quotation from Mussolini. The Palazzo dei Ricevimenti e dei Congressi was also affected by Piacentini's redesign. This lack of freedom was at the core of the fascist ideology. The nation is superior to the individual. Everyone must submit to the nation's will and make sacrifices for it.<sup>39</sup> This also links with the anonymity of Augustan art. Few names of artists and architects of antiquity are known because the client imposed his taste upon the artist. In a similar way, the regime imposed an official style during the EUR construction.

The central piece of the exhibition was the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, with its display overtly connecting the Rome of Augustus with the Italy of Mussolini. The key theme of the exhibition was to show the Romanness of Italians through all ages, which gave them superiority over the other nation states. The same logic was applied to the other pavilions. The repetitive aesthetic principle of this building was the arch, a symbol of Roman architecture. The general idea of this museum was to create a breath-taking display that appealed to feelings and emotions.

Among the many pavilions it is relevant to mention the *Mostra della Romanità* whose *Leitmotif* was the column. This element was repeated to generate the whole complex. This was similar to those of Roman buildings recently excavated in Rome, so people would be able to recognise similar features, although it is not a copy.<sup>40</sup>

The work at the EUR area started in 1937, a few months after the declaration of empire. On January 10th, 1940, Italy entered the Second World War with the hope that it was going to be a quick war with an assured victory for the axis alliance. In the eyes of Mussolini, Italy was going to be the maker of a universal peace putting him once again on a parallel with Augustus, who had brought to Rome the *Pax Augusta*. Mirroring once again the famous Roman

38. Tullio Gregory, *E42. Utopia e scenario del regime*, 1 (Los Angeles: The University of California: Cataloghi Marsilio, 1987), 154.

39. Ghirardo, *Italian Architects and Fascist Politics*, 21-22.

40. Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity*, 136.

emperor, Mussolini renamed the EUR incorporating a new theme—the concept of peace, or in his more specific meaning, the peace that would follow Italy’s victory over its enemies: *Olimpiade delle Civiltà in Esposizione della Pace* (Olympics of Civilization in the Peace Exhibition).<sup>41</sup> The leader’s megalomaniac reveries did not materialise and what was supposed to be a brief war became a long one. On January 30th, 1941, Cini communicated to Mussolini the suspension of the building works at the EUR “It is a war without barracks [...] In these conditions, it is evident that the Exhibition at Rome, and its initial conception, that is to say, with a great international participation could only be implemented in a much more distant era than expected.”<sup>42</sup> The whole area was abandoned by 1943,<sup>43</sup> just a few months before the collapse of Mussolini’s government.<sup>44</sup> However, by this time most of the main structures were practically finished.

### *Mirroring the Roman Fori*

The construction of this project responded to diverse factors. Firstly, the EUR was, as David Watkin called it, “Mussolini’s imperial theme park.”<sup>45</sup> But it was also a new urban model adapted to motorised transport. Moreover, the organisers saw the necessity to equate Rome with new neoclassical centres like Washington or Paris. These cities built monumental centres of power based in neoclassical style. Mussolini’s government wanted to erect something similar in Rome.<sup>46</sup> The new area was also necessary in order to expand the Italian capital, whose population had increased dramatically in recent years.<sup>47</sup> The decision taken by Mussolini was to expand Rome in a southward direction,

41. Gentile, *Fascismo di Pietra* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2013), 195.

42. Tullio Gregory, *E 42: Utopia e scenario del regime* (Venice: Cataloghi Marsilio, 1987), 82. Quote translated by the author of this text. Please find the original below: “È una guerra senza caserma [...] In queste condizioni è evidente che l’Esposizione di Roma, e la sua concezione iniziale, cioè con una grande partecipazione internazionale, poteva realizzarsi solo in un’epoca molto più lontana di quella prevista.”

