

10. Queering Fascist Heritage: Dildoarchitectures at Casa del Mutilato

Carlota Mir



Image: Annie Sprinkle as Shiva.

1. Casa del Mutilato as a Prosthesis of Hegemonic Masculinity

'In architecture, we learnt from Las Vegas. It is time to learn from the dildo'.

Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto*

A tapestry featuring the mutilated bodies of three Fascist soldiers presides the sala d'Adunanze, inside Casa del Mutilato. '*Chi è con noi è con la Patria*' – whoever is with us is with our fatherland, the text reads.



Figure 1: Tapestry in the Sala d'Adunanze, Casa del Mutilato, Palermo
Source: Author



Figure 2: The tapestry was out during the building's inauguration in 1939.
Source: Casa del Mutilato, Palermo

In a similar tone, the original text inscription in the oculus of the building's atrium, now invisible, reads '*È la perenne giovinezza del sacrificio che infiora il camino della vittoria* - It is the eternal youth of sacrifice that embellishes the path towards victory'.



Figure 3: Oculus in the building, now missing its original inscription. Casa del Mutilato, Palermo. Source: Author

These architectural elements situate the mutilated male body as a primal site of politics within the building. Casa del Mutilato was conceived as one of several dozen war memorials across the country, all of which were exclusively dedicated to Italian war mutilees fighting for the Fascist Italian regime. Their aim was thus to transform the loss of live and able masculinities in war into sacrifices in the cause of transcendent nationalism. Indeed, the Palermo building constitutes one element within a larger architectural and ideological strategy that consisted of building 'containers' and multipliers of Fascist heritage, thus shaping Italian public memory around Fascist ideology.

The construction of the healthy national body politic in Fascist Italy is a heavily gendered one. In the cause of empire and national grandeur, men were to be warriors and women were to be mothers.¹ In particular, constructions of hegemonic masculinity² and their relationship to war,

¹ P. Willson (2007) 'Empire, Gender and the 'Home Front' in Fascist Italy', *Women's History Review*, 16:4, p. 187

² 'Hegemonic masculinity' is a term that was coined in 1982 and is most commonly associated with the writings of R.W. Connell. Connell and J. Messerschmidt distinguish

sacrifice, loss and death were integral to the success of manhood and Fascist ideology, which demanded that male soldiers give their lives for the greater ideal of the Empire.



Figure 3: Several examples of 'Case del Mutilato' across Italy. Source: unknown

I argue that these 'mutilated houses' or 'Case del Mutilato' can be understood as a multi-legged architectural technology, a series of **architectural prostheses of hegemonic masculinity** implemented throughout the country with the aim to restore the heterosexual symbolic order in the mutilated and emasculated bodies of the soldiers, thus preserving the fascist national body politic in Italy.

2. The City as Body: After Paul B. Preciado's *Alter Ego Beatriz de Bruni*

Indeed, the notion of **prosthesis** is crucial for developing an understanding of the role of architecture as a multiplier of (gendered) ideology. As Paul B. Preciado argues, hegemonic masculinity is prosthetic³: it is a symbolic yet material, and ideologized add-on, **a dildo**⁴,

hegemonic masculinity from other masculinities: although not enacted by the statistical majority of a given population, it is widely considered to be *normative*. It requires all men to position themselves in relation to it and it ideologically legitimates hierarchies of power, particularly patriarchy. See R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept, Gender & Society*, Vol 19, Issue 6, 2005. pp. 829-859

³ "Gender is not only performative, as J Butler announced, but prosthetic above all - it only exists within the materiality of bodies. It is a technology of fabrication of sexual bodies. See J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990)

⁴ Preciado distinguishes between the Phallus (symbolic or transcendent signifier of erectile activity - masculine genius), the anatomical penis (a poor and imperfect model for this idea) the dick (the penis imbued with these phallic powers in a semantic unit) And finally, the dildo-as-prosthesis. The dildo is the objectual representation which turns the phallus into reality: the dildo comes before the penis This argument, which completely overthrows essentialist notions of masculinity, has been central to

operating on a multiscalar yet monolingual language that only speaks ‘to reproduce itself’ from body to territory. ‘The dildo-building as structure is the only model upon which the development of the erect urban skeleton has been developed’,⁵ he argues. Indeed, he signals ‘dildo-architecture’ as foundational practice of patriarchal societies:⁶



Figure 4: 30 St Mary Axe in London and Torre Agbar in Barcelona. Source: unknown

“The city has a man’s body. In the city, buildings are also masculine bodies, dildo-structures reclaiming the power of the phallus in specific enclaves. The dildo-building is the empirical reinscription of phallic transcendent power in social urban space. Whether it is an industry, a home, or a ministry, every building is a sacrament of the heterosexual institution of the reproduction of love-power”.⁷

The prosthetic logic of architectures of power and its relationship to the body politic of hegemonic masculinity is intensified to the extreme in Spatrisano’s building. The building operates in the manner of a giant dildo in public space, much in the spirit graphically embodied in contemporary buildings like London’s 30 St Mary Axe, commonly known as ‘The Gherkin’ or Barcelona’s Torre Glòries: they all produce an urban, prosthetic masculinity, a social apparatus reassuring and re-establishing the material exploitation of one sex over the other in such a way that the sheer genitality and nature of this imagery is completely naturalised and thus, paradoxically invisible.

3. Mutilation as Abjection, Abjection as Power

However, one could argue that the very symbolic presence and visual representations of the mutilated’ abject bodies undermine Fascist ideals of masculine cleanliness and imperial civilisation. Instead, and following Julia Kristeva, these abject bodies are ‘subversive by

contemporary queer philosophy. See Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2002).

⁵ B. Bruni [Paul B. Preciado] ‘Dildo-architecture’, in *Fisuras*, vol. 8, Madrid, 1998, p.4

⁶ Ibid., p. 5

⁷ Ibid.

definition'⁸, their vulnerability and fragility involuntarily *queering* the nationalist, conservative gender norms that produced the buildings in the very beginning and questioning the 'cleanliness' of self-sacrifice as a manly act of endurance and self control.



Figure 5: 30 Italian war mutilee. Source: unknown

Just because symbolic meanings are materially inscribed into our urban reality invisibilized and naturalized, it does not mean that these meanings cannot be subverted. As preservers of queer heritage, aside from retrieving lost histories and queer cultures, we must examine the cracks in the monolingual technologies of the production of gender, turning around and 'queering' the normative gazes responsible for a myriad interconnected layers of oppression.

In other words, our aim is to use experimental methodologies of architectural preservation in order to appropriate spaces and that have been completely denied to us, but also to subvert the terms of 'heritage' and 'preservation' altogether by exposing the violently charged technologies of oppression that conventional narratives entail, in ways that include, but do not exclusively point at, minority sexualities, but rather pinpoint the operational logistics of interrelated systems and technologies of gendered, sexual and racial domination.

⁸ As violation of culturally constructed norms, the abject is subversive by definition: it 'does not respect borders, positions, rules'. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, First published 1980) p.102

3. Queering Fascist Heritage: Experimental Preservation Strategy

For this aim, using 'queering' as a main tool of experimental preservation is extremely useful. As the verb form of queer, *queering* can refer to the act of taking something and looking at it through a lens that makes it strange or troubles it in some way. As Thelathia "Nikki" Young argues, queering is a way to deconstruct the logics and frameworks operating within old and new theological and ethical concepts, dismantling the dynamics of power and privilege persisting among diverse subjectivities.¹⁰

Thus, notions of 'queer heritage' do not exclusively refer to particular objects, histories and struggles of specific sexual minority characters. Rather, they point to specific ways of 'decoding' the heteronormative historical and systemic foundations of our material, affective and sexual worlds and recoding them through reinscribing alternative meanings which may be present in them, thus pointing to new possibilities and configurations and opening up liberating ways of experiencing the world.

Queers, dykes, and trans people are a complete failure in the writing of societal gendered scripts - and so are mutilees. What if, then, following this logic of **intersectional abjection**, we undertook the preservation of Palermo's Casa del Mutilato taking into consideration the abject talking bodies that are placed at the very core of its being as a central point of its meaning? What if we made them speak of their and all Otherness, of the violent absences present in fascist 'heritage', of their own emasculation, perhaps as a liberating factor, of what it means to live under a heterosexist, binary regime of gender production? What if we could use abjection as a resistant, productive and defying self-determination of a group of abject bodies appropriating this symbolic space and speaking for the first time, reclaiming their own identity?

From this perspective, the oculus which presides the dildo-building of Casa del Mutilato in its central atrium can be seen and activated from a radically different perspective. In 'Capitalism and Schizophrenia',¹² Deleuze and Guattari argue that the anus has been completely desexualized and marginalised in contemporary societies which favoured the coding of genitalia into a binary gendered system. Equally, in 'Countersexual Manifesto', Preciado argues that the anus is indeed 'a countersexual workspace'.¹³

Can we then see Casa del Mutilato, and activate its atrium, as a building-as-orifice hosting within it Other/queer heritage-as-resistance, perhaps passing the building on to be used as a public space or the headquarters of a series of grassroots LGBTQ initiatives in the city, but also other minorized collectives, such as migrants, differently abled bodies, or sex workers? Could we have, as Paul B often suggests, an intersectional parliament of women, dykes, trans people, colonized bodies, disabled bodies, *and mutilated bodies* - bodies that live in the margins of that

⁹ T. "Nikki" Young, "Queering "The Human Situation"". *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol, 28. April 2012, pp. 126-131

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See G. Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1972, 1980)

¹³ Preciado, 'Countersexual Manifesto', p. 36

which is considered normal – and work collectively in order to effectively challenge the dominant biopolitical *and* tanatopolitical, regimes?

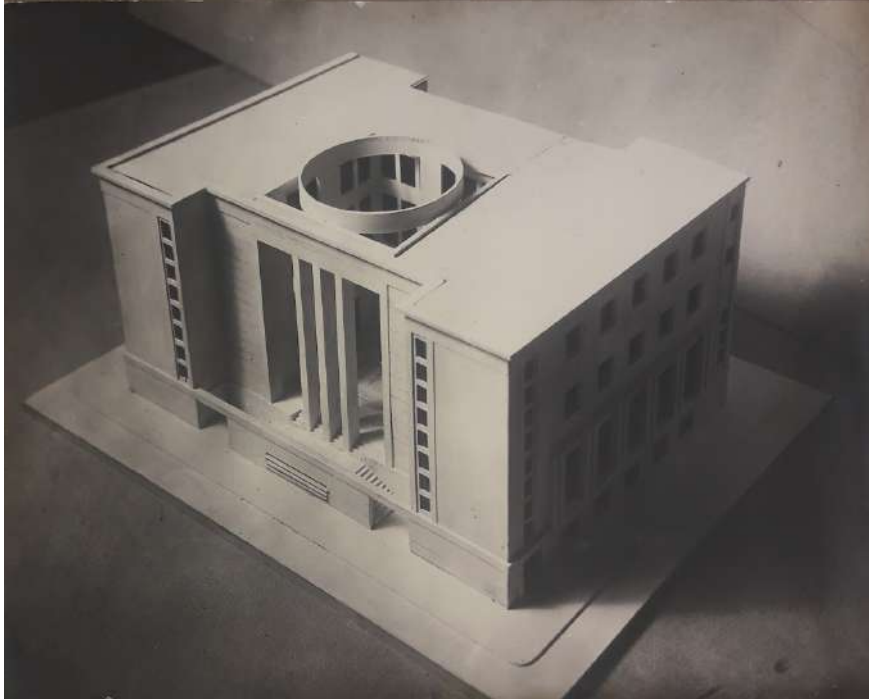


Figure 6: A model of the building in which its orifice-like quality can be appreciated.
Source: Casa del Mutilato

Equally, looking at Casa del Mutilato through the lens of dildo-architecture allows us to play with a myriad different strategies for queering fascist heritage. One of these is the appropriation, and subversion, of the power symbols of the phallus, which is very much contained in Preciado's statement that 'the dildo came before the penis'. Using the erotic as a source of rebellion, simultaneously exposing and twisting the meaning inside architectures of power from a place of humour is one of the strategies used in post-porn by thinkers, writers and activists such as Preciado himself or Annie Sprinkle. The presented intervention, designed to substitute the inscriptions in the oculus and the mutilees' tapestries in the future use of the building as a public meeting place for minorized collectives, takes after this type of strategy.



Figure 7: A performance by Annie Sprinkle in which a strategy of multiplication is used in order to rethink and subvert the semiotics and power of the dildo. Source: ArtStor

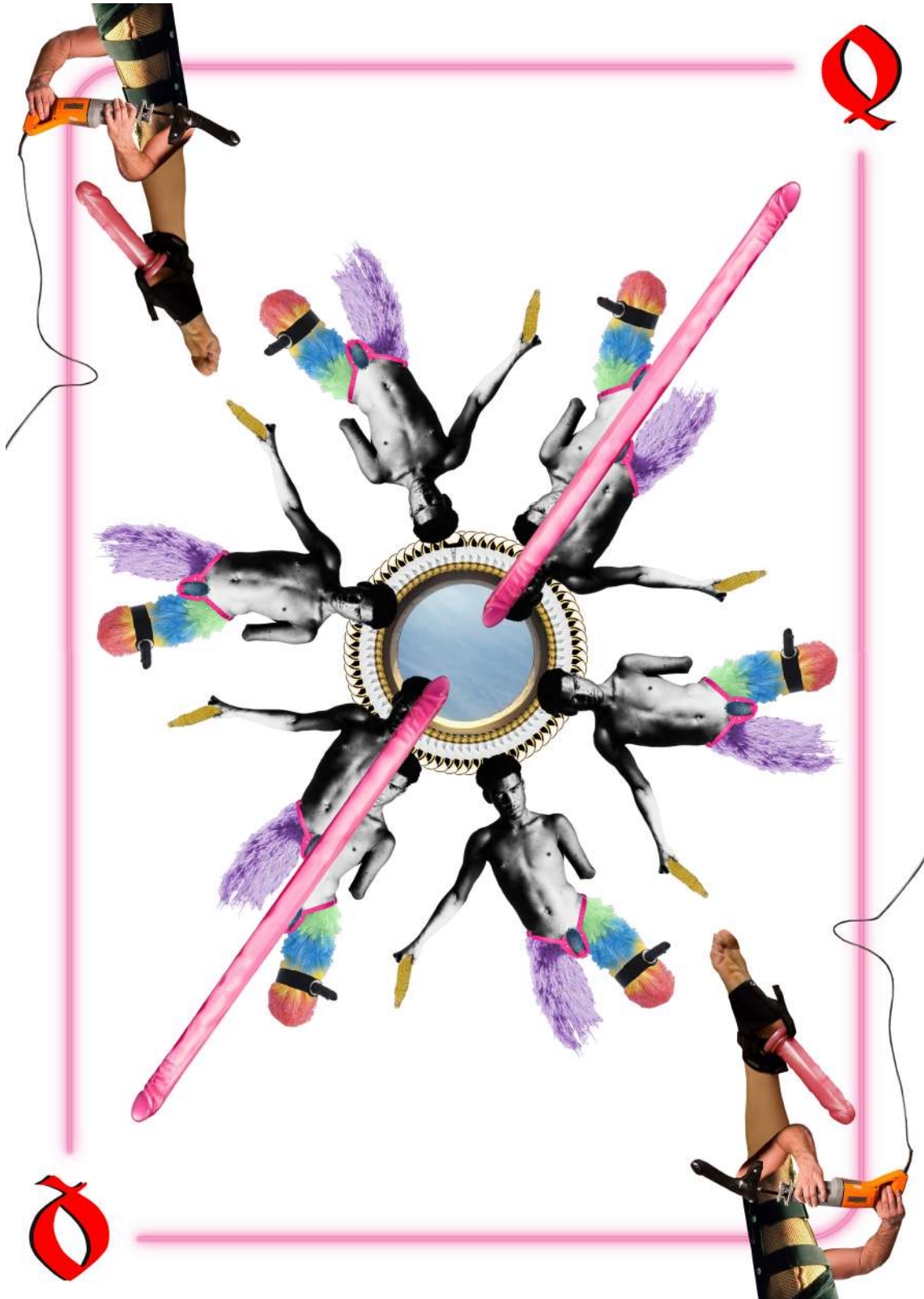


Figure 8: An artistic intervention of the 'oculus as orifice' to go in place of the mutes' tapestry as part of the intervention. Author: Alvaro Borrajo

A tactic of 'visual queering' seeking to question and turn around unquestioned logics is crucial to setting the framework for understanding Palermo's invisible queer heritage: it allows us to situate the stories, struggles, cultures and histories of the city's LGBTQ life in a position of defiance and resistance, and not in the sugarcoated way which usually assimilates and desexualises the very few queer figures who have managed cross the threshold and eventually become 'public characters' or remembered for their contributions to society. Through queer experimental preservation, we aim to appropriate Casa del Mutilato as a setting for the queer heritage of the city to begin telling its own story from a place of agency, centrality and legitimation.

In the case of Palermo's Casa del Mutilato, a series of historical layers and reinterpretation of current architectures and narratives have been taken as objects of queer experimental preservation, covering topics in an open-ended and intersectional way which, rather than creating a set of answers to defining heritage, aims to deploy a methodology to continue investigating queer heritage in relationship to traditional notions of cultural heritage. The intervention proposals and microhistories in this dossier aim to illustrate the myriad ways in which heritage can - and should - be queered.

Bibliography

Agrest, Diana I., 'Architecture from without: Body, Logic, and Sex' *Assemblage*, No. 7 (Oct., 1988), pp. 28-41

Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990)

Bruni, Beatriz de [Paul B. Preciado], 'Dildo-architecture', in *Fisuras*, vol. 8, Madrid, 1998

Connell, R.W. and James W. Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept*, *Gender & Society*, Vol 19, Issue 6, 2005. pp. 829-859

Cottrill, J Matthew, *Queering Architecture: Possibilities of Space(s)*, (Miami: Miami University Press, 2006)

Davis, Whitney. *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1972, 1980)

Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, First published 1980)

McNelly Kearns, Cleo, *The Virgin Mary, Monotheism, and Sacrifice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.24 (emphasis in the original); Kramer, p.84, p.88M89, p.95M97, p.100M101.

Otero-Pailos, Jorge, 'Experimental Preservation', *Places Journal* [<https://placesjournal.org/article/experimental-preservation/>][acc 04/06/2018]

Otero-Pailos, Jorge et al. *Experimental Preservation* [Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016]

Preciado, Paul B. '¿La muerte de la clínica?' MNRS [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4aRrZZbFmBs>][accessed 04/06/2018]

Preciado, Paul B., *Manifiesto Contrasexual* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2002)

Sprinkle, Annie, *Post-Porn Modernist*, (Amsterdam: Art Unlimited, 1991)

Willson, Perry, 'Empire, Gender and the 'Home Front' in Fascist Italy', *Women's History Review*, 16:4, 2007, pp. 487-500

Young, Thelathia "Nikki" (April 2012). "Queering "The Human Situation". *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. **28**: 126–131. [ISSN 1553-3913](https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-1270000).

