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## The Multiple Futures of the Fascist Past

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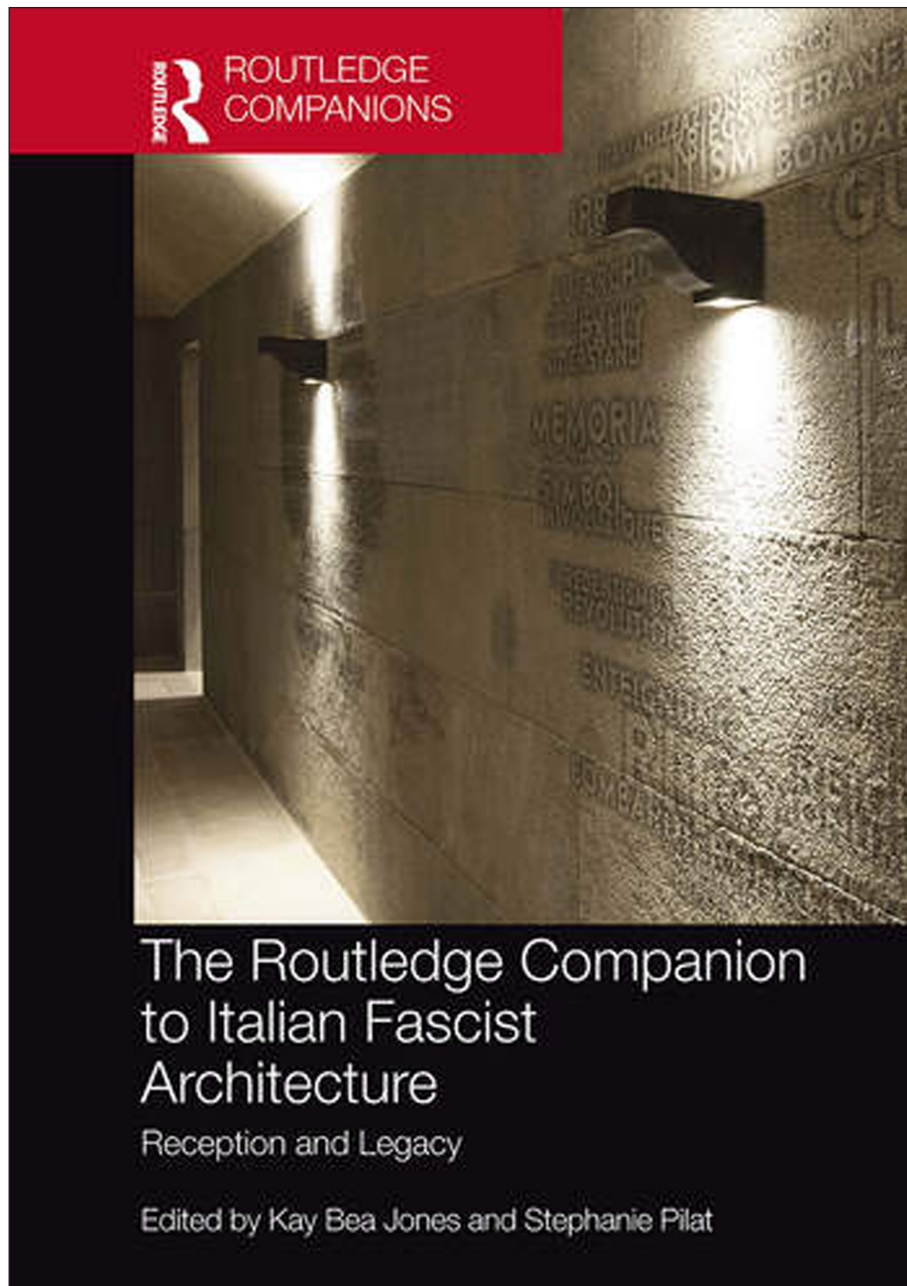
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This review is of the publication *The Routledge Companion to Italian Fascist Architecture: Reception and Legacy*, edited by Kay Bea Jones and Stephanie Pilat, published by Routledge in 2020 as part of the Routledge Companions series. An ambitious project, it explores what has happened to buildings from the fascist period in Italy and examines the strategies used to both preserve and resignify them.

Over a span of only twenty years, the fascist regime utterly transformed the built environment of Italy and its colonies. Despite their rapid construction, the majority of these buildings still stand. Some are ministries, sports complexes, train stations, and courthouses, many of remarkable aesthetic quality. Others are everyday sites — schools, post offices, housing complexes, summer camps — and generally invisible infrastructure, including roads, bridges, railways, and sewage systems.

The aesthetic diversity of fascist architecture offers a compelling object of study for those interested in the relation between form and ideology: can fascist beliefs be evinced in the grammar of Italian interwar architectural language? The sheer quantity of fascist buildings and their often unchallenged status still fascinates and horrifies scholars and tourists alike: ‘Why Are So Many Fascist Monuments Still Standing in Italy?’, Ruth Ben-Ghiat famously asked in *The New Yorker* in 2017 (October 5).

