CASA DEL FASCIO

FORM.BODY.TECHNIQUE.SPACE
FORM
As one of the most influential architects of the Rationalist movement, the works of Giuseppe Terragni served to advance the catalogue of modern examples of architecture in Italy, as well as support and propagate Fascist ideology.

As a Rationalist and a member of a group of avant-garde designers, Gruppo Sette, or Group 7, Terragni was an advocate of architecture which prioritized technical and functional considerations and believed that with the primacy of such considerations, a new aesthetic of architectural form could be derived (Ghirardo, 1980, p.109). Moreover, adhering to rationalist formal organizations, Terragni favoured large extensions and openings, extensive use of glass and “the absolute correspondence between structure and the purpose of a building” (Ghirardo, 1980, p.109), in his architecture.

In addition to being a rationalist, Terragni was an ardent Fascist and “a modernist architect who never lost the connection to the classicism and conservatism of his education” (Schumacher, 2001, p.229). Despite his extensive training and understanding of the traditional roots and grandeur of Italian architecture, Terragni’s work can be characterized by an ”almost maniacal pursuit of the monolithic block – where the monolith is the abstraction of modernism and also a symbol of purity, and of the divine” (Schumacher, 2001, p.231), which often played a large role in classical architecture as well. In addition to this, Terragni, stemming from his Rationalist inclinations, had a tendency towards functionalism and order, which are also central themes to fascist ideologies. And, in 1932, as a result of the combination of all of these influences, as well as the good fortune of Terragni’s brother, Attilio, being mayor of Como, Italy, Giuseppe Terragni was given the commission to design the fascist headquarters – the Casa del Fascio, Como.

**DIAGRAM 1:**

**COMPOSITION THROUGH ORDERING**

The square is established as the most simplistic organization of form on the front facade of the Casa del Fascio. Despite the higher ratio of open form to solid form, the front facade has a clear rhythm and proportionality due to the creation of the form by multiple, related orders.
The Casa del Fascio in Como Italy, as well as every other municipality in Italy, served as the party headquarters as well as the center for all civic life (Ghirardo, 1980). With the understanding that the Casa was intimately connected to both the political and social spheres, it can be inferred that its resultant form is directly correlated with such a relationship. And furthermore, the form of the Casa del Fascio cannot be studied apart from its historical setting or intended use, and instead should be understood in the relationships it has to fascist political ideology, down to the last detail.

Constructed behind the cathedral and facing out onto the main piazza in Como, the form of the Casa del Fascio, upon initial consideration, appears seemingly simple in both the squareness of its plan and related four elevations. This however, is the extent of its simplicity, as the design of the form is not only considered in terms of its exterior aesthetics and surrounding context but also in terms of its interior spatial organization, and the relationship between the two. The building form is achieved via a structural concrete frame upon which the exterior façade is attached and interiority characterized by a double height, open, central atrium, and four surrounding floors of office space.

**DIAGRAM 2: ACCESSIBILITY**

Although the Casa del Fascio is not located in the center of the city, it is not remotely hindered in its accessibility, physically or visually. Its advantageous location is not only readily accessible via major vehicle through-fares and the heavy-rail line, but is also located directly off the main piazza. Visually, the placement of the Casa del Fascio connects each facade of the form with a major structure in the city, whether it be the hospital, the Cathedral or the port on the lake. Additionally, the combination of the expansive use of glass on the form and the low-rise housing stock immediately surrounding the building allows those within the structure to be clearly seen and to have unimpeded views when looking out.
The exterior facade is made up of an ordering of marble ashlar panels and open loggia. The marble panels, uniform and monolithic in nature, can be thought to illicit feelings of durability and elegance, as well as speak to traditional Italian roots where marble was thought to embody that of richness and rule (Ghirardo, 1980). Although marble is an expensive building material, the use of said material was insisted upon by Terragni for its functional usefulness (Ghirardo, 1980) in its support of Fascist ideology and ability of the structure to serve as a political vehicle. Moreover, use of the marble in the structure directly correlates with rationalist formal organizational strategy, as in covering key areas of the building where the public, or crowd, met with fascist officials, as well as the ceiling of the open atrium, a preparatory ambience and support for the importance of the absolute bond and obedience of the public to the fascist regime was created, which is central to the function of the building. And, to further support the necessity for the use of marble to create such atmospheric conditions, Terragni stated that “for a representative building, only marble walls can be used” (Ghirardo, 1980, p.113).

