

Building, furniture design and the decorative arts collaborate to embody Fascist political values and mass identity in an icon of modern architecture.

Furnishing the Fascist interior: Giuseppe Terragni, Mario Radice and the Casa del Fascio

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*The struggles, conquests, and responsibility for victory contributed a mystical beauty to the humble headquarters, where enthusiasm for the Duce and the heroic blood sacrificed by the enlisted were often the greatest source of comfort and the most poetic “furnishing”.*¹

The political values of Benito Mussolini’s Fascist regime resonated throughout the architecture and furnishings of Giuseppe Terragni’s Casa del Fascio (1932-36) in Como [1].² Every physical detail and spatial relationship in this building is invested with political symbolism. The building represents an example of interwar modernism in which architecture and furnishings were considered as an integral whole, both by the architect – whose architecture operated in a middle register between

the scales of furniture and urbanism – and by collaborating artists, for whom constructs and installations utilising photomontage acted as modernist interpretations of the traditional media of fresco, bas-relief and mosaic. Furnishings – including furniture, installations and plastic arts – played an integral role in fostering three recurrent themes throughout Terragni’s project: establishing the symbolic presence of the Duce; representing the political values of the Party through the use of materials and formal relationships; and constructing a uniquely Fascist identity, stressing national (rather than regional) allegiances and emphasising the formation and exploitation of a mass identity for the public. This essay considers how these three themes are physically manifested in the building’s most important interior spaces.



¹ Giuseppe Terragni, Casa del Fascio, Como, 1932–36. 35/36 (October 1936)

Mass identity

The Casa del Fascio gave concrete expression to the regime's interest in forming and politicising the masses [2]. As Terragni wrote, 'The moving quality of the work is no longer the rhetorical figure with spade or pick on his shoulder and the sun sinking behind him. It resides rather in acknowledging the thousands and thousands of black-shirted citizens amassed in front of the Casa del Fascio to hear the voice of their leader announce to Italians and foreigners the advent of Empire'.³ Terragni was a leading figure in the intellectual circle that produced the journal *Quadrante* (1933–36). In the October 1936 double issue dedicated to the building, he illustrated this passage with a full-page

photomontage depicting the masses standing before the Casa del Fascio, listening to a broadcast of Mussolini's announcement that the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, had been seized on 5 May 1936.⁴ Formally, Terragni represented the militarisation of the mobilised citizenry with a rank of glass doors through which the masses were to enter the building [3]. The 18 mechanically-operated glass doors opened and closed in soldierly unison at the push of a button. The crowd then entered the main space of public assembly, the *sala per adunate* (assembly hall), where banks of floodlights would illuminate them like parading troops [4]. To the left of the entry the *sacrario* – dedicated to the four Comaschi Fascists who had died in the seizure of power – repeated the



Fascist roll-call, 'presente', a participatory chant so familiar as to elicit an audible response from the reader [5]. Such visceral cues, which ordered the movement of one's body through space and triggered memories of mass spectacle, assured the Fascist citizen of a collective and martial experience by the mere act of entering the building, even when alone.

Just as important as the image of the assembled masses in front of the building was the physical transparency which linked the piazza dell'Impero and the two-storey *sala per adunate* – the two main sites for political assemblies – metaphorically linking the populace with the Party.⁵ The glass doors which granted entry to the building rendered the threshold between the two spaces fully transparent, while the *sala per adunate*'s opaque north and south boundaries (comprising offices and services) served to emphasise the visual and processional relationship between the hall and the piazza. This formal relationship reflected Terragni's (and most Rationalists') obsession with Mussolini's metaphorical characterisation of Fascism's political transparency. 'It was necessary,' wrote Terragni:

'to study possible access to this vast space by flanked rows of Fascists and the public for big assemblies, thus eliminating any break in continuity between indoors and outdoors so that a leader can speak to his followers assembled inside and still be heard by the masses gathered

*in the plaza. Thus Mussolini's concept of fascism as a glass house into which everyone can peer gives rise to this interpretation [...]: no obstacles, no barriers, nothing between the political leader and his people.'*⁶

On the interior, the visual relationship between the *sala per adunate* and the *direttorio* (boardroom) on the floor above reflected Terragni's earnest belief that the building's transparency would foster a party leadership more responsive to the populace. 'This physical proximity to the people,' he wrote, 'presupposes that the public can comfortably approach the building housing the directors and commanders of this advanced society' [6].⁷ And at the more intimate scale of the custom-designed furniture, Terragni's emphasis on a more delicate tectonics ensured that there were no heavy desks to hide behind. 'The predominant concept in this Casa del Fascio is visibility, with an instinctive verification between public and Federation employees' [7].⁸

Terragni also sought to use the decorative arts to project the regime's political values and foster popular participation in the Fascist project. He commissioned⁹ his long-time friend (and sometime collaborator) Mario Radice to design a series of didactic and rhetorical installations in the building's principal public spaces, the *sala per adunate* and the *direttorio* [8].¹⁰ Terragni designed ideologically-charged installations for the most important offices, those of the *segretario federale* (Fascist party secretary)



2 Photomontage of rally on 5 June 1936

3 The building's front doors opened at the push of a button

4 The *sala per adunate* (meeting hall)

5 The *sacrario* dedicated to Como's fallen Fascists

6 Views into the *sala per direttorio* (boardroom) from the *sala per adunate*



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and the *fascio* (the local party chapter), which are stacked vertically above the *sacrario* and create a sequence of secular reliquaries extolling the *fascio*'s relationship to the national Fascist party (see below). Radice decorated the *sala per adunate* with abstract paintings, inscriptions and a photographic effigy of Mussolini, mounted on glass [9]. Throughout the building, Radice and Terragni's work conflated party and state history, playing the propagandist role of controlling the transmission and retelling of recent events, particularly the March on Rome and the invasion of Ethiopia. The installations also placed special emphasis on Como's role in the Fascist ascent, linking local and national identity as part of the

regime's project of forging a unified Italian identity to supplant the country's traditionally regional character.