The volume under review reveals the complexities of answering Ben-Ghiat’s question. Over the course of forty-two essays, *The Routledge Companion to Italian Fascist Architecture: Reception and Legacy*, unpacks the afterlives of fascist architecture on the Italian peninsula and in Italy’s former colonies in the Mediterranean and in the Horn of Africa (**Fig. 1**). Complementing the copious scholarship on the history of fascist architecture, this multi-author volume instead focuses on its ‘reception and legacy’. As its editors, Stephanie Pilat and Kay Bea Jones, two of the leading scholars in Italian modern architecture, point out, ‘rather than studying how and why [fascist architectural] projects came to be, we ... consider how they have been transformed and adapted since 1943 and what these evolutions mean’ (xx) and ‘by whom and to what ends’ (2). The debate on this topic, as Ben-Ghiat’s article in *The New Yorker* reveals, is very lively. Yet this volume is one of the first systematic efforts to tackle the wide range of case studies and stakeholders involved.

Both senior and early-career scholars, from Italy and beyond, appear among the volume’s 30 contributors. Many are architectural historians. Others are practicing architects, engineers, and urban planners directly involved in the preservation of fascist architectural heritage. Combined with its international breadth, this range of authors constitutes one of the volume’s most original features, as it studies the fascist-built environment from a historical and theoretical point of view but also from the perspective of those directly responsible for the practices enacted today to help citizens reckon with it.

The volume is organized into seven sections, two edited by the book editors and five by leading scholars of fascist architecture. Pilat and Jones afforded Sean Andersen, Francesco Cianfarani, Mia Fuller, and Brian McLaren the freedom to guide their contributions in ways that best complemented their individual scholarship. Their

section introductions, therefore, put each editor's scholarship in conversation with other voices that expand its scope and reach.

*The Routledge Companion to Italian Fascist Architecture* opens foregrounding central discourses regarding fascist architectural legacy. Cianfarani reviews architectural culture during Mussolini's regime, highlighting its aesthetic diversity and shifting political agendas. Harald Bodenschatz then compares the approaches of Italy, Spain, Germany, Portugal, and the Soviet Union to the architectural heritage of dictatorships, revealing the singularity of the Italian case. Finally, an interview with architect and theorist Paolo Portoghesi provocatively answers Ben-Ghiat's aforementioned question, decrying Manichean and polarizing approaches to the analysis of fascist architecture.

Section 1, edited by Pilat, reconsiders two highly visible fascist sites in Rome from different but complementary perspectives. Paola Somma and Jelena Loncar study the shifting construals of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, while Ankie Petersen and Pilat explore the political and artistic reinterpretations of the Foro Italico. These authors address how these iconic sites have been reset and rebranded by both corporate sponsorships and public governance.

Leaving Italy behind, Section 2 addresses the fate of Italian fascist architecture in Greece, Somalia, and Eritrea — a very welcome broadening of the discourse on fascist heritage to the whole scope of the so-called Italian Empire, a discourse that unfortunately is not as common as it should be. Sean Anderson, the section's editor, advocates for a study of the 'ephemera of colony' (139) that focuses on how they shaped different constituencies: colonial subjects and Italian settlers in the interwar period and postcolonial individuals today who deal with the physical mementos of their country's oppression. The scholars who analyze fascist architecture in Leros (Georgia Grkatsou and Amalia Kotsaki), Kallithea (Luca Orlandi and Velika Ivkowska), Mogadishu (Anderson), and Asmara (Matthew Scarlett) also unpack the starkly different preservation laws that rule these sites' conservation, as well as the negotiations between postcolonial subjects and fascist heritage.

Section 3, edited by Cianfarani, addresses the afterlives of fascist-built neighborhoods in Bolzano and in Rome and of new rural towns in Lazio. Though these new settlements all displayed fascist values, their individual aims varied and thus citizens renegotiate them differently today. Sometimes, the function of fascist settlements was to Italianize German-speaking cities; as Sara Favargiotti, Alessandro Busana, and Daniele Cappelletti argue, this legacy shaped Bolzano's postwar public spaces. Other times, new settlements relocated Italian urban or rural poor, either in agrarian communities in the Pontine Marshes or in *borgate* outside of Rome. Such sites, studied by Fuller and Cianfarani, respectively, maintain a strong social fabric

and elicit historical pride from their citizens. Conversely, Guidonia (examined by Luca Arcangeli) originally housed the Italian aviation elite but is now unrecognizable due to its uncontrolled postwar growth; its fascist legacy is almost forgotten.

