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MEDITERRANEITÀ DESIRED AND REALISED: THE IMPOSITION OF THE FASCIST AESTHETIC IDEOLOGY OF MEDITERRANEAN-NESS OVERSEAS FROM 1935 TO 1940¹

GEORGE EPOLITO

Italianità (Italian-ness) or mediterraneità (Mediterranean-ness) were the two terms most frequently used to describe the formal qualities of a design identified as distinctly Italian.

Dennis P. Doordan

Architecture was born in the Mediterranean and triumphed in Rome in the eternal monuments created from the genius of our birth: it must, therefore, remain Mediterranean and Italian.

Florestano di Fausto

Introduction: Mediterranean = mare nostrum

Much is written about Mussolini's attempts at creating a global fascist empire, one based upon, or justified by, the idea that Italians were the rightful heirs of the former Roman Empire. Most accounts focus on *specificities* pertaining to particular countries and/or colonies. The focus of this essay, however,

¹ This text is a revised and extended version of the paper "*Mediterraneità oltremare: Assimilation, Appropriation, or Rejection? The Imposition of the Fascist Aesthetic Ideology of Mediterranean-ness Overseas from 1935 to 1940*" presented at the international conference *Southern Modernisms: Critical Stances Through Regional Appropriations*, ESAP, Oporto, 19-21 February 2015.

attempts to show in *general* terms how an overarching strategy of *mediterraneità* (Mediterranean-ness) was implemented in both realised and desired colonies. North and East Africa exemplify the former, while parts of South America represent the latter. Interwoven throughout the essay are recurring polemical themes which confronted the fascists: 1) *unity* versus *diversity* at the scale of the nation and its colonies, political control, aesthetic direction, climate, and races of peoples, etc.; 2) *public image* versus *private reality*; 3) the *desired* versus the *realised*; 4) the *general* versus the *specific*; and 5) *purity* versus *hybridisation/syncretism*, etc.

The terms of *italianità* (Italian-ness), *mediterraneità* (Mediterranean-ness), *romanità* (Roman-ness), and *latinità* (Latin-ness), for instance, were *generally* viewed as interchangeable tools of propaganda by Italian fascist ideologues. They gave a *public image* of *unifying diverse* parts at the regional scale within the nation or at the trans-regional scale extending to the colonies. The *specific* implementation of each term often depended on the context in which the fascist promoters were trying to prove their point or justify their actions to *diverse* peoples such as Italians, leaders of powerful nations, or natives in both her *realised* and *desired* colonies. As scholar Sean Anderson concurs: “Invariably, notions of *italianità* and *mediterraneità* shifted according to colony and region”.² The *public image* of the propaganda, which routinely projected the appearance of success and progress, often masked the *private reality* of intentions and actions, where substance and actual achievements were few and far between.

Part of the political rhetoric argued that Italy had the right to (re)conquer former lands of the Roman Empire such as North Africa. In this case there was a logic, however misguided it may have been. After all, the region did contain Roman ruins and was referred to as the Fourth Shore implying that its coast was an

² Sean Anderson, “The Light and the Line: Florestano Di Fausto and the Politics of ‘*Mediterraneità*,’” in *California Italian Studies*, 1(1) [2010], <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/9hm1p6m5> (accessed 9 January 2015).

extension of the Italian one. When applied to East Africa and South America,³ however, the logic became increasingly convoluted.

Fascists had to adapt their overall strategy in order to transform the *desired* into the *realised*. In the case of the *desired*, a soft rhetoric was employed, giving a *public image* of gentility. The *private reality* behind the rhetoric, however, was that it was masking the true malevolence of fascism. In the case of *realised* colonies, the strategy was to utilise a harder, more direct rhetoric accompanied by blatantly inhumane actions.⁴

Attempts at implementing any kind of *unified* strategy over such *diverse* lands and the people who inhabited them proved problematic for the fascists. The complexity of the situation led to polemical questions arising in both the *desired* and *realised* colonies. How would people in the colonies, particularly those who did not fit into the ethnic and racial categorisations of a common Roman ancestry, receive the constant onslaught of fascists' propagandising of Italian superiority, particularly in regards to architecture and aesthetics? Would the displacement of Italian cultural capital needed to implement said superiority have to be fused with localisms, resulting in *hybridised* products in order to mitigate said colonised peoples? If so, would acknowledgement of said localisms be deemed a sign of weakness by fascist ideologues? After all, how could any other culture produce anything comparable to the grandness of Roman-ness?

“Italy certainly has a colonial past, albeit one that is often described as *rimosso* (“repressed” or “displaced”) ...”

Mia Fuller

³ More specifically, the *desired* colonies, to which I am referring, are Argentina, Uruguay, and (southern) Brazil.