Mussolini ever-present

Numerous photographs of Mussolini throughout the Casa del Fascio served as the most overt means of establishing his symbolic presence, as well as reinforcing his popular representation in a variety of guises: war hero, statesman, military leader, journalist, and so on. His helmeted visage commanded the *sala per adunate* [9], his erect stance presided in uniform over meetings of the *direttorio* [8] and his tailored bust kept watch over the *segretario*



- 7 Office of the segretario federale
- 8 The sala per direttorio
- 9 Blackshirts assembled in the sala per adunate. The photograph of Mussolini is mounted between two sheets of tempered crystal

federale's shoulder [7]. Terragni and Radice used only photographic representations of Mussolini, emphasising the continuity between modernism (expressed through the techniques of mechanical reproduction) and tradition (represented by the genre of portraiture) in the visual arts.¹¹ Radice similarly spoke to modern and traditional concerns with his simultaneous use of figuration and geometric abstraction in the building's installations, and he exploited the dialectic of traditional media/modern materials in frescoes and bas-reliefs executed in concrete, often hovering in front of a wall on a light steel frame.¹²

The Duce's writings and pronouncements were inscribed and painted on Radice's installations in the sala per adunate and the direttorio, so that the building's walls would literally echo with his words, playing on the public's familiarity with his speeches through the new medium of radio.¹³ Radice carved the Fascist motto 'Order Authority Justice' through a four-metre slab of Musso marble, standing behind the glass-mounted portrait in the sala per adunate.¹⁴ The balconies facing piazza dell'Impero, which took the place of the customary arrenario (rostrum), were an index of the great orator's authority [1].¹⁵

The subtlest manifestation of the absent dictator took place beneath the surface of the direttorio's conference table. Terragni's drawings for the table, as published in *Quadrante*, show an unrealised footrest at the end of the table occupied by the segretario federale. But at the head of the table no corresponding footrest was to be provided. Along with the absence of a chair in front of the photomechanically-etched marble figure of Mussolini, the table's asymmetry reserved a place for the Duce.¹⁶

Materiality and ideology

A thin sheet of crystal covered the conference table's thick, polished rosewood surface [8].¹⁷ Chromed legs of white copper (an alloy of copper, zinc and nickel) supported the top, and were braced below by round aluminium tubes, which doubled as footrests.¹⁸ The drawings reproduced in *Quadrante* show two square figures in the table top which do not appear in the realised design. It is not known what these squares (which appear only in the plan, not in the elevations) represented but, given their similarity in scale and proportion to a series of vitrines in the office of the fascio, it is quite possible that they were intended as shallow display cases cut into the wood, which would exhibit political relics beneath the glass surface of the table.¹⁹ The segretario federale's desk was made of the same materials, while other desks had writing surfaces of opalescent crystal in white, grey, green and black. Because of their rich wood substrates, the glazed tops of the desks and tables reflected light but did not transmit views, much like Terragni's sophisticated use of reflective finishes throughout the building, which served to direct and magnify specific visual relationships.²⁰

The Casa del Fascio and its furnishings employed materials carefully chosen to symbolise the political values of the Party, fluctuating between the evocation of the classical past and an enthusiastic embrace of modernity. Fascism's self-identification with the Roman Empire found material expression in Terragni's use of marble revetments to clad an expressed – if not exposed – concrete structure. The Casa del Fascio's construction coincided with Mussolini's increasing self-identification with Augustus, the first Roman emperor, and to Terragni the structure's 'classical' proportions and material palette emphasised this historical association. He argued that the building's sumptuous finishes suggested the Imperial legacy of grand public buildings [10].²¹

On the other hand, new and advanced materials used throughout the Casa del Fascio reflected the political symbolism of modern technology, which represented both Fascism's self-promotion as a revolutionary movement and Mussolini's project of broadly expanding the nation's industrial capacity [11]. Terragni's furnishings employed stainless steel, aluminium and new alloys with anti-corrosive finishes, often provided by manufacturers who supplied the same materials to Italy's automotive and aeronautic industries.²² Non-corroding metals spoke simultaneously of the Fascist concern with a