43. Kallis, *The Third Rome*, 270.

44. Medina Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, 2.

45. Watkin, *The Roman Forum*, 209.

46. Medina Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, 10.

47. Gentile, *Fascismo di Pietra*, 160.





3. Giovanni Guerrini, Palazzo della Civiltà del Lavoro, 1938. Photography Fred Romero, CC BY-SA 2.0

towards the sea, in an area close to the Abbazia delle Tre Fontane. This is obvious from the words of the writer Arnaldo Frateili: “The area of the Tre Fontane was chosen as a first stage of the city’s advance towards the sea. This direction was imposed by [...] Mussolini.”<sup>48</sup> The sea was traditionally seen as a fountain of resources. This idea of connecting the capital and the sea was heavily promoted by the fascist magazines. It was as if Rome was planning to regain control over the Mediterranean Sea again.

The project’s connection with Romanness was traceable to the words of the famous Roman architect Vitruvius, who in his book *On Architecture* praised Augustus with the following words:

But I observed that you cared not only about the common life of all men, and the constitution of the state, but also about the provision of suitable public buildings; so that the state was not only made greater through you by its new provinces, but

48. Arnaldo Frateili, “Come nasce una città,” *Civiltà. Rivista Trimestrale della Esposizione Universale di Roma* (February, 1941): 12-22; 16.

the majesty of the empire also was expressed through the eminent dignity of its public buildings.<sup>49</sup>

In these words, there is a strong parallel between Mussolini and Augustus. The fascist dictator reformed the state and looked after the working class by providing the *Dopolavoro* leisure organisation, which was in charge of providing activities for the lower class during their free time. He also added new territories to the country by conquering Ethiopia, and he was planning to build more magnificent public buildings, which were becoming a reality in the EUR area.

Another connection with Rome was achieved by the unique use of white colour. The monochromatic complex mirrored the famous words attributed to Augustus by Suetonius: “I found Rome a city of brick and left a city of marble.”<sup>50</sup>

During the age of Augustus, the *Luni* quarry was discovered. This is the location used to extract Carrara marble, famous for its pure white colour. The fascist regime used the same material as well as white Travertine stone, another traditional Roman material, for the construction of the EUR buildings. The unity in colour as well as the unity in style of the complex were an expression of Italian autarchy, which led the National Fascist Party to the use of Italian materials and a pure Italian style as an expression of Italian superiority.

This was also an influence from Nazi Germany. The new ally forced Italy to introduce racial laws in 1938, although, according to Aaron Gillette, this was traditionally contradictory to Italian fascism.<sup>51</sup> It created a new racial ideology as a consequence, which was best represented by the journal *La Difesa della Razza* (The defense of the Race), whose articles twisted the idea of Rome and Romanness. For instance, the journal asserted that racist examples in ancient Rome could be traceable to the figure of Cato the Elder, who confronted a Semitic Carthage. The racist approach also contaminated architecture. Restorations aimed to clean the pure Italian architectural style from impure foreign and inferior styles. To do that, a specific palimpsest layer was chosen as pure Italian and the rest were erased, destroying many centuries of history. If the restorers found nothing underneath the “non-Italian layer,” they just rebuild

49. Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture*, 1.2.

50. Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, 2-28.

51. Aaron Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy* (London: Routledge, 2003), 188.



it as it should have been, creating an architectural fake. Architectural purity was a physical representation of the decency and morality of the Italian race.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, these high moral values of the Italian race had to be expressed in a pure Italian modern style, the Littorio style. Materials designated as being fit for assignment after the 1935 sanctions imposed by the League of Nations were travertine stone, marbles, tufa stone and bricks.<sup>53</sup> Concrete and steel were avoided, as was visible in the EUR area.