⁴ When analysing the terms of *mediterraneità* and *italianità* in relation to the arts and architecture produced during the fascist period, it is important not to merely focus on aesthetic qualities, but also to remember the brutality of the regime's actions.

Time Frames

In her book, *Moderns Abroad*, scholar Mia Fuller outlines three specific time frames in regards to Fascism and its relationship to the arts and architecture: 1) early 1920s into the early 1930s; 2) early 1930s to 1936; and 3) 1936 to the early 1940s.⁵ The first period was characterised by competing approaches to aesthetics - *Futurismo*, *il Novecento*, and *Razionalismo*. Each approach differed in its relationship to the stoic history of the peninsula and also in its link to the Modernism espoused by northern Europeans. Various advocates were fighting for their preferred approach to be designated as the official aesthetic of the fascist state. In spite of their differences, all the approaches commonly held the belief that they were the appropriate aesthetic to help modernise Italy whilst serving to transform her regionally *diverse* cultural identities by *unifying* them on a national level.⁶ The second time frame was defined by debates both at home and abroad over the appropriate direction to take aesthetically as the fascist state remained relatively neutral towards promoting any one particular approach. As a result, pluralistic approaches to design continued, much to the chagrin of each approach's particular advocates. Also during this period, the fascist regime increased spending on major public works. The third period was characterized by a tightening of aesthetic expression both at home and abroad, accompanied by an increase in inhumane and authoritarian policies.

This essay is focused roughly on the last period, more precisely from 1935-1940. First, however, key events from the prior two time frames are highlighted in order to contextualise what happened during the latter part of the 1930s.⁷

“This imperial expansionism of Italian culture, which, like a river that never stagnates but is fed by other rivers, gives and takes, universally

⁵ Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad: architecture, cities and Italian imperialism*, London 2007, 88.

⁶ Previously, promoters of medieval revivalisms, Neoclassicism, and the Liberty Style (known more commonly outside of Italy as *Art Deco*) dominated similar debates.

⁷ As 1935 is a pivotal year, I wish to include this in the main body of text, not merely as a point of reference.

assimilates and is assimilated, is a spiritual attitude characteristic of fascism and its ever intensifying revival of the universal and imperial ancient tradition”.

Margherita Sarfatti

Early 1920s – mid 1930s - Italy and Her Realised Colonies in Africa

Part of the harder, more direct rhetoric employed by fascists in the 1920s was aimed at Italians; it told ordinary citizens to sacrifice immediate material gain for the promise of reaping the rewards of a soon-to-be-realised global fascist empire. For some Italians, this meant transferring to lands that once fell under the jurisdiction of the former Roman Empire. Italians were asked to relocate to the New Towns constructed on the reclaimed swamplands known as the Agro Pontino in the Lazio region of central Italy, as well as to the *realised* colonies in Africa.

In the case of the latter, fascist propaganda called upon Italians to establish agricultural communities in the 1920s. The initial involvement of the fascist regime at this stage was more indirect, assisting individual entrepreneurs in process.⁸ Also during this decade, many of the built works formally reflected a negotiation of revivalisms such as neo-Renaissance or neo-Moorish. Although he would take the opposite stance years later, Roman architect Marcello Piacentini himself was involved in the design of similar eclectic works such as the Teatro Berenice in Benghazi, Libya.

Towards the latter part of the 1920s, various fascist intelligentsia and cultural promoters were campaigning for the implementation of a *specific* form of Italian cultural expression. Filippo Marinetti was continuing to support for his own vision, *Futurismo*; Margherita Sarfatti personally was endorsing *il Novecento*; and Pier Maria Bardi was supporting the principles set forth by *Razionalismo*. Piacentini was arguing that *Razionalismo* was too closely aligned with the

⁸ Fuller, *Moderns Abroad*, 177.

concepts of northern European Modernism and therefore inappropriate for Italy. Carlo Enrico Rava, one of the founders of *Razionalismo*, attempted to counter Piacentini's argument by trying to contextualise his preferred movement at the trans-regional scale of the Mediterranean or what he called *mediterraneità*. His concept was introduced in a series of essays he published in *Domus* in 1931 where he countered that "... it is in this 'Mediterranean spirit' that we should then look for the characteristic italianità that is still lacking in our new rational architecture".⁹ Rava found potential of this 'spirit' in the local forms of North Africa, but any incorporation of them into *italianità* had to be justified by linking their origins, and therefore their worth, back to Roman-ness.

