Before I begin, I would like to thank Ana Magalhaes, Luciano Migliaccio and Paolo Rusconi for the kind invitation to participate in this fascinating and important conference.
I want to begin by dedicating this lecture to my friend, Roberto Segre, one of those extraordinary Italians who shaped the discourse of Latin American architecture, and whose love of Brazil was quite profound.
The short-lived cultural journal *Quadrante* transformed the practice of architecture in fascist Italy. Between 1933 and 1936 the magazine agitated for an “architecture of the state” that would represent the values and aspirations of the fascist regime, and in so doing it changed the language with which architects and their clientele addressed the built environment. The journal sponsored the most detailed discussion of what should constitute a suitably “fascist architecture.” *Quadrante* rallied supporters and organized the most prominent practitioners and benefactors of Italian Rationalism into a coherent movement that advanced the cause of modern architecture in interwar Italy.
My research investigates the relationship between modern architecture and fascist political practices in Italy during Benito Mussolini's regime (1922-43). Rationalism, the Italian variant of the modern movement in architecture, was at once pluralistic and authoritarian, cosmopolitan and nationalistic, politically progressive and yet fully committed to the political program of Fascism. An examination of Quadrante in its social context helps explain the relationships between the political content of an architecture that promoted itself as the appropriate expression of Fascist policies, the cultural aspirations of an architecture that drew on contemporary developments in literature and the arts, and the international function of a journal that promoted Italian modernism to the rest of Europe while simultaneously exposing Italy to key developments across the Alps.
No group of architects in fascist Italy was more overtly concerned with architecture’s ability to represent the regime than the *Quadrante* circle. More than *Architettura*, *Casabella* or any other journal, *Quadrante* championed modern architecture as an explicitly fascist mode of construction, both endorsing fascism’s project of modernization and supporting the regime’s self-identification with the tradition of imperial and papal Rome. While the review was thoroughly political, its content was not reducible to mere propaganda. Its mission was also explicitly social. The journal endorsed the fascist state’s desire to structure comprehensively every aspect of social life, seeing architecture’s political content as ranging from its engagement of the metropolis and construction of a mass identity on the part of the public to its reflection of traditional rituals and patterns of everyday life.
The politics of Italian Rationalism was exceptional among the interwar movements in modern architecture, since most were associated with progressive or revolutionary politics on the Left. Rationalism was the only movement of modern architecture that sought to represent the political values of a fascist regime, and Italy, through both the state and the fascist party, provided official patronage for modern architecture at a level not equaled by any other country in the interwar period. Polemists from all camps saw architecture as part of a broader project of cultural renewal tied to the political program of fascism, and argued that architecture must represent the goals and values of the fascist regime. While exceptional, the case of a modern movement’s outspoken engagement with radical right-wing politics provides excellent insights into the (sometimes) authoritarian tendencies of international modernism and the opportunistic practices of many important modernists.
This overtly political vision of architecture was not always present in Italian modernism, however. The first writer to map out architecture’s explicitly ideological role was art critic and gallery owner Pietro Maria Bardi. In 1930, he began to advocate a “fascist architecture” in his column in the Milanese paper *L’Ambrosiano*, initiating a debate that would preoccupy Italian architects throughout the decade. In 1933, Bardi co-founded the journal *Quadrante* with novelist and playwright Massimo Bontempelli, a key intellectual supporter of the regime and member of the prestigious Reale Accademia d’Italia. For the next three years, *Quadrante* (based in Milan and Rome) would be the nexus for discussions linking the development of modern architecture to that of fascist politics in Italy.
In November 1933, six months after co-founding *Quadrante*, Bardi made his first trip to South America. He traveled to Buenos Aires, home to a large population of Italian émigrées, to mount an exhibition dedicated to modern architecture in Italy. Bardi’s mission had two purposes: he sought to publicize Italian modernism around the world, and he was interested in engaging Italians who had moved to Latin America as part of the fascist regime’s concern with expanding its global influence through diasporic communities. The exhibition was received enthusiastically by Argentine Italians, who wrote of the pride engendered by seeing works of architecture on par with those produced by other European nations. Bardi remained in South America for four months before returning to Italy, and the exhibition later traveled to Alexandria, Egypt, home to another émigrée community.
