

## 7. *Colonie* Architecture and Fascism's Cult of Youth

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### Abstract

Under the Italian Fascist regime, rationalist *colonie* (summer camps) promised to improve Italian children's health through visibly structured mass playtime. At the same time, photographic representations of the *colonie* were disseminated as propaganda. In this chapter, first, I investigate the history of summer camps in Italy. Next, I examine the construction and use of three sites heralded as model *colonie* by the regime: Montecatini, Snia, and Nave. Then, I move from the topic of *colonie* design to that of *colonie* representations in the regime propaganda to understand how the Fascist party wrote narratives of healthy living around these architectural sites. To conclude, I return to the salvage of the bones of the camps as Urbanex sites.

**Keywords:** *colonie*, camp, Fascism, youth, outdoor

The Northern Italian coastline is studded with brutal gems—concrete complexes linked by strict geometry and curvaceous streamlining. Nestled in the Alpine Mountain valleys and stretching along the Lombard lakesides, these Cubist campuses evoke miniature cities. Vast pathways lead to spiraling staircases that ascend to towering obelisks. Two styles blend: rigid Rationalism accented by whimsical Futurist forms. Housing blocks turn into living objects—buildings resemble ships, planes, and animals. Common architectural features suggest a total fusion of building structure and purpose. It is an open yet highly structured layout, built for the surveillance and display of Italian children at play.

The origins of these sites lie under Benito Mussolini's dictatorship. The Fascist regime attempted a mass organization of its young citizens with the ultimate goal of enhancing the vitality of the future Italian race. To combat childhood

diseases like tuberculosis, state-affiliated medics recommended fresh air and sunlight. To act on these recommendations, the regime would need to partner with architects to build youth *colonie*, essentially Fascist summer camps.

Translated literally as “colonies,” these camps aimed to promote racial health and hygiene through exposure to the sun, the sea, and exercise. Children of industrial workers could visit these residential seats for month-long excursions to experience outdoor living. The history of these holiday hostels sheds light on Fascism’s eugenic approach to architecture and urbanism. At a historical moment when evidence of a large, youthful population visually implied national military might, the Fascist regime looked to summer camps to serve as architectural laboratories for building better Italians. In this chapter, I argue that the *colonie* provided the Fascist party with an opportunity to pursue two intertwined political goals. First, the design of the *colonie* promised to improve Italian children’s health through visibly structured mass playtime. Second, photographic representations of the *colonie* could be disseminated as propaganda.

Three interwoven threads trace Fascist *colonie* architecture and related propaganda. In Section I, I relate the history of summer camps in Italy to contextualize their later use as childhood sanitariums under Fascism. Here, I examine Fascism’s cult of childhood and the role played by youth groups like the *Figli della Lupa*, *Piccole Italiane*, *Ballila*, and *Giovani Italiane*. Twinned policies of pronatalism and youth control were enacted upon through the regime’s employment of architecture as a form of social hygiene. Rationalist buildings, where form bowed to function, promised to reform unruly young people. Through exposure cures, like thalassotherapy and heliotherapy, *colonie* provided specialized rooms that purported to treat a range of physical and moral ailments (fig. 7.1). In Section II, I analyze the construction and use of three sites heralded as model *colonie* by the regime: Montecatini, Snia, and Nave. Fulvio Irace observed that these Rationalist buildings provided “a laboratory of experimentation for those young architects eager to test in a real project the effectiveness of their ethical and aesthetic ideals.” In addition to their utility as design, the Fascist regime intended the buildings to serve as “formidable propaganda machines dedicated to the working classes.” In Section III, I move from the topic of *colonie* design to that of *colonie* representations in the regime propaganda to understand how the Fascist party wrote narratives of healthy living around these architectural sites. To do so, I analyze “The City of Childhood,” an exhibit held at Circo Massimo in June 1937. Regime publicity for the *colonie* depicted multitudes of Italian girls and boys arranged in orderly rows, set against avant-garde buildings and spectacular natural panoramas. To conclude, I return to





Figure 7.1. Photograph of children undergoing heliotherapy in a *colonia solarium*, “Le Scuole all’aperto in Italia,” Ministero dell’Educazione Nazionale. Milan: Fieri and Lacroix, 1940, p. 40.

the salvage of the bones of the camps as Urbanex sites. In their afterlives, these complexes have become key sites for ruin tourism. Dystopian endings provide a fitting exclamation point to the uncomfortable political questions posed by Fascist utopias and their cult of youth.

## History of the Colonie

The Fascist dictatorship did not invent the *colonia*. Sending needy children—especially those from the industrial cities of the north—to rural sanitariums had been an Italian tradition since at least the late nineteenth century. But there was one key difference: prior to Fascist *ventennio*, management was private rather than state-run. In the holiday complexes of the 1870s, patrons from among the local gentry typically sponsored the buildings and their upkeep. Religious and philanthropic groups also helped by managing children’s daily lives in these spaces. By 1885, there were already 19 *ospizi marini* along the Northern Adriatic and Tirrenean coasts (Dogliani 2002, 34). Well before Mussolini marched on Rome, Italian medics prescribed fresh air and sunlight

to children as both a prophylactic measure against tuberculosis and as a potential cure for its bacterial complications outside the lungs, like scrofula.