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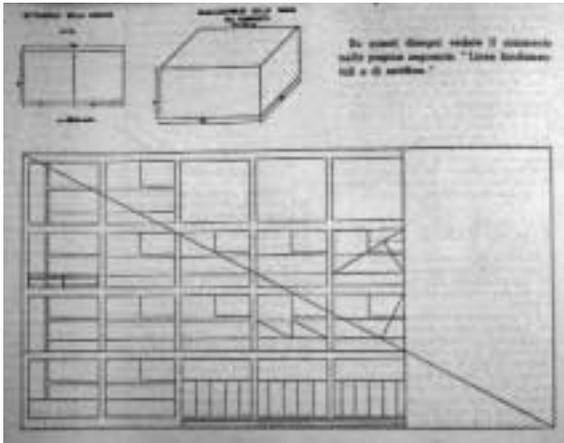
mechanised vision of modernity and the desire to represent the eternal with materials that – literally – would not wear the patina of time. Steel, in particular, found common use in Mussolini's rhetoric as a trope for combat and struggle – the dictator's fondness for the sport of fencing being well publicised. Aluminium fulfilled the regime's policy of economic autarchy by exploiting Italy's extensive bauxite deposits. Above all, the prominent use of glass in a wide variety of contexts signalled the technological advancement of the state. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the single piece of crystal – seven metres long, yet only one centimetre thick – used to cover the conference table in the *direttorio* [8].²³

A similar dialectic between classicism and modernity marks the use of materials and techniques in Radice and Terragni's installations and murals. Radice's abstract compositions in the *direttorio* are built up of thin layers of wood and plaster that straddle a line between fresco and bas-relief. Here, as in the *sala per adunate*, Radice collaged photographic – rather than painted – portraits of Mussolini onto substrates that included marble, concrete and glass. Terragni, too, chose a photographic portrait of the Duce for the office of the *segretario federale*. This prominent display of mechanical reproduction reinforced the architecture's emphasis on technological progress as consistent with, rather than divergent from, the classical tradition.

In the *direttorio*, Radice photomechanically etched Mussolini's image onto a sheet of marble, which he added to the shallow polychrome composition covering the room's east wall. He accompanied the portrait with a quote from the Duce, taken from *Il*

Popolo d'Italia. Radice also designed the mural on the opposite wall, where a quote from the 'Doctrine of Fascism' (describing the party's role as organiser of every aspect of social life) and a stylised fasces reinforced the authority of the *segretario federale*, who sat before the fresco during board meetings. Together, the two richly decorated end walls contrasted sharply with the room's fully glazed lateral walls, one of which surveyed the adjacent *sala per adunate* from above.

Radice's paintings and installations also trace lines through space, manifesting the *tracées regulateurs* of Terragni's half-classical, half-Corbusian geometry [12]. These lines would otherwise be restricted to the printed page, and represent the building's underlying geometric order. Radice's wife, Rosetta, taught mathematics and often discussed the contemporary work of Matila Ghyka with the local Rationalist circle.²⁴ Ghyka's 1931 book on the golden section, *Le nombre d'or*, included the chapter 'Les canons géométriques dans l'art méditerranéen', which Terragni read as a way to link modern architecture to classical precedent without recourse to ornamentation.²⁵ The golden section was particularly important to Terragni's work, and the architect's *relazione* includes detailed descriptions of the proportional relationships underlying the Casa del Fascio's sophisticated composition.²⁶ So significant were these relationships that Terragni varied the thickness of the concrete's cladding to maintain consistent finished dimensions throughout the building, even as the columns decreased in size at the upper storeys.²⁷ Geometric proportions played as large a role as structural engineering in dimensioning the building's concrete frame.



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- 10 The main stair is finished in marble, glass block and tempered crystal
- 11 Rear stair glazing
- 12 Diagram illustrating the building's regulating geometry

- 13 Plan of Como. The Casa del Fascio is the dark square to the far right, opposite the cathedral
- 14 Construction photographs

Indeed the Casa del Fascio's structure was one of its most important formal elements, acting as an organisational matrix which orders the interior spaces and projects their interrelationships onto the building's highly abstract facades. Its prominent grid represented both the abstract ideal from which the Rationalists took their name, and the gridded street pattern which reflects Como's Roman origins [13]. *Quadrante* emphasised the relationship between the grid plan of Como and the concrete structure by juxtaposing two facing pages (6 and 7) in which the former displayed two images of the city (a map and an aerial view) and a plan depicting the Casa del Fascio's relationship to its historical context, while the latter presented seven photographs of the building's concrete frame during construction [14].²⁸ Engineer Renato Uslenghi designed the reinforced-concrete structure,²⁹ whose materiality also recalled the Roman legacy of structural engineering and material innovation. Sergio Poretti has argued that, in response to the international sanctions following the 1935 Ethiopian invasion, the Casa del Fascio's concrete frame came to symbolise a construction technology fully consonant with the requirements of the government's autarchy policy, while earlier, concrete had represented an example of an industry integrated within the corporatist economy.³⁰ This analysis follows Terragni's own account of the material's symbolic role – which included the Roman tradition of concrete structures clad in stone – but fails to acknowledge the political expediency of such claims. The League of Nations sanctions postdate the structural frame's erection, and so the architect's claim of autarchic value seems opportunistic, at the very least.