Called the *Mostra dell’architettura italiana d’oggi*, the exhibition comprised 36 photomontaged plates assembled by Bardi. The images were reproduced in an accompanying catalog published in Italian and English by the journal’s own imprint, Edizioni di Quadrante. The projects exhibited included examples of Italian Rationalist architecture designed by members of the *Quadrante* circle, including Giuseppe Terragni’s Novocomum building in Como, and Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini’s Villa Studio per un Artista, built at the 1933 Milan Triennale. Pier Luigi Nervi’s Florence stadium merited its own panel of photographs, and Guido Fiorini’s tensistruttura tower was juxtaposed against Antonio Sant’Elia’s seminal città nuova project (1914). Transportation infrastructure projects figured prominently in the exhibition, including the viaduct over the Oglio river between Milan and Brescia, the Gruppo Toscano’s Florence train station (1932-34), Luigi Vietti’s Andrea Doria maritime terminal in Genoa (1933-34), and even one of Mario Cereghini’s gas stations in Lecco.
Bardi celebrated the emerging role of steel in Italian construction with photographs of the Savigliano company’s large-scale works (such as Milan’s Centrale rail terminal), and highlighted the importance of electricity with photographs of power transformers at Marghera (near Venice) and the Casa Elettrica, built by Quadrante-circle Rationalists and sponsored by the Edison company in 1930. Other works displayed in the exhibition ranged from the iconic Fiat Lingotto factory (Giacomo Matte-Trucco, 1919-26) to the Rex ocean liner to the Savoia Marchetti seaplanes used in Italo Balbo’s mass-flights of the early 1930s. Many of these photos would appear in subsequent issues of Quadrante, as well as publications by members of the Quadrante circle.

The Mostra dell’Architettura Italiana d’oggi was inaugurated at the Museo de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires by Argentine President Augustín Pedro Justo, and the exhibition’s official patronage ensured it received ample media coverage. Bardi had intended to send the show to locations in Brazil, Uruguay and Chile before sending it to North America and around the Mediterranean. However, the exhibition appears to have only been reinstalled once, at the Casa del Fascio in Alexandria, Egypt, and it remains unclear why it wasn’t exhibited more broadly.
Nonetheless, Bardi’s missionary zeal proved attractive to South American audiences. The Italian critic was received enthusiastically in Sao Paulo en route to Argentina, and a Spanish translation of his book on Soviet Russia was published in Buenos Aires in 1934. To be fair, South American architects were already interested in Italy before Bardi’s visit. The Buenos Aires-based journal *Nuestra Arquitectura* contacted *Quadrante* architects Enrico Griffini, Eugenio Faludi and Piero Bottoni about publishing a house they built at the 1933 Milan Triennale, and Bardi found during his voyage that Griffini’s book, *Costruzione razionale della casa*, was already well-known and respected in the Argentine capital. Yet when Torinese architect Alberto Sartoris returned from an Argentine speaking tour that included eight lectures in 20 days, he credited Bardi with having laid the groundwork for South American interest in Italian modernism.
The importance of studying *Quadrante* stems from its seminal role in the politicization of Italian architecture, and thus my research focuses on the central role played by discourse—the web of discussion, debate, organization and provocation—in the development of Rationalism. More than any contemporary European publication, *Quadrante* dealt with the vexing question of how modern architecture could meet the regime's ideological need for formal representation. *Quadrante* offers a valuable case study in the complex interdependence of politics and cultural production.