As the years progressed into the 1930s, the scale of resettling Italians into the *realised* colonies increased, as did the financial commitment of the regime to do so. The *public image* of this propaganda led Italians to believe that fulfilment of this important mission would help to bring prosperity to all of Italy. Of course the fascists had an ulterior motive, one that was masking a more cynical *reality*. The physical displacement of Italians to rural lands abroad was part of a greater social policy that had the general aim of reducing the number of landless, often unemployed labourers. In the case of Libya, scholar Vittoria Capresi elaborates on how this fascist social policy was in fact an attempt to demonstrate the regime's capacity to solve *specific* problems and to gain more *general* support in the process:

"Mass demographic colonization¹⁰ was planned under the Fascist regime precisely because it offered an outlet for the violent political desire to transform the presumed solution to internal social problems into visible work, which was to be displayed in order to increase public support for

⁹ Vittoria Capresi, "Architectural Transfer, Italian Colonial Architecture in Libya: 'Libyan Rationalism' and the Concept of 'Mediterraneity', 1926 – 1942," in *Colonial Architecture and Urbanism in Africa: Intertwined and Contested Histories*, ed. Fassil Demissie Farnham, Surrey 2012, 33 -66, here 59.

¹⁰ Mia Fuller clearly defines demographic colonisation as "the state-sponsored settlement of Italian farmers on a grand scale." See Fuller, *Moderns Abroad*, 177.

Mussolini's policies".¹¹

Concurrently, many designs in the *realised* colonies reflected a Mediterranean spirit by attempting an eclectic negotiation of ancient Mediterranean or local vernacular forms and modern forms. Anderson points out how the works of Florestano di Fausto, one of the most prolific architects in *realised* colonies,¹² had his own interpretation of negotiations: "His numerous government commissions assumed a commanding role, producing an architecture that supplemented *italianità* while masking the rationalist intentions of a bespoke *mediterraneità*".¹³ Two particular works of di Fausto that were designed during this period, I would argue, reflected this "bespoke *mediterraneità*" of which Anderson was speaking. First, in the case of the Artisanal Market, *Souk al-Mushbir* he fused modern forms with ancient Mediterranean ones. The project even received the approval of the fascist regime: "Cubist and rational in its conception, the market-place satisfied the claim of Italian authorities both to modernize and support local traditions".¹⁴ In the second case, the Uaddan Hotel and Casino, he syncretised modern forms with various aspects of a local architectural vocabulary.

Were these various eclectic and flexible design approaches simply a matter of aesthetic preference or could they have been veiling a political motive? Had the fascist regime used such *syncretism* as a soft rhetorical means of appeasing indigenous peoples? In the case of North Africa, scholar Krystyna von Henneberg provides the possible answers:

"Keen to the need to put a benevolent face on Italian rule, many architects developed an uncharacteristically eclectic and flexible approach to questions of design. The militant anti-regionalism of Italian Rationalist

¹¹ Vittoria Capresi, "The rural centres of Libya. Reading tools," in *The Built Utopia The Italian rural centres founded in colonial Libya (1934–1940)*, ed. Vittoria Capresi, Bologna 2009, 32.

¹² In addition to his numerous works in North Africa, di Fausto had previously been responsible for many important designs in the *realised* colony of the Aegean Islands.

¹³ Anderson, "The Light and the Line". Rava did not agree with di Fausto's *bespoke mediterraneità*, feeling that it contained too much Arab picturesque-folklorism.

¹⁴ Krystyna von Henneberg, "Imperial Uncertainties: Architectural Syncretism and Improvisation in Fascist Colonial Libya," in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 31(2) (1996), 373–395, here 386.

and fascist architecture was frequently eclipsed by a more syncretic style that incorporated 'orientalizing' and local elements".¹⁵

Not everyone, however, was convinced that pluralistic approaches and/or their resulting *hybridised* forms, particularly when derived from eclectic revivalisms, were of any merit. For example, important Italian architects such as Rava and fellow rationalist Luigi Piccinato thought neo-Moorish buildings in North Africa were inappropriate.¹⁶ Many architects felt there was a need to find a *unified* colonial architectural language, which in turn could benefit the regime by leaving a strong impression on colonised peoples and neighbouring European powers alike.¹⁷ Yet, would the implementation of a singular approach abandon or incorporate localisms? The answer, in the opinion of von Henneberg, was more complex: "Eclectic or neo-Moorish structures proved difficult to reconcile with an official architectural discourse based on unity and order. Diversity, after all, had been clearly identified with liberal rule, and with weakness".¹⁸

Early 1920s – mid 1930s - The Desired Colonies in South America

The fascist regime utilised the *general* concept of *mediterraneità*, more specifically Roman-ness and/or Latin-ness, in both its cultural and political rhetoric pertaining to South America. Contrary to logic, there were significantly more people of Italian decent already living in the *desired* colonies than in the *realised* ones during this period. The tactics that the regime needed to implement, therefore, had shifted in order to reflect this demographic difference between the *desired* and *realised* colonies. First the regime aimed to gain the support of the Italian citizens, who it viewed, *happened to be living abroad*.¹⁹ It then sought

¹⁵ Von Henneberg, "Imperial Uncertainties," 377.