15 Office of the *segretario federale*. The vitrine encasing the 'bare' column is to the centre of the room

16 View from the office of the *segretario federale*

Much as Terragni equated the physical transparency of glass with the political transparency of Fascism, he argued for a 'moral' dimension of 'honestly revealing the structural elements'.³¹ Yet Terragni did not reveal the concrete frame by leaving it exposed. While there are important practical reasons for this choice, his intention was, above all, symbolic. 'If,' he explained, 'for the functional and utilitarian purposes of an office building a plaster wall is as good as a marble wall, for the representational nature of a building only the marble wall will do'.³² He assigned different marbles to various spaces depending on their hierarchical importance.³³

On the interior, Terragni clad the concrete with several varieties of stone, as well as glass and plaster. He carefully positioned reflective, transparent and matte-finished surfaces to emphasise specific visual relationships, such as that between the *sala per adunate* and the piazza. Terragni clad the entry vestibule's ceiling, floor and certain column faces with reflective marble and other materials, which dematerialise the building's structure and repeatedly mirror the view of the piazza when seen from the *sala per adunate*. The care with which Terragni selected materials can also be seen in the building's exterior cladding, where he employed 3016m² of Botticino *calcare* after visiting marble quarries in Carrara and Musso.³⁴ Remarkably, Terragni left one column bare;³⁵ this column – in the *segretario federale's* office – is partially encased within a glass vitrine displaying the fascio's *labarum* [15].³⁶

The *segretario federale* was the leader of the *fascio*, and his office reflected his status as Como's most important Fascist citizen.³⁷ Among the room's furnishings was the 'glass and black granite shrine'³⁸ exhibiting the *fascio's* *labarum* and other artefacts evoking the display of political relics at the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista. The vitrine framed the unplastered column, as if displaying the construction of the building itself as an object of political significance.

Continuities

Behind the *segretario federale's* elaborate glass-topped desk, Terragni installed an open framework of steel which carried a series of concrete panels imprinted with images and inscriptions, 'dominated,' as he wrote, 'by an evocative portrait of the Duce on the end wall which commands the attention of the visitor' [7].³⁹ Terragni's installation presented a graphic history of the Fascist party, and emphasised the link between the mobilised masses and a charismatic leader, in the room where the *segretario federale* received his most important guests. One floor above his office (and two storeys above the *sacrario*) Terragni designed a series of glass and steel display cases and a wall-mounted mural installation that transformed the office into a shrine to Luigi (Gigi) Maino, the recently deceased founder of the Como *fascio*.

Images published in *Quadrante* emphasised and extended the representation of Mussolini's presence in Radice's and Terragni's installations. Ico Parisi's iconic photograph of the *segretario federale's* office includes two Olivetti typewriters as representations of the Duce, in his guise as a journalist and founder of *Il Popolo d'Italia* [16].⁴⁰ His portrait on the wall is just visible to the right, as is its reflection in the glass surface of the desk.

Parisi's photograph also emphasises the continuity Terragni sought to draw between Rationalism and past epochs of Italian architecture. Filippo Juvarra's baroque dome (c.1730) atop the duomo dominates the *segretario federale's* window, while its reflection in his desk draws the older building into the Casa del Fascio, echoing the importance of historical precedent in Rationalist discourse. The immediacy of the visual relationship between the seats of church and party power is made possible by the picture's low vantage point, which uses the desk surface to edit out the middle ground of the piazza to pull the more distant cathedral into the foreground. The photograph envelops one typewriter within the duomo's apse and its reflection, as though poetically conflating the sites of sacred and secular scripture.⁴¹ Terragni took similar care in framing Como's mountainous landscape, both from within the building and when viewed from the piazza. But the



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most eloquent of elements in this visual allegory of Fascist rhetoric is the single exterior column visible outside the *segretario federale's* office. As a free-standing pier it illustrates the separation of structure and enclosure so important to Terragni's modernism, while the prominent seam in its revetment (an element commonly airbrushed out of *Quadrante's* illustrations) demonstrates the relationship between concrete structure and marble cladding that Terragni cited as a direct link to the traditions of Roman construction.

Radice's and Terragni's murals and installations reinforced the building's representational themes throughout its most important spaces. Terragni's glass and steel vitrines in the offices of the *segretario federale* and the *fascio* served as secular reliquaries, displaying objects associated with the *fascio* and its relationship to the national party. Many of Radice's works featured lengthy, bombastic inscriptions of Mussolini's pronouncements, which Terragni described (in reference to the *direttorio*) as 'a warning for the servants of Fascism in a position of command' [8].⁴² The inscriptions of the Duce's speeches and writings were printed in a heroic, fully capitalised typography that echoed his oratorical style, evoked Roman epigraphs, and almost added an aural component to the celebration of the dictator. The quotations reinforced the programmatic functions of the spaces they served and monumentalised aphorisms that appeared in such ideologically significant venues as the 'Doctrine of Fascism' and *Il Popolo d'Italia*.⁴³ The murals and installations served

three key political roles: they sought to educate each successive generation of Comaschi about the sacrifices of their ancestors, to remind those who had made the pilgrimage to Rome of the experience of the exhibition of the Fascist revolution, and to prevent the party functionaries working in the building from falling into bureaucratic complacency.