Work designed by architects associated with *Quadrante* presents many clear examples of how Italians adapted international modern architecture to the political context of fascist Italy by emphasizing modernist tendencies which they saw as sympathetic to, or at least consistent with, the fascist regime’s rhetoric. Order, hierarchy, the importance of classical precedent, and technological innovation as a sign of industrial progress could all be readily exploited to give concrete form to abstract political values. …
The modernist conception of design as a process of problem solving at multiple scales became a total work of art that reinforced the fascist desire to infiltrate every sector of social life. Their support of “corporativist urbanism,” in particular, demonstrated the *Quadrante* circle’s belief that the formal concerns of Rationalism reflected the political order of fascism at the scale of the metropolis, the region and the nation.
Quadrante did not address the architectural implications of all of the period’s political controversies, however. Although deeply committed to improving social welfare, Quadrante, like fascism in general, did not advocate the abolition of existing class structures. Nor did it tackle the lingering economic and social antagonisms between city and country which stoked the Strapaese movement, despite publishing elaborate proposals to solve both urban and rural problems. Quadrante largely avoided the question of colonialism; if anything, it offered its support with its authors’ repeated references to Italy’s renewed status as an imperial power.
Quadrante defined its political engagement in terms of the invention, development and popularization of an architecture of the state and advocacy of specific positions in the debates within fascism. Fascist Italy was, to its editors, a militarized and corporatist state of mobilized masses, one whose new institutions (such as youth centers and party headquarters) and expanding cities required appropriate architectural expression. The review presented its designers’ work as the very mirror of a political creed that stressed unity, abhorred individualism, remained agnostic on questions of religion, appeared apathetic to the subject of racial identity, and professed antipathy to the insular arguments of nationalists in the Fascist Party. The Quadrante circle was fiercely intellectual and elitist (both in terms of aesthetics and technocratic innovation) while simultaneously celebrating valor, sacrifice and collective action.
Politically, *Quadrante* was allied with the corporativist and internationalist wings of the Fascist Party, whose economic policies sought a third way between American capitalism and Soviet communism, and whose diplomatic stances called for Italy to assume a position of leadership among western nations while avoiding the overtly xenophobic rhetoric of the party’s nationalists. Giuseppe Bottai, who was at various times the Minister of Corporations, Minister of Education, and Governor of Rome, was an important early supporter of both *Quadrante* and Bardi. Bottai and industrialist Adriano Olivetti (one of Rationalism’s key patrons) argued in *Quadrante*’s pages in favor of the corporativist development of fascist politics, while architects Piero Bottoni and the partners of BBPR (Gianluigi Banfi, Ludovico Barbiano di Belgioioso, Enrico Peressutti and Ernesto Nathan Rogers) offered urban plans based on those principles. It was in this context that the journal's contributors pressed the Rationalist argument that modern architecture reflected the regime's pursuit of rapid industrialization and modernization, not just in the construction of infrastructural projects (such as railway stations and post offices) but also in the provision of hygienic housing and modern educational and recreational institutions. In accordance with the fascist project of unifying Italy's famously parochial regions, *Quadrante* published simultaneously in Milan (the industrial capital) and Rome (the political capital).
Bardi and Bontempelli produced the first issue of *Quadrante* in May 1933, with the financial assistance of Giuseppe Terragni—Rationalism's most significant architect—and the abstract painters Mario Radice and Virginio Ghiringhelli. *Quadrante* combined coverage of architecture with articles on the fine and applied arts, literature, music, theater, dance, technology, engineering and, especially, politics. Contributors to the journal included some of the era’s most innovative critics, architects, artists, engineers, authors, industrialists and historians.
Politics, collaboration, interdisciplinarity and militant advocacy defined *Quadrante*. No other Italian architectural journal devoted itself so completely to developing a theory of an architecture of the state. Nor did any contemporary Italian journal situate architecture in such a broadly defined field of cultural production. This interdisciplinary orientation paralleled the *Quadrante* circle’s use of multiple vehicles to engage contemporary cultural debates; the group staged exhibitions at Bardi’s Galleria d’Arte di Roma and the Galleria del Milione in Milan, attended international congresses, organized Italian lectures by such figures as Le Corbusier, built temporary installations at national expositions and participated in official and professional boards to press their case for a modern, fascist architecture as the legitimate expression of Mussolini’s “continuing revolution.” *Quadrante* was not launched to report on contemporary architecture; it aimed to create it.