*Colonie* came to the cultural fore during the 1920s in part to serve Fascism's cult of youth. Fascism claimed to be a rebellious, insurgent movement that would lift up the values of the young. It prioritized energy, modernity, sobriety and sport—considered to be the requisite elements for enhancing female fertility and male militarism. Behind this obsession lay a tactical strategy. Mussolini correctly identified a cultural clash between the official culture of the ruling elite and the avant-garde of the intellectual youth. He attempted to embody youthful vigor through careful control over his public image. Propagandistic photographs show Mussolini threshing grain, soldering metal, racing cars, and even taming lions. Newspapers were forbidden from covering his illnesses and birthdays to suggest perpetual good health. The dictatorship's triumphal hymn was "Giovinezza," an ode to the "spring of beauty" of Fascism's young workers and warriors. Fascism's cult of youth looked ahead to the next generation through demographic policies aimed at encouraging pronatalism and decreasing childhood mortality.

Fascist urbanists and medics alike feared that encroaching urbanism negatively impacted children's health and social hygiene. In his Ascension Day speech, Mussolini went so far as to identify the Italian city as a demographic problem.<sup>1</sup> To combat infant mortality, the Senate established the *National Bureau for the Protection of Maternity and Infancy*, known by the Italian acronym *ONMI*. Originally titled *Opera Nazionale Fascista per la Protezione della Maternità e dell'Infanzia*, a subsection of law #2277 created this office on 10 December 1925.<sup>2</sup> *ONMI* identified tuberculosis as enemy number one in the fight against childhood mortality and suggested that urban living conditions were the primary collaborators with this enemy. Specifically, *ONMI* medics associated this disease with the rapid industrialization of northern cities like Milan and Turin, where urban peripheries were becoming increasingly dense. Rapid urbanism often resulted in poverty in the substandard public housing of the *bassi* of southern cities, like Naples, and in the *borgate* of Rome because of the unhealthy number of residents per apartment.

Cities were described in biological terms, with dense neighborhoods compared to tumors and cancers. As concerns for sick children and fears

1 Benito Mussolini. "Il discorso dell'Ascensione [Address to the Chamber of Deputies]." 26 May 1927. In *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 22, eds. Edoardo Susmel and Duilio Susmel (Florence: La Fenice), 363.

2 This is the standard English translation for *ONMI* used by scholars of Fascist maternal policy, such as Elizabeth Dixon Whitaker, David Horn, and Maurizio Bettini. Translations are the author's own unless otherwise specified.



of delinquent adolescents rose, the regime utilized the *colonie*, with their vast panoramas and bright solariums (fig. 7.1), to provide an ideal solution for children from so-called “*famiglie bisognose*.” Admission to the *colonie* was at first reserved to poor children ages 6 to 13 years old whose parents possessed current membership in the Fascist party, with further preferences for the progeny of dead or injured veterans of the Great War, the Fascist Revolution, the East African campaign, or the Spanish Civil War. Only one exception was made: children in “*famiglie numerose*” were always welcome (1939 Regolamento 179). In many ways, the *colonie* were the opposite of what David Horn has termed “the sterile city.” To the regime, these sites provided the perfect setting to promote health, foster obedience, and ultimately shape the next generation of Italian mothers and soldiers.<sup>3</sup> A 1935 medical conference held in Rimini underscored the importance of climate in promoting health. Here, conference-goers classified pre-existing *colonie* according to climate and period of curative stay, prescribing different environments (ocean, mountain, river, lakeside, plains, thermal) to treat different types of sickness.

While this history shows that the *colonie* and their cures did not emerge wholesale under Fascism, it also highlights Fascist period changes. In 1926, provincial branches of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* began to assume managerial and financial control over local *colonie*. During this same year, the regime founded the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB), absorbing a vast array of preexisting youth groups, and then unifying them as a single cohesive entity under Fascist state control. *Balilla* were later subdivided by age and gender into groups like *Figli della Lupa* and *Piccole Italiane* for younger members; *Avanguardisti* and *Giovani Italiane* for older children. *Balilla*, and later the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* (GIL), offered afterschool and Saturday activities like sports, gymnastics, military drills with toy rifles to school children between the ages of eight and fourteen. Their most popular offerings, however, were the holiday excursions to the sea or in the mountains, where they would stay in the *colonie*.

## Architecture as Social Control

Scholars of interwar Europe often approach architecture through style, as if it were possible to divorce a building from the circumstances of its

3 David Horn, “The Sterile City,” *Social Bodies: Science, Reproduction, and Italian Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 108–109 and 120–121.



production. We see this in the field's insistence on a distinction between architecture under Fascism (*architettura "fra le due guerre"*) and Fascist architecture (*architettura fascista*). Such differentiations often create ad hoc political categories to suggest parables of good and evil, pitting figures like Marcello Piacentini (who Claudia Lazzaro memorably refers to as the "official architect of bureaucracy") against "anti-Fascists" like Giuseppe Terragni, Edoardo Persico, and Giuseppe Pagano.<sup>4</sup>

But, as Lazzaro maintains, most architects in 1930s Italy favored Fascist politics and modernist aesthetic movements, like Rationalism and Futurism. Indeed, they even competed with one another through *concorsi* to win the funding and creative rights to plan hospitals, prisons, schools, and camps for the Fascist state. Functional buildings like these are built around activities like healing, punishing, and instructing. The Fascist state made clear their vision of how people ought to be treated in these spaces. Rationalist architects, whose credo maintained that form should always follow function, then designed and built the physical forms to translate those visions into concrete and glass realities.