Anti-sedentary chairs

Terragni was particularly adamant that the building, furnishings and decorations ward off bureaucratic ossification, the *bête noire* of Fascism's 'continuous revolution'. 'A Casa del Fascio,' he wrote, 'is not the place for long hours in vast or commodious waiting rooms. There is no need for bureaucracy.'⁴⁴ Bureaucracy would have to be avoided despite the building's administrative and organisational functions, in order to promote the Party's continual self-renovation: 'the "changing of the guard" is imaginable only in a severe and anti-bureaucratic atmosphere'.⁴⁵

Terragni's furniture designs address this dilemma by instructing their users' behaviour.⁴⁶ The Lariana side chair [17] is comfortably elastic, yet its wooden seat and back are detailed in such a way as to discourage slouching or lounging, lest the sitter slip between the back and seat. This experiential quality literally rectifies the user's carriage, while the Lariana's attenuated verticality formally models the erect posture proper to 'the servants of Fascism'. The Benita armchair [18] presents a more vexing



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17 Lariana chair

18 Benita chair

problem. Intended as a leather-upholstered, cushioned easy chair suitable for important Party officials, the Benita had to balance luxuriousness against the Fascist insistence on action over reflection, and struggle instead of comfort. To this end, Terragni diverged from prominent modern

precedents in seating design by bending the chair's metal frame to isolate the seat from the back. The seat's separate bearing gives it a more powerful reaction to the sitter's weight, compared with earlier designs by Marcel Breuer and Mart Stam. As with the Lariana, the springiness of the coiled tubing propels the sitter upward and outward, ready for action. 'Fascism was not the nursling of a doctrine previously drafted at a desk,' Mussolini had already declared, 'it was born of the need of action, and was action.'⁴⁷

In designing the furniture for the Casa del Fascio, Terragni showed a desire to adapt the materials and syntax of modern furniture while distancing it from its origins in the bourgeois salon. The building and its furnishings share open and expressed structural frameworks and unornamented surfaces of sumptuous materials; they are simultaneously functional and expressive of functionality. Much like other modern furniture designs, Terragni's chairs, desks and tables used contrasting materials to differentiate between their structural armatures and their finished surfaces. This dialectic between the metal supports and the sitting or writing surfaces of glass, wood and leather mirrored modern architecture's clear distinction between structural frame and enclosing surface, a dialectic manifested in the principal facade of (and indeed throughout) the Casa del Fascio. Similarly, Radice and Terragni's installations often excised the bas-relief and fresco from their traditional place on (or in) the building's walls, separating the representational surfaces of the visual arts from the enclosing surfaces of the architecture, a distinction maintained by light steel frames of a dimension similar to the furniture's metal supports.⁴⁸ The furniture, decorative arts and architecture share a sculptural sensibility that contrasts delicacy with solidity, transparency with opacity, and sumptuousness with austerity.

While the polished surfaces of the building's interior reflect Terragni's belief that the Party headquarters should be appropriately luxurious, they did not invite one's touch in the same way as the Benita's leather cushions. Terragni's furniture thus does something his architecture cannot do – it expresses sensuality. The sinuous lines of the Benita and Lariana chairs curve through the crystalline atmosphere of the Casa del Fascio, dancing like serpents against the orthogonal backdrop of the building's rigid geometry. Terragni's seating designs comprise the most intimately sensuous moments in a building whose rich experiential qualities are essential to its function as a place of ritual participation in the rites of fascism.

Ritual and memory

Of all the places in which the Casa del Fascio celebrated the rituals of Fascism, the most solemn was the *sacrario*, a secular shrine to the four Como natives who died in the Fascist seizure of power in 1922 [5]. Terragni called the *sacrario* 'the spiritual and ceremonial centre of the entire building', and located it in a processional intersection oriented toward both the front entry and the main stair,

where it greeted every visitor entering or exiting the Casa del Fascio. ‘The black marble ceiling in the foyer,’ Terragni testified, ‘is an important decorative element and prepares the visitor for the religious devotion of the sanctuary made of three monolithic red granite walls on the left side of the foyer.’⁴⁹ The *sacrario*’s massiveness, ‘which may recall the primitive religious or regal constructions of ancient Mycene or Egypt’,⁵⁰ contrasted with the graceful tectonics that characterise the rest of the building. This site of personal and collective remembrance resembled an abstract chapel and anchored the light-filled ‘house of glass’ with a dark, lithic core.

Like Radice and Terragni’s installations, the *sacrario* was intended as a permanent memento of the extraordinary spectacle of the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista (Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution).⁵¹ Fascism’s decennial celebration had attracted nearly four million visitors to Rome’s Palazzo degli Esposizioni over the course of two years, beginning in 1932, and was intended (by 1934) to be a permanent part of the Party’s new Rome headquarters, the Palazzo del Littorio (Lictorial Palace). All of the rooms at the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista displayed relics and souvenirs submitted by citizens from throughout the country. Terragni designed one of its most memorable spaces, a room dedicated to the nine months immediately preceding the Fascist seizure of power in October 1922 [19].⁵² Called *Sala O*, Terragni’s design featured large photomontages of massed crowds and disembodied hands raised in the Fascist salute. Similar images of mass demonstrations appear in the Casa del Fascio (especially Terragni’s didactic installation behind the *segretario federale*’s desk) and in the most memorable image reproduced in the *Quadrante* monographical issue: the photomontage of the ‘oceanic’⁵³ crowd assembled for the proclamation of empire, broadcast through loudspeakers on *case del fascio* throughout the country, and quoted on the panels lining the walls of the *sala per adunate*. The dynamism of *Sala O*, along with its large-scale use of photomechanical reproduction, displays the influence of Russian Constructivism, particularly the work of El Lissitzky and Gustav Klutis. The exhibition culminated in Adalberto Libera and Antonio Valente’s solemn *Sacrario dei Martiri* (Room of Martyrs), a martyrium centred on an enormous metal crucifix inscribed ‘PER LA PATRIA IMMORTALE’ (‘for the immortal fatherland’) [20]. The *Sala dei Martiri* frequently appeared in the popular press – like Libera and Mario De Renzi’s enormous fasces constructed in front of the exhibition hall, it served as an iconic image of the exhibition – and Terragni mounted a photograph of the room into the installation behind the *segretario federale*’s desk.