¹⁶ Fuller, *Moderns Abroad*, 118.

¹⁷ Fuller, *Moderns Abroad*, 15.

¹⁸ Von Henneberg, "Imperial Uncertainties," 378.

¹⁹ This was the viewpoint of the fascist regime which refused to acknowledge the expatriates and their offspring as Argentines or Brazilians who *happened to be* of Italian descent. Those displaced to South America, tended to view themselves as Argentines or Brazilians.

to convince these expatriates and people of Iberian ancestry that they all shared a common Roman heritage - Roman-ness and/or Latin-ness.²⁰

In its quest to accomplish its goal of '*imperial expansionism of Italian culture*' into the region, the fascist regime assumed that the displaced Italian citizenry would act as intermediaries. Private impresarios, cultural institutions, and government agencies sponsored and hosted cultural events in which soft, persuasive rhetoric espoused the virtues of *italianità*. Italian art, architecture, literature, and language²¹ were promoted in said events with each containing a varying degree of political propaganda. Some of the key events included: Marinetti's 1926 lecture tour to promote *Futurismo* in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Córdoba, Rosario, Buenos Aires and Montevideo;²² Sarfatti's 1930 *Novecento Art Exhibition* in Buenos Aires and Montevideo; and Bardi's 1933 *Architettura d'oggi Exhibition* in Buenos Aires which featured the architectural works of *Razionalismo*.

Contemporaneously, the soft rhetorical argument of Roman-ness was advanced *specifically* in Argentina to the point of linking the country historically to Italy. As Argentine scholar Finchelstein states: "Between 1922 and 1931, the fascist regime wanted to convince the Argentines that their history, or part of it at least, was a direct outcome of Italian historical agency".²³ Their claims that Italians had played key roles in the development of Argentina dating back to even before the time of Garibaldi were accurate, but the fascists wanted to embellish these facts. In addition to offering their own interpretation of Argentine history to the *general* populace, the fascists understood that that they also had to *specifically*

²⁰ In this instance, the terms Mediterranean-ness and Italian-ness were most likely avoided as the former could have been easily interpreted differently by both the Portuguese and Spanish creoles; the use of the latter would have overtly exposed the fascists' (offensive) belief in Italian superiority.

²¹ Literature and language were also important parts of the soft rhetorical campaign, but they are not the main focus of this essay. The following literary cultural events took place: Mussolini confidant, Franco Ciarrantini's 1927 book fair in Argentina; Piero Parini's 1931 lecture tour, aimed at spreading the Italian language and nationalism throughout Argentina; and noted Italian author, Massimo Bontempelli's 1934 tours in South America.

²² Except in the case of Rio, the cities chosen for the tour were ones which had large Italian expatriate populations, '*Italians who happened to be living abroad*' in the eyes of the Italian fascists.

²³ Federico Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism: Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919-1945*, Durham, NC 2010, 87.

court potentially like-minded politicians. They targeted a group known as the *nacionalistas*. “Throughout the 1930s an Argentine group of politically conservative nacionalistas met with Mussolini personally”.²⁴ Included in the group was the upcoming politician, Manuel Fresco. Yet why limit the effort solely to the *specific* case of Argentina? In 1934, Mussolini attempted to broaden his sphere of influence in the region. Finchelstein points out that “... Mussolini wrote to his South American embassies that the time was ‘favorable’ to expand fascist propaganda in their respective countries”.²⁵ In other words, *specificities* pertaining to Argentina could now be applied more *generally* to its neighbouring countries.

1935 – 1940 - Italy and Her Realised Colonies in Africa

By the time the aforementioned works of di Fausto were opened for occupancy in 1935, infighting between Italian architects had begun to shift the attitudes away from the *syncretisation* of modern and local traditions. Such design approaches were no longer looked upon favourably.²⁶

This shift was part of extensive changes for the Italian people both at home and abroad which were brought on as a consequence of Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia that same year. The fascist regime fought back widespread international condemnation and sanctions by becoming increasingly more repressive.²⁷ As a result, “(a)ll of Italian political life, architecture included, turned to greater uniformity”.²⁸ Pluralistic design approaches were now succumbing to the stranglehold of fascism as the regime tightened its grip on the creative process. In other words, the *diversity* exemplified previously by various aesthetic movements

²⁴ Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism*, 111.

²⁵ Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism*, 94.

²⁶ Interestingly, von Henneberg also pointed out that the fascists and architecture press in Italy ignored di Fausto’s market-place.

²⁷ Edward Denison, Guang Yu Ren, and Naigzy Gebremedhin, *Asmara: Africa’s Secret Modernist City*, London 2006, 63. In the *realised* colony of Ethiopia, Italians introduced anti-miscegenation laws in order to enforce the separation of the races, which in turn, led to much misery and anguish for Eritreans.