Rational architecture first emerged in the same year as *Balilla*, in 1926, when a group of young architects (Giuseppe Terragni, Carlo Enrico Rava, Sebastiao Larco, Guido Frette, Adalberto Libera, Luigi Figini, and Gino Pollini) formed the *Gruppo 7*. Their manifesto, published in *Rassegna Italiana*, updated the Roman and classical elements of the Novecento movement with the industrial inspirations of Futurism. Italian Rationalist and Futurist architects contributed to the international prestige of Italian modernism, crafting many of their most iconic structures following the Italian Fascism's ideology. They advocated for the primacy of technical and functional considerations, supported by time motion studies. Their vision rhymed with Fascism's early self-portrayal as a rebellious party of the avant-garde youth.<sup>5</sup>

The "coming out" party for Italian Rationalism took place in Rome in 1928, at the first *Esposizione Italiana di architettura razionale*. Terragni at the time noted the predominance of "healthy squadristism" in these new expressions of

4 Piacentini led the Novecento group of Rome, earning from Claudia Lazzaro the memorable title "official architect of bureaucracy." While they were successful in gaining commissions for certain large-scale projects like the University of Rome campus in 1938, the architecturally moderate Novecento group's neo-classical reproductions often won the bids for big state buildings.

5 They wrote: "The hallmark of the earlier avant garde was a contrived impetus and a vain, destructive fury, mingling good and bad elements: the hallmark of today's youth is a desire for lucidity and wisdom [...] This must be clear [...] we do not intend to break with tradition [...] The new architecture, the true architecture, should be the result of a close association between logic and rationality."

Italian architecture. Rationalists made further headway in 1933, when Giuseppe Pagano, future architect of the *Palazzo della Civiltà*, called the “Colosseo Quadrato” for its monumental grid, became editor of *Casabella* in 1933. As editor of the influential magazine, Pagano prominently featured the new constructions of fellow Rationalist architects. Editorials pressed the Fascist state to adopt Rationalism as the state’s official style. *Domus* editor Gio Ponti promoted similar ideas in the industrial north, in Milan. The *Triennale di Milano*, under the leadership of both Gio Ponti in 1933 and Pagano in 1936, advocated for a tighter relationship between architecture and industrial production.

Major urbanism projects following the canon of Rationalist architecture returned to the metaphor of the city as a body in their inspiration. To provide for what they considered to be healthy circulation and flow, projects like the *sventramento* of Rome and the clearing of the Pontine Marshes aimed to free blockages to the city’s nervous system. In addition to that, new train tracks, highways, and a postal network were built in order to connect the countryside to the city. Urban *sventramenti* demolished the slapdash homes of the poor to clear space for triumphal thoroughways and piazzas in Rome, Turin, Milan, Genova, Bari and Padua.

The regime also worked on “interior colonization” of the land. It drained the malarial swamps and scrubland of the Agro Pontino, something Mussolini liked to note that even Caesar himself had not managed. What remained of the urban structure was its Romanità: the classical features of an idealized national past, a capital and a set of Fascist New Towns riveted with Corinthian columns and wide forums. Such sites, however, provided the space to build new types of structural features, such as the surveillance towers that watched over the populations of Sabaudia and Aprilia. For the regime, Rationalist architecture provided a means to social control.

## Holiday Complexes and Schedules for Mass Life

The *colonie* extended the regime’s control of children’s private lives into afternoons and weekends. It already controlled the school day. In both public and private schools, Mussolini’s portrait hung next to that of King Umberto I. The Duce’s motto, “*Credere, Obbedire, Combattere*,” was posted on classroom walls. Through these changes, the regime was making a bid to unify the future national body through the production of common experiences in childhood—ones that encouraged positive associations with the Fascist party. Local changes became national ones when *Ente Opera Assistenziali*, including *ONMI* and *ONB*, coordinated to contribute staff and funds to



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Figure 7.2. Photograph of child in colonial garb standing guard at tent display of City of Childhood, "La città della infanzia," Mostra Nazionale di Colonie Estive e dell'Assistenza all'Infanzia, p.4. Rome, June-September 1937.



Figure 7.3. Photograph of children arrayed in the words, "Duce ti amiamo," "Leader We Love You," "Le Scuole all'aperto in Italia," Ministero dell'Educazione Nazionale. Milan: Fieri and Lacroix, 1940, p. 38.

expand the total number of sites, and children served. These efforts were largely successful. In 1926, there were 100 *colonie*. By 1931, the number of sites had risen to over 3000, with 350 beach camps, 330 river camps, and 280



mountain camps, in addition to more than 2000 temporary heliotherapy day camps in the exurbs of large cities. 1935 ISTAT data pointed to 568,680 children assisted in that year alone. By the mid-1930s, about 10 percent of qualified Italian children had spent at least one month in a *colonia* in the mountains or by the beach.

*GIL* not only aimed to expand the total number of *colonie*, but also to intensify the political experience provided by the camps through the *fascistizzazione* of pre-existing *colonie*. By the mid-1930s, these formerly health and education-based sites took on a decisively political flavor. At the *colonie*, summer days followed precise patterns that were established by *GIL* at the national level. Daily life in the colonies was managed by the *Fasci femminili*, who received specialized puericulture education courses on how to run the camps. Common schedules aimed to produce comradeship, as the *Balilla* youth woke, ate, played, studied, and marched together. Daily flag-raising ceremonies were followed by autarchic breakfasts (fig. 7.2). Then, children walked to their open-air classrooms, patios set with rows of desks, to write patriotic essays pledging their allegiance to the dictatorship. At recess, guided mass movements provided paramilitary training. Student bodies were also assembled to celebrate Mussolini with slogans like “*Duce ti amiamo*” (“We love you Leader”) (fig. 7.3). But although it was the Fascist state which promoted this unified program of summer camps for children, it was actually private companies that realized this vision.