The Casa del Fascio related to the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista much like the city’s Duomo did to the Vatican. If the exhibition and its anticipated home in the Palazzo del Littorio comprised the new pilgrimage sites at the heart of the secular religion of Fascism, then the Casa del Fascio was the provincial nexus for commemorating Como’s connection to the



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19 Giuseppe Terragni, *Sala O* of the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista, Rome, 1932

20 Adalberto Libera and Antonio Valente, ‘Sacrario dei Martiri’ of the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista, Rome, 1932

Fascist National Party. Even their addresses, on Rome's via dell'Impero and Como's piazza dell'Impero, bespoke this association. The Casa del Fascio's installations and *sacrario* evoked the power and memory of the exhibition in Rome as part of a broad effort to shape and instill a shared Fascist identity, as mandated by the regime.

At the time of its completion, the building was promoted by its partisans as the seminal achievement of Italian Rationalism, and its richly symbolic architecture and furnishings were

presented as a model for future construction.

Terragni's building is emblematic of a movement that witnessed intense collaboration between architecture and the decorative arts, and which saw architects engage the urban context with the new language of international modernism. From the microcosmic scale of furniture to the macrocosmic scale of the metropolis, the Casa del Fascio inculcated the citizenry of Como with the political values of the Party and modelled a new mass identity, mobilised in service to an ever-present Duce.

Notes

- Giuseppe Terragni, 'La costruzione della Casa del Fascio di Como', *Quadrante*, 35/36 (October 1936), 5–27. Terragni's *relazione*, or account of the building's design and construction, appears in translation in Thomas Schumacher, *Surface and Symbol: Giuseppe Terragni and the Architecture of Italian Rationalism*, trans. by Debra Dolinski (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991). All quotes from Terragni's *relazione* are taken from *Surface and Symbol*.
- This article is indebted to numerous writings that have considered the political symbolism of the Casa del Fascio, including Schumacher, *Surface and Symbol*. A landmark revision of the ideological content of Terragni's work can be found in Diane Ghirardo, 'Italian Architects and Fascist Politics: An Evaluation of the Rationalist's Role in Regime Building', *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 39, No. 2. (May 1980), pp. 109–27. In addition to Schumacher's important study of Terragni, significant analyses of the architect's work are collected in Giorgio Ciucci, ed., *Giuseppe Terragni: Opera completa* (Milan: Electa, 1996). Richard Etlin presents an extensive and well-researched analysis of the Casa del Fascio in Richard Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture, 1890–1940* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991): pp. 377–568.
- Terragni, p. 151.
- Quadrante*, 35/36 (October 1936), p. 19. The photograph has been manipulated to slightly augment the crowd and, more tellingly, to remove an enormous banner with Mussolini's portrait from the blank wall facing the piazza [Fig. 2].
- The most spectacular venue for mass rallies was in the piazza dell'Impero in front of the Casa del Fascio. Balconies on the upper three storeys accommodated the party officials (*gerarchi*) whose addresses to the assembled masses were modelled on those of Mussolini. Terragni planned the building to host three scales of rallies, ranging from smaller audiences within the atrium to enormous crowds filling the piazza between the Casa del Fascio and the Duomo. Schumacher, pp. 159–60.
- Terragni, p. 143.
- Terragni continued, 'The fact of seeing what goes on inside is the highest distinction for a Casa constructed for the people, as opposed to a palace, a barracks, or a bank'. Terragni, p. 143.
- Terragni, p. 147.
- Terragni formally invited Radice in a letter of 11 March 1935, but Radice was already at work on the decorations in 1934. Radice received the official commission to execute the work in February 1936, at which point he presented the mayor (but not the *segretario federale*, it seems) with his written *relazione*, copies of the designs and a cost estimate for the work. Luciano Caramel, *Radice: catalogo generale* (Milan: Electa, 2002), p. 119.
- Radice had earlier collaborated with Terragni and a team of architects from Como on the House for an Artist on a Lake, a temporary pavilion built at the 1933 Milan Triennale. Radice contributed two figurative frescoes. Luciano Caramel argues that Radice was strangely resistant to abstraction until his work on the Casa del Fascio. Caramel, pp. 12–13.
- Painter and designer Marcello Nizzoli, another member of the *Quadrante* circle who had collaborated on the House on a Lake for an Artist at the 1933 Triennale, prepared two designs for a series of exterior decorations facing the piazza dell'Impero, with Terragni and historian Enrico Arrigotti. Comprising photomontages printed on enamelled steel panels, the decorations featured portraits of Mussolini and images representing Fascist party history. One set of panels was executed, but never installed, and is now displayed at the Musei Civici in Como. See Diane Ghirardo, 'Politics of a Masterpiece: The Vicenda of the Decoration of the Facade of the Casa del Fascio, Como, 1936–39', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (September 1980), 466–78.
- Dennis Doordan notes other instances of a dialectic between modernity and tradition at the Casa del Fascio, including the idiosyncratic fenestration of the main (west) facade. Dennis Doordan, *Building Modern Italy: Italian Architecture, 1914–1936* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), pp. 129–42. See also Etlin.
- Philip V. Cannistraro, 'Radio in Fascist Italy', *Journal of European Studies*, 2 (1972). Radios were distributed to civic centres throughout the country to encourage the public to listen to Mussolini's speeches, and as a tangible sign of the country's progressive modernisation.
- 'ORDINE AUTORITA GIUSTIZIA.' The marble slab measured 4200 x 1200 x 200mm, and was inscribed with 500mm high words. By the time Radice published his *relazione* about the interior decorations in *Quadrante*, Nizzoli had already designed a set of exterior decorations that included Mussolini's other motto, *credere, obbedire, combattere* (believe, obey, fight). Radice mounted the photograph of Mussolini – printed in indelible coloured inks on a thin sheet of metal – between two panels of Securit tempered crystal, measuring 1900 x 2100mm. Radice, p. 33, and Caramel, pp. 346–7.
- Terragni was part of a team that produced a premiated (but unrealised) design in the 1934