²⁸ Fuller, *Moderns Abroad*, 88.

at home and in *syncretic* designs in the *realised* colonies was now under pressure to yield to an authoritative mandate of *uniformity*, of architectural linguistic *purity*.

This apparent shift also reflected a greater change that started to take place the following year in the *realised* colonies. According to Fuller, "... architects' attention shifted from North to East Africa in 1936" and with it "the question of colonial-architectural syncretism faded out all together..."²⁹ In part, this was a result of the differences in context between North and East Africa. Syncretisms manifested by Rava's 'Mediterranean spirit' were made possible in the former because of its link back to Roman-ness. In the case of the latter, the preferred *purity* of "militant anti-regionalism of Italian Rationalist architecture" devoid of any contamination of localisms was more possible because, in the eyes of many fascist ideologues, this context represented a cultural tabula rasa. For the Italian colonisers, the nomadic nature of this region's indigenous people rendered them the least civilised and thus their built history contained no localisms or regionalisms worthy of appropriation.

The growing intolerance for *diversity* and *hybridisation/syncretism* in favour of *unity* and *purity* had many influential advocates. Piacentini, arguably the regime's most powerful architect by this time, was one of them. Shortly after the declaration of Empire in 1936, Piacentini volunteered his services to coordinate a design programme for Italian East Africa in an attempt to prevent unacceptable syncretic designs such as the neo-Arab works that had been constructed in North Africa previously. Piacentini conveniently failed to mention his own involvement in such eclectic designs previously in Benghazi.³⁰ In so doing, he personified the typical fascist agenda of providing a false *public image* to mask his own *private reality*.

²⁹ Fuller, *Moderns Abroad*, 134.

³⁰ Fuller, *Moderns Abroad*, 126.

The shift in focus to East Africa, resulted in Asmara experiencing unprecedented growth from 1935–1941 with buildings now characteristic of more humble or simplified versions of *il Novecento* and *Razionalismo*. Over previous decades in Asmara, many neo-revivalist works had been built, but during this period, they were more modern in character, although not necessarily reflecting the *uniformity* that many had espoused.

In the midst of the massive building campaign under way in Asmara, in 1937 Italian attitudes towards urban planning acknowledged the need for flexibility whilst designing for the various conditions related to climate and races of peoples who, as the delegates at the First National Congress of Urban Planning thought, had different habits and levels of civilisation.³¹ In other words, the blackness of Asmara and its lack of ancient Roman structures created a context that had to be treated differently, albeit not necessarily with respect for the locals. The need for flexibility, therefore, necessitated a certain degree of *diversity*. Localisms post-rationalised as being derived from Rome in order to relate back to *mediterraneità* were not part of this argument. Instead, Roman-ness in this instance was now to be implemented as a means of civilising the natives.

During this period, restrictive, often harsh, fascist policies such as the ones mandating the separation of ethnicities and/or races influenced the layout of new planning proposals throughout the *realised* colonies. Whilst the attention of most architects turned away from North Africa, the government continued its plans to relocate Italians in massive numbers to populate the region. “From 1938 onwards Libya was expected to accommodate 100,000 Italian farmers distributed in annual transfers of 20,000 settlers for a period of five years”.³² Proposed *villaggi*, rural agricultural settlements, generally sought a greater separation of the displaced Italian populace from the locals throughout the *realised* colonies. Whilst this may have been easier to accomplish in newly planned towns, dealing

³¹ Von Henneberg, “Imperial Uncertainties,” 382.

³² Capresi, “The rural centres of Libya. Reading tools,” 32.

with expansion of existing towns and cities meant that such new restrictions changed the already established patterns of social interaction. In the *specific* case of Asmara, Italians had previously intermingled with native Eritreans freely, but the new layout for the planned expansion of the modern city mandated a strict separation of the races.

It is interesting to note that with such a massive programme of building construction in a relatively condensed period of time, none of the major Italian architects of the day had any designs built in Asmara. There were no works credited to Piacentini, Rava, or di Fausto. In the case of di Fausto this may be because he continued to design works in North Africa, such as his *Villaggio Oliveti* in Tripolitania (1935-1938), even though the presence of architects had diminished in this region.