## The Corporate Connection

Corporations played a major role in organizing life in the *colonie*. All sectors participated in *GIL*'s daily planning, from Fiat automobiles to the Perugina chocolate industry. As the SniaViscosa fabric company put it in their worker's assistance pamphlet (fig. 7.4), “Going to the people” (“*Andare verso il popolo*”), was the incisive motto expressed by the head of government whose goal was to grant the citizenry “higher social justice” (“*una più alta giustizia sociale*”).<sup>6</sup> Another worker's assistance pamphlet (fig. 7.5) from the Montecatini chemical company describes daily life at the Montecatini *colonia* alongside parallel workers' benefits accorded by the state.<sup>7</sup> To factory workers' children coming from one end of Italy to the other, Montecatini dedicated its “most loving

6 “SNIA Viscosa: le Opere Assistenziali.” Turin, 1938.

7 Most were child-centric, and included factory nurseries, elementary schools, and technical schools. Montecatini, *Assistenza igienico-sanitaria negli impianti industriali* (Milan: Esperia, 1937).



Figure 7.4. Montecatini. *Assistenza igienico-sanitaria negli impianti industriali*. Milan: Esperia, 1937.



Figure 7.5. Photocollage by Erberto Carboni depicting scenes from SNIA Viscosa Colonia, in "SNIA Viscosa: le Opere Assistenziali." Turin, 1938.

cures" (*"cure più amorevoli"*) at the Marina di Cervia, a *colonia modello* covering 50,000 square meters; Montecatini Chemicals was capable of housing 1500 children each season at the lido at Crotone offering schools, gyms and clinics.

Their promotional pamphlet devoted the majority of its text to describing the *colonie alpine e marine* promising a summer dream. Groups of happy children were depicted en masse while enjoying themselves on a sunny beach or on the move: “they laugh together, run together, gather together, disperse from one another” (“*si ridono, si rincorrono, si raggruppano, si disperdono*”). Then: silence. Montecatini emphasizes that the rest hour provides more prophylactic exposure to light, with sun-bathing on the sand. Then a flash of naked bodies, bronzed and glossy and a dive into the sea (“*poi, un baluginare di corpi nudi, abbronzati, lucenti*”). At a sharp command from the *Fasci femminili*, the children rise as one. Harmoniously, they return to shore for gymnastic exercises, or else obediently adjourn to chapel for prayer, to watch a regime-approved film, or to sing the songs of the fatherland.

Private companies like Montecatini Chemicals, hand in hand with the Fascist state, used their *colonie* to train young children in the dutiful activities of mass culture that characterized the Fascist lifestyle expected of adults. So-called “delinquent” teenagers were singled out for technical school training, like industrial and agricultural labor, while everybody was required to take part in the para-military practice. Broadly speaking, the sites attempted to replace capillary networks of local loyalties to family, church, and township with a monolith: the love of the national state.

Mass education at this scale was new, and it was not without problems. Sites that hosted 20 children at a time in the mid-1920s housed 100 or more by the mid-1930s. In Mussolini's native Romagna, the town of Rimini was one of the most popular sites for oceanside *colonie*. The small seaside city hosted 6000 children in the 1920s, then 16,000 in 1932, and finally 18,000 in 1934. *La Colonia della Cassa Mutua Fiat*, known as the Vittorio Emanuele III offered 300 beds. *Le Torri Balilla* at Marina di Massa boasted 850 beds for Lingotto factory workers' children. Faced with this surge of young visitors, many refurbished *colonie* began to experience the same overcrowding and sanitation issues that they had originally been built to remedy. In response, architects and planners designed expansive structures for new *colonie* sites—miniature stadiums for sports, expansive pitches for war games. Because these new sites were so large, they came with high commissions for the architects who built them, attracting leading architects who ultimately produced complexes that were visually stunning in their modernity. In many ways, these sites were most emblematic of the Fascist party's vision.<sup>8</sup>

8 “Everything in [the colonies], from their abstract lines and volumes to their ground plans, which trace the itineraries of life in common [...] everything combines – canteen and washrooms,

## Nautical Motifs in the *Colonie*

Marine motifs marked the *colonies* in Chiavari and Novara, with boat decks and porthole windows. The central building of a Novarese colony built in 1934 looks like a warship crossed with a lion, ready to pounce. At Chiavari, a submarine tower-scope pops from the roof of the central building. Like a Cubist *arengario* tower or lighthouse keep, it provided easy surveillance or the opportunity to take Futurist aerial photographs of the impressive mass gymnastic displays in the open fields below (fig. 7.6). The overall structure of this holiday camp, designed by Camillo Nardi Greco in 1935, cites the life aquatic across both land and sea, with structures that resemble crow's nests, gunports, water tanks, and lighthouses. They integrated both the primary and shadow functions of the state into their physical structures, providing an advertisement for the vigor and discipline provided by seaside living as well as normalization of Fascism's cult of physical strength and its disciplined sociability.