But Nazism was also a competitor to Italian fascism. The exceptional international prestige of Italian fascism during the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s was falling with the progressive increase of Nazi power. This produced a competition for international status between the two regimes. The competition was translated to architecture through the project *Germania* by Albert Speer after Hitler's visit to Rome in 1937. During the visit Hitler realised that his new capital could not be built in concrete and steel, but in marble like the Roman forums.<sup>54</sup> The central piece of the new project was the *Volkshalle*. This building would have overshadowed Rome by having a giant dome which would have been able to accommodate in its interior the Pantheon and the Basilica of Saint Peter at the same time.<sup>55</sup> While Speer's *Germania* was just a project, the EUR was a reality.<sup>56</sup> The EUR project was also highly influenced by the Nazi Nuremberg. As with this complex, the EUR was going to be a huge scenography specially designed to enshrine its political achievements. The new Rome of Mussolini was going to be a colossal new stage for political performances built outside the city centre without the restrictions of the existing city's urbanism.<sup>57</sup>

Another parallelism between the Nazi regime and Italian fascism is the increase in importance of the laic religion. In the particular case of the EUR project, this idea was expressed with greatest force at the spaces surrounding the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana and in the building itself. Following a visual analysis of the space in front of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana—what is today known as Viale della Civiltà del Lavoro—I was able to see that, even

52. Medina Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, 181.

53. Medina Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, 202.

54. Watkin, *The Roman Forum*, 212.

55. Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2015), 532.

56. Kallis, *The Third Rome, 1922-1943*, 235.

57. Spiro Kostof, *The City Assembled: the Elements of Urban Form through History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 141.

without finding any direct allusions in the documentation that survived from the fascist period, the space was designed as a modern reinterpretation of the Forum of Augustus. The lack of information about the EUR project and its final appearance is a constant in the remaining documentation about it. Many meetings of the different committees were held in a quasi-informal environment and on many occasions, there were no transcriptions of the conclusions agreed in these meetings. Besides this, other committees were constituted very late and the advance of the war impeded the meetings. It is very likely that the elite in charge of organising and coordinating the project had a clear vision of the overall outcome. However, they left no written evidence behind them.

The original rectangle of the square has been transformed and deformed by the later buildings added in this area from the end of the Second World War until now. According to Spiro Kostof, the rectangular form was commonly used in Roman public spaces like forums because it had the advantage of creating an axis towards a monument or a temple.<sup>58</sup> In the case of the city of Rome, the imperial Roman forums that follow this rule are the Forum of Augustus, the Forum of Julius Caesar (built by Augustus) and the Forum Transitorium, which was built by the emperor Nerva just after the collapse of the Julio-Claudian dynasty; the influence of the forum of Augustus thus takes precedence over the other two imperial forums, which were built later. In the fascist case, the temple was clearly the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana. The original rectangular plaza creates an axis which finishes in one of its two short sites on a building higher than the rest and elevated in a high podium like in the case of the temple of *Mars Ultor* in the Forum of Augustus.

The spiritual connotations of the building were asserted by contemporary writers to the construction of the building. From the writer Cecchi's point of view, the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana was like a sacred temple with new fascist gods<sup>59</sup> and Cini referred to the building as "the spiritual centre of the exhibition."<sup>60</sup> The main space inside the building was the Mussolini room, which was a de-contextualized space with sacred meaning. This room, with an oversized equestrian sculpture of Mussolini, would have been like the colossus room in the forum of Augustus. In the room in the forum of Augustus,

58. Kostof, *The City Assembled*, 150.

59. E. Cecchi, "Il palazzo della Civiltà italiana," *Civiltà* (February, 1941): 5-8.

60. Vittorio Cini, "Significato e aspetti dell'esposizione universale di Roma," *Civiltà* (April, 1940): 1-21; 11.



4. Palazzo INA, Rome. Photography Sergio D'Afflitto, CC-BY-SA-4.0.

a colossal sculpture of Augustus dressed as Pontifex Maximus was exhibited. Augustus was never deified in life in Rome, but it was quite obvious that being the son of the deified Caesar, the son of a god, meant that he would become a god, too. The room of the colossus in the Forum of Augustus was like a precedent to his deification as well as the Pantheon. The Mussolini room, which was designed by Guido Mancini, was located at the beginning or end of the visit to the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana. The interpretation that a contemporary publication gave to this fact was that Mussolini was considered as the conclusion of history, linking the beginning (Augustus) with the end (Mussolini). This is related with the fascist conception of time. This was because it was the first time that Italy had a universal mission after Augustus.<sup>61</sup> As Tullio Gregory has shown, the religious connotations are obvious: Mussolini, as the catholic god, was the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end of time.<sup>62</sup>