1935 – 1940 - The Desired Colonies in South America

In 1935 in South America, renowned Italian architect Alberto Sartoris continued to utilise lecture tours as a soft rhetorical means of promoting architecture, more specifically *Razionalismo* and its connection to *mediterraneità*. At venues such as the First Argentine Congress on Urbanism, The Scientific Society, and the Faculty of Architecture in Buenos Aires, he unashamedly attempted “to raise awareness of the accomplishments of fascism in the field of urbanism”.³³ His lecture titles also clearly linked architecture with fascism: “Architecture and the State, and The Architecture of the State as Inherent to the Fascist Concept of the City”.³⁴

The fascist ideologues promoting the transference of Italian cultural capital in the *desired* colonies must have thought their efforts were finally coming to

³³ Anahi Ballent and Alejandro Crispiani, “Il Razionalismo è Vivo: L’irruzione della Nuova Architettura Italiana nell’Argentina degli Anni Trenta,” in *Metamorfosi – Quaderni di Architettura* – N. 25/26, Argentina, eds. Gabriele De Giorgi, Alessandra Mutoni and Marcello Pazzagli, trans. by author, Rome, 1995, 56–62, here 60.

³⁴ Jorge Liernur, *Arquitectura en la Argentina del siglo XX – La construcción de la modernidad*, trans. by author, Buenos Aires 2001, 172.

fruition. Mussolini's continuous meetings throughout the 1930s with Argentine *nacionalistas*, his regime's close diplomatic ties with Brazil³⁵, his instructions in 1934 to his South American embassies to expand fascist propaganda, Bardi's 1933 Exhibition of Italian architecture, and the constant bombardment of soft cultural rhetoric aimed at Italian expatriates in the region, must have all contributed to this perceived breakthrough.

The main targets had always been two-fold – direct political engagement aimed at local creole elites *and* soft rhetoric aimed at those of Italian lineage living abroad to embrace the fascist vision. In 1935, in Brazil, Piacentini was starting to benefit from this dual targeting strategy. In the case of the former, he was invited by the Brazilian government to design a public work in Rio de Janeiro; whilst in the case of the latter, he received a private commission by an Italian immigrant/entrepreneur, Ermelino Matarazzo in São Paulo. Contemporaneously, from 1936–1940, the dual strategy seemed to converge positively in Argentina. Those years marked the political reign of the previously-mentioned *nacionalista*, Manuel Fresco as governor of the Province of Buenos Aires. Fresco had commissioned his friend, Francisco Salamone, an architect/engineer of Italian origins, to design projects in the province.

During this convergence of politics and architecture in South America, the soft rhetoric became aimed at cajoling those of Iberian ancestry into believing that they were linked to Italians through a common heritage of Roman-ness and/or Latin-ness. In a statement delivered in 1937, Emilio De Bono, a founder of fascism who previously had governed in Libya from 1925–1929, declared:

“The Latin republics of America are living expressions of Roman-ness ... in the new continent ... If a Roman citizen of the time of Augustus were to be reborn in Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, or Brazil ... this Roman citizenship would feel the same beating of heart, the same geniality of mind, the reblossoming of intelligence, as in the lands of the Empire ...

³⁵ Brazilian President Vargas was an admirer of il Duce.

Fascist Italy, elevated to the rank of imperial Italy, is sending today her caring and inaugural salute to her sisters of America ...”.³⁶

The strategic use of the term *Roman citizenship* implied a shared Mediterranean heritage between those of Spanish, Portuguese, and/or Italian decent. Strikingly omitted from his statement, however, was any reference to those who did not fit precisely within this categorisation, namely those of native or African origins who populated in great numbers these Latin American republics. This genteel statement came out in the same year, 1937, that the delegates at the First National Congress of Urban Planning acknowledged the need to consider various conditions such as the race of people in the colonies and De Bono conveniently skirted the issue of race in his rhetoric. Be that as it may, the question still remained whether such soft rhetoric would succeed in persuading the governments and peoples of Brazil and Argentina to embrace their imperial fascist sisters from Italy.

It would appear to be so in the case of Piacentini who was originally appointed by the Brazilian government to design the campus of the Cidade Universitária do Rio de Janeiro. Piacentini was considered for this project because Mussolini had commissioned him to direct the design of a new home campus for the University of Rome in 1932. Piacentini’s designs for the buildings on the Brazilian campus, a process that spanned 1935 to 1938³⁷, were formally and spatially reminiscent of those he had previously designed throughout Italy. Interestingly, Piacentini’s proposal for the campus paralleled di Fausto’s design and construction of the *Villaggio Oliveti* in North Africa. Both Piacentini’s proposal and di Fausto’s built works expressed variations of an *italianità* version of Mediterranean-ness. Piacentini’s implementation of his signature stripped-down classicism, *Stile Littorio*, was loaded with symbolic content of Roman superiority, but beyond its formal aesthetic connections to Italy, there was a direct political link, also. As

³⁶ Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism*, 105-106. Excerpts originally taken from La Rázon (Argentina), 24 May, 1937.

³⁷ Marcos Tognon, *Arquitetura italiana no Brasil: A obra de Marcello Piacentini*, Campinas 1999, 175.

scholar Zilah Quezado Deckker attests of Piacentini: “His fee was paid by the Italian government, with a nominal sum from the Brazilian government”.³⁸ His involvement in the project was not that straightforward. Carioca architects, such as Lucio Costa, were not accepting of the Italian architect’s proposal and wanted Le Corbusier’s inclusion in the project.