The open loggia of the building exterior can be considered equally as central to the communication of the function and spirit of the building as the marble panels. The design of the loggia is characterized by unusually deep opening in the concrete frame and the extensive use of glass. As a rationalist architect, the use of glass was particularly important to Terragni as a means by which to utilize the structure to embody Mussolini’s metaphor of Fascism as a glass house. By utilizing large windows, in the fascio design, to make up glass walls, as well as glass doors and panels, Terragni sought to create a sense of openness internally and externally. And by physically exposing the building’s interior structure to the surrounding urban context, and the building itself via the large, central atrium, the building is imbued with a sense of honesty and transparency and even allows the Italian populace to visually connect and participate in the inner workings of the fascist headquarters. Furthermore, by creating no private or hidden areas, the form of the Casa del Fascio exemplifies Fascist ideology that championed “no hindrance, no barrier, [and] no obstacle between the political leaders and the people” (Kirk, 2005, p.98).

**DIAGRAM 3: SOLIDITY VS. OPENNESS**

The relationship of open space vs. enclosed spaces found in the plan of the Casa del Fascio is reflected in the exterior façades of the form as well. Not only do the open areas of the facade offer views to the spaces within but also correspond with the surrounding urban context. For example, the south facade (bottom), offers strong viewing potential of the Cathedral, and the west facade (left) offers strong viewing potential of the lake beyond.
In consideration of every detail of the form of the casa, Terragni utilized exterior ornamentation as another way to connect his architecture to the function and use of the building. The original design for the exterior facade called for a giant mural to be painted on the large marble panels which faced the piazza. Terragani commissioned Marcello Nizzoli to do such a mural since he had worked on previous mural projects previously commissioned for the Fascist regime. Terragni’s vision for the mural was to use giant photograph which would be easily understood as images for enhancing the political consciousness of the viewer as dictated in the fascist manifesto” (Kirk, 2005, p.98). Under Terragni’s direction, a slogan was to be inscribed below the giant photo of Mussolini that read, Credere Obedire Combattere, and would be followed by images of the citizens below that, who would serve to represent the Italian populace that believed, obeyed, and fought in the new martial social order (Kirk, 2005). However, Terragni’s ambitions for the exterior decoration of photography was eventually abolished by the Fascist authorities who believed that such a treatment of the façade “did not make clear the representative function of the building” (Kirk, 2005, p.99).

With its representation of important fascist ideologies of hierarchy, order and communal action, as well as its decorative emblems of the regime, the Casa del Fascio in Como Italy served as not only an example of modern architecture in Italy, but also as a vehicle for the communication of political ideology. With its completion in 1936, the final form of the Casa del Fascio in Como Italy, was a natural consequence of the influence of Italian rationalist design, and also of the social and political doctrines of the regime in power at the time. And from this, it is clearly evident that the form of the building and the process by which it was realized must be studied and understood in terms of both the architect and prevailing movements of the time, as well as the entire urban fabric of the time within which it was realized.

**DIAGRAM 4:**

**PERMEABILITY**

The degree of permeability of the Casa del Fascio is directly related to the materiality of its form. On the exterior, the most permeable areas are characterized by the deep openings in the concrete frame and the glazing panels which allow expansive views into the interior. The solid panels of marble, however offer nothing to the observer that is physically or visually permeable.