One of the most interesting examples of oceanic Futurism was the *Colonia XXVIII Ottobre* in Cattolica, nicknamed "*Le Navi*" (fig. 7.7). Imagination and tom foolery took material forms in this *colonia* designed by Clemente Busiri Vici in 1932. Here, a Futurist flotilla emerges from a centralized office block, a cafeteria, and four dormitory wings. The nautical playscape docks at the edge of the sandy shore. Set directly onto the sand, buildings appear as steamships at harbor. They evoked a doubled association of the regime's grand transportation projects (the steamships that carried Italian settlers to the North and East African colonies) plus its problems (the steamships that had historically carried Italian emigrants to Brazil and Argentina, as well as Canada and the United States). And indeed, that was the point. *Le Navi* catered to a specific audience: the children of Italians who lived abroad. It was the Fascist regime's most impressive *colonia*, with whimsical modern architecture designed to spread a message of Italian hyper-modernity abroad.

At *Le Navi*, dynamic elements were activated as children ricocheted across the complexes. Architectural features lofted children into the air. Flying bridges and ramps turned the daily movements of children into

dormitory and gymnasium – to make up the plastic form and visual image with which, for ever, these children will identify the memories of periods spent in school colonies [...]. They will be stimulated for the first time to appreciate architectural form seen not just from the outside, but adopted for living within." Mark Sanderson, "Derelict Utopias: The Fascists Go on Holiday," *Cabinet* 20 (Winter 2005–2006), citing Mario Labò, "L'architettura delle colonie marine italiane," in Mario Labò & Attilio Podesta, *Colonie* (Milan: Editoriale Domus, 1942), quoted in Fulvio Irace, "Building for a New Era: Health Services in the '30s," *Domus* 659 (March 1985), 3.



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Figure 7.6. Photograph of teenage *colonie* residents during pre-military exercises, “Le Scuole all’aperto in Italia,” Ministero dell’Educazione Nazionale. Milan: Fieri and Lacroix, 1940, p. 38.



Figure 7.7. Postcard of Cattolica Colonia Figli Italiani all’Estero.

photographic spectacles of successful mass life. Semi-helix staircases took note from Futurist architecture's cult of machines. Ramps became turbines that filtered flows of children, suctioning them up from the dormitory floors and then flushing them out in front of the double-doored departure hall by the end of the day. Such buildings would have stood in stark contrast to the humdrum structures of working-class children's everyday lives, providing a memorable experience. They were meant to impress, in both senses of the word: they provoked marvel in their impressionable young visitors, and then changed their ways of interacting with buildings and open space, forming Fascist ways of moving that would last a lifetime.



Figure 7.8. Photograph of Le Navi photographed by Alessandro Piredda, 1985, Riccione, Italy. Appears in “Coastal Icons: Italian Holiday Camps, from Mussolini to Valtur,” by Alessandro Benetti, *Domus*, August 13, 2019.

What made the holiday camps of Italy’s Fascist era so iconic was this architectural merging of state and corporate interests through architecture. Private companies and the Fascist regime shared a common desire to mold an energetic and obedient generation to serve as the workers, mothers, and soldiers of the future. They turned to architecture to promote these new functions; at the same moment a young generation of designers was looking for new aesthetic forms. In line with their credo, the Rationalists approached the *colonie* as instruments of modernity. It was a fusion of Rationalism, Futurism, whimsy, and surveillance without architectural precedent. Children would have had the feeling that these modern fantasies had been built just for them. Adults, by contrast, received a different dose of propaganda. They encountered the *colonie* indirectly, through media representations and *colonie* expositions.

### Youth City: Representing *Colonie* at the City of Childhood

At 8:30am on June 20, 1937, the band struck up the martial tune of “Giovinezza” and eighteen pennants unfurled the national *tricolore* of red, white, and green. Fifteen hundred doves were released, flying over Benito Mussolini, Achille Starace, and the 80,000 *donne fasciste* who crowded the Viale Aventino in Rome to hear the Duce’s speech, inaugurating the *Mostra Nazionale delle Colonie Estive e dell’Assistenza all’Infanzia* at the Ancient Roman ruins of the Circo Massimo.<sup>9</sup> Regime-affiliated newspapers recorded

9 The event was covered nationally in newspapers, including *Il popolo d’Italia* and *Il Corriere della Sera* in Milan, *La Gazzetta del Popolo* in Turin, *Il Telegrafo* in Livorno, *Il Mattino* in Naples, *La*

the ecstatic call-and-response cries of “*Si!*” from the female crowd, as the Duce implored them to give birth to many children, the soldiers and pioneers necessary to defend the empire. To give these children a Roman and Fascist education, he would count on women’s tenacity (“*Si!*”), their discipline (“*Si!*”), and their faith (“*Si!!!*”). When the speech concluded, they would be free to visit the *Mostra*, the Fascist regime’s most carefully conceived representation of the *colonie*.

In a promotional pamphlet for the event, the regime argued for the ethical value of the exhibition, claiming that it would “demonstrate to Italy and the world how much the regime has accomplished for the very young generations” (“*dimostrare all’Italia ed al mondo quanto il regime ha compiuto in favore delle generazioni giovanissimi*”). Rationalism, it argued, could be used not only to increase the population, but also to better the race. How fitting, that the site was chosen for its reference to Roman origins, but was designed with an architectural style that would evoke the modern new age. In other words, while the audience for *colonie* architecture was children, the audience of representations of that architecture were women—mothers and potential mothers, the gatekeepers of Fascism’s dreams for the next generation of the Italian race. To them, Mussolini dedicated this adult-facing national exhibit of Fascist childhood.