Fascism was like an *ersatz* religion based in Rome. Rome was reduced to a partial view of the age of Augustus. Augustus acquired many religious positions which made him the maximum religious authority.<sup>63</sup> Mussolini was

61. Mostra della Civiltà Italiana, *Criteri fondamentali per la presentazione della Mostra*, (Rome: Casaldi, 1939), 32.

62. Tullio Gregory, *E42: Utopia e scenario del regime* (Venice: Cataloghi Marsilio, 1987), 6.

63. Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press), 118.

unable to become the pope of the Catholic church, but he could be the head of a new pseudo-religious laic movement. Hence, it was convenient that Augustus was seen by fascism as a messiah. This type of discourse was developed by the regime from its early beginning by using religious vocabulary. This type of style can be seen in the writings by Carlo Cecchelli<sup>64</sup> and the scripts by the politician and mayor of Rome, Filippo Cremonesi, who mentioned Mussolini as if he was sent by a higher force.

The new laic religion created a competition and a contradiction with an ally: the Catholic Church. The power of the Vatican was inescapable. As a consequence, the church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul with its towering dome was built on the fringe of the EUR area. Although its notable dimensions and its strategic location are at the end of a major road (the dome is the vanishing point of one of the streets in the complex), it is striking to notice that the structure was left outside of the square that defined and closed the EUR area: “(The EUR was going to have) a severe, square shape, thus avoiding both radial planning according to the French taste and those plans with romantic or rustic flavour, which inevitably diminish that sense of stability and solidity that we are trying to achieve.”<sup>65</sup>

Another similarity that relates the EUR area with the forum of Augustus was the intentional division between these perfect mini cosmoses and the real Rome. In the case of the Roman construction, the complex was separated from the *suburra*, the name of the lower-class neighbourhood that surrounded the forum of Augustus on its east site by an over-dimensioned wall thirty-three metres in height.<sup>66</sup> This wall protected the complex from fire at the *suburra*, but it also separated both spaces. Furthermore, Augustus banned access to his forum to people not wearing a toga, and the massive wall would have been the control point for access to the enclosure. In a similar way, the EUR was the perfect fascist mini universe with its direct references to Rome whilst in fact being completely detached in style and distance from the real city and working-class area.

Another similarity with the Forum of Augustus that from my visual analysis of the space suggests is the situation of Morbiducci's relief in relation to the

64. Carlo Cecchelli, “Itinerario imperiale,” *Capitolium*, no. 4 (1938): 186-188.

65. “Esposizione Universale,” pamphlet (1939), 4, in MCR MAR RS.

66. A. J. Droge, “Finding his Niche: on the ‘autoapotheosis’ of Augustus,” *MAAR*, nos. 56/57 (2011/2012): 96.

Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana. The *Summi Viri* in the Forum of Augustus were located the temple on the long sides of the Roman forum's courtyard leading up to the temple. As in the Forum of Augustus, Morbiducci's relief, *La storia di Roma attraverso le opera edilizie*, was located in one of two long sides of a similarly rectangular space. Morbiducci's relief created a fake history of Rome to the liking of Fascism in the same way as the *Summi Viri* did in the age of Augustus. This is another reference that reinforces the connection between the first Roman emperor and Mussolini as a new Augustus.