This same relationship is experienced as the observer moves through the structure. As one passes through the outset of walled spaces, such as offices or service rooms, the most interior space of the structure is a completely open, double height, atrium with a view of all the interior spaces that open up onto it.
"At the outset, the body as a site of production, reproduction, habitation, interaction and sensation has been related to architecture as shelter, symbol, scale and proportionality." - B. Bratton
ACCESS TO NATURAL LIGHT BY FLOOR

Due to a high degree of glass usage and the rhythmic pattern of the loggia, the interior spaces enjoy a high degree of access to natural light, fairly consistently. Due to the patterns of this access, the offices of the most prestigious fascist leaders are located around the perimeter of the floors, with spaces of lesser importance, or communal gathering spaces, on the interior (Ghirardo, 1980).
As a common theme of the modern period, and as a realization from the beginning of the 18th century, buildings evolved beyond mere representations of the human body and began to characterize bodily projections in their evocation of emotional responses in the human body (Vidler, 1991). As articulated by theorist Anthony Vidler, human beings interpret the outside world in accordance with the expressive systems they have become familiar with through the workings of their own bodies (Vidler, 1991, p.5). In the case of buildings, the spirit and desired emotional responses are also bodily projections which have been characterized in the modern era. The Casa del Fascio, as the fascist headquarters in Como Italy and the civic and directorial centre of all civic life in the municipality, characterizes the hierarchical, authoritarian and regulatory spirit of the fascist regime and imparts such understandings onto the populace. This spirit of the processes, functions, mechanisms and dynamisms relative to the total makeup (Hall, 1954, p.34-35) of fascist ideology are understood and interpreted by observers through similar and familiar expressive bodily systems, such as that of one's personality.

**INTERPRETATION THROUGH SYSTEM**

Similar to the mode by which human beings interpret the outside world in accordance with the expressive systems of one's own body, the hierarchies of power in the fascist system are implicitly characterized by the internal systems of the Casa del Fascio.
Despite the seemingly open facade, views into the building are regulated through a controlled pattern of clear vision glass and opaque spandrel glass, while surveillance from within is unhindered.
As the modern era gave way to the post-modern, the reference of the body in architecture has evolved in a way which has seen a distancing between the two and a more fragmentary nature of the body itself. As technology advances, the body that architecture like the Casa del Fascio once referenced, has become “fragmented, if not contorted, deliberately torn apart and mutilated almost beyond recognition” (Vidler, 1991, p.3). Under this guise, and in the realization of post-modern biotechnologies such as gene therapy, transgenic recombination and body-architecture hybridization, it can be examined what bodily functions and projections the Casa del Fascio could have been characterized by. One potential for the fascist headquarters building, as a body, may have been the ability of its already highly articulated façade to be more pronounced in its ability to control and evoke feelings of such in its observers. As discussion by Benjamin H. Bratton in his article on The Premise of Recombinant Architecture, biotechnologies in the form of genetic architecture could yield a building skin which is autonomous in its ability to respond to environmental conditions and stimuli. This could manifest itself within the Casa del Fascio by altering its façade, which already regulates the views in and out of the building, and imbuing the building with the ability to re-configure its openings at will, to whichever desired degree.

The Casa del Fascio, as an expression of modern architecture and as a political vehicle, can be seen as successful in its communication and embodiment of the fascist spirit. In analysis of the motives and systems which underlay the conceptual basis of the building and the architectural theories that support it, the Casa del Fascio can be understood as both a building as body and as a building characterizing bodily projections.

**SELF AWARENESS via BIOTECHNOLOGY**

In the post-modern era, technological advancements such as genetic architecture, and body-architecture hybrids could have allowed the facade of the Casa del Fascio to self regulate and re-configure at will in response to environmental conditions or any other.
“Fascism is a religion. The twentieth century will be known in history as the century of Fascism.”