- competition for the Palazzo del Littorio, the Fascist Party's proposed headquarters in Rome, that featured an *arengario* jutting forth through a massive, porphyry-clad screen wall inscribed with lines recording isostatic forces in a manner meant to suggest the physical power of the Duce's oration. Schumacher, p. 180.
16. Schumacher has likened this relationship to the genre of Last Supper paintings, which metaphorically brought Christ into monastic refectories. Schumacher, p. 163.
 17. For the *direttorio*, Radice designed a large, sculptural ceiling light fixture whose dimensions (7000 x 3500mm) matched those of the table below, and was fabricated from black sheet metal, glass and neon. The fixture was installed after *Quadrante's* publication in October 1936, and was removed in the 1970s. Caramel, pp. 347–8.
 18. *Quadrante*, 35/36 (October 1936), p. 51.
 19. Centro Studi Giuseppe Terragni, Como, drawing 23.033.F2.D.L.
 20. I am particularly indebted to Lucy Maulsby for her observations on the Casa del Fascio's carefully staged visual relationships.
 21. The theme of luxurious cladding materials as a modern interpretation of traditional construction techniques was taken up in the 1926–27 Gruppo 7 manifesto, which Terragni co-authored. In the 1934 competition project for the Palazzo del Littorio, Terragni's team sought to represent the Imperial past and future of Rome in part through the prominent use of porphyry, a material associated with the Roman conquest of Egypt. Schumacher, p. 183.
 22. Rafaella Crespi notes that Terragni constantly looked to foreign developments in materials research. In the margins of one of his sketches related to the Casa del Fascio, Terragni wrote, 'nuovo materiale americano da chiedere a Nizzoli', which Crespi believes referred to Formica, which was at that point unknown in Italy. Rafaella Crespi, *Giuseppe Terragni Designer* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1983), p. 48.
 23. 'Why not recall the workers', and my, excited exultations when those exemplary sheets of thick crystal were set into the stair parapet, or the truly incredible crystal which is the table surface in the Director's salon? Or when we opened the main entry door for the first time by simply pushing a button?', Terragni, pp. 150–1.
 24. Silvia Danesi, 'Aporie dell'architettura italiana in perioda fascista – mediterraneità e purismo', *Il Razionalismo e L'Architettura In Italia Durante il Fascismo* (Venice: Biennale di Venezia, 1976), p. 24. Luciano Caramel expands on Rosetta Radice's interest in Glyka in Luciano Caramel, *Radice: catalogo generale*.
 25. Danesi. Danesi refers to the 1935 (6th) edition of Glyka's text, but the chapter on geometry in Mediterranean art was already included in the original 1931 edition. Glyka, *Le nombre d'or, rites et rythmes pythagoriciens dans le développement de la civilisation occidentale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1931).
 26. Reyner Banham described the west (principal) facade as 'a monumental diagram of the rules of *divina proporzione* immortalised in marble'. Reyner Banham, *The Age of the Masters, A Personal View of Modern Architecture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 93. Quoted in Thomas Schumacher, *Giuseppe Terragni: Casa del Fascio, Como, Italy, 1932–36; Asilo Infantile Antonio Sant'Elia, Como, Italy, 1936–37* (Tokyo: A. D. A. Edita Tokyo, 1994), unpaginated.
 27. Centro Studi Giuseppe Terragni, drawing 23.26.E1.D.L. The ground floor concrete columns are 400mm square, reducing to 350mm on the *primo piano* and 300mm on the upper floors, while the perimeter piers are rectangular in plan. The columns maintain a consistent finished dimension by varying the thickness of their stone or plaster revetment.
 28. See also Etlin, pp. 470–1.
 29. Terragni, 149. Uslenghi had collaborated with Terragni and six others under the rubric CM8 (Piero Bottoni, Cesare Cattaneo, Luigi Dodi, Gabriele Giussani, Pietro Lingeri, and Mario Pucci) on the 1934 urban design competition for Como.
 30. Sergio Poretti, *La Casa del Fascio di Como* (Roma: Carocci, 1998), p. 51. Terragni made special mention of the companies that continued to provide materials and manufactured elements throughout the 'economic siege' of the League of Nations sanctions. Terragni, p. 150.
 31. Terragni, 157. Elsewhere he wrote, "Fascism is a glass house", Il Duce declares, indicating and marking in the figurative sense the organic, clear, and honest qualities of the construction'. Terragni, p. 153.
 32. Terragni, pp. 144–145.
 33. Terragni, 'I marmi', *Quadrante*, 35/36 (October 1936), p. 51.
 34. Poretti, p. 60.
 35. Centro Studi Giuseppe Terragni, drawing 23.146.C8.D.L.
 36. A labarum was a banner that carried the insignia of a Fascist organisation, recalling the military standards carried in processions in front of Roman emperors.
 37. For a detailed description of the strained relationship between Terragni and Ernesto Carugati, the *segretario federale* of the *Como fascio*, see Ghirardo, 'Politics of a Masterpiece'.
 38. Terragni, p. 157.
 39. Ibid.
 40. One of the typewriters was mounted into the image for publication, possibly in gratitude for Olivetti's support of *Quadrante*. The model shown is Olivetti's first portable typewriter, the MP1, designed by engineer Aldo Magnelli and first produced in 1932.
 41. Kenneth Frampton offers a provocative analysis of this relationship. Kenneth Frampton, 'Photography and its Influence on Architecture' *Perspecta*, no. 22 (1986), 38–41.
 42. Terragni, p. 158. This specific text, on the main mural in the *direttorio*, was taken from the inaugural issue of *Il Popolo d'Italia*, founded by Mussolini on 15 November 1914. Mario Radice, 'Le decorazioni', *Quadrante* 35/36 (October 1936), p. 33.
 43. The mural on the rear (west) wall of the *direttorio* features a quote from the 'Doctrine of Fascism', written by philosopher Giovanni Gentile but published above Mussolini's signature in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* (1932).
 44. Terragni, p. 147. Terragni's language evokes a passage from the 'Doctrine of Fascism', 'Therefore life, as conceived of by the Fascist, is serious, austere, and religious; all its manifestations are poised in a world sustained by moral forces and subject to spiritual responsibilities. The Fascist disdains an "easy" life.'
 45. 'A party headquarters such as this has the job of organization, of propaganda, and of political and social education. But it is not a bureaucratic structure, a handsome and commodious palazzo for offices.' Terragni, p. 152.
 46. Terragni, p. 153.
 47. Terragni furnished his next major project, the Sant'Elia nursery school (1934–37), with toddler-scaled versions of the Lariana chair (teachers used the adult model, while the school's director merited the Benita arm chair).