One more example of the Augustus-Mussolini link, this time in connection with the figure of Augustus and not with his forum, was the four sculptures of the Roman mythological *Dioscuri* made by Publio Morbiducci and Alberto de Felci at each corner of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana. According to the fascist author Emilio Balbo, the two Dioscuri were Mussolini and Augustus because they both saved the state from a situation of crisis. They were both against celibacy and were in favour of biologically productive marriages. They both reconfigured the moral crisis of the country through religious regeneration.<sup>67</sup>

The Forum of Augustus was going to be directly connected with the EUR through the Via Imperiale (Imperial avenue), currently Via Cristoforo Colombo. This axis would also have connected the EUR area with Piazza Venezia, where the headquarters of the dictator were, and Mussolini's forum (the current *foro italico*), which was another fascist architectural landmark in the city of Rome. The connection between the old and the new Rome was direct through this road. In the words of contemporaries, this project was view as: "The beginning of a new Rome. The new metropolis is connected to the old one [...] The axis and the direction of the new city's grandiosity are marked by the imperial avenue."<sup>68</sup>

For that reason, the EUR not only had to compete with other great cities, but with Rome itself. The mirroring of the old city was directly linked through this new road. Therefore, the connection of the EUR was not only with the Forum of Augustus, but with all the Roman forums. However, it was not a direct copy but rather a modern reinterpretation of the area. First of all, the shape of the EUR was very different. The fascist project was designed ex-novo without any of the previous limitations and thus, a regular square shape to circumscribe

67. Emilio Balbo, *Protagonisti dei due imperi di Roma: Augusto e Mussolini* (Rome: Casa Editrice Pinciana, 1940).

68. Gentile, *Fascismo di pietra*, 183.

the whole complex was chosen. The orthogonality of the EUR creates parallels and perpendicular lines. This urbanist design was not a reflection on the city of Rome, which was very irregular and chaotic, with the exception of the area of the forums. The series of imperial forums was started by Augustus, who had them located on a ninety-degree angle. After this initial setting, subsequent Roman emperors continued this pattern with their own forums.<sup>69</sup> Another direct reference to the ancient forums was the repetitive use of porticos. This element was not a traditional feature of Roman architecture and was copied by the fascist architects directly from the ancient forums.<sup>70</sup>

Victorious Roman generals and emperors were expected to spend part of their war booty on public buildings in Rome.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, each forum commemorates a military campaign whose conquest paid for its construction. Augustus followed this tradition and built his forum from the spoils of war.<sup>72</sup> Mussolini was going to build the EUR after his victory in war. However, the cost of the Ethiopian campaign was much higher than expected and according to Del Boca, Italy was close to bankruptcy.<sup>73</sup>

Although Mussolini and the fascist apparatus was consciously trying to follow the steps of the first Roman emperor, he was not satisfied with merely copying Augustus. He wanted to surpass Augustus. This was supported by the dictator's affirmation in his *Opera Omnia* where he said that: (Italians have to make sure that) "the past glories are surpassed by those of the future."<sup>74</sup>

Bearing in mind all of these facts and my own visual analysis of the space, I shall now pay particular attention to how the urbanism of the EUR complex was conceived as a succession of new and modern Roman forums. The same idea was voiced by Spiro Kostof.<sup>75</sup> However, he failed to take it any further and provided no information in its defense. Mussolini in his megalomaniac blindness on the eve of his total defeat was not just seeking to emulate the emperor Augustus, he wanted to be greater than him. Therefore, it was not just the forum of Augustus that he was imitating, but all the imperial Roman