The controversy surrounding the university project was part of a greater debate in Brazilian architecture that tried to reconcile modernisation, localisms, and national identity, *brasilidade*. Costa acknowledged “that the new architecture was international, but emphasised its Latin roots, which would make it more acceptable for Brazil...”³⁹ In this case, the *specific* meaning of terms such as Latin-ness and/or Mediterranean-ness varied depending on the nation concerned. Costa’s interpretation of the term Latin-ness was not directly related to the fascist’s promotion of *italianità*. Mediterranean-ness for many Brazilians was defined by *brasilidade* and, although it had its origins in Roman-ness, it was more aligned with the historic period of Portuguese Colonialism. These differences in defining terms fuelled the national debates that led in part to the fascist architect not receiving the commission for the campus.

Perhaps Piacentini, and by extension fascism, would have more success in São Paulo which had a very large Italian ‘colony’.⁴⁰ Piacentini’s design of the Edifício Conde Matarazzo, 1935-1939,⁴¹ was an example of pure “*italianità*, as it appropriated few localisms, and thus appeared more like an Italian building strangely misplaced. Matarazzo retained Piacentini’s services to reconfigure his villa, 1939–1941,⁴² and to design the Universidade Commercial Matarazzo which he began in 1938.”⁴³

³⁸ Zilah Quezado Deckker, *Brazil Built – The Architecture of the Modern Movement in Brazil*, New York 2001, 50.

³⁹ Quezado Deckker, *Brazil Built*, 17.

⁴⁰ In Italian, the word for ‘colony’ can also be applied to a large group (of Italians) living abroad. It does not necessarily mean that said group is under the jurisdiction of the Italian government.

⁴¹ Tognon, *Arquitetura italiana no Brasil*, 182.

⁴² Tognon, *Arquitetura italiana no Brasil*, 189.

⁴³ Tognon, *Arquitetura italiana no Brasil*, 193.

Piacentini's initial proposals in Brazil took place whilst he was trying to take command of the regime's design direction in East Africa. During the latter part of the 1930s, he was clearly trying to exercise his architectural authority in Italy as well as in both the *realised* and *desired* colonies. There was, however, no real breakthrough for fascism to take hold.

Would De Bono's persuasive rhetoric be more convincing in neighbouring Argentina? Many intellectuals felt that decades of heavy Italian immigration had been undermining the essential Hispanic character of the nation. Mediterraneanness to this group of creoles was aligned more specifically to *hispanidad*, which represented an attempt at reclaiming the Hispanic roots of the country. Instead of Mediterraneanness being seen as an overarching concept connecting creoles of Spanish descent with Italians, this group's preference of identifying with *hispanidad* drew a distinct line separating the two groups. At the same time, this group of creoles was denouncing the *cosmopolitanism* that was being promoted by other European (Italian inclusive) and North American influences in the country.⁴⁴

Architectural design in Argentina reflected pluralistic approaches – from those advocating the appropriation of elements from a Hispanic colonial past to the various proponents of cosmopolitanism. Fresco himself employed architects with varying approaches. Commissioning Salamone for a series of public works, however, would appear on the surface to demonstrate Mussolini's success in cajoling Fresco. This appeared evident in Argentine scholar Ramón Gutiérrez's account of Salamone's works: "the conservative governor Manuel Fresco populated the province of Buenos Aires with town halls that, in the rationalist language, recalled the medieval *palazzi comunali* with towers as much as the designs of Mussolini's fascism".⁴⁵ It is true that many of Salamone's works

⁴⁴ Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism*, 145.

⁴⁵ Alberto Belluci, "Monumental Deco in the Pampas: The Urban Art of Francisco Salamone," in *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, 18: *Argentine Theme*, (1992), 90-121, here 91. Originally taken from Ramón Gutiérrez, *Arquitectura y Urbanismo en Iberoamerica*, (1983), 575.

contained quasi-fascist formal and spatial content, but according to Argentine professor René Longoni, the architect was not a fascist, but someone who was politically shrewd in his ability to gain commissions through Fresco. Salamone, like many Argentines - especially those of Italian origin - did not necessarily embrace fascism or his Italian-ness wholeheartedly. Instead, he appropriated various architectonic elements, like most Latin Americans did at the time, when they suited his needs. Once again, what appeared to be a breakthrough in the eyes of Italian fascists, in reality led nowhere.