The *Quadrante* circle conceived the journal’s mission in bold terms: to define the characteristics of modern architecture, to defend modernism against the criticism of reactionaries and conservatives, to situate modern architecture within a broader interdisciplinary project of cultural palingenesis, and, ultimately, to campaign for Rationalism’s adoption throughout the nation as the official architecture of the fascist state. For the Rationalists, and especially for the polytechnic-trained members of the *Quadrante* circle, the term “anti-culturalist” combined Mussolini’s self-proclaimed “anti-elitism” with Le Corbusier’s frequent exhortations against the “academic” practice of architecture.
The *Quadrante* circle included members of the seminal Gruppo 7 (the first group of Italian Rationalists, founded in 1927), Bottoni, Enrico Agostino Griffini and BBPR, as well as the abstract painters of the Gruppo di Como (including Ghiringhelli, Radice and Manlio Rho). These architects and artists often exhibited at Milan's Galleria del Milione—previously the Galleria Bardi—under the direction of Ghiringhelli and, later, Persico. The *Quadrante* circle frequented the Bar Craja (designed by *Quadrante* contributors Luciano Baldessari, Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini), whose other patrons included industrialists like Carlo De Angeli-Frua (an important Milanese patron of modern art and architecture) and the painter Mario Sironi (perhaps the most significant artist of the Novecento movement, and who would later collaborate on some of Terragni's most poetic projects). *Quadrante's* circle extended from Milan to Rome and embraced the figurative artists of the Scuola Romana (especially the painter Corrado Cagli, who was Bontempelli's nephew). The Roman painters exhibited at Bardi's Galleria di Roma, which co-produced exhibitions with the Galleria del Milione. The prominence given to the fine arts in *Quadrante* reflects the extent to which the journal advocated a set of common principles in the development of appropriately fascist forms of art and cultural production.
Gruppo 7 projects exhibited at the III Triennale, Monza (top) and Gruppo 7 projects exhibited with drawings by Antonio Sant’Elia, Werkbund Ausstellung, Stuttgart (middle and bottom), 1927. Quadrante 23 (March 1935).

The exhibition in Buenos Aires reflected *Quadrante*’s primary mission: to construct an environment in which modern architecture could flourish in Italy and the world. To do this, the journal sought to cultivate circles of patrons (state, corporate, institutional and private) and stoke enthusiasm among the general public, in order create a demand for Rationalist architecture. Extensive technical discussions were aimed at encouraging research among manufacturers and familiarizing builders with the materials and methods of modern construction. Architects, the journal’s primary constituency, used *Quadrante* to refine their aesthetic and conceptual concerns in an atmosphere of collegial discourse and debate. Thus, the *Quadrante* circle sought to expand its audience by installing exhibitions at the Galleria del Milione and the Galleria Bardi, curating sections of the Milan Triennale, and sponsoring public lectures in Milan and Rome. Bardi’s voyage to South America expanded these efforts globally. The goal was to create a broad culture of modern architecture in Italy and the world.
The editors were committed to collaboration in both the content and production of the journal. They frequently published major projects by large teams of prominent architects, and responsibility for editing the magazine rotated with each issue among the large circle of contributors. Bontempelli believed collectivity was a primary value of modern cultural production, and argued that the innate anonymity of architecture (in terms of the finished work’s distance from its author) should be a model for the other arts. Collaboration among architects reflected the fascist ideal of consensus, which had influenced the Gruppo 7’s rejection of individualism. Many of the period’s most fertile collaborations, including designs submitted to the 1934 Palazzo del Littorio competition by two teams of Quadrante contributors, began with friendships forged through mutual association with the journal; one of the teams, in fact, called itself the Gruppo Quadrante.
Quadrante amplified the great importance Bardi had long ascribed to the roles of engineering and urbanism. The journal published a large number of visionary projects by engineers Gaetano Ciocca, Guido Fiorini and Pier Luigi Nervi. Bardi also maintained a personal correspondence with other engineers, including Luigi Kambo, designer of the famous dam on the Tirso River. Ciocca, Fiorini and Nervi used the journal to press the case for their technocratic responses to societal needs. Ciocca, in particular, was involved in the journal’s early planning, and Quadrante provided a medium for him to explain numerous projects ranging from the Theater of Masses (which was also the subject of important articles by Bontempelli) to his Taylorized pig farm. Quadrante published Fiorini’s tensistruttura proposal, one of several significant points of contact between Le Corbusier and the Quadrante circle. The journal established contacts between these engineers and Rationalist architects, resulting in a series of important (though unrealized) collaborative projects for E’42, the partially-completed universal exposition and administrative city south of Rome, as well as the 1934 master plan competition entry for Pavia.
Through the advocacy of Olivetti, Bottoni and Rogers, *Quadrante* served as one of the leading vehicles for the discussion of modern town planning in Italy. Olivetti was both an advocate and patron of modern urban design, and *Quadrante* published the regional plans of Valle d’Aosta he commissioned from Figini, Pollini, Bottoni and BBPR. Every Italian delegate to CIAM was a central figure in the *Quadrante* circle, and they all published articles in the journal, many of them synthesizing the international organization’s positions with Bottai’s corporativist economic policies. Bardi covered the 1933 CIAM conference aboard the SS Patris II, building on the earlier CIAM participation of Sartoris, Rava, Bottoni, Pollini and Figini. *Quadrante* also provided a forum for critically evaluating other developments in Italian town planning, and in particular the design of the Pontine marsh towns.
Interwar Italian architecture represents an example of architecture’s transformation from a reflection of social values and interpretation of social aspiration to an active participation in political processes, in a way anticipated by the political writings of Antonio Gramsci and the philosophy of Benedetto Croce. Emblematic of this position was Gaetano Ciocca’s article, “Contro l’intelligenza sedentaria,” published in the first issue of Quadrante. In it the engineer set the tone for the journal’s activist stance by calling for productive labor from intellectuals to replace the “sedentary intelligence” of the cloistered academic. A close reading of architectural literature in fascist Italy further reveals a moment when architecture itself became discursive, that is, architecture served as a medium for political and cultural discourses.
Like their contemporaries at *Casabella*, Bardi and Bontempelli typified the activist intellectual described by Gramsci, whose critique of Marx recognized the potentially critical and political role of intellectual activity. Gramsci established the importance of ideas as a locus of power and a structure of societal power relations, thus ascribing a new level of importance to intellectual activity, which Marx had treated as a superstructural reflection of more important base power relations. I am not suggesting that Bardi, et al., took Gramsci’s writings as a point of departure for their own practices. Yet clearly the editors of *Quadrante* recognized that, just as ephemeral practices (such as publications, exhibitions and competitions) were invaluable elements of architectural practice, architecture itself could be an instrument of political expression. As Italian intellectuals considered the proper manner in which artistic production could meet the fascist regime’s need for cultural representation, architecture—as competition project, as exhibition pavilion and as built work—became a powerful medium for arguing the ideological efficacy of modernism. *Quadrante* exemplifies how architects used architecture to participate in Italy’s political debates.
A careful study of the interrelationships between politics and cultural production in Fascist Italy is essential to understanding Pietro Maria Bardi’s long career as a critic, curator, agitator and promoter of modernism. This micro-history of Quadrante and the discursive formation of Italian Rationalism is part of a broader discussion of the forces that shaped the ideology of the modern movement and its reception in the social context of Europe in the period between the two world wars.
For those of you interested in reading more of this work, I have put links to my research on my web site, which you can access at this address. Thank you!