– Benito Mussolini
Upon first consideration of the Casa del Fascio, an over-arching focus on technique concerning proportionality, rhythmic repetition of form and the simple usage of contrasted void and solid are immediately apparent. However, despite the square-ness of its plan and façade and its aesthetic seemingly devoid of meaning beyond rational proportionality, closer consideration of the internal spatial programming yields a certain level of communication of the fascist ideologies that control the world and culture in Italy at the time within which it was designed and built. Moreover, in the design of the space, one can clearly infer the importance of centrality (Kirk, 2005). In such characteristics as periphery hallways, the organization of enclosed spaces out from the central void, as well as the achievement of unimpeded views from the outside into the central core; the space is imbued with, and instrumentally utilizes, the ability to reinforce and communicate fascist ideology which champions the state over the individual and demands the transfer of energy from individual parts, back into the central being – the state. So through simple organizational technique, a clear parts to whole relationship is understood across aesthetics, program and the ideology that is intended to be communicated.
As a common, indoctrinated backdrop to Italian Fascism, the Fascist government strongly intertwined itself with religion and championed the superiority of Italian heritage and history. It would seem prestigious and affective enough to occupy a site directly across from the historical Cathedral for the Fascist headquarters in Como, but upon closer analysis, it is apparent that the details of the siting of the building were instrumental in legitimizing Fascist rule in relation to religion. In consideration of the building orientation to the street, cathedral and plaza, and the surrounding buildings, the Casa del Fascio is set on axis to the duomo, bearing a direct relationship (Eisenman, 1970). This relationship is not directly noticeable to the naked eye as the Casa del Fascio plaza, train lines and curved street obscure the connection. But, in diagramming the position of the building, other buildings on the same side of the plaza and that of the cathedral and surrounding neighborhoods, it becomes apparent that the Casa del Fascio is purposefully oriented with its center directly on axis to the cathedral. In its role as the center for all civic life in Como at the time of its construction, and the importance of religion in 1930's Italian society, its orientation and relationship to the cathedral would have served to reinforce the legitimacy of the government to the population and justify any and all government actions and mandates.

**LEGITAMACY THROUGH ORIENTATION**
At the core of Fascist ideology is the chief importance of the state, the subordination of all to the state, and the control, by the state, of most aspects of daily life including movements, interactions and perceptions. The layout of the site and the orientation of the building on the site can be understood as being designed in a way which further upholds the controlling power of the government and the degree to which they exercise control over all aspects of public and private life (Curtis, 1996). The building is set back on the site allowing for a large open plaza to exist out in front between the building and the train tracks, faces towards the larger plaza of the cathedral and cathedral buildings, and is directly accessible off of the main entrance to the building. The streets alongside of the building are very narrow, offering just enough space for street parking and single lane traffic, and no real gathering space of any sort. The backside of the building is completely inaccessible to anyone outside of the building as it is gated, has surveillance cameras and serves generally as a parking lot for building staff. Upon initial observation it would seem that the site planning has the main goal of accommodating the gathering space out front, in view of the cathedral and accessible to the rail line, but in actuality, this siting allows for much more. From within the building, this siting allows for a viewer, or speaker, at the front entrance way or on any one of the exterior terraces, to observe and address the large space. The courtyard out-front, set-back on the site, also allows for a natural gathering place for individuals as well as a high degree of exposure. In consideration of the time in which Terragni designed and built this building, one can imagine a fascist leader holding an assembly out front of the building, an impromptu rally or even the observation of an enemy of the state or questionable individual being brought into the headquarters by the fascist secret police. In siting the building in this way, Terragni employs the building as an instrument that is able to direct and control a population physically and mentally as prescribed by fascist ideology.
In addition to commanding the absolute obedience of the general populace to the fascist regime, control and obedience were also common dynamics within the fascist regime itself. Just as the design of the exterior of Terragni’s Casa del Fascio sought to embody the spirit of Mussolini’s glass house in which there would be “no hindrance, no barrier, no obstacle between the political leaders and the people” (Kirk, 2005, p.98), the internal organizational technique seems to follow a similar logic. In diagramming and analyzing the internal structure of the building it becomes evident that a high degree of glass serves in various applications throughout the interior floors in place of more opaque systems. As walls, room-dividers and even floors, glass is utilized to articulate space physically while having implications mentally. Spatially, a strong emphasis within the building is placed on communal spaces – a common characteristic of fascist ideology and of key importance to fascist governments in realizing goals and communal action (Hoppes et al., 2011). Furthermore, as action for the greater good and control over all elements of urban life are championed so highly by the Fascist government, such a high usage of glass can be thought to symbolize and enforce an understanding of control and surveillance within the regime. And from this state of constant supervision and communal work, the building itself regulates the actions of those within the building as much as it
“SPACE ACCOUNTS FOR ALL THINGS, YET CANNOT EVER BE FULLY KNOWN”
Through spatial analysis of the Casa del Fascio in Como, Italy, as designed by Giuseppe Terragni, evidence of the importance of some information over others are present. In simply observing the exterior and interior space, it is clearly presented that the materiality of the space was utilized to communicate uniformity, and does not consider any further information concerning texture, variation or unnecessary decoration. Another set of information that is important in this space is the organization and orientation of the rooms and open areas. At the outset it would seem that the rooms are placed around the exterior of the floor plates for simplicity and ease of accessibility, but in closer consideration, the rooms are found to be organized in terms of their function and user. Further investigation also yields evidence that the organization of the interior space champions aspects of openness and strong circulation with clear unobstructed views out onto the plazas and urban context, and less-so that of future variation.