Circo Massimo set the tone for the event, in that the ruins visually connected Fascist childhood with Romanità (fig. 5.8). An essay “*Dal Palatino all’Aventino*” described the committee’s process, and its conclusion that this site best evoked Fascist childhood as a legacy of Ancient Roman youth culture. The center of the site stood directly in front of the Piazza Romolo e Remo, evoking the foundation myth of Rome. Romulus and Remus, the two young twins, were suckled by the She-Wolf of Rome. The site thus evoked the name of the most popular Fascist youth group, the *Figli della Lupa*. The Roman newspaper *Il Lavoro Fascista* further observed that the coloration of the site evoked the flag, with the red of the ruins and the green of the floriculture exhibit at the site center. While promotional materials heralded the exhibition site for its distillation of the ancient Roman past, they applauded the pavilion construction for its conjuring of a modern Italian future. Modernity was evoked not only by the architecture of the wood and glass pavilions, but also by the speed of their construction. Descriptions of

*Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno* in Bari, and *L’Ora* in Palermo. In Rome, no fewer than ten newspapers covered the event, including *Messaggero*, *Il Giornale d’Italia*, *Tevere*, *Critica Fascista*, *Gente Nostra*, *Economia Italiana*, *Il Corriere dei costruttori*, *La Donna Fascista*, *Meridano di Roma*, and *Il Lavoro Fascista*.



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Figure 7.9. Photograph of City of Childhood exhibition at Circus Maximus, “La città della infanzia,” Mostra Nazionale di Colonie Estive e dell’Assistenza all’Infanzia, interior cover image. Rome, June–September 1937.

the site preparation evoke the *sventramento* process taking place in the major industrial cities, as well as high speed links between the city and the countryside via train tracks and highways. First, the exposition was massive, with the boundary measuring 50,000 square meters. Site plans emphasized the need “to level, to reorder, to render, ultimately, presentable all the terrain scarred with holes, unstable, covered with weeds” (*livellare, riordinare, rendere, infine presentabile tutto il terreno solcato da buche, franoso, ricoperto da erbacce*).

Making the Mostra was as much a clearing project as it was a construction project. Special trains organized by the local fascist federations carried over half a million visitors from provinces all over Italy to the site. Many foreigners too, papers claimed, came to marvel and admire the pavilions and the “potent mechanism that moves the new Italy” (*potente meccanismo che muove l’Italia nuova*). Modernity meant going fast, “The motto was this: hurry up,” (*Il motto d’ordine fu questo: far presto*).

Dynamic energy surged through the event’s official poster (fig. 7.9). Text escapes the confines of line, recalling the Futurists’ “words in freedom” poetry, where words leapt across the page. This poster emphasizes the key themes of the *colonie*, the summer camps set up by the Fascist regime as a prophylactic measure to promote the health of children, the future mothers and soldiers who would uphold the regime. A child’s disembodied head floats at the center, with a stylized collar drawn on it in white. He is set over the outline of a Fascio, filled with photocollages of bodies on mass—young adults march across the top, school-age children crowd close to the camera against a background of tents in the middle, and at the bottom, toddlers dance in a circle. Below, text



Figure 7.10 Map of City of Childhood, “La città della infanzia,” Mostra Nazionale di Colonie Estive e dell’Assistenza all’Infanzia. Rome, June – September 1937, p. 3.

escapes the confines of line, slightly recalling the energy and modernity of the Futurists’ “words in freedom” poetry, with words that leapt across the page. That text reads “National exposition of the summer colonies and childhood assistance.” Posters, like the event itself, brought together multiple Fascist concerns: increasing the national birth rate, using trains to connect the country and city, and improving children’s health through architecture built for mass exercise all come together in the promotion of the *Mostra*.

Architect Cipriano Efisio Oppo was a man of few words, but his maxim for speed profoundly shaped the *Mostra* site and construction.<sup>10</sup> It was a complex built to be experienced dynamically, like the *colonie* themselves. The *Mostra* rushed visitors along a race track, with pit stops at twelve pavilions.<sup>11</sup> Proceeding from east to west along the *Via del Circo Massimo* to the *via dei*

10 Under the guidance of PNF secretary Giovanni Marinelli, architects Mancini and Morini, with engineers Luisi, Niccoli, Forestieri, and assistants Vincenzo Nigro and Tommasi built the site. Also contributing was the Impresa Garbatino-Ciaccaluga-Mazzacane, who provided the ONB, Tourism, and Merceology pavilions.

11 The Turinese newspaper *La Gazzetta del Popolo* noted that the omnipresent photography set across the pavilions and the extensive use of panorama to create a sightline worked together to give the sense of rapid and able construction, all set along a course.

*Cerchi*, exhibit-goers would have hurried from the Introduction room to rooms dedicated to *ONMI*, Childhood Assistance, School, Reeducation for minors, Summer Camps, Italians Abroad, *Opera Balilla*, GUF, Merceology, Meeting Room, Types of Heliotherapy Colonies. With size as an index of importance, the *Colonie Estive* was the largest pavilion at four times the size of the spaces accorded to schools, reeducation, Italians Abroad and the *Balilla*. The exhibit abruptly ends in sunlight, with the parking lot, ticket booth, bathrooms, and offices. It was important to the designers that the *Mostra* achieve this effect of venturesome arrival, that the site did not make them feel “like Gulliver in the Lilliput country,” but rather like visitors to “a small city of high pavilions.”