Edited by Mia Fuller, section 4 studies the postwar reputations of fascist-era architects and urbanists. In her introduction, Fuller interrogates the reception of Giuseppe Terragni, perhaps the most renowned Italian interwar architect, who compels us to ask, in her words, ‘How can good architecture be reconciled with bad politics?’ (260). Contributors to this section use this as a guiding question. Micaela Antonucci studies the ‘two lives’ of Cesare Valle; Sofia Nannini explores the postwar reception of Giuseppe Vaccaro’s work, while Diana Barillari probes the afterlives of Umberto Nordio’s design for the University of Trieste. Mario Ferrari compares the readaptations of Luigi Moretti Rome’s Fencing Academy and Angiolo Mazzoni’s Florence train station, and Denise Costanzo explores the US interpretation of Armando Brasini’s work. Together, these articles also reveal the origins of a prevalent discourse in Italian public debate that often detaches the aesthetics of fascist architecture from its politics, condemning the latter while redeeming the former.

Section 5 studies building typologies and materials whose strong associations with fascism complicate their rebranding. Edited by Pilat, this section addresses materials considered ‘autarchic’, such as linoleum, studied by Dr. Medina Lasansky, and new building types such as ossuaries and Houses of the War Wounded, addressed by Silvia Barisione. The other three essays in this section examine architectural interventions in formerly Austrian territories: the Mother and Children Home in Trieste (Fabrizio Civalleri and Orsola Spada), Bolzano’s edifice for fascist women organizations (Paolo Sanza), and the redesign of Trento’s Post and Telegraph building (Fabio Campolungo and Cristina Volpi). These three essays examine the postwar fate of these fascist buildings, studying the challenges of repurposing them as kindergartens, supermarkets, research centers, and modern post offices.

Everyday citizens’ perception of the fascist architectural imprint and the influence of the regime on urban development today is the focus of section 6, edited by Jones. The contributors spotlight cities in northern Italy where fascist architecture originally symbolized centralized control but which has now been resignified. Katie MacDonald and Kyle Schumann focus on the Villaggio ENI near Cortina d’Ampezzo, a postwar company vacation town inspired by fascist summer colonies. Addressing Marcello Piacentini’s urban projects in Genoa and Brescia, as well as those of Adalberto Libera in Trento, Matteo Fochessati, Paolo Nicoloso, Paolo Castelli, and Damiano Castelli interrogate the shifting reception of fascist sites among local citizens, attesting to Italy’s volatile political landscape. It might have been stimulating to address this issue

in relation to cities located south of Rome too, unpacking whether fascist heritage there is renegotiated in different ways than in the North.

The final section of *The Routledge Companion to Italian Fascist Architecture*, edited by McLaren, addresses the complex relationship between fascist and postwar architecture. After 1943, could Italian architects build on their past, or should they seek radical change in order to mark their distance from the regime and its aesthetics? By exploring the writings of fascist intellectual Ugo Ojetti, Alessandro Canevari unpacks the ambiguities in the regime's architectural thinking that facilitated its incorporation into postwar life. The postwar career of Carlo Enrico Rava, explored by McLaren, shows his move away from political engagement towards a historicist interest in applied arts. Finally, iconic anti-fascist sites such as the BBPR group's Monument to the Fallen in Concentration Camps, studied by Flavia Marcello, and the Fosse Ardeatine Monument and the Monument to the Resistance in Udine, explored by Jones, interrogate the politics of abstraction in postwar Italy.

Jeffrey Schnapp's epilogue is an exposé of his own work with curators and designers in the exhibition *BZ '18-'45* (2014), located in Piacentini's Monument to Victory in Bolzano, singled out in the volume (it is also the image on its cover) as a blueprint for projects dealing with the resignification of fascist architecture. The Italian annexation of Bozen resulted in the prohibition of the German language, the displacement of German speakers, and the relocation of Italian speakers to the city. Piacentini's monument still epitomizes the animosity between German and Italian communities in Bolzano. *BZ '18-'45* is a commendable collaboration between scholars, designers, curators, and community members, with the dual aim of engaging the legacy of fascism while also moving on from it.

Thanks to its diverse case studies (many of which have so far been studied only in the Italian specialised scholarship) and theoretical frameworks, this volume eschews easy solutions and platitudes. The editors stress the profound heterogeneity of responses by architects, artists, and communities to Italy's fascist heritage; their volume could not be but 'a cacophony of responses rather than defining a collective position', framing fascist architecture as a palimpsest of meanings rather than a stable signifier (2).

It is difficult to do justice to such an ambitious and deliberately dissonant volume in the brief span of a review. *The Routledge Companion to Italian Fascist Architecture* will certainly become a reference point for anyone interested in fascist Italy's eclectic architectural legacy. Above all, though, the book will remain a touchstone for those interested in the fate of buildings once the violent regimes that sponsored them no longer exist, and in the diverse strategies used to both preserve and resignify them.

This kaleidoscopic volume suggests (against the grain of many discussions on so-called difficult heritage) that the fascist origin of a building does not overdetermine its reception — that, in the words of Matthew Scarlett, ‘when it comes to architecture, the act of dwelling often overwhelms the politics of origin’ (187), and thus that a space built in the context of oppression may always be resignified to defy that very same oppression. Avowing the violent heritage of the fascist regime does not prevent subsequent generations by giving new meanings to its architecture. As Spanish writer Javier Marías puts it at the end of his novel of 2014, *Thus Bad Begins*, ‘The past has a future we never expect’.

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**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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