When comparing the key sets of information that were considered in the design of the space of the Casa del Fascio, a strong parallel can be made to the spirit of the building, and to the cultural and political contexts of the time in which this building was built. The fascist regime operating in Como Italy during this building’s construction can be understood to champion certain sets of information over others as well. For example, although still a characteristic of Italian fascism, race and sex were not as strongly considered in terms of population rule, as they were in Nazi Germany fascism. In addition to this, Italian fascism considered the overall health of the populace and communal action to be of great importance, and were very concerned with capitalist prosperity and the regulation and obedience of the populace to the sovereign, more so than with a social class system (Hoppes et al., 2011).
As a key feature of fascism in Italy, the regulation of flows of information, actions and relationships in and amongst the general population were considered crucial to maintaining obedience and control. Control of the mass media and various communication technologies, as well as the creation of spaces that could also serve as communication devices, can be understood as a means by which the fascist regime was able to affect the populace in Como, Italy in their control of the visual and experiential conception of spaces (McDonough, 2004). As an architectural consequence of these desires and actions of the fascist regime, the material organization of the Casa del Fascio strongly reflects fascist ideologies, and also acts as a vehicle for their communication. Moreover, the materiality of the space communicates important meanings to the populace at varying levels and to varying degrees; from a one to one level where messages are communicated that directly affect the individual pedestrian, all the way up to mass indoctrination and censorship on a large scale, built form can offer pre-specified readings. Some of the various aspects of fascist ideology that are communicated can be identified in the engagement of the population from a level in which there is a false sense of openness and invitation – as demonstrated by the ground floor level windows of the building that are clear glass and offer views straight into the interior courtyard, up to the large, uniform white marble surface that was originally designed to feature full scale images and messages in accordance with fascist politics and prominent party leaders. As “social processes and relationships are integral to the function and creation of the city (McDonough, 2004), the importance of the populace accepting desired information and being surrounded by an environment that upholds such information was crucial to fascist control.
In consideration of the spatial organizations of both the exterior and interior spaces of the Casa del Fascio, the space appears to follow a rhythm of open and closed forms defined by the open loggia and solid surfaces. The obvious ordering of the space and relationship between interior and exterior is far more fixed and homogenous than the perceived variability and apparent flexibility that its plan and elevation suggest. Furthermore, closer observation of the space reveals a pattern of definite beginnings and ends and differentiation between top and bottom - common to textile diagrammatics such as crochet. In this sense, the striated nature of the space is directly “tied to order and to the notion of the sovereign” (Deleuze, G., F. Guttari, 1987), and in its spatiality, further supports fascist ideology and the fascist political model.
Works Cited


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