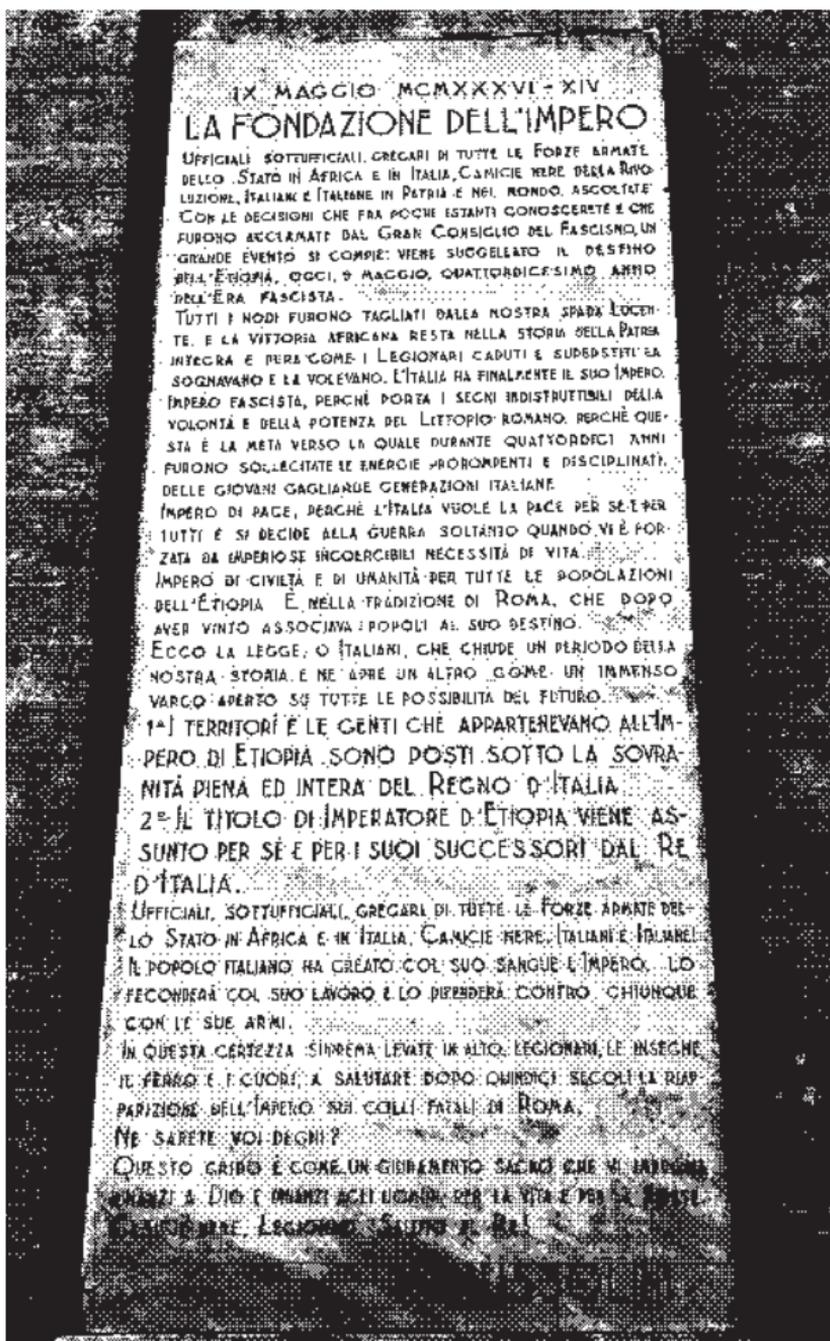


CASA DEL MUTILATO

The Afterlife of Colonial-Fascist Architecture



THE SOUND OF DISPLACEMENT

Echoes from the Italian Empire

"Italy has finally its own Empire [...] a Fascist Empire because carries the indestructible signs of the will and the power of the Roman Littorio."

Benito Mussolini (May 9, 1936)

Colonialism, Modernism and Space

Echoes from the "colonies" resound in "Casa del Mutilato", where history is represented by the voice of the coloniser. One of the epigraphs, placed at the sides of the vestibule that introduces to the sacrarium, reports Mussolini's speech at Palazzo Venezia in Rome: on 9 May 1936, Mussolini announced to Italy and the world the foundation of the Italian Empire. The religious function of the building is consecrated by Mussolini's words that recounts a history of colonisation in name of the grandiose past of the ancient Rome.

The fascio littorio, in the ancient Rome, was a weapon used by the lictores (civil servants) for protecting the Roman institutions, it was constituted of wooden sticks tightened together and it was used to punish criminals or to execute them, in this case, an axe was attached to the bundle. The name "Fascism" comes from this weapon that, in the Fascist regime, was used as a symbol of sovereignty and power over life and death. In modern times, this kind of power is strongly linked to the idea of imperialism, colonialism and to the emerging of camps as a spatial and, as Theodor W. Adorno said, ineluctable consequence of the modern West.