69. Diane Favro, *Making Rome a World City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 261.

70. Montorsi, *Il mito di Roma nella pittura di regime (1937-1943)*, 97.

71. Favro, *Making Rome a World City*, 235.

72. Donald Earl, *The Age of Augustus* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1968), 102.

73. Angelo Del Boca, *La guerra d'Abissinia 1935-1941* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1965).

74. Mussolini, Susmel, and Susmel, *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, 82.

75. Kostof, *The Third Rome: 1870-1950*, 74.





5. Trajano's market, Rome. Photography NilonZ7II, CC-BY-SA-4.0.

forums together, for he conceived his power as greater than that of all the Roman emperors combined. The succession of squares at the EUR area was like the succession of spaces in the Roman forums. The types of buildings and the rectangular forms were a direct inspiration of the Roman forums—but on a much bigger scale, so as to express the grandeur of Mussolini himself. Fascist architects, urbanists and designers of the EUR area, led by the key figure of Piacentini, fragmented and recomposed the different themes found in the old city, formulating a new and too familiar urbanism. For example, the Palazzo dei Ricevimenti by Libera is a modern Roman basilica. It could well have been inspired by the basilica at Trajan's forum, with different volumes in the elevation, which make it different from the basilicas in the Republican forum. The Palazzi INA and INPS by Muzio, Paniconi and Pediconi were directly inspired by the only two open exedras of the forum of the emperor Trajan. Libera's unbuilt arch was a modern and totally over-dimensioned Roman triumphal arch. The articulation of the Piazza delle Forze Armate, the Palazzo degli Uffizi and Piazza Imperiale is the basic articulation of all the Roman forums: a square or courtyard surrounded by porticos. This theme can be found all around the area.

### *Conclusion*

This is an initial study into the architecture produced by a dictatorial system. Eventually, this approach could be taken further in order to analyse the architecture produced by other totalitarian regimes with leaders who centralize vast power in order to express their inherent megalomania. The EUR project was built on a scale which, according to Trigger, exceeds any function besides reinforcing the ideology of the leader.<sup>76</sup> The political and moral renewal or rebirth, which was supposed to allow the return of a new golden age comparable to an old and prestigious age in a remote past, was a strategy used by other dictatorships to justify a centralized and authoritative power.

This simultaneously old and new technique is related with the return of the ancient golden age strategy because both discourses are based on an idealisation of a famous period in history, a remote past that nobody can truly recall, but that appeals to most citizens. This idealisation of the past looks at it through rose-tinted spectacles. To make this possible, it was necessary to mindfully suppress a significant part of the golden period in order to compose the lineal evolution.

The EUR area remains an outstanding example of the expression in architecture of late Italian fascism. It was so big that it was detached from reality, the daydreaming of an ageing leader, who was formerly an energetic and strong man, but who was now neurotic and isolated. What Mussolini wanted to be was not what he really was. The EUR project was perhaps a way of escaping reality. It was a representation of a not yet achieved victory, which ultimately never arrived.

The fascist use of the classical past was not new; it was rather a constant through history. It was akin to that of a Renaissance prince, designed to give prestige to himself. However, the fascist reuse of antiquity was unique because it was a systematic reuse, made with all the bureaucratic and technological resources of a modern state, creating a bold, new architectural style. The honour or dishonour of this creation can be given to Piacentini, whose style was not the most innovative. However, the focal point of his style was not based in innovation, but in communicating effectively the central ideal of Italian fascism

76. Bruce G. Trigger, "Monumental Architecture: A Thermodynamic Explanation of Symbolic Behavior," *World Archaeology*, no. 22 (1990): 119-132, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/124871> [accessed 3 August 2019], 124-128.



to the masses: Romanness. This style was not aimed at architectural experts and for that reason it has been highly criticised by many scholars.

The idea of a golden age can be and have been used differently through time as fame and prestige are variable concepts. For instance, the referent for Augustus was the Athenian Acropolis and the referent for Mussolini was the imperial Roman forums. Therefore, it is obvious that the referent is not constant. This referent was not even constant in fascist Italy. Although there is a special emphasis on ancient Rome and in the age of Augustus, there are exceptions to this rule. As Medina Lasansky has shown in her book *The Renaissance Perfected*, fascist architectural interventions in Tuscany were more closely related with the concept of *tuscanità* (tuscanness) rather than the concept of *romanità* (Romanness). The referent for the fascist golden age in Tuscany was the time of Petrarch and Dante, not Rome. Therefore, fascist architecture in the towns of this Italian region took on a *Violletian* medieval style. This representation of an old golden age that an enlightened leader was determined to bring back took different styles and shapes. ♣