Conclusion:

Mediterraneità (Mediterranean-ness) and all its variants were used by Italian fascists as means of propaganda aimed at convincing various groups of people that Italy had the right to reinvent herself as the modern day version of the Roman Empire. The strategy was to employ both *hard* and *soft* forms of rhetorical arguments and actions to try to achieve an imperial expansionism in both her *realised* and *desired* colonies, such as North and East Africa and parts of South America, respectively. Aesthetics, particularly in the form of the arts and architecture, played a key role in the fascist propaganda machine. Yet how did the people in both the *realised* and *desired* colonies receive the constant onslaught of fascists' propagandising of Italian superiority in aesthetics? What is the legacy that resulted in the transference of Italian cultural capital to her *realised* and *desired* colonies?

In the case of the former *realised* colonies of North and East Africa, the legacy depended on the *specific* context. North Africa, which was the inspiration for Rava's concept of *mediterraneità*, for example, experienced a deliberate dismantling and categorical *rejection* of said concept under the four decades of rule of Colonel Gaddafi. For East Africa, however, the legacy left behind from decades of Italian rule is more complex. The atrocities carried out by the ruling fascists have left enduring, painful memories for the generation that experienced them. For others however, the legacy of Italian cultural capital is more positive.

Through the act of *appropriation* by present day *Asmarini*, buildings originally intended only for Italians to use, now give meaning to the locals: “For many Asmarini the cultural capital attached to the Italian past provides them with a claim to a long-standing cosmopolitanism”.⁴⁶

In the *desired* colonies the results were also mixed. The initial attempts at promoting imperial expansionism of Italian cultural capital, *italianità*, into the region masked in the guise of a shared heritage of Roman-ness and/or Latin-ness did not produce the results that the fascist regime had anticipated. The endless lecture tours sponsored by private impresarios, cultural institutions, and government agencies had no transformative effect.

The *Novecento Exhibition* of Sarfatti did have an impact on the aesthetics of painters in the *desired* colonies, but her political agenda did not. According to Argentine scholar, Diana Wechsler, there was an appropriation of the works exhibited, but it came as a result of a rupture between, not an embrace of, fascist politics and aesthetics. With the passage of anti-Semite laws in Italy in 1938, Sarfatti herself experienced a similar rupture as she went into exile in Buenos Aires and Montevideo.⁴⁷

The legacy of the intersection of politics and aesthetics in the form of architecture also varied based on the *specific* context. Brazilians in Rio de Janeiro at the time rejected the proposals of the most powerful architect of the fascist regime, Piacentini. In São Paulo, however, a city where displaced Italians had more political and economic clout, his signature stripped-down classical design for a private commission was built. Despite its odd displacement of *italianità*, the building today has been appropriated by the local government and converted into the *Prefeitura* or city hall. Are contemporary *paulistas* even cognisant of the link of their city hall to Italian fascist ideals?

⁴⁶ Mia Fuller, “Italy’s Colonial Futures: Colonial Inertia and Postcolonial Capital in Asmara,” in *California Italian Studies*, 2(1) [2011], <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4mb1z7f8> (accessed 16 January 2015).

⁴⁷ Sarfatti had converted from Judaism to Catholicism, but feared that this would not matter in the eyes of her former fascist compatriots.

In Argentina, some success seemed to occur in the symbiotic relationship put forth by the political wills of Manuel Fresco and Italian-born/Argentine-raised architect and engineer, Francisco Salamone. The major public works constructed by the two in the Province of Buenos Aires paralleled chronologically those being built by the fascists in Asmara. Some regard these Argentine works to be imbued with fascist meaning, while others claim that they were a result of political shrewdness, but devoid of any true link to *italianità*.

It is interesting to note that the attempts at imperial expansion of Italian cultural capital were viewed at least in two cases as containing the gravitas of Italian *cosmopolitanism*. In one case, it appeared negatively as posing a danger to *hispanidad* in the *desired* colony of Argentina in the 1930s. In the other case, in the former *realised* colonial city of Asmara, present day *Asmarini* have appropriated it as a means of differentiating themselves from their less-worldly African neighbours.⁴⁸ Rejection or acceptance of Italian *cosmopolitanism*, it appears, was based on its ability to threaten or enhance one's own modern cultural identity.

The traces of displaced Italian cultural capital into either *realised* and *desired* colonies did not translate into the prosperity that a global fascist empire was supposed to bring. Contemporary prosperity, however, can be found in a form of displaced Italian cultural capital in aesthetics. Its success in the world is still due in part to *soft* forms of rhetorical arguments, except this time the source is not fascism but capitalist marketing machines. The seemingly limitless appetite for Italian cultural capital in the form of luxury designer products takes place in developing markets such as China. By embracing the contemporary rhetoric of consumerism, said markets ensure that the transference of Italian cultural capital, devoid of political propaganda, will live on into the 21st century. Italian *cosmopolitanism* lives on today in contemporary *desired* consumer colonies. *Viva italianità!*

⁴⁸ Fuller, "Italy's Colonial Futures," 15.