- 'The Asilo Sant'Elia is a glass house of learning,' writes Thomas Schumacher, 'just as the Casa del Fascio is a glass house of Fascism.' The process of instructing behaviour through furnishings and architecture was thus extended to the earliest years of the Fascist citizen's life. Schumacher, *Giuseppe Terragni: Casa del Fascio, Como, Italy, 1932–36; Asilo Infantile Antonio Sant'Elia, Como, Italy, 1936–37*.
48. An earlier example of an open spiral kind of self-springing chair (as opposed to the Breuer/Stam-type S-curve chairs) was designed by Gigi Chessa and Umberto Cuzzi for the Bar Fiorina (Torino, 1931–32). Anty Pansera, ed. *Flessibili Splendori: I mobili in tubolare metallico. Il caso Columbus* (Milan: Electa, 1998), p. 73.
49. Terragni, p. 157.
50. Terragni, 'I marmi', *Quadrante*, 35/36 (October 1936), p. 52.
51. On the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista, see Marla Stone, 'Staging Fascism: The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 28 (1993), pp. 215–43; Richard Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture, 1890–1940* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 407–17; Giorgio Ciucci, 'L' Autorappresentation del Fascismo: La Mostra del decennale della marcia du Roma', *Rassegna di Architettura* 10 (June 1982), pp. 48–55; Diane Ghirardo, 'Architects, Exhibitions and the Politics of Culture in Fascist Italy', *Journal of Architectural Education* 45, 2 (February 1992), 67–75; Libero Andreotti, 'The Aesthetics of War: The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution', *Journal of Architectural Education* 45, 2 (February 1992), 76–86; Jeffrey T. Schnapp, 'Epic Demonstrations', in Richard Golsan, ed., *Fascism Aesthetics and Culture* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992). The exhibition catalogue is Dino Alfieri and Luigi Freddi, *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista: Guida storica* (Rome: Partito Nazionale Fascista, 1933).
52. Caramel believes that Radice assisted Terragni and Nizzoli on their respective installations at the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista, based on a letter from Nizzoli conserved in the Radice archives. Caramel, p. 119.
53. Jeffrey Schnapp discusses the representation of massed crowds and their propagandistic importance in Jeffrey T. Schnapp, 'The Mass Panorama',

Modernism/modernity, 9, 2, pp. 243–81.
54. Schumacher, pp. 172–3.

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Dino Alfieri and Luigi Freddi, eds. *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista. Guida storica* (Rome: Partito Nazionale Fascista, 1933), 19–20

Biography

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