Maps to the site (fig. 7.10) read like mechanical manual for operating a steamship, and indeed, there was a nautical theme to many of the buildings: “In front of the balcony of the pavilion offices, which seems like the deck of a luxury transatlantic ocean liner, is the panorama of a new city. It is as if I had reached after long navigation the port of a new city” (*“Dinanzi alla balconata del padiglione degli uffici, che sembra il ponte di un transatlantico di lusso, è il panorama di una città nuova. È come se io fossi giunto dopo lunga navigazione al porto d’una città sconosciuta”*).

Sailing over the Roman plane, the twelve pavilions of this urban complex were built to be temporary—they could be assembled and disassembled in a matter of weeks. Opaque ceilings and walls were made of wood, but each building contained a fourth, glass wall set along the corridor side. A visitor, walking down the central street, could see the smallest details of construction.<sup>12</sup> Surveillance was structurally constitutive of the “new architecture for children.” Newspaper coverage of the event in Milan’s vanguard paper *Il Corriere della Sera* noted that under Oppo’s direction, architects Libera, De Renzi, and Guerrini had in under three months created “clear, simple, and light architecture,” that was the “very image of summer and childhood to which the exhibit was dedicated.”

Surveillance meant glass for looking into the interior of buildings, and electric light to make the *Mostra* accessible at all hours, including at night. The cover photograph of “*La città dell’Infanzia*” shows the nocturnal side of the *Mostra*, lit to surgical brightness by three lamps that beam blooming pools of light over the fountain below (fig. 7.11). Electric wires and hydraulic pipes rendered the power grids and water mains of the site visible. Everything about the site evokes the square lattices of rationalism—covered

12 As the Livorno newspaper *Il Telegrafo* noted, glasswork focused on the architecture created as expression of taste and ideals that were “not just aesthetic, but social” (*“non soltanto estetico, ma sociale”*).

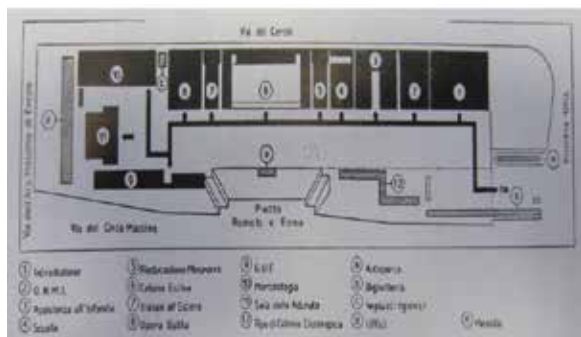


Figure 7.11 Photograph of City of Childhood exhibition entrance in “La città della infanzia,” Mostra Nazionale di Colonie Estive e dell’Assistenza all’Infanzia, cover image. Rome, June – September 1937.



Figure 7.12 Photograph of cradle expo in City of Childhood, “La città della infanzia,” Mostra Nazionale di Colonie Estive e dell’Assistenza all’Infanzia, p. 7. Rome, June – September 1937.

outdoor area with regular poles, with isolated chairs to take in the air while remaining protected from the elements. Two dark paths cut sharply through the grass showed patrons exactly where to walk. The lone tree in the picture seems to have got lost on the way to the forest. Plucked and repotted here, it appeared domesticated: an office plant displayed on a rectangular desk. Representing the *colonie* through the *Mostra*, and its photography, underscores the foundational goals of these spaces. Modernity meant access to electric and hydraulic infrastructure for health. Complete order and regularity of life could be realized through Rationalist architecture.

Architect Giuseppe Pagano wrote in *Casabella*, “[t]he characteristics of this Roman exhibition can be summarized in three points: unity of style, great clarity of urbanism, promotional vivacity” (“*I caratteri di questa esposizione di Roma possono essere riassunti in tre punti: unità di stile, grande*

*chiarezza urbanistica, vivacità espositiva*"). Pagano clarified that this last element, vivacity, was the most important. It was gained through dynamic movement, just like the *colonie* were. Noisy and bustling, the *Mostra* was animated by children's concerts and theatrical plays, and a popular Merry Go Round set in front of the model *Casa della Madre e del Bambino*. *Balilla* children slept in camp sites and performed their gymnastic games directly before the adult public. As one pamphlet put it, they were the "protagonists and actors" of the *Mostra*. Through these living dioramas, children performed the ideals of Fascist childhood.

Actors included thirty infants, some still breastfeeding and some weaned, who lived in the *Mostra*'s promotional nursery along with their twelve mothers. In other words, the model *Casa della Madre e del Bambino* was truly a working site. Perhaps more than any other pavilion, this site directly addressed mothers, the *Mostra*'s primary audience. It aimed to promulgate regime promises for the provision of childcare assistance to the mothers of *famiglie numerose*. Women and their infants provided the living architecture of these intimate exhibits.

Just as the *colonie* were financed by private companies like Montecatini chemicals and SNIA Viscosa fabrics, so too were their *colonie* represented at the *Mostra*. Indeed, the regime considered Montecatini to be an ally who had offered "a tireless collaboration with the politics of the regime in the area of the tutelage of children" ("*una infaticabile collaborazione alla politica del Regime nel campo della tutela dell'infanzia*"). Montecatini, with its 170 productive units, financed the Merceology extensive wing. Merceology is the branch of science that studies the identification and function of materials, as well as their impurities.

The wing provided Montecatini with an opportunity to pitch company contributions to daily life in the *colonie*—they were responsible for the aluminum that made its desks and chairs, the rayon that composed the children's uniforms. Aluminum, the Montecatini exhibit exclaimed, is "a very modern synthetic material obtained chemically" ("*un modernissimo materiale sintetico ottenuto chimicamente*"). Similarly, its new synthetic fabric, Albene rayon, "provides clothing that is ideal for our children" ("*fornisce biancheria e maglieria ideale per i nostri ragazzi*"). New materials not only supported and clothed the outside of the body but healed the insides as well. Medicines and other synthetic comforts devised by Montecatini provided valuable coefficients of childhood health. Alimentary gelatins served in the holiday camps contributed to rational childrearing. Herbicides and pesticides provided "the most ideal instruments for the floral and ornamental cultivation of the Garden of Childhood," a site at the center of





Figure 7.13 Photograph of cradle expo in City of Childhood, “La città della infanzia,” Mostra Nazionale di Colonie Estive e dell’Assistenza all’Infanzia, p. 7. Rome, June – September 1937.

the exhibit (“*gli strumenti più idonei per le coltivazioni floreali ed ornamentali dei Giardini d’infanzia*”).

Exhibits like Merceology advocated for autarkic living to increase the comforts of childhood through the national chemical industry. Put in concrete terms, Montecatini used this exhibit to promote Italian industrial products like aluminum, plastic, rayon, and medicine directly to mothers. Corporate means were set towards Fascist ends. Participating companies were integrating industrial action with State initiatives, as one promotional pamphlet noted.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, SNIA viscosa wanted to show the different applications of their new synthetic fabrics, like *Lanital*, *Snia Amba*, and *Sniafiocco* fabrics, so that mothers would dress their newborns in *Sniafiocco*, their children in *Snia Amba*, and themselves in *Lanital*. To advertise, they provided a subtle but omnipresent contribution to the *Mostra*. Every fabric used in the exhibition had its source in the SNIA Viscosa factory: every hope chest, every uniform for every *Figlio della Lupa*, and every black *fascio* that each child wore (fig. 7.12).

## Ruin Tourism in Fascist Dystopias

On the eve of World War II, the Fascist regime prescribed architecture as a cure for a range of societal ills, ranging from medical ones, like tuberculosis, to social ones, like delinquency, to be administered to the nation’s

13 In “La partecipazione del Gruppo Montecatini,” the pamphlet states: “*L’azione dell’industria integra le iniziative dello Stato.*”



Figure 7.14 Photograph of La Cattolica dormitory designed by Clemente Busiri Vici, 1932. Photographed by Mark Sanderson, in "Derelict Utopias: The Fascists Go On Holiday," Cabinet Issue 20: Ruins. Winter 2005-2006.

youth through summer camps. Futurist marine and alpine hospices were refurbished, or else built entirely anew in Rationalist-Futurist style. At once whimsical and authoritarian, these dormitories, refectories, and fields were built to support and enhance the outdoor schooling and paramilitary exercises that constituted the new ideals of physical rigor and moral discipline that the Fascist party hoped would typify mass life. These were spaces that aimed to militarize the young national body, preparing it for war.

War did come, to Italy and to the summer camps. In 1942 and 1943, many were converted into hospitals and hospices. What had been conceived of as prophylactic care quickly was instead used as convalescent centers for injured soldiers, or orphanages for the children left parentless by the war. In this context, the ENEL summer camp in Riccione, designed by Genoese architect Giancarlo De Carlo, embodies the common legacy of these Fascist control structures for children, and their architectural remnants along the Italian coast. The ENEL building post-dates Fascism, making it part of an Economic Boom period trend that took the Rationalist-Futurist focus on controlling the child with architecture, and then reversed it. Paradoxically, company summer camps did not disappear along with the discredited Fascist party in the 1950s and 1960s—rather, they boomed. Architecturally, these new structures sought to represent children's participation in the life of the summer camp by designing structures around them. Children, not politics, served as the primary movers and the genius of the space. Some *colonie* still function as summer camps today, like *Le Navi* which currently serves as a multi-use space for an art school, a summer youth center, and a windsurfing school.

But the majority of these spaces, like the ENEL summer camp, are no longer suitable for children. Many structures stand vacant, which is not





Figure 7.15 Photograph of Colonia Marina Enel, photographed by Alessandro Piredda, 1985, Riccione, Italy. Appears in "Coastal Icons: Italian Holiday Camps, from Mussolini to Valtur," by Alessandro Benetti, *Domus*, August 13, 2019.

the same as being uninhabited. As early as 1987, architectural magazine *Domus* noted that the former *colonie* were now the site of ruin tourism. Today, ENEL and other Fascist summer camps are popular sites for urban exploration (also called urbex). Urbex typically involves the exploration of manmade environments, including infrastructural elements of cities, like train stations, and individual buildings, like rooftops, and storm drains. Former *colonie*, as small cities, provide both. Rather than obedient children, adventurous young adults now frequent these spaces, trespassing onto derelict property to visit the historical ruins of the Fascist period, and to document its strange architecture with photographs.

Yesterday's utopia is today's dystopia. The *colonie* were imagined as Fascist summer camps, as baby cities that would nurture the next generation in Fascist forms of mass life. Architects aimed to realize structures that could both delight their inhabitants and control them. These holiday camps, with their marine themes, lofted bridges, and panoramic vistas, were conceived by the Fascist party as children's utopias. Ruin tourism has reopened these once-defunct spaces, connecting the architectural history of the Fascist period to the political concerns of the present day.

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