The architectural and urban plans of the colonized cities helps us to see how colonialism, bodies and space are tightly linked to each other. Urban planning, during Fascist time, was used as a tool for propaganda and control. The bombings of the colonized cities were followed by new urban plans – as in the case of Addis Abeba – which, in a modernist way, neglected the existing urban fabric, and which consequently led to segregation, domicide and displacement. The sound of the bombings coming from the "colonies" was never heard in Fascist Italy. At the same time "new towns" were used by propaganda to endorse the narrative of a civilizing mission for the uncivilised native, in line with the Modernist faith in the Progress.

"Empire of peace, because Italy wants peace for itself and for everyone and decides to go to war only when it is forced by urgent and pressing life necessities."

The records of the war recount a different history, made of atrocities that can hardly be seen as self-defence acts: as Dr. John Melly, who led the British Ambulance service in Ethiopia, describes it in a letter 1936: "[...] This isn't a war – it isn't even a slaughter – it's the torture of tens of thousands of defenceless men, women and children, with bombs and poison gas. They're using gas incessantly [...].



Kebedech Seyoum, A Female Patriot, c 1935
Source: Nega Tegegn Ye'Ethiopoawiyen

“Empire of civilisation and humanity for all the populations of Ethiopia. This, in the Roman tradition that, after having won, used to link the populations to its own fate.”

Most Ethiopians claim that Ethiopia has never been colonised, based on concrete historical facts. Ethiopia and Liberia were the only two African countries that were not subject to European colonization, which began in 1882 with the British occupation of Egypt. It was only between 1936 and 1941 Ethiopia was illegally annexed to the “Africa Orientale Italiana”. During this period the Ethiopian resistance was significant, as Aregawi Berhe writes, “the resistance movement was based on the ideals of restoring national independence and preserving cultural identity.”

At the same time as Casa del Mutilato was built, many Ethiopians, also in the intellectual context, raised their voice against Imperialism claiming the existence of an Ethiopian anti-colonial identity; popular songs, plays, novels, poems, articles have been sung and written before, during and after the Fascist occupation. Through the sound of their voices we state the need to explore the Ethiopian resistance to Imperialism and its cultural production, in order to make these counter narratives visible through those voices ignored by history and collective memory. Acknowledging this colonial history and counter histories, could help laying the basis for a productive debate in an anti-colonial and de-colonial perspective.

Echoes from the Empire

Near the mural a sound installation let us hear other voices, other sounds that flood in the cracks of history, allowing the colonial past to flow into the present, in a non-linear temporality that can criticise the incontestable monolithic and progressive Western idea of history. The sound installation works as a possible intervention on the inscription, as a counter-voice that echoes the ghosts of the Italian past and opens to the possibility of making visible those narratives that have been mutilated in the official representation of the Fascist regime.

Sound can have the power to make emerge cultural and historical resources that survive and resist, question and deconstruct the alleged unity of the present. Sound can be considered as expression of strangled realities in as much as its language is formulated and conceptualized on a deeper level where realities cannot find their place in an univocal and positivist concept of history. The sound of the voices from the so called “Impero d’Etiopia”, in this perspective, can be considered as an essential instrument that may enable a repressed narrative to emerge as a disruptive element, whose unpredictable performance is always difficult to be controlled by the power, thus proposing issues of memory and its ownership.

The Afterlife of Fascist-Colonial Architecture:

Mutilated Histories and Prostheses for “Casa del Mutilato” in Palermo

During the period of the two world wars, under the fascist regime, Italy built a vast number of public buildings, housing and monuments that have shaped Italian cities and former Italian occupied cities such as Asmara, Addis Ababa, Rhodes and Tripoli. In the last years, these built structures have been celebrated and completely detached from the fascist, violent and genocidal regime that produced them. With the re-emergence of today's fascist ideologies in Europe – and the arrival of populations from north and east Africa – it becomes urgent to ask: What kind of heritage is the fascist-colonial heritage? How do the material traces of the Italian empire today acquire different meanings in the context of migration from the ex-colonies? Should this heritage be demolished, simply reused or re-oriented towards other objectives including reparations from Italian colonization?

Decolonizing Architecture Advanced Course

Royal Institute of Art / Kungliga Konsthögskolan (RIA) in Stockholm

The struggle of decolonization once primarily located outside of Europe, today has moved within its borders. It is not possible to understand today's displacement of people and migration flows, nor contemporary fascism, without thorough knowledge of the colonial heritage. The course proposes an innovative, comparative and interdisciplinary approach to the study of colonial architecture expanding the notion of colonial space to present realities.

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