Architecture of Leisure: The Strategic Re-Creation of Fascist Italy

PAUL KARIOUK University of Florida

FASCISM/MODERNITY/LEISURE

While leisure was a leitmotif for architecture produced throughout Europe in the interwar years, this essay examines the development of a specifically Italian-Fascist-architectural response to this new cultural force. Reasons for the massive expansion of an Italian culture of leisure are inseparable from the (il)logic of the Fascistic political machine. While a detailed examination of Fascist policy is beyond this essay's scope, it is crucial to underscore one primary characteristic of Fascism: its political analysis is characterized by both a confusion of left and right and a conflation of progress and reaction.1 Although reactionary tendencies saturated Italian culture from politics to artistic expression, it is nonetheless too facile to critique her artistic endeavors by equating political ethics and aesthetic values; such analysis has precluded the possibility that social gains might have been made under the regime. Despite the valid identification of Fascism with social oppression, the Fascistic works that I review here achieved a more modern response towards leisure than projects elsewhere in Europe, in spite of the fact that many of these works were clothed in retrograde envelopes. The emergence of a leisure-culture in Europe between the wars was one paradigm that the Italian government embraced self-consciously to add fuel to patriotic fire; leisure served as an exemplary means through which the government believed it could achieve its endsthe cultivation of unmitigated nationalism.

STRATEGIC LEISURE

In 1923, Mussolini, intending to ingratiate himself to the working classes approved the first Eight-Hour Bill curbing the work day and institutionalizing paid vacations.² From the moment that leisure was legally installed the regime began a campaign of social engineering and an attendant campaign of architectural construction to insure that worker's time-off would be as efficient and beneficial to the state (and corporations) as their work time. Unregulated leisure, regime officials feared, would allow workers to both devote their leisure time to political issues, and imitate bourgeois vices; uncontrolled leisure would only lead to "decadence-the dark side of progress." The activity programs devised by the regime advocated healthy and praiseworthy pastimes selected according to criteria of productivity, efficiency, and enlightened modernity. Physical [and to a lesser degree] moral and intellectual pursuits were to discourage frivolity.4 The more the workers were "invited" to partake of their new leisure culture the more readily they were drawn into the public realm were they could be thoroughly observed and managed.

The implementation of the control of laboring-class leisure began with the reorganization of extant recreational circles called "dopolavoro" ("afterwork"), and continued systematically from the early 1920s until the regime's de facto collapse in 1943. These

dopolavoro of the twenties and thirties—vestiges of nineteenth-century industrial-labor social clubs—organized workers according to mutual athletic or cultural interests; similarity of employment, employer, or craft; or simply geographic proximity. In 1923 the supervision of this operation was placed in the hands of the newly formed Fascist bureaucracy, the Opera Nationale Dopolavoro (OND), which went on to create more than 20,000 discrete organizations, and whose construction budget expanded to comprise one of the government's single largest expenditures.⁵

By the middle 1920s Italy's economic boom ended and workers' living conditions returned to pre-war levels. Work hours increased as industries rejected the recently won eight-hour day, wages were cut, and unemployment rose to fifteen-percent. "Leisure," briefly lauded as proof of Italy's modernity, became synonymous with the consequences of economic failure and a euphemism for unemployment. Although the Fascists viewed the dopolavoro with condescension, they were now forced to embrace fully and to subsidize more heavily the social clubs in order to stave off a reduction of nationalistic fervor. By 1927 the Fascists' legitimate fears that extant dopolavoro were places where bitter workers would become politically volatile resulted in the active campaign to bring the recreational circles under governmental control. The greatest surge in the construction of leisure facilities occurred during this economic depression with a public works program initiated to help curb unemployment. At times this process meant the erection of a new leisure facility to placate a regional population, at other times it could mean the violent destruction of whatever public gathering place existed as an alternative to the Fascists' clubs, be they private clubs, bars, or homes; outlets for leisure became available to the same degree that individual liberties were revoked. It is significant to note though that alongside the Fascists' inherent opportunism there existed a modern, progressive aspect to this campaign relative to other European nations; for example, while some French industries made mollifying gestures to labor regarding leisure in 1919, no comparable broadbased legislation promoting leisure was enacted there until 1936.6

Mussolini and his government, targeting an ever larger populace through this broad construction program, quickly extended the OND's reach beyond the re-organization of the dopolavoro proper. To this end, the social identity of the working class which was formerly foremost centered around the nuclear family, was deliberately fragmented and recast into divisions based upon age and gender. Consequently, the autonomous expression of class identity and volatile class alliance that posed a considerable threat to the government's stability was undermined. The regime's new architecture of leisure gradually evolved into a vehicle that came to address formerly disenfranchised Italians: women and children, as well as veterans and the infirm.

The rhetoric surrounding the dopolavoro promoted individual

self-improvement and eventual fulfillment, often integrating the most technologically sophisticated means to further a nationalism that exuded nostalgia. For instance programs relied upon cinema and radio to deliver Italian history and folklore, and classes in physical education aggressively promoted athletic activities that could take place in the Italian outdoors. Governmental pressure forcing workers to spend their time in the open countryside rather than sequestered in the cities was a critical step in the formation of a modern Italian tourism industry, and gave rise inadvertently to yet another component of mass leisure. Despite the Fascists' intention to reinforce a family based culture, the policy of providing diverse activities away from the home ultimately worked against their particular notions of family life. Women were harangued to birth (12) children each yet due to the government's active promotion of leisure, they actually had more non-maternal options opened to them: sporting events, theater, and cinema; sponsored by the regime, these options qualified as "legitimate" uses of time, and ultimately because of this greater access to leisure, women were not manipulated into infant production contrary to the Duce's expectations. If Fascism demanded adherence to anti-modern attributes such as stoicism, it also required that citizens be on call and live fully in the public domain. These contradictions caused the Fascists' architecture to develop along lines that promoted forms of socialization that the Italian middle-class would not have otherwise been drawn to, and contributed to the social interchange of members of the working classes who had few options open to them before the leisure campaign. In the end, the augmented possibilities for socialization impeded the Government's ability to promote its political agendas.

This political maneuvering, attempting to monitor and limit the working class population, resulted in the generation of three distinct architectural typologies. Alongside the re-made dopolavoro (leisure clubs for adult workers), emerged the colonie (summer vacation camps for the indoctrination of children), and the balilla (clubs resembling gymnasiums for the inter-regional competitions of adolescents), each administered by its own bureaucracy. The dopolavoro and the colonia were existing institutional types, architecturally and politically reconfigured by the Fascists, but it was the balilla—an architectural type invented to satisfy a regime necessity—that ultimately made the greatest inroad toward a modern architecture of leisure.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF LEISURE: BUILDINGS AND PROJECTS

Fascism maintained credibility in large part because it adapted very effectively to local political contexts and hence each project built by the Opera Nationale Dopolavoro (OND) and Opera Nationale Balilla (ONB) was unique and could be viewed as a barometer indicating the Fascists' perceptions of regional political climates. The following is a very limited review of the spatial and programmatic diversity of the government's endeavors; my intention is not to provide a survey of this campaign but only to suggest its ideological and architectural breadth.

Giovanni Muzio's *Tennis Club of Milan*, built in 1922-23 demonstrates the cultural role that leisure architecture played in Italy just before the Fascist's initiative commenced, and illustrates the fact that modernity, leisure, and nationalism already constituted a single topical issue that only had to be recognized by the regime as a raw product with political potential. A critic in the architectural press remarked, "The building contributes to the movement forming in Italy that wants to revive and modernize our best classical tradition according to new requirements... it is an oasis of rural peace... almost like the suburban villas of purely Italian tradition." We must consider that the villa in Italian terms was an icon of Italian "soil and tradition and that it was a distinctly rural, not urban form;" the villa and its landscape were ideologically indistinguishable and their cultural maintenance pointed to a desire to preserve a traditional, not

revolutionary, political order. ¹⁰ The architectural idiom of the *Tennis Club*—the building's novecento style which was not intended as "a historical revival but rather as a modern analog to the neoclassical past" —is joined here with the preservation of an *idea* of nature. The regime came to exploit such symbolic access to nature as both a prerequisite for Fascist ideals and as a nationalistic gesture.

The government's overt promotion of leisure institutions and Mussolini's repeated calls for a new "Italian" aesthetic were taken as a magnificent challenge by those architects who in the 1920s and 30s were starting their careers. The project for a dopolavoro designed by Gruppo 7 and exhibited at the 1927 Monza Biennale conveys simultaneously the architects' pervasive optimism in the regime and their belief in the virtues of the regime's stated agenda. (At the same moment we must recognize that these young architects played up to Fascism's progressive posturing, therein seeing a key to public commissions.) As Richard Etlin points out, in spite of contrary claims, the rationalists directed a great deal of their energy to populist concerns, particularly in the area of public housing and urban design.12 This populist concern manifests itself in this dopolayoro project through the use of such features as balconies and large expanses of glass exposing the public meeting halls on the most accessible levels; the Gruppo 7 project is represented as an extroverted urban institution advertising its raison d'être-leisure. With this project we may recall Terragni's commentary on his casa del fascio, an interpretation of Mussolini's aphorism, "Fascism is a glass house into which all may look."

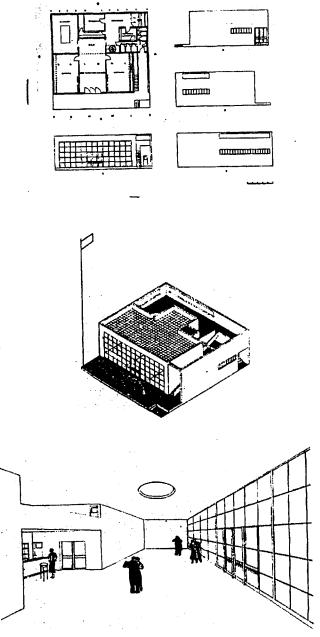
In the typical Fascist style which paired superlatives with a rhetoric of general inclusion, Mussolini announced that the dopolavoro ranked with the most significant institutions of the regime. Although this new institution was greeted by architects with tremendous creative and nationalistic enthusiasm, the regime did not ever allow the construction of any all-inclusive dopolavoro such as Gruppo 7's to materialize, revealing again the Fascists' need to reduce opportunities for frequent large-scale gatherings. If Muzio's *Tennis Club* serves as a reference point for what the laboring class had to aspire to, Gruppo 7's project indicates an equally unrealistic vision on the part of the design profession. This project serves well to indicate the rift that emerged between the regime's rhetoric and the reality of their building practices.

These influences of bourgeois leisure and a visionary desire for modern life brought to a populist level were evidenced in two villa projects exhibited in 1930 at the Fourth International Exhibition of Decorative Arts held in Monza. Of the thirty-six villa projects exhibited there three were built on the park grounds, and of these, two-the "Casa Elettrica" and the "Casa Vacanza" suggest that leisure continued to be held out as an individually attainable product in spite of the country's economic turmoil. Apparently, the only adjustment that the designers felt was necessary in order for such leisure trappings to become readily available was a change to a more modest scale. The catalog description of the Casa Elettrica read: "It is extremely modern and yet traditionally Italian to want to enjoy nature fully; elements of clearly Italian character are the great terraces, covered loggias, covered atrium, [and] the glass conservatory."13 This suburban prototype retains nature in the light of modernity to the same degree that the Vacation House—a micro-villa theoretically affordable by a wide public—retains Italian iconicity despite its modern program of leisure. As a "casa," each of these "homes" for modern convenience and leisure underscores again that the architecture of leisure did not in fact extend to the laboring class. Instead the Fascists attempted to translate and bring the idea of modernity and leisure "home" to the public nominally via their case del fascio, case del dopolavoro, and case balilla. 14 In contrast to the Italian "casa," we may consider that the German laboring class received "workers' clubs" and the Soviet proletariat received "palaces of labor." In this way "the concept of Fascism as a home for the Italian family became part of the regime's attempt to encourage traditional family unity nationally," but paradoxically, as I have

pointed out earlier, this unity was being structured architecturally and psychologically in the public realm. In this way the illusion of bourgeois leisure could be suggested without being made available in actuality—the consequence of the regime's financial limitations.

The 1934 unbuilt dopolavoro project designed for a Genoese insurance company by Renzo Zavanella exemplifies the dynamics of control between corporate Italy and workers regarding leisure. In its austerity the design provides workers with an education in the virtues of frugality. The author of the *Casabella* article where this project appeared explains that the scheme is so efficient that the entire operation can be staffed by a single live-in employee, residing on the upper level. ¹⁵ This employee would be given access to the oculus above the meeting hall, permitting a close watch over the festivities below.

The spaces of the dopolavoro cluster around the bar, a feature that contradicts Fascist attitudes on alcohol, but that is partly explained



Figs. 1-3. Dopolavoro for an insurance company in Genoa; Renzo Zavanella, architect. *Casabella*, 1934.

by the fact that this facility was intended for the company's higher level workers—a frequent distinction made in this building type. Compartmentalized spaces prevent mass gathering, which on rare occasions would be accommodated via sliding walls. Contrary to Gruppo 7's ideal dopolavoro, this building turns its back on the street, facilitating the architect's intention to create a "villa: the stimulus to gain a collective mentality without rational discipline." The author concludes: "What a Soviet dopolavoro is to a garage, this building is to a villa," thus valorizing corporate activity over workers' interests and employer/employee parity.

Both this dopolavoro project and the Tennis Club illustrate an inherent shortcoming of Gruppo 7's ideal dopolavoro—its urbanity. While all of these projects are urban works, it was not to the regime's advantage to promote the public urban sphere. By the late 1920s, the squalor of rural living conditions and services brought about the extraordinary flow of farm workers into the cities, threatening catastrophe. There were two immediate results; first, fear spread throughout the regime over the formation of an explosive urban mob-explosive because Italy's industries could not absorb such quantities of labor; and second, panic escalated among wealthy landowners who feared the loss of cheap farm labor. Consequently, in 1928 the Fascists initiated an anti-urbanization campaign under the slogan "Empty the cities." Mussolini urged that "every means, even coercive ones," be used to "promote an exodus from the cities, [and] to prevent the desertion of the countryside." Mussolini himself abandoned the cosmopolitan suit of the "Americanizer" in favor of the sober garb of "First Peasant of Italy." Political rhetoric, in conjunction with an enormous graphic advertising campaign, began to extol the miracle that was the Italian countryside—Italian soil was transformed into a commodity facilitating real and conceptual access to the landscape.

The dopolavoro that developed were pockets of "rural peace" in the city, whose staff increasingly began to organize retreats to the countryside for member workers. Even the most humble urban dopolavoro became covered with murals depicting the Italian countryside, promoting the belief that weekend tourism—that is, exodus from the city—was a patriotic act.

The regime's architectural response to the recreational needs of the youngest members of the labor class was the colonia. Contrary to the building program that targeted urban adults and adolescents in order to siphon off political variances, colonia were located in the countryside, where isolation was seen as more conducive to Fascistic indoctrination. The fact that children posed no threat within cities accounts for the fact that no urban architectural system of recreation was developed for children. Working class children, up to the age of twelve spent four weeks per year at the colonie. Separation from the family was total, and, as with the balilla, gender separation was the general rule, with higher quality facilities designed for boys.

Implicit in the logic of the colonia was the understanding that health begins in the home, and only those families who could preserve the "health" of their children could reward their children with a vacation at the colonia. A healthy body stemmed from a healthy mind, and subscription to Fascism was the best way to stay healthy. As was the case with the dopolavoro and balilla, these institutions included medical facilities; compliance with the Fascists' social aims could mean the sole opportunity for working class children to receive medical attention.

Like the dopolavoro, the colonia became introverted, compartmentalized, and functionalized in their planning. The design intention was to achieve general public visibility since the regime insisted on recognition of its generosity, but simultaneously each colonia was designed to shield its specific activity to avoid the interference of outside dissenters and thus further assert its control over the children. Following this same philosophy and advancing possibilities for autonomy, architects and officials conceived the colonia as islands within their own farmland, with children at times participating in the farm's operation. Thus, still another layer was added to the regime's

attempt to "cultivate" a peasant landscape. Because the colonia became so large programmatically, included such visible symbols as towers, and had introverted plans, they could be interpreted as idealized landscapes. In this regard, by turning away from the natural landscape that they so fervently promoted, the Fascists' revealed their attitude toward the literal land to be merely additional rhetoric.

The Fascist project directed toward leisure that aestheticized politics to the most extreme degree was the colonia *Marina XXVIII Ottobre* designed in 1932 by Clemente Busiri-Vici. The idiosyncratic design was a response to the importance the government placed upon that colonia's particular population: the children of Italians abroad. A new attitude towards design arose here, as it did at every intersection between Italy and other nations. A writer for Architettura described this colonia by stating: "Nothing can serve the national propaganda better than the love we give to these children—only if they see the beauty of Italy will they learn to adore it. All the illuminous memories of their infancy will bear in the soul of these future men a psychological importance deeper and longer lasting than any later propaganda. Therefore, when we build, we need to consider the architectural aspect that will psychologically most influence these children." 18

While the architectural design—a landlocked fleet of ships housing 1100 uniformed "sailors"—pleased the regime, some architects remained skeptical. In the same article the writer concluded by saying, "Only [by considering these psychological influences] can we justify the architectural objectivism and symbolism employed." In this the writer addresses the severe criticism the project received from those progressive members of the architectural community who were outside of the immediate regime.

Rhetoric and strict discipline notwithstanding, the magical impression that such an environment would have sustained for a young boy cannot be quickly dismissed.

The Colonia IX Mai designed by G. Levi-Montalcini in 1938 provides an example that stands in stark contrast to the Busiri-Vici project. It is less conspicuous in its form and illustrates the more typical colonia trait of turning in upon itself, creating a counterlandscape. This project differs significantly from the majority in that it was programmed for boys as well as girls—with boys housed in the tower and slab at the front of the scheme and girl's placed in a dormitory at the rear of the site.

Despite the forced dispersion of the most rebellious anti-Fascist factions by 1926, Mussolini maintained a facade of support toward Italy's urban youth to preclude militant sympathies from forming again. The strongest architectural manifestation of this political strategy was the balilla, a building type analogous to a gymnasium, and overseen by the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) whose building campaign surpassed that for the dopolavoro. Whereas the leisure agenda of the dopolavoro delivered merely distraction, participation in the balilla was intended to prepare youth for membership in the industrial troops, and if necessary, the military; order and efficiency were its essential objectives. It is understandable then that the balilla, more than either the dopolavoro or the colonia, was a masculine domain. As George Mosse stated, "the ideal of manliness accompanies the development of nationalism." ¹⁹

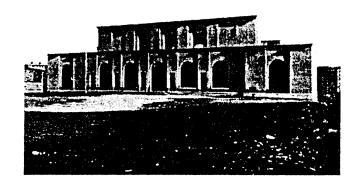
In a building program already enmeshed in a project of nationalism the rhetoric of virility became a touchstone. The poet Marinetti establishes the tone furthered by the architecture of the balilla: "Your machine will give you back not only what you put into it, but double or triple, much more and much better than the calculations of its builder—its father!—made provisions for." ²⁰

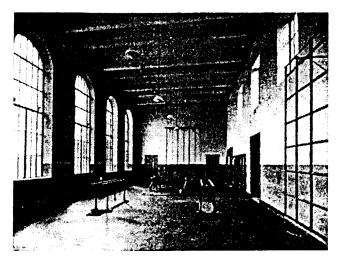
The graphic representations and textual descriptions of the balilla underscored the Fascists' interest in the machine: the machine of hygiene and the machine for exercise. Something as static and low-tech as a gymnastic ladder was referred to as a "modern appliance," while ventilation and plumbing within projects were fetishized and described in terms of breathing and fluid circulation. Low building budgets often led to unadorned sanitary fixtures and exposed me-

chanical systems, but when they were represented by the architectural press they were aestheticized. If at times the regime relied upon the rhetoric associated with the balilla to equate the human body to a natural product born from the soil of Italy, at other moments it sought to transform the body into a machine. The balilla became an icon of a Fascist world, the fusion of technology and tradition, progress and reaction. Architectural journal accounts describe these buildings as "all in harmony and well-proportioned,"—terminology descriptive of a re-made, re-enforced body, no longer only an individual body but a collective social body. Especially in regards to class, such ideas of harmony and proportion implied the successful coexistence of Italian society's unequal parts—governmental and corporate sponsors of the balilla versus the laboring class.

Ironically, while the balilla participated in the invention of lowbrow forms of leisure and in particular such activities as gymnastics, it soon began to influence developments in upper class leisure. Gymnastics were identified as an inferior sport by the regime during the 1920s, but by 1940 the participation in gymnastics resulted in its tremendous growth in popularity among all classes. This is not to imply that facilities shared fully by multiple classes resulted; in fact, when a single complex was constructed to house a certain activity for several social classes, plans were arranged so that each group remained spatially segregated. By 1940 the Duce himself had a lavish "balilla" for his sole use.

Unlike the OND that used its architecture to reformulate an existing social entity, the ONB had no similar predecessors. Because its purpose was to develop a new, modern building typology for

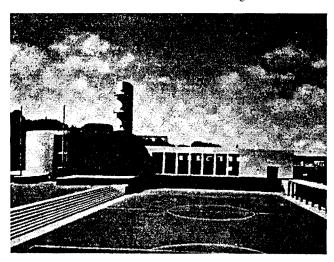


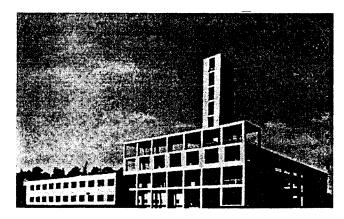


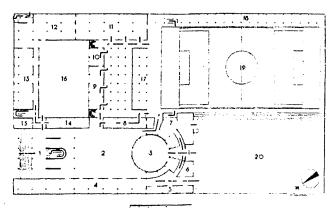
Figs. 4-5. Balilla on Via Lesina in Rome; Enrico del Debbio, architect. Architettura e Arti Decorative, 1930.

leisure the bureaucracy did more to promote the novecento and rationalist work than any other governmental agency. This demonstrates the depth of the Fascist's bureaucratic system; the head of each office was in many ways autonomous, at least until the late 1930s, and hence each head had tremendous influence over who received commissions and which aesthetic trends would be favored. The director of the ONB became a power broker for Italian modern architecture.

An example of the Fascist intention to distract youth by encouraging physical development is illustrated by the *Balilla Madre*, a gymnastics display campus where nearly 400 young athletes could compete for regional titles, designed in 1934 by a favorite of the ONB—Enrico Del Debbio. The desires of the regime are reiterated







Figs. 6-8. Project for the Balilla Madre near the Foro Mussolini: Enrico del Debbio, architect. *Architettura*, 1934.

by Architettura's editor who reviewed this project: "We know that the physical and moral education of masses is of primary importance... The problem (to be addressed) is organizational, educational, and the disciplining of the masses. This building operates in view of collective exercises and extraordinary exhibitions, which aim to create in the participants and spectators a sense of unity, order, power and beauty..."²²

CONCLUSION

Because the Fascists modified and even reversed their strategies when they were not embraced by the masses, in effect the regime always achieved success. The Fascists' framework for recreation obviously did not serve labor's political ideals, but neither did the regime's apparent success significantly advance its own political causes since the tactics they used were generally viewed with tremendous cynicism by the public.²³ The Fascists' leisure campaign was neither intended nor understood as a progressive measure, often it was imposed brutally, yet arguably relative to the pre-Fascist period, labor's quality of life improved in so far as the benefits that could be gleaned from the campaign to institutionalize leisure were real social gains—though acquired at a significant social price. These benefits were perceptible by the labor class—after the final collapse of Mussolini's regime in 1945, the bureaucracies responsible for organizing leisure were not dismantled but were preserved and reconstituted, and continue until today. As the working class continued to struggle against severe hardships imposed by the regime, the government's program for leisure, anchored by its attendant architecture, slowly contributed to the working-class public's passage toward modernity.

NOTES

- ¹ Andrew Hewitt, Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avantgarde (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 68.
- ² Victoria de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 25.
- ³ Hewitt, p. 134.
- de Grazia, p. 3.
- ⁵ de Grazia, p. 16.
- ⁶ Julian Jackson, The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy 1934-38 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 104-108.
- ⁷ de Grazia, p. 16.
- ⁸ Mark Robson, *Italy: Liberalism and Fascism 1870-1945* (Kent: Hodder &Stoughton, 1992), p. 106.
- ⁹ P. Torriano, "Cronache milanesi: la nuova palazzina del 'Tennis Club' di Milano," *Emporium* 61 (May 1925): 339. Located in Richard A. Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture: 1890-1940* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1991), p. 189.
- Russell A. Berman, Modern Culture and Critical Theory: Art, Politics, and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 29.
- 11 Etlin, p. 212.
- 12 Etlin, p. 226.
- Dennis P. Doordan, "Architecture and Politics in Fascist Italy," (Diss. Columbia University 1983), p. 77.
- For a discussion of the rhetoric of "case," see Ellen Ruth Shapiro, "Building Under Mussolini," (Diss. Yale University 1985), p. 105 et al.
- ¹⁵ "Project for a Dopolavoro," Casabella (August 1934): 24.
- 16 Ibid.: 24.
- ¹⁷ de Grazia, p. 98.
- 18 "Colonia Marina XXVIII Ottobre Per I Figli Degli Italiani All 'Estero a Riccione," Architettura (1934): 614.
- ¹⁹ Barbara Spackman, "Fascist Women and the Rhetoric of Virility," in Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture, Robin Pickering-lazzi, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 108.
- Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Selected Writings*, ed. with an introduction by R. W. Flint (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), p. 91.
- ²¹ Etlin, p. 434.
- ²² "Progetto di una Casa Balilla Madre," Architettura (1934): 391.
- ²³ de Grazia